LOST IN SPACE?
READERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SCIENCE FICTION WORLDS

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

1995

University College London
ABSTRACT

This thesis is an empirical investigation of readers' interpretations of the world of William Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy. Science fiction provides readers with 'imaginative resources' with which they can map the new spaces of the Information Age, and the thesis explores the practices by which readers make sense of the geographies of science fiction.

Unfortunately, both cultural geography and the field of science fiction studies privilege the text at the expense of the reader. Arguing that readers are active and creative producers of meaning, the thesis draws upon material from in-depth group interviews with readers of William Gibson's cyberpunk fictions to examine the relationships between texts and readers. As a result, the focus of the study is the practices used by readers to constitute experiences of fictional spaces. In particular, it is argued in Section One that readers of science fiction develop a contract with the genre which shapes their understanding of a particular text, and that in creating meaning they draw upon not only their generic knowledge but also their personal experiences. In this way two major factors influence their reading: the position of science fiction within the wider culture, and the reader's place in society.

Having demonstrated the inadequacy of the textual model of interpretation, some alternative approaches are developed in Section Two to illustrate the ways in which readers construct meanings from some of the more important themes in William Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy. These include representations of race, gender, and 'posthuman' identity, and the two most important spaces of cyberpunk, cyberspace and the Sprawl. The final section provides an even more grounded analysis of reading by outlining five of the most common practices used by the discussants to read the conventions of science fiction. The empirical and theoretical concerns of the thesis are then united through an examination of the strategies and tactics readers use to 'thicken' literary descriptions of space in science fiction.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Amongst the many people who have helped me write this thesis, knowingly or unknowingly, are the following from UCL: Jon Binnie, Adrian Chappell, Kevin Collins, Julia Cream, Phil Crang, Gail Davies, Luke Desforges, Claire Dwyer, Peter Jackson, Larry and Jan Jolley-Cort, Nina Laurie, Jon May, Linda McDowell, Jon Murdoch, Jeremy Stein, Neil Ward, Giles Wiggs, and the members of the Discourse Analysis Group. Thanks also to Guy Baker in the UCL Geography Department Drawing Office for producing figure 3.1. at such short notice, and to the UCL Audio-Visual Unit for help and advice with recording equipment. In a year at Bristol the following people have been equally helpful and supportive: Nick Bingham, James Boardwell, Paul Chatterton, Emily Gilbert, Bon Holloway, Annie Hughes, Alan Latham, Phil McManus, Nigel Thrift and Sarah Whatmore. I am especially grateful to Bob Jarvis, Felix Driver, and particularly Martin Barker, for participating in my upgrade workshop and helping to focus my ideas.

In the world of science fiction I must thank Lucie Armit, Mark Bennett, Mark Bould, Andy Butler, Derek Littlewood, Polly Marshall, Maureen Speller, Peter Stockwell, and all the members of the Academic Fantasy Fiction Network for ideas and general encouragement. Recruiting discussants for the groups was made a lot easier by the cooperation of the staff at Forbidden Planet, and by David Pringle, editor of *Interzone*, and Jenny and Steve Glover, editors of *Matrix* magazine. Thanks to anyone else I have neglected to mention.

Extra special thanks to those people who have kept me sane over the last four years: my family, John and Jackie Keith, Ralph Kidson, Anne Scully, and Siobhàn Totham. I am obviously indebted to the discussants, without whom this thesis would be a lot poorer, but I would like to thank them for making the research so enjoyable. Most importantly of all, I owe a great deal to Jacquie Burgess, both intellectually and personally. Thanks to you all!

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Ethel Storey.
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NOTES

This thesis uses a standardised notation in the reproduction of sections of the interview transcripts. The Group and session number from which the material came is reproduced in parentheses at the conclusion of each excerpt, with line numbers from the original transcript. For example, (B4:1504-10) refers to lines 1504 to 1510 inclusive from the transcript of Group B’s fourth session. Where I have emphasised part of the transcript (in italics) this is also noted in the parentheses. Within the excerpts the following conventions are used:

[...]
material elided for ease of presentation
[to John]
extra information not in statement but added for clarity
[laughter]
various non-verbal sounds
[word or phrase?]
transcription of this section unclear
...
short pause
[3 second pause]
pause of longer duration
-
marked break in discussant’s statement

On the whole I have attempted to capture the rhythm (through commas) and intonation (italics for emphasis) of the discussants’ speech patterns. This is simply an attempt to add extra-verbal context to the content of the utterances, and is not due to my desire to ‘clean up’ the speech of the discussants.

In addition, the vagaries of mass market paperback publishing create problems for researchers: SF books often go through many reprints or are out of print altogether. As a result, some of the sources cited in this thesis show two dates, eg Gibson (1984/93). The first date represents the original date of publication, and the second refers to the edition I have used myself. In addition, where I have quoted from a work of fiction, I have noted the chapter that the passage appears in with the symbol §. For example, (§4:45) refers to page 45, chapter 4 of the edition cited.
SECTION ONE:

ARGUMENT, THEORY AND METHODOLOGY
CHAPTER 1
ELSEWHERE: SCIENCE FICTION AND GEOGRAPHY

Storytellers ancient and modern have swept their audiences - young and old alike - away from the world we live in to far lands where magic dwells and the extraordinary is commonplace - beyond the light of the campfire, beyond the edges of the sea or the borders of the galaxy, over the next hill to that mysterious, alluring place that always lies elsewhere, that has been the landscape of fantastic fiction for thousands of years. (Windling, in Windling and Arnold, 1981: no page)

Magic dwells in lands of boundless dimension, lands not always apparent... The vistas and images of fantasy describe an endless atlas of invented worlds, planes, pastures, castles and cities; oceans and heavens of myth and dream; veiled corridors of the past; shadowed corners next door, up the attic, in the kitchen; distant hills and tors and redoubts stretching in all directions to the beginnings and ends of time... This is a sampler of lands. (Arnold, in Windling and Arnold, 1981: no page)

1.1. Introduction

Windling and Arnold's introductions to Elsewhere (1981) set the scene for their collection of "tales of fantasy" which contains thirty fantastic prose and poetry compositions by mainstream writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and William Butler Yeats and fantasy authors like Ursula Le Guin, M. John Harrison, and John Crowley. Although my thesis is an exploration of one the worlds of science fiction and not of fantasy, Windling and Arnold's descriptions of Elsewhere touch on something shared by many non-realist genres. It is also apposite for a thesis which attempts to make sense of science fiction through the literature of cultural geography, since spatial metaphors are currently very much in vogue in geography and cultural studies (see, for example, Jackson, 1992; Keith and Pile, 1993; Woolf, 1993). While I would agree with Woolf that these metaphors should be handled with care, the idea of Elsewhere has been such a useful conceptual tool that I would like to develop it as an introduction to this thesis.

By Elsewhere I mean a new or unfamiliar space, but one which draws some of its power from its links to our everyday world; a place which allows us to look at the world with new eyes. While it is impossible to leave our sense of being in this world completely, it is possible to imagine a somewhere else, a place where things are very different. These fantastic places are often associated with the
uncanny, the frightening, the grotesquely amusing, the sexually seductive (the word glamour has its roots in enchantment, a more ambiguous usage than that of the worlds of fashion and stardom); Elsewhere is often the place of the Other. This is, at least, the argument of Rosemary Jackson (1981) who draws on Freud to find in fantasy the repressed fears and desires of modernity. Following Todorov’s structuralist analysis of fantasy (1973), Jackson creates two models of fantastic writing: in the first, the fantastic Other invades or attacks the bounded self (the Dracula myth); in the second, the rational self splits, creating its own Other as a dark reflection (the Frankenstein myth). Several critics discern a similar structure in the themes of science fiction; the new worlds presented to the reader defamiliarise his or her understandings of the everyday (Suvin, 1979; Malmgren, 1991, 1993). Utopias, the most celebrated ‘no-places’ of literature, also rely upon the relationship between imagined worlds and their referents to criticise or satirise the assumptions of the societies in which they were written.

The notion that Elsewhere is the space of Otherness is made more concrete when we consider the role of science fiction’s own others: many of the most estranging worlds of SF have been created by women writers, African American authors, gay men and lesbians. For similar reasons, the most engaging criticisms of SF have been made by those who stand outside the space of mainstream science fiction. The title of Sarah Lefanu’s In The Chinks of the World Machine points to the marginalisation of women not simply as subjects but as authors of SF (1988); one of the key concerns of Jenny Wolmark’s recent book is the extent to which SF constructs its own Aliens and Others (1993); and the essays in Lucie Armitt’s collection make a similar point (1991). Nothing could make this any clearer than the case of James Tiptree Junior, author (aptly enough) of ‘The Women Men Don’t See’ (1973); he was discovered to be a she, Alice Sheldon, after an eight-year long career in SF1. Elsewhere is a place to speak from, a site for reflection, criticism and pleasure - but it should not be simply celebrated, because it has been partially colonised and contains its own Others. As a spatial metaphor it carries a complex but powerful set of connotations. Not surprisingly given the nature of science fiction.

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1 See Lefanu (1988:105-29) for an excellent analysis of this case of a woman writing as a man about women.
fiction, its criticism is littered with similar metaphors: Armitt's *Where No Man Has Gone Before* (1991); Malmgren's *Worlds Apart* (1991); Annette Kuhn's collection *Alien Zone* (1990a); and Tom Shippey's *Fictional Space* (1991).

Besides being an allusive pun, my own title builds upon the Elsewhere metaphor in three ways. Firstly, from the work of Suvin, Malmgren, Jackson and others it could be assumed that the space of Elsewhere might be disorienting to readers of science fiction. By its very nature, any work of fiction creates unreal spaces. However, when we read SF, we are presented with places which do not exist, which might exist in the future, or which could not possibly exist because of their denial of the laws of the physical and human sciences. Do readers get 'lost' in these unnatural spaces? The ways in which readers make sense of this disorientation is one of the key concerns of the thesis.

Secondly, this is a thesis which centrally locates its analysis on reading. Unfortunately, as I will argue in Chapter 2, cultural geography seems to have lost sight of the reader. While the existence of these actors has been extensively theorised, they remain lost in the *terra incognita* of the subdiscipline (and also in science fiction criticism). Using a science fiction analogy, readers are the aliens here, while the critics expend huge amounts of their resources searching for their traces, like the scientists who listen to signals from space wondering if there is intelligent life Elsewhere. In some ways, this thesis represents a First Contact with these ETs: Extra-Textuals.

Finally, there is a powerful construction of reading as a process by which readers 'lose themselves' in fiction. As de Certeau puts it, "to read is to be elsewhere... in another world" (1984:173). While any act of reading is a step on the road to Elsewhere, in the case of non-realistic genres like science fiction and fantasy the practice of 'losing yourself' is assumed to have specific political consequences. Entertainment is often seen as a luxury, a wasted space outside the fundamental sites of production and reproduction. In the case of fiction which is based upon an explicit rejection of the real, reading is constructed as *escapism*. When the political is understood as engagement with the real, losing yourself in fantasy implies a rejection of political responsibility: the worst kind of conservatism. As if this construction was not enough, there is another way in
which 'losing yourself' is given a political meaning. In this formulation, the reader is lost because he or she is led astray by the text or the author; giving yourself up to the pleasure of reading means passively accepting the ideology encoded into writing. The reader is offered an active rejection of the political or a passive acceptance of hegemony. Neither of these positions will do, although I would agree that reading is a political act. Another core element of the thesis consists of a critique of these ideas of 'loss'.

Using the metaphor in these three ways, then, the shape of the thesis can be simply spelled out. I am interested in the places and spaces of Elsewhere, as constructed by a certain kind of science fiction; in the ways readers make sense of these geographies of the imagination, as part of an attempt to extend the range of cultural geography; and in the political implications of these readings. Each element also contains a critique: of ideas of Elsewhere which fail to take into account the specifics of genre; of the reluctance to engage with the reader; and of the construction of readers which sees them as escapists or passive dupes. Having established this, it is now time to examine the specific focus of the thesis.

1.2. Popular Culture, Genre, and Science Fiction

Many introductions seek to define key terms but I will be largely side-stepping this issue because it seems to me to be more interesting to examine the definitions of others. Obviously, I cannot work without my own constructions and I will be sketching out where I stand on the contested terrain of such concepts as 'the popular'. As a result I want to discuss the nature of popular culture; the fantastic, science fiction and cyberpunk; and finally the writings of William Gibson in order to situate the particular concerns of my study within the wider field of contemporary culture.

"I have almost as many problems with 'popular' as I have with 'culture'. When you put the two terms together, the difficulties can be pretty horrendous" (Hall, 1981:227). Although some of the difficulties Hall is alluding to stem from the multiple meanings of both terms, his 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular' demonstrate that part of the problem facing the student of the popular is the political use of the term itself. Though the tone of Hall's article seems slightly old-
fashioned now, it remains a useful exploration of three interpretations of the popular. Firstly, a cultural form can be said to be popular if it is widely consumed and enjoyed: a question of the conditions of production and consumption. This is the sense of the term which is similar to ideas of 'mass culture', with its long history of negative associations (it "brings socialists out in spots", Hall, (231)). The second definition finds another idea of 'the people' to work with, describing the popular as "all those things that 'the people' do or have done" (234). However, we cannot simply describe the popular unless we know who 'the people' are, or more importantly what that term excludes. As Hall argues:

...the structuring principle of 'the popular' in this sense is the tensions and opposition between what belongs to the central domain of elite or dominant culture, and the culture of the 'periphery'. (234)

The popular, then, has already been defined by its opposition to the elite culture. This leads Hall to his last definition, which not only sees the popular as the culture of 'the people' but also seeks to interrogate the contestation of culture - "the process by means of which some things are actively preferred so that others can be dethroned" (235). It is this last definition that I prefer, since it suggests that if we wish to find the popular we must look for it on the contested terrain of taste. The politics of taste, considered in the light of Bourdieu's work (1986), determine the nature of the popular, and this nature is highly contingent. One of the problems with Hall's article, I would suggest, is that at this point he was still using a model based upon hegemonic and resistant cultures - though one which allows more flexibility than the version preferred by many cultural geographers (see 2.2. and 2.3.). Beyond a crude interpretation of the hegemony of culture, we can recognise other tastes which stand in an awkward relationship to 'high' and 'low' culture - the best example being 'middle-brow culture'. More importantly, if we consider that taste-making is a practice, and we are prepared to examine the empirical construction of the popular, we can get a better feel for this contestation and transformation.

For example, the science fiction of William Gibson - the focus of this thesis - provides a fascinating example of the tensions inherent in constructing the
Science fiction is generally considered to be low-brow, or at best middle-brow, but certain SF authors have been recently championed by Fredric Jameson (1984, 1991) and Andreas Huyssen (1988) as essential postmodern figures. Roger Luckhurst convincingly demonstrates that Jameson, Huyssen and others achieve this by bringing authors like Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard and Gibson up into the mainstream while simultaneously denigrating the low status of other SF authors (1991). In other words, it is possible for some people, at certain times, to turn the products of low culture into high culture. This conjuring trick is easier to perform for particular forms of SF than others: the tenth anniversary of Philip K. Dick's death was observed by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London but Star Trek is more likely to be mocked than celebrated. There are powerful gender codings here too; the televisual SF audience is more likely to be female than male, which creates another field of contestation. And yet the image of the male SF fan or reader as a sexless 'nerd' offends dominant heterosexual masculine tastes as well... Some of the complexities of these twists and turns will be explored in the course of the thesis. In conclusion, it makes no sense to say that this thesis is about popular culture; rather it is an examination of the ways in which specific constructions of the popular are made and contested by different groups.

These specific constructions of the popular have a generic character. The genres concerned with Elsewhere can be generally described as 'fantastic', and as we will see, they are often contrasted to, or held in opposition with, realist genres. Science fiction, horror, the fantasy of Tolkein, Kafka or Borges, the ghost story; all depend on elements of the unreal and impossible. However, since the fantastic by its very nature attempts to escape from understanding, there is a limit to how far a text can cope with these impossible elements. As a result there will always be strands of realism running through fantastic fiction: it is through these links to the everyday world that we make sense of fantasy. This will be explained further in Chapters 4 and 8.

Before I move on to discuss science fiction, I would like to discuss what I mean by 'genre', as it serves to illustrate my approach to culture and society.

2 Throughout the thesis I will use 'the fantastic' to refer to this wider grouping of non-realist forms, and 'fantasy' to more specific examples of it.
Steve Neale's *Genre* (1980) was an attempt to reconceptualise the role of genre in film studies, reinterpreting the structuralist analyses of Jim Kitses (1969), Colin McArthur (1972) and others in line with the post-Althusserian work which appeared in *Screen* in the late 1970s (also see Kuhn, 1990b:3-5). What attracted Neale to genre criticism was its attempts to bring together artist, film and audience: the conditions of production, the text, and the consumers. The focus of much genre analysis was the *convention*, defined by Kitses as "an area of agreement between audience and artist" (24), with McArthur suggesting that a genre was a kind of sign system, "an agreed code between film maker and audience" (20). Unfortunately, much of this earlier work was hampered by a consideration of the director-as-auteur which breaks down the relative autonomy of the genre: if the director is completely free to manipulate generic conventions, can they really be said to form an agreement with the audience? Neale's book is an attempt to establish the specific nature and function of genre conventions, 'reading' them to see how they work at creating meaning. However, once he has suggested that conventions are significant because they avoid the problem of privileging author, text, or audience, he becomes solely interested in their appearance within texts. Although he establishes a history of changing generic conventions, he cannot explain how the interaction of production, text, and consumption have constructed these changing forms.

Martin Barker, on the other hand, is far more interested in the social constitution of generic (and formal) conventions (1989). In his analysis of children's comics, he makes this clear:

'Convention' originally meant (and still sometimes means) a coming together; over time it has accrued the extra meaning of an 'agreed way' of coming together. To understand comics, we need to understand both parts of the definition: the agreement, and the coming together. (1989:9-10)

Following Barker's suggestions, I understand the characteristics of genres to be mutually constituted by a wide network of factors in the areas of production, in the form of the text, and in the audience. Conventions acquire a certain fixity through this history of constitution, and thus exert some influence over the nature
of the generic narrative. This is not to say that they are autonomous, which would suggest that a genre is the 'author' of a text; the construction of conventions is, like everything else in culture, highly contested. In conclusion, any empirical investigation of the fantastic genre must not simply treat its conventions as *agreements*, but must ask how and why it was decided that this was an acceptable way for author, text and audience to come *together*. As a result, I draw out some of the conventions of the fantastic, including its 'topography', in Chapters 4 and 8, but I am also interested in seeing how these are constituted by the genre's audience.

Within the 'meta-genre' of the fantastic, I will argue, we find many genres which share versions of its conventions. Science fiction is perhaps the hardest to define (this is something of a standing joke with fans). The two commonest kinds of definition rely on either *content* or *discourse*, so that SF can be recognised by its use of robots, space ships, and aliens and/or by the way in which it discusses these and other subjects (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983). While I myself prefer the latter form of definition, my discussions with SF readers demonstrate that content-based definition is a common way of constituting the genre. While it is perhaps easier to trace the history of the content of science fiction, a brief sketch of its discursive development more usefully shows the complexity of the genre.

I see the nature of science fiction and its generic conventions at any one time to be the result of a long and complicated conversation between several different discourses: utopia, fantasy, and science. For example, both Alexandra Aldridge (1984) and Raymond Williams (1979) argue that the nature of utopian thought underwent a significant shift during the nineteenth century, a period which saw the establishment of a particularly scientific form of rationalist utopianism. This led, on the one hand, to the establishment of a technocratic science fiction with its roots in Jules Verne's writing, which flourished in the pulp SF of the 1930s (see Ross, 1991). Simultaneously it produced the SF of H. G. Wells, with its more ambiguous reading of technological progress, and prompted a reaction in the form of anti-scientistic dystopias like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). The constitution of these forms of SF was therefore the result of the interplay between the forms of utopianism and scientism dominant at that time.
Similarly, Tulloch and Alvarado (1983) detect both scientific and fantastic elements in *Dr Who*, arguing that these two discourses are in constant tension. The three main discourses unravel into many different strands, and the interweaving of these strands with each other and with external discourses helps us to understand the nature of many different forms of the fantastic. The Gothic, for example, is one result of the mixture of SF and fantasy; the 'hollow earth' or 'lost world' story is another; and More's *Utopia* (1516) is a pre-scientific form of the rationalist utopia.

The sheer complexity of this history means that it is unwise to define the nature of SF too strictly. However, I can say that its difference to the two other main forms of the fantastic, the utopia and the fantasy, lies largely in its reliance on the discourses of science. As a result, it remains the most 'realistic' of all the fantastic genres. Where the fantastic intrudes into science fiction, for example in the form of aliens or technological marvels, it is generally contained by a scientific explanation. If the fantastic event is possible (*i.e.* accountable to the laws of science as we understand them), it can be explained and described realistically. However, the fantastic cannot be simply repressed by science; within all science fiction there are elements of the uncanny. This will be developed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 8, but for now this tension between science and fantasy, with the former usually dominant, will have to serve as a definition of the workings of science fiction.

1.3. Cyberpunk and William Gibson's Fiction

Narrowing down my focus further, the specific type of science fiction I will be studying is cyberpunk, a subgenre which developed during the 1980s in American SF. William Gibson is arguably the most famous and influential cyberpunk author, and his first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), acquired notoriety in the SF community by winning both the major SF awards, the Hugo and the Nebula, as well as the less well-known Philip K. Dick Award. Over the late 1980s Gibson published two sequels to *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), as well as a collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome* (1986). It is this body of work, the novels known as the 'Sprawl Trilogy' and some of the
short stories, which provides the textual source for the thesis, although the respondents I interviewed also discussed his 'steampunk' novel, *The Difference Engine* (co-authored with Bruce Sterling, 1990). Gibson's most recent novel, *Virtual Light* (1993) - which has been interpreted as an attempt to distance himself from cyberpunk - was published after the conclusion of the interviews and is not considered here except to provide further context.

It is at this point that I find it hardest to absent myself from this discussion; this thesis is largely shaped by my enjoyment of and fascination with Gibson's fiction. When I read *Neuromancer* in 1984, I was well and truly hooked - I cannot remember the last time I felt like that about a novel. As a result, sitting on the sidelines while others (especially other academics) construct the meanings of 'cyberpunk' and the worth of Gibson's fiction is extremely frustrating. Since my enjoyment of cyberpunk predates my academic interest, it is also hard to find references for the following information - though it might be impressionistic, I hope it is also informative.

I could devote a whole chapter to the etymology and interpretation of the term 'cyberpunk', since it has become such a loaded term that one of my respondents jokingly refers to it as "the c-word" to avoid dragging its baggage into discussions with fellow fans. Cyberpunk rapidly became the most important development in science fiction in the 1980s and, largely following on the heels of Gibson's crossover into the mainstream, it became a media buzzword. Along the way it shifted from being a description of a subgenre of science fiction to the name of a new subculture and in some cases a new identity. The reasons for this are complex, but I would suggest that it stems from the simultaneous success of Gibson's novels and the media's discovery of a whole new world of hackers, bulletin board culture, smart drugs, virtual realities, radical cosmetic surgery, biotechnologies, cyborgs and a host of other elements of what Mark Dery has usefully dubbed 'cyberculture' (1992). Many of these ideas could be found in Gibson's books; he was hailed as the spokesperson for this new culture, as its guru, and as the prophet of a new-look future.

Strange things began to happen in SF, in the world outside, and in the world of the academy in the late 1980s. Science fiction has, in the eyes of many
readers, fans, and critics, been transformed by the impact of cyberpunk. The works of Gibson and the other 'Mirrorshades' writers (Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, and others)\(^3\) sold well and were so influential that other writers began to use the themes and conventions of the subgenre in their own fiction. As a reader at the time, I felt that some hack writers were jumping on a lucrative bandwagon, a view shared by some of the readers I interviewed. At the same time, the urge to discover cyberpunk 'roots' has also led many to redefine Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Alien* (1979) as cyberpunk, as well as finding 'fathers' for the subgenre in the shape of Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, William Burroughs, Samuel Delany, and others. The absence of any 'mothers' for the subgenre, and Delany's reluctance to accept this paternity suit, are discussed in Chapter 4.

Some fans feel that the cyberpunk 'movement' has died, and that we are now in a 'post-cyberpunk' era; the new conventions provided by the subgenre have become part of the nuts and bolts of SF more generally. This was certainly the intent of the cyberpunk 'movement', or at least of its mouthpiece, Bruce Sterling, who uses his introduction to Gibson's *Burning Chrome* to goad traditional science fiction into accepting that the world has changed and that the future is not what it used to be:

...the sad truth of the matter is that SF has not been much fun of late. All forms of pop culture go through doldrums; they catch cold when society sneezes. If SF in the late Seventies was confused, self-involved and stale, it was scarcely a cause for wonder. \(^{(1988:9)}\)

However, talk of the 'cyberpunk movement' and the polemic of Sterling's manifesto disguises the fact that the cyberpunk authors had and have very little in common (see Suvin, 1989). In terms of content, many were interested in the new technologies, cultures and social relations which they saw just around the corner in the near future - the 'cyber' part of the term. In terms of style and 'attitude', many of these books evoke a sense of cynicism, paranoia, individualism

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\(^3\) This name has been applied to those authors whose short stories are collected in the cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades*, edited by Bruce Sterling (1988).
and hedonism often associated with 'punk'. It is quite possible to be a cyberpunk by concentrating on one half of the term and ignoring the other; indeed, as it rapidly became a lifestyle through the glossy pages of magazines like *Mondo 2000*, the attitude became more important than the substance^4^.

Apart from the diversity of cyberpunk authors, the marketing and subcultural power of the 'punk' suffix promoted a further fragmentation, as new sub-subgenres such as steampunk and splatterpunk appeared. The first focuses on rewriting (sometimes literally) the scientific romances of Verne and Wells: examples include K. W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979) and *Infernal Devices* (1987), James Blaylock's *Homunculus* (1986) and *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (1992), as well as Gibson and Sterling's *Difference Engine*. Again, we could apply the punk style to Jeter but it seems inappropriate for Blaylock. Here the name seems to have been simply acquired rather than earned. Splatterpunk, on the other hand, certainly possesses the punk attitude, as it refers to exceptionally gruesome horror fiction and films; however, it rapidly fell into disuse.

Outside in the real world, cyberpunk became part of a burgeoning cyberculture. It acquired some bizarre gurus: Timothy Leary saw a new psychedelic marvel in virtual reality ('cyberdelia'), as did 'new age guru' Terence McKenna. British techno/pop band The Sham en embraced McKenna's 'techno-paganism', and on the West Coast of the USA rave, techno and industrial music became the cyberpunk's favourite sounds. Somewhere along the line body-piercing, body-painting and tattoos also became part of cyberculture. Performance artists Survival Research Laboratories and Stelarc create robotic combat circuses and turn their bodies into musical instruments respectively^5^. With the advent of the 'information superhighway', and growing public awareness of the existence of the Internet, cyberpunk ideas have become useful conceptual tools by which an increasing number of people in the First World make sense of their everyday lives.

It is this insight which has prompted much of the recent academic interest in cyberpunk and cyberculture. One of the key uses of cyberpunk by critics such

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as Fredric Jameson, Larry McCaffery, and Scott Bukatman is in making sense of what they see as a postmodern world. In Chapter 4 I review this literature and conclude that it is deeply flawed because of its emphasis on purely textual interpretations. However, the acres of criticism devoted to cyberpunk over the last ten years can still be borrowed for an investigation of reading practices. Like many of these critics, I was interested in looking at the ways in which SF, and perhaps cyberpunk in particular, construct representations of a 'postmodern' world. However, I remain sceptical about the assumption that there has been a universal shift in the contemporary economic, social and cultural fabric; far better, I feel, to investigate these shift empirically. For example, Baudrillard (1991) and Haraway (1991a, 1992) provide useful ideas for thinking through the ways in which communications technologies and the media have altered our experiences of place and space, and we could trace those through cyberpunk fiction. However, must we assume that these experiences are common to all people? How do the politics of difference create a complex web of relations to these technologised experiences?

This thesis is not an ethnography of cyberculture, nor is it simply a test of the empirical validity of SF criticism. My aim is to see how readers of William Gibson's cyberpunk use his ideas to make sense of their worlds. Where they feel that an experience is new and unfamiliar, they may use Gibson's tropes to help them reach an understanding that they can use. However it should never be assumed that they will automatically do this, nor that their world is the 'schizophrenic' mess presented to us by Jameson and others. Another consequence of using these fictions as a frame is that I am able to avoid the grand statements of which other SF critics are so fond. If the readers I interviewed discuss the cyborg, then my analysis must be situated within their constructions; I cannot speculate that readers who wish to be cyborgs are suffering from the 'crisis of masculinity' posited by Andrew Ross (1991, and see Chapter 5). It is possible that they are undergoing a personal crisis, or that they perceive new forms of masculinity in Gibson's work; but connecting this up to a general cultural malaise is, in John Fekete's words, "obsessive, simplistic, and devastatingly short-sighted" (1992:398, and see 4.2.1.).
1.4. Cultural Geography and Science Fiction

Unfortunately, when cultural geographers interpret cultural forms they often follow a similarly flawed schema. I will be providing an overview of the relevant work in geography in Chapter 2, but for now I need to set out a brief description of the subdiscipline and my criticisms of some of its methods.

The 'new' cultural geography from which this thesis takes its orientation to culture is critically concerned with the relationship between culture and geography. 'Culture' is another word with a complex history, but contemporary cultural geography usually considers it to be a signifying system by which groups and individuals make sense of their place in society. With the current interest in post-structuralism a consensus is emerging which sees the unmediated experience of place and space as an impossibility; we receive our understanding of the world through culture. In this sense the world is constituted through different kinds of text: speech, the written word, visual representations, sensual contact, and so on.

The second major aim of the subdiscipline is to examine the workings of power in this mediation of experience. Just as there is a politics of culture, there is a cultural politics of place. The construction of difference results in a plurality of geographical experiences and representations, and the power relations which create these different meanings are expressed in the contestation of interpretations. It is not just that there is more than one experience of place: it is that some are more powerful than others.

These theoretical and political positions have resulted in a wide range of cultural geographical research over the last decade. In particular, the arrival of Ecumene, a new journal devoted entirely to one aspect of cultural geography, highlights the diversity and strength of the subdiscipline. I will only be considering one particular aspect of this work: the study of cultural forms such as landscape painting, literary descriptions of place, advertising, news media, and so on. In reviewing this work, which seemed closest to my own research, I hoped to be able to build upon earlier interpretive traditions. However, there is surprisingly little research on science fiction and geography, despite the popularity of the genre; I can only think of three papers by David Lowenthal (1982) and John Gold (1985, 1987). Lowenthal is interested in the representation of past
landscapes through various conventions, including that of the SF time traveller, while Gold examines representations of the future city in films like *Metropolis* and in television documentaries. These papers are ground-breaking explorations of the subject, but unfortunately there has been little attempt to extend this work.

The geographical analysis of cultural forms, especially literature, is examined in detail in Chapter 2, where I make three criticisms of its assumptions and limitations. Firstly I will argue that geography has not yet seriously engaged with the popular, apart from a few exceptions. Secondly, very few geographers have actually considered the role of the reader, and those who have tend to follow post-structuralism in theorising about reading rather than admitting that reading has a materiality as a kind of practice. Thirdly, much of this work has an impoverished understanding of the power of culture. In conceptualising the text-reader relationship as a kind of transmission of meaning from the powerful to the powerless, the critic presupposes that the reader is a passive dupe, receiving the ideological messages encoded into representations of place and space. This is both a result of and a reason for their concentration on the text as the site of meaning-production. For these three reasons, this thesis presents a critique of contemporary cultural geographical studies of cultural forms.

1.5. The Aims of the Thesis

This thesis is not an attempt to build a coherent theoretical foundation for the analysis of cultural texts in geography. Instead it pieces together a set of conceptual tools, both theoretical and methodological, which I have found helpful in my exploration of a specific research question: how do readers make sense of the world elsewhere which is presented to them by William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction? A second question underpins this one: if these works are ideologically constructed, which I believe they are, how is this power mediated in reading practice? In short: what are the political consequences of reading Gibson's books?

I believe that this research could be used to comment on other fields of cultural consumption, and as a critique of much of contemporary cultural geography. However, I am wary of extending these arguments too far, since they are firmly grounded in the specifics of the research. This thesis rests, in the main,
upon material collected from three in-depth discussion groups: sixteen readers and fans who talked about their interpretations of Gibson and SF generally. Before joining the groups, each reader was interviewed on their own, providing one layer of information. Within the groups the readers’ comments are rooted in a specific social dynamic which provides another layer of context, beyond their own experiences. My presence in the discussions also played a role in the constitution of the group dynamics, and my prompts, questions, and interjections form part of the background. This combination of individual and group experiences created a rich and complex set of constructions of Gibson’s texts. However, in a sense that is all I have to go on, which is why the description must be ‘thick’. Taking the comments of one discussant out of the complicated to and fro of their conversational context risks abstraction. To move any further away, to make greater assumptions about ‘deeper meanings’ behind their statements, would be nothing more than educated guesswork. I feel that both cultural geography and science fiction criticism have had enough of that already.

Finally, the two questions outlined above, and the shape of the whole project, arose as the result of my own ‘identity’ as a reader of science fiction. I have been reading science fiction for as long as I can remember and it is still a source of great enjoyment for me. In this way, I am more of an ‘insider’ than many academics might be - although I would say that in the course of the research I learned more from the discussants than they learnt from me. As an insider of sorts, I found it easier to pick my way through the discussions, and felt closer to the readers because we shared a love of SF. This was and still is tremendously important to me. Of course, this makes it harder for me to criticise them, to stand ‘outside’. It would be disingenuous of me to claim that through this closeness I overcame the difference between us but over the course of the research my respect for these people grew, and I began to change the way I thought about readers.

In many other respects I hesitated between involvement and exclusion, wanting to be a ‘reader’ rather than a ‘fan’, like several of the other group members. This hesitation is, I admit, prompted by the existence of the boundary between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste. Andrew Ross describes this process very well. Discussing ‘middlebrow culture’, he asserts that while academic critics are quick
to analyze the popular, they see middlebrow culture as "stale, flat and unprofitable, its politics unremarkable, and its pretensions devoid of the edge that comes with the everyday alienation, as at least one version of populist cultural studies has it, endured by the popular classes" (1991:27). The academic response to cultural formations like the New Age is a 'cringe'. Ross goes on to say:

I do not want to distance myself from this habit, for I am as much a "victim", if you like, of this essentially intellectual tendency. It is a symptom of the logic of cultural capital that the culturally wealthy can afford the kind of downward mobility which sanctions their devotion to the popular, while they police the cultural order by deriding the sublegitimate middlebrow as only they can. The challenge for intellectuals, clearly, is to help create a more democratic cultural politics that would not be hamstrung by this logic.

Like Ross, I cannot pretend that I never cringe; but I do not agree with his idea that we are 'victims' of this tendency. It is difficult to devalue your own cultural capital but we can avoid knee-jerk reactions. Being inside this research has not been simple.

Two things led me to mix criticism and pleasure, thereby putting at risk the enjoyment I get from science fiction: my own dissatisfaction with the critical accounts I had read, and a desire to understand my own reading pleasure. In the first case, I felt like many other readers have when confronted by the critical analysis. To discover that you have been wrong about your favourite author all along is rather upsetting. My own particular way of dealing with this involved finding a way to challenge the critics on their own ground. The second reason is still important to me, though I cannot really put it into words. Fortunately Ien Ang said it for me a decade ago:

At one time I really belonged to the category of devoted Dallas fans. The admission of the reality of this pleasure also formed the starting point for this study - I wanted in the first place to understand this pleasure, without having to pass judgement on whether Dallas is good or bad, from a political, social or aesthetic view. Quite the contrary; in my opinion it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to make such judgements - and hence to try to formulate the terms for a progressive cultural politics - when pleasure is at stake. (1985:12)
The difficulty of judging the things which give you pleasure is certainly something I have felt during this research.

1.6. The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first of these, Argument, Theory and Methodology, discusses the concepts and methods used in the thesis. This chapter is the Introduction; Chapter 2 is a review and a critique of cultural geography's engagement with cultural forms since the late 1970s. I feel that this work is compromised by a failure to move beyond the place of elite culture, by a crude and politically negative picture of the text-reader relationship, and by the adoption of the institutional role of the critic. Chapter 3 discusses formulations of the text-reader relationship developed outside geography, finding a useful set of ideas in the field of audience studies, explaining the theory and practice of the group interviews, and providing a 'model' for the research.

The second section, The World Of Gibson's Fiction, pieces together the readers' constructions of the setting of the Sprawl fictions. Chapter 4 provides a theoretical basis for such an investigation, reviewing the literature of 'science fiction studies', examining the representation of space in the novel, and providing a short summary of the Sprawl fictions. Chapter 5 examines two aspects of Gibson's world of stories to demonstrate the value of this approach, looking at cyberpunk's cultural politics and the figure of the 'posthuman'. Finally, Chapter 6 brings together textual representations and readerly constructions of the two main spaces of cyberpunk, cyberspace and the city.

The final section, Cultural Geography And A Theory Of Reading, is an attempt to ground these readings in the specificities of reading practice. Chapter 7 illustrates how readers construct the genre of SF, how these skills are learned, and which conventions they recognise as central to their enjoyment of the genre. Over the chapter I develop an analysis of specific reading practices. Finally, in Chapter 8 I bring together these ideas in an analysis of the ways in which the discussants read representations of place in cyberpunk and SF, which unites their specific reading practices with generic conventions for depicting space in non-realist fiction.
Chapter 9, Conclusions, draws the thesis to a close by summarising the research findings and investigating their consequences for cultural geography and for studies of reading and science fiction.
CHAPTER 2
ARE LANDSCAPES TEXTS WITHOUT READERS?

'That's the trouble with you intellectuals', said Moonflower... 'You always stare at the images and tell us what they mean to you. You should ask us what the signs mean. We're the people who use them. You should be doing scientific surveys, not staring at your own belly-buttons.'  (Ryman, 1992:392)

2.1. Introduction: Critics and readers

One of the key arguments of this thesis is that academics have largely preferred to make their own interpretations of cultural forms rather than ask readers for their opinions. In this chapter I demonstrate this point through a review of one particular kind of cultural geography.

In section 2.2., I offer an brief overview of those aspects of Anglo-American cultural geography which examine representations of place and landscape in different forms, including literature, landscape art, and the media. This work is closest to my own research, as it investigates the ways in which geographies are imbued with meaning, and the uses people make of their interpretations. However, in the process of detailing the post-structuralist concerns of the 'new' cultural geography in 2.2.3. I develop a critique of this approach which suggests that while geographers are becoming increasingly interested in the textual model of landscape, they have largely ignored the readers of these texts. This, I will argue, is not merely an oversight. Rather, it stems from the power of the academy to determine not only which texts are worth reading, but also how they should be read. This critique is developed in 2.3. and concludes the chapter.

2.2. Geography and the Study of Cultural Forms

Many geographical investigations of culture have concentrated upon representations of place and landscape in different forms and on the landscape itself as a cultural artefact. I want to briefly review this work to show that it cannot provide the foundations for an investigation of the way in which representations of places are read. Contextualising the discussions that follow has
been made easier by the appearance of two short histories of the subdiscipline\(^1\) (Jackson, 1989; McDowell, 1994), and there are also useful reviews of contemporary work (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Gregory and Ley, 1988; Philo, 1988; Cosgrove, 1989, 1990, 1991). Although I have organised my reviews around the object of study - literature, landscape art and the media, and the 'landscape as text' metaphor - each is primarily associated with a particular approach to geographical interpretation.

For example, although the study of literature is still important to cultural geography, the greatest body of this work was produced by humanist geographers in the 1970s. Launched as a reaction to the dominance of positivist geography, humanism (along with existentialism and environmental perception) seemed to offer ways of conceptualising the *subjective* experience of place (Moore and Golledge, 1976; Relph, 1976; Ley and Samuels, 1978; Buttimer and Seamon, 1980). However, these writers risked an "excessive celebration of man" in their emphasis on individual experience at the expense of social structures (Ley, 1981:252), and the approach was extensively criticised by radical and cultural materialist geographers in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Cultural materialism, "a particular application of the Marxist method of historical materialism in the field of cultural studies" (Jackson, 1989:33) seemed to offer cultural geography a synthesis of orthodox marxism and humanism, and therefore a resolution of the structure/agency debate (Cosgrove, 1978; Duncan and Ley, 1982). This particular formulation sees culture as something actively produced by people, though within certain constraints, had been successfully developed by Raymond Williams (for example, 1973, 1977), John Berger (1972), and Edward Thompson (1963, 1971). The value of this approach was explored by Cosgrove (1983), Thrift (1983) and Daniels (1989) amongst others, and this strand of work produced some very interesting cultural geographies which largely concerned landscape art and design, and the mass media. However, the subdiscipline was further transformed by a shift from structuralist to post-structuralist forms of interpretation.

\(^1\) Although these histories have been contested - see Price and Lewis (1993).
The phrase 'new cultural geography' is used by many commentators to describe contemporary work in the subdiscipline. Though the field is currently much larger and more fragmented than ever before, it seems possible to draw out six key themes which are common to much of this work. Firstly, the "cultural turn" in the social sciences has raised the importance of culture in the discipline as a whole (Cosgrove, 1989; Chaney, 1994). Secondly, culture is seen as a political arena or contested space: "that the cultural is political follows logically from a rejection of a unitary view of 'culture', and from a recognition of the plurality of cultures" (Jackson, 1989:4). Thirdly, our conception of cultural politics has been expanded from the largely class-based analyses of the cultural materialists to take in all kinds of cultural difference (McDowell, 1994). Fourthly, and crucially for this chapter, it is possible to see many of these geographies as post-structuralist ones. Following Barthes, Derrida and Foucault there has been a 'linguistic turn' in the subdiscipline which has textualized all cultural forms and problematized representation. Fifthly, geographers have analyzed the postmodern as a new cultural, social and economic formation and used postmodernist analyses to interrogate modernist epistemologies (Soja, 1988; Harvey, 1989). Finally, these latter approaches have led to a reflexive scrutiny of our own academic practices and politics (Crang, 1992, Keith, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Radcliffe, 1994).

Having established something of a context for my discussion of the geographical interpretation of cultural forms, I now want to review the literature in three subsections, which follow this broadly chronological account.

2.2.1. Literature and Geography

As I have said, the study of literature by geographers is still largely associated with the humanistic tradition. However, more recent work has applied cultural materialist and post-structuralist approaches, though the humanistic legacy is still evident in contributions to collections like Preston and Simpson-Housley's Writing the City (1994). This review concentrates on the humanistic tradition, and more recent research - which is closer to the spirit of this thesis - is discussed in 4.4.. The material which follows is indebted to Marc Brosseau's 'Geography's Literature' (1994), which is by far the best overview of the subject.
Earlier studies of geography and literature had used novels as a source of data\(^2\), but the humanists were interested in literature because of its apparent success in 'capturing' the subjective experience of place in print. Key texts which develop this approach include Tuan (1976, 1978), Pocock (1979, 1981a), and Porteus (1985). Tuan argued that the subjective nature of literature invalidated its use as a form of geographical evidence; instead, the subjectivity of authors could be recovered to illustrate their position and worldview (1976). More importantly, literature was felt to articulate experiences which might be suppressed in everyday speech and to discuss the great themes of human existence (birth, life and death), illuminating hidden psychological feelings. I would argue that these themes represent the core concerns of the humanistic engagement with geography. Refining his argument in 1978, Tuan attempted to synthesise the geographer's objective study of the novel with the subjective nature of the experiences represented in it, choosing the nineteenth century realist novel as a model of such a synthesis because it combines realistic external description with discussions of the internal subjective feelings of the characters (1978:204-5). Many of these ideas are reiterated in Pocock's introduction to *Humanistic Geography and Literature* (1981b), in Mallory and Simpson-Housley's collection (1987), and are further elaborated by Porteus (1985).

But what about reading? There is very little discussion of this point, for many of these writers simply argue that literature produces subjective experiences in the reader. Reading is therefore merely a question of receptiveness to these experiences. However, Pocock asserts that

\[\ldots\text{the reader is no neutral receiver, but is also a creative, interpretive being. Both author and reader have their own unique biographical history and general social or cultural contexts... The work is reactivated, and comes alive in the mind and feelings of the reader.}\]

\[1981b:11-12\]

This approach is extremely promising, but is not developed. In fact Pocock, like Tuan, argues that the uniqueness of the reader's interpretations should not

\(^2\) See Darby (1948) and Jay (1975).
deter geographers from studying literature, because the novelist presents us with universal experiences. This suggests that while the humanist geographer should remember that readings are idiosyncratic, it is still possible for him or her to attempt to find transcendental truths within literature.

Literary truth has a universality: it evokes a response in Everyman's breast... (Pocock, 1981b:11)

As a consequence of this, the reader's creativity is ignored in favour of this 'universal literary truth'.

Some of the criticisms which can be levelled at this work have been applied to the humanist project more generally. For example, none of these geographers consider the social and material context in which landscapes and novels are produced, and Pocock and Tuan rest their arguments upon a conception of the human subject which is both individualistic and transcendental, as we have seen. Other critiques are related to the particular field of study. Their engagement with literary criticism is extremely limited, as it takes the form of largely commonsensical reworkings of the New Criticism which represents the conservative heartland of Anglo-American literary theory (Lodge, 1977). As a result, the text is seen as a 'transparent' reflection of experience (Brosseau, 1994:339), and representations of space can be unproblematically abstracted from it because it is seen to have no internal organisation.

This critique can be extended to Tuan's attempt to synthesise objective and subjective modes of study and experience. Brosseau writes that although these geographers "claim not to be looking for positive information of any particular place", they assume that experience can be unproblematically (objectively) represented in texts:

...we remain within a generally unexamined mimetic conception of literature: we go from viewing literature as the reflection of reality to considering it as the reflection of the soul contemplating or experiencing this same reality. (338)

3 An approach criticised by Thrift as "stamp collecting" (1978) and by Gregory as "casual ransacking" (1981).
Cosgrove makes a similar point about the tension between objective/external and subjective/internal theories of landscape in humanist research (1984, and see 2.2.2.). These flaws run through the humanist study of literature and seriously undermine the value of this work.

More productive studies have since appeared. Papers from a cultural materialist position, including Barrell (1982), Thrift (1983), and Silk (1984), sought alternative approaches. Barrell traces a set of subjective but material geographies in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* through the movements of the novel's characters, while Thrift studies the structures of feeling of the British middle class as represented in the poetry of the Great War and John Fowles' novel *Daniel Martin*. Silk's paper is a sustained search for a marxist alternative to humanism, and represents an interesting if rather unfocused critique. In addition, contributions to collections by Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe (1992) and Preston and Simpson-Housley (1994) have variously applied cultural materialist and post-structuralist analyses to very varied literatures (for example, Gilbert, 1994), though a latent humanism seems to dog other contributors (Kneale, forthcoming). Finally, several other papers including Marc Brosseau's excellent study of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1995) are discussed in more detail in 4.4., since their approach is closest to my own.

2.2.2. The Ideology of Cultural Forms: Landscape art and media

I have grouped these two forms together because they are related by a similar mode of interpretation. These two areas of cultural geography have largely been studied using a cultural materialist or structuralist approach, seeking to re-politicise the concerns of the humanists. As such they seek to reveal the ideological nature of texts, and this concern is, I argue, inherited from the work of critics like Raymond Williams and John Berger, and in the case of the media, from the analyses of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).

Examining studies of landscape art first, the most important figure is Denis Cosgrove, whose *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984) represents the most thorough application of cultural materialism of Williams and Berger to
geography. Cosgrove follows Berger in tracing the history of a particular "way of seeing" from the development of perspective in early modern Italy and Flanders as "an articulation of a human relationship with" the natural world (9). Through perspective the landscape painting offered the viewer an illusion of control over the represented view. The relationship with nature which is offered is therefore one of ownership, of subjective control over an objective environment, and domination by an individual outsider at the expense of the collective experience of insiders. These expressions of individualistic power are, Cosgrove suggests, linked to the emergence of distinctly capitalist forms of social organisation, and he traces the specific histories of the landscape idea in relation to particular historical geographies of capitalist Western Europe and North America. These ideas were also developed in two important papers from the same period (Cosgrove, 1982 and 1985).

Outside geography, John Barrell's work on landscape art and poetry (1972, 1980) follows a similar argument, and Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) is still a highly influential model for this approach. Stephen Daniels extends these cultural materialist analyses in his studies of the work of landscape architects like Humphrey Repton (1981, 1982), arguing that their parks were constructed on the model of the painted landscape analyzed by Cosgrove. The last contribution of this kind that I wish to address is Cosgrove and Daniels' *The Iconography of Landscape* (1988), because it seems to represent a transitional stage between cultural materialist interpretation and the post-structuralism described in 2.2.3..

In their introduction, Cosgrove and Daniels discuss the iconographic method of interpretation, blending the metaphor of landscapes as *texts* with structuralist metaphors of 'uncovering' hidden depths of meaning (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1988:7). There are clear signs here that post-structuralism had entered the field.

There is (astonishingly) comparatively little research on the 'mass' media. Indeed, in 1985, Jacquelin Burgess and John Gold wrote that "the media have been on the periphery of geographical enquiry for too long" (1), and little had changed when Burgess re-surveyed the field in 1990. In fact, without Burgess' own contributions this kind of work would be even less significant. Beginning with a study of place advertising in 1982, Burgess continued this line of enquiry
with an analysis of the selling of London's Docklands (with Peter Wood, 1988). Burgess was also co-editor of Geography, the Media, and Popular Culture with Gold (1985), for several years the only book-length examination of this topic. I want to begin with this collection because it represents an interesting angle on the cultural materialist approach.

Rejecting the American tradition of communications research for its behaviouralist assumptions, Burgess and Gold see the work of the CCCS (especially Stuart Hall) and of writers like Williams as holding out great promise for geographical interpretations of the media. Drawing upon this work, they suggest that the media is "the major cultural and ideological force in contemporary life" (23). Interestingly, they also raise the question of media audiences, following the "recognition that groups and individuals will decode messages differently" (25). Finally, Burgess and Gold also present a synthesis of media sociology, textual study and audience work based upon Hall's notion of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980b). This provided a very challenging agenda for cultural geographers, and it is a shame that the majority of the collected papers did not live up to it. As a statement of intent, though, it is evidence of a strong commitment to the study of the media and popular culture.

Burgess' later work has moved away from the structuralist conception of ideology which underpins papers like 'News From Nowhere' (1985). Having noted the role of the audience in 1985, she draws upon the field of audience studies (see 3.2.2.) to build a coherent and sophisticated model of the communication and transformation of environmental meanings (1990; and see Burgess, Harrison and Maiteny, 1991). Burgess' work on the media represents a strong alternative to the highly influential post-structuralist 'landscape as text' approach, and this thesis is built upon a similar commitment to the study of the consumption, as well as the production, of geographical meanings.

2.2.3. Landscape As Text: Post-structuralist geographies

This approach is based upon a key post-structuralist tenet: that geographical writing is never simply a reflection of the world. Since the relationship between sign and referent has been displayed to be arbitrary by
Saussure, it follows that the real world cannot be captured in writing. As a result, we must be aware that our writing is nothing more than a set of representations, and that our constructions of reality are bound up in a set of power relations: writing is a political act.

I will discuss three important moments in the development of a post-structuralist cultural geography, linked by the work of one writer, James Duncan. Duncan's own position has shifted significantly since 1988, and this does, I think, point to what might be described as 'the rise and fall of post-structuralist geographies'. Each stage of this work is considered in terms of its relationship to literary theory, and its conception of power in language. This last point is then developed into a critique of the entire project in 2.3.1., as I argue that our theories of the politics of language tend to combine post-structuralism and older, largely structuralist, models of ideology despite the tension between these approaches.

The first important paper is James and Nancy Duncan's 'Re)reading the landscape' (1988), which starts with the premise that "literary theory provides us with ways to examine the text-like quality of landscapes, and to see them as transformations of ideologies" (117). Duncan and Duncan's conception of the text is based upon the post-structuralist critique of referential theories of language. Following Barthes, they stress the role of the reader in creating meaning from intertextual associations. Surprisingly, they also suggest that

Although it is important to recognise the instability of meaning, it is equally important to realize that this plurality is finite. It is related to actual empirical differences in interpretations.

(120)

Compared with later post-structuralist geographies, this is a rather down-to-earth position. Despite this, the paper fails to demonstrate convincingly how representations of landscape communicate meanings to those who experience them. Using a term which we will encounter throughout this section, Duncan and Duncan suggest that landscapes "naturalize" ways of thinking about the world, and that the job of the critic is to "denaturalize" them:

If landscapes are texts which are read, interpreted according to an ingrained cultural framework of interpretation, if they are often read...
‘inattentively’ at a practical or nondiscursive level, then they may be inculcating their readers with a set of notions about how the society is organized: and their readers may be largely unaware of this.

(123, emphasis added)

Duncan and Duncan suggest that landscapes (and their politics) are taken for granted because they are "so tangible, so natural, so familiar" (123). Although they qualify this by saying that landscapes do not necessarily naturalize social relations, and suggest that this process can be challenged by groups outside the academy, they argue that "denaturalization in this and other realms is an important task of the academic as critical theorist" (125). These arguments rehearse those made by later post-structuralist geographies.

The second stage seems to represent a moment of acceptance, as this approach became an important form of geographical interpretation. The texts I will use to illustrate this are James Duncan’s *The City As Text* (1990), Trevor Barnes and James Duncan’s collection *Writing Worlds* (1992a), and Jeffrey Hopkins’ ‘West Edmonton Mall’ (1990). The 1987 AAG meeting in Portland, Oregon, seems to have spurred this development, as two special sessions were devoted to the theme of ‘Text and landscape’. As well as providing the majority of the papers for *Writing Worlds*, the conference probably provided a stimulus for later work of this type.

Duncan’s study of the role of landscape in constituting social meaning in nineteenth century Kandy is an excellent post-structuralist geography (1990). Drawing upon both historical archive work and contemporary readings of the landscapes of the past, the book focuses on the textual characteristics of the urban structure of Kandy itself:

...the physical form of the city constituted a text which was in turn a transformation of the texts that informed the discursive field of Kandyan kingship.

(6)

The last king of Kandy attempted to rebuild the city to rewrite the text of kingship in his own favour, prompting a struggle over the definition of Kandyan society expressed through rival readings of the 'city-text'. Duncan suggests that these competing discourses represent ideological and social struggles over the
symbolic meaning of place.

Seeking to explain landscape's role in the reproduction of ideology, Duncan expands upon the concept of 'naturalization', asking a question which is central to this whole body of work: how do landscapes signify and naturalize meaning? For Duncan, the answer lies in what he calls 'the rhetoric of landscape'. Rhetorical studies aim to uncover the tropes (metaphor, metonym, synecdoche and others) which encode meaning in a text in such a way that it convinces readers. He argues that this rhetoric is ideological, fixing or normalizing meanings which then become taken-for-granted. Landscape, as a concrete, anonymous text, is a powerful channel for these ideologies because it is "an objectifier par excellence":

[A landscapes] history as a social construction is unexamined. It is, therefore, as unwittingly read as it is unwittingly written. (19)

This conception of textual power represents the major flaw of these geographies, as I will go on to demonstrate.

Trevor Barnes and James Duncan's introduction to Writing Worlds (1992b) presents a similar argument, based upon a critique of 'objectivism' which reiterates Duncan and Duncan's attack on 'referential' theories of meaning. There are three consequences of this. Firstly, writing reflects not reality but other writing, through intertextuality. Secondly, "writing about worlds reveals as much about ourselves as it does about the world represented"; writing is part of a set of wider power relationships which constitute the producer's authority (3). Thirdly, Barnes and Duncan inform us that "in writing worlds, we must pay attention to our rhetoric, as well as the rhetoric of others" (3): a call for reflexivity.

Discussing the nature of texts brings the reader into the frame of interpretation in an interesting way:

...the meaning of a text is unstable, dependent upon the wide range of interpretations brought to bear upon it by different readers. ...these interpreters are not free to make of the text what they like, but are subject to discursive practices of specific textual communities.

'Textual communities' are defined as "social groups that cluster around a
shared reading of a text" (1988:117). This notion allows the social to creep back into post-structuralist geographies. However, Barnes and Duncan's conception of the social is also textualized. Therefore

The social-life-as-text metaphor is easily applicable to landscape because it too is a social and cultural production. (6)

If the social and cultural are textual, and the landscape is socially and culturally produced, then landscape must also be a text.

These landscape-texts are convincing in two ways. Firstly, Barnes and Duncan draw upon Foucault to suggest that "it is their association with institutions that legitimates the 'truths' that they produce" (9). This 'association', it seems, serves to naturalize ideology. Secondly, meanings are naturalised through rhetoric, especially metaphors. Barnes and Duncan define the latter as a trope which "asserts a similarity between two or more different things" (10). The contrast between the different terms creates "all manner of effects", from laughter to "the creative spark" (10). Once metaphors have become accepted, they die, ceasing to have any further transformative effects; they can then appeal to objectivity because they are taken for granted.

These points can also be seen in Jeffrey Hopkins' study of the West Edmonton Mall (1990), which mirrors James Duncan's work. While it anticipates the 1992 collection, I have dealt with Writing Worlds first because it is a clearer and more detailed exposition of a post-structuralist geography. Hopkins' aim, ambitiously enough, is to provide an interpretation of a contemporary "landscape of simulation" (2), the West Edmonton Mall. The world's first mega-mall creates "an environment of 'elsewhere'" through:

...the overt manipulation of time and/or space to simulate or evoke experiences of other places for profit and amusement. (2)

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I am slightly surprised that Barnes and Duncan do not recognise that metaphors create meanings which may in fact be utterly arbitrary. In other words, it seems pointless to 'prove' the similarity between society and the text: all this demonstrates is the power of the metaphor that makes this equivalence possible.
While Hopkins reads the WEM as a text, he is far more interested in the readings of others - the ideological effect of this "spatial strategy of 'simulated elsewhere'" (2, emphasis in original). Hopkins' interpretative method rests upon a semiotic and iconic approach similar to the rhetorical strategy employed by Duncan, Barnes and several of the contributors to Writing Worlds. However, Hopkins' conception of the dominant ideology behind this simulation of elsewhereness sees it as a cover for the real work of shifting products. Hopkins presents a rewriting of media studies 'effects theory' (see 2.3.1. and 3.2.2.): having fun at the mall, it seems, is merely a sugar coating which disguises the bitter pill of consumption. For example, Hopkins admits that the malls' patrons are not fooled by this elsewhereness but concludes that this makes them "temporal and spatial hypocrites engaged in play" (13). Damned if you are fooled, damned if you are not.

As the third moment in the development of this approach, Place/Culture/Representation seems to mark a shift, or perhaps a maturing, of the dialogue with post-structuralism (1993a). Duncan and Ley's introduction (1993b) retreats from the fairly 'high' post-structuralism of the earlier work, and perhaps surprisingly suggests a return to hermeneutics. In other ways, though, the introduction keeps to the agenda set by Writing Worlds. The concepts of 'referential meaning' and 'objectivism' introduced by earlier contributions are usefully relocated within the history of Anglo-American human geography. Duncan and Ley identify "four major modes of representation" within the discipline: two attempt to represent the world mimaetically, while the other two are critically opposed to such a project (2). Mimesis mimics or reflects reality, refusing to problematize the act of depiction. The two mimetic modes are "descriptive fieldwork based on observation" and "a form of mimesis loosely based upon positivist science" (2); the other two are postmodernism and hermeneutic interpretation (3). In the latter, which emerges as the favourite, attempts at mimesis are denied by the researcher's awareness of his or her presence within the research.

In their critique of mimesis, Duncan and Ley argue that it conceals the social construction of language (4). Tellingly, they draw upon Barthes' structuralist arguments in Mythologies (1972) to strengthen their claim that
mimesis naturalizes social relations. However, they concede that this mimesis is constantly subverted; feminists and post-colonialist critics have added to the critique of mimesis by underlining its collusion with patriarchy and imperialism. The idea that 'ordinary' readers outside the academy might recognise that this reality is constructed is not considered, though it seems to me to be almost self-evident. Despite this, Duncan and Ley's discussion of the reader is perhaps the most useful theorisation yet offered in geography; we move towards a less mechanical theory of the production and consumption of meaning:

The world in the text is continually compared to the worlds outside the text in order to see what the former reveals about the latter and as a 'test' of the plausibility of the former. (9-10)

I will discuss the value and problems of such a theorisation later, but it is important to note that while post-structuralism places the reader centre-stage, it has taken five years for him or her to get more than a token mention from these cultural geographers.

Apart from Duncan and Ley's comments on 'naturalization' (discussed above), the collection largely avoids the question of representational power. Denis Cosgrove and Mona Domosh's paper (1993), which explicitly examines the authority of the author and the text, uses the concept of hegemony to account for the power of cultural representations:

Theories of hegemony suggest that [a struggle over meaning] occurs through a process of naturalizing specific discourses, suppressing others and thus legitimizing uneven distributions of power. (29)

As usual, the authors neglect to explain how this naturalization and suppression is achieved - are some discourses natural simply because they are linked to hegemonic interests? Rhetoric is also largely absent, apart from the landscape-text metaphor and its derivatives (for example, landscape as spectacle or theatre, see Daniels and Cosgrove, 1993). As a result, the papers in Place/Culture/Representation are generally more careful in their assumptions.

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5 Their ideas are taken from Iser (1989); see 3.2.1.
about texts and discourses, though the question of textual power is still answered by references to 'naturalization' and 'association', as I have shown.

2.3. A Critique of Geographical Interpretation

In my review of the geographical study of cultural forms I noted two main problems. Firstly, the reader is largely considered only as a theoretical abstraction or ignored altogether; secondly, readers are presumed to be unproblematically influenced by the texts they read, whether they are novels, works of art, or material landscapes. This section develops these arguments into a critique of these modes of interpretation. In 2.3.1. I examine post-structuralist geographies in more detail, since it has become a sophisticated and influential form of interpretation in cultural geography. However, these studies rely upon a theory of ideology which is, I argue, simplistic, mechanical, and at odds with a post-structuralist approach. Having established this, I turn to the question of taste as a partial explanation of the flaws of this method in 2.3.2. and conclude by examining the role of the critic in producing the figure of the reader as a passive 'dupe' in 2.3.3.

2.3.1. The Problem with 'Naturalization'

From my review of the 'landscape as text' literature, it would seem that the most important questions raised by this approach are:

Do landscapes communicate ideologies to those who view or read them?

If they do, how is this achieved?

I would suggest that the concepts of representational power used by the vast majority of these authors are simply forms of the 'effects theory' which plagues media criticism. Where conservative effects theory - exemplified by debates over the power of videos to corrupt the young - assumes that cultural texts make deviants of their consumers, an equally influential left-liberal version argues that hegemonic ideologies promote forms of false consciousness. Aspects of this 'theory' persist in post-structuralist landscape studies, and I suggest that we have yet to
produce a theory of landscape meaning which escapes the crude determinations of 'naturalization'. In 2.2.3. I showed that this idea is central to the approach of these geographers. They argue that landscapes naturalize social relations and fix hegemonic meanings in three ways: by *association*; through *rhetoric*; and through *over-familiarity*. I will examine each idea in turn, before returning to the idea of rhetoric to display some of the problems with the idea of naturalization.

Landscape-texts can be powerful through *association* because they are linked to institutions and sites of power: science, government, law, and so on. However, must we assume that these legitimating sites and discourses are always accepted by those who experience them? The mechanisms by which this power is transmitted from source to landscape to reader are presumed to be infallible. In fact, this power-by-association theory still does not convincingly demonstrate how this power is produced, or how it is used in practice.

The *rhetoric* of landscape seems to work in one of two ways: by generalizing from a particular example, or by substituting one thing for another. The first establishes a *metonymic equivalence*, as a part is exchanged for the whole, or vice versa; the second creates a *metaphoric equivalence* as two different terms are involved in a process of substitution (Lodge, 1977). The idea that rhetoric possesses a generalizing power, like the theory of power-by-association, ignores the social nature of language. Can we be certain that these generalizations will not be challenged, or simply taken for what they are: exaggerations? The power of metaphor is similarly tenuous.

The idea of *over-familiarity* suggests that landscapes are so concrete and taken for granted that they successfully hide their own constructedness. Similarly, when metaphors become over-used, they cease to be shocking, settling into cliche. These dead metaphors no longer draw attention to themselves and are therefore subliminally persuasive. Again, this idea rests upon a specific conception of the communication of meaning.

The theory of power which underpins these ideas is based upon what media studies critics would term a 'transmission model': meanings are unproblematically transmitted to the reader, who simply accepts them. It is interesting that Duncan and Duncan (1988) use the metaphor of "uncovering" meaning, and that in 1993
Duncan and Ley could still cite Barthes' *Mythologies*, a classic structuralist text, as support for the 'naturalization' thesis. The notion of power that these authors seem to be working with is, I would suggest, a post-structuralist analysis bolted onto an earlier structuralist theory of meaning. The task of the critic, specially trained, is to uncover the real meaning of the text, so that its harmful ideological content can be neutralised. The tension between the ideas of 'representation' and 'truth' hardly needs to be emphasised, yet it remains at the core of this approach.

Not only is this theory extremely simplistic and pessimistic, it also rests upon a conception of the reader as a passive 'dupe'. For the Duncans and others, the goal of the critic is to 'denaturalize' the landscape; the possibility of a non-academic making this kind of challenge is rarely addressed. Though the reader is supposed to be the privileged site of post-structuralist criticism, this approach actually constructs two readers: the active reader and the dupe. In fact, only certain readers are granted the active role suggested by post-structuralism. In addition, it is assumed that meanings are either accepted or rejected. Ideology, it seems, either works or fails, and its success is dependent upon the nature of the reader. When it works (on the 'unwitting' non-academics) it is utterly effective and creates some form of false consciousness. When it does not (in the case of the critic), its ideological nature is instantly visible and easily 'denaturalized'. I find this hard to believe, and I am convinced that Gillian Rose is right when she writes that the use of a "binary model of culture" has led geographers to make a priori assumptions about the power of culture (1994, and see 2.3.2.).

These problems are especially obvious in those works which use a rhetorical analysis. I want to demonstrate this through an examination of a central text for many of these cultural geographers: Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* (1978). White assesses the role of tropes (rhetorical forms) in representing and constituting consciousness, and he argues that all discourse contains tropes, no matter how realistic its style (2). This latter point is often reiterated by Duncan and others to emphasise the importance of rhetoric, but they tend to gloss over White's elaboration of this argument. He argues that the study of tropes can help

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6 It should be pointed out that Cosgrove and Domosh (1993) criticise the Duncans for assuming that ideology can be "unmasked".
us to understand the ways in which people make sense of the world. This is because tropes represent a turning away from one possible meaning and towards another. This switch in meaning represents the practice of understanding:

Understanding is a process of rendering the unfamiliar...familiar; of removing it from the domain of things felt to be "exotic" and unclassified into one or another domain of experience encoded adequately enough to be felt to be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association. This process of understanding can only be tropological in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative. (5)

To use a pertinent example, geographers have troped their understanding of the term 'landscape' away from 'material object' to 'text'. The landscape metaphor has changed because cultural geographers felt unhappy with the older idea of a stable, concrete landscape. Seeking an analogy for landscape which would fit their new pre-occupation with polysemy and interpretation, they decided that this newly unfamiliar landscape was actually like something very close to their hearts: the written text. This is a figurative troping, in White's terms, because it involves a representation of the landscape through a new metaphor.

It is White's conception of this "process of understanding" which I wish to criticise. He writes that when we attempt to render the unfamiliar familiar, we make propositions which often take the form "this is that": in other words, a metaphor, "without which our transition from a state of ignorance to one of practical understanding would be unthinkable" (20). Even if the metaphor is considered to be 'wrong', it still demonstrates how understanding is reached:

...it gains its effect as an illumination, if not of reality, then of the relationship between words and things. (21)

I have used this insight to suggest the reasons for the origin of the 'landscape as text' metaphor above. However, where I disagree with White is in his assertion that the two terms in the proposition "this is that" are not in a state of tension. To develop this I need to discuss White's rhetorical analysis of A. J. P. Taylor's historical writings.
Starting with the premise that there is "no escaping the determinative power of figurative language-use" (105), White demonstrates that the rhetorical language of Taylor's historical writing "serves as a "code" by which the reader is invited to assume a certain attitude towards the facts and the interpretation of them" (107). White argues that a passage of Taylor's writing possesses a beginning, a middle and an end, and a 'plot' which could be described as a "pseudotragedy" (109). White goes on to find a kind of hidden structure in the passage, "a level of secondary meaning" which organises the narrative to gain the maximum effect from the reader (110). None of this is particularly controversial; I support White's claims for the poetic function of non-literary writing because like him I cannot believe that mimetic representation is possible. Where I disagree is with the assumptions he makes about the 'encoding' of this 'deep structure' and its power to convince. Having made his points about Taylor's style, he shows that it contains "dead metaphors":

...the appeal of dead metaphors to particular groups of readers should not be underestimated. They can, in fact, be comforting, having the effect of reinforcing views already held and serving to familiarize phenomena that otherwise would remain exotic or alien. (114)

Their very lack of vividness helps these metaphors to appear 'objective', working their effects more subtly because they are taken for granted. This parallels the idea of 'over-familiarization' discussed above. In addition, although White does not go as far as Duncan et al in assuming that rhetoric 'naturalizes' meaning, he does see the reader as the passive recipient of coded meanings:

[The secondary] figurative level is produced by a constructive process, poetic in nature, which prepares the reader of the text more or less subconsciously to receive both the description of the facts and their explanation as plausible, on the one side, and as adequate to one another, on the other. (110, emphasis added)

This position influences White's theory of understanding. While he seems to recognise the active, creative nature of the understanding process, he also sees dead metaphors as "comforting" and "reinforcing" to the reader, who is being prepared "more or less subconsciously" to believe the author through the text's
tropes. There is no indication that the reader might be able to resist (unless he or she is a critic like White), nor of a more complex formulation which would allow the reader to be both convinced and sceptical at the same time. This theory of rhetoric sees language as effecting instant changes in the reader's understanding through the operations of the text.

This idea of the process of understanding relies upon a particular conception of the workings of metaphor. If we return to White's description of this process, we can see that it rests upon the point that we understand the world by "rendering the unfamiliar into the familiar". I am in complete agreement with this, but those geographers who have used his work seem to see this rendering as a kind of loss. By making the strange into the known, by classifying and naming the Other, we create, it seems, an impoverished image of the world. However, this only follows if we assume that in every case understanding will be determined by hegemonic discourses, and I find this difficult to believe. If we move away from the idea that understanding necessarily involves a flattening of our experience of the world, then we might be prepared to investigate the empirical workings of this process of understanding. For de Certeau, for example, the practice of making sense is a vital aspect of everyday life, and need not necessarily reproduce hegemonic ideologies (1984, and see 3.2.2.).

In fact, this rather pessimistic theory of understanding rests upon a particular interpretation of the role of metaphor. White's formulation of the position "this is that" assumes that one term is neatly transformed into the other, so that 'landscape' becomes 'text'. This is based upon a theory of equivalence, where the two terms are considered to be synonymous once the metaphor has been created. However, if we compare this with structuralist and formalist theories of metaphor, particularly the work of Roman Jakobson, we find a very different idea of the relationship between the two terms. Drawing on such a tradition, it is not surprising that David Lodge is more interested in the tension between the terms than in their equivalence or similarity (1977). This tension allows metaphors to be productive precisely because they say that one thing is actually another.

For example, Lodge takes the sentence "the ships crossed the sea" to demonstrate the differences between metonyms and metaphors. After he has
troped the sentence, it becomes "the keels ploughed the deep". Keels are part of a ship, so this is a synecdoche (a kind of metonym); "deep" is a property of "sea", so this too is a metonym. However, to replace "crossed" with "ploughed" we must recognise the similarity between the ship's wake and a ploughed field. This metaphorical substitution therefore requires a bigger 'jump' in understanding than the substitution of "deep" for "sea". In cultural forms or styles which rely on metonyms, Lodge suggests, it is easier to create an illusion of mimesis, "not as a model of reality, but as a representative bit of reality" (109); his examples are film, journalism, and the nineteenth century novel. Those that rely on metaphor (drama, poetry, the modernist novel) constantly draw attention to their constructedness. This is because the narrative and the metaphor are in tension:

The greater the distance (existentially, conceptually, affectively) between [the old and new terms], the more powerful will be the semantic effect... but the greater, also, will be the disturbance to the relationships of contiguity between items in the discourse and therefore to realistic illusion. (111)

In other words, the more unfamiliar the metaphor, the more it stands out from the narrative, and the less convincing it will be. It is obvious that Lodge's theory of the power of rhetoric is similar to White's, but this is irrelevant to my argument.

I want to use these contrasting theories of metaphor to suggest that there must be some middle ground between Lodge's and White's positions. Lodge reminds us that metaphors can be strange, perhaps even shocking, and this is a useful corrective to the ideas of White and those geographers who follow him. My own position would be that we should not take metaphors for granted in either of these two ways. They are elements of language which can be accepted, transformed, or rejected, and the particular ways in which readers perform these activities cannot be predicted from an analysis of the text.

I hope that I have established that these theories of power in language - power-by-association, rhetoric, and familiarity - are all based upon two flawed premises. Firstly, they depend upon the passivity of the reader, who is unable, except in the most obvious cases, to resist ideological messages. Secondly, they
create a rather rigid conception of the effects of this power. Meanings are unproblematically transmitted and then either accepted or resisted. If we are prepared to move away from these two ideas, then we must accept that the reader is not simply an ideological dupe, but an active producer of meaning; and this means that every reading must always be a transformation of some kind. Readers make sense of texts in ways which seem sensible to them, drawing upon their experiences of other texts, other social and cultural situations. Meanings are therefore always always being made and remade, not simply passed on or dropped. We need to stop thinking about culture as a form of transmission, and instead see it as a network of understandings which make sense through their relationship to each other.

2.3.2. Interpretation and the 'Binary Theory of Culture'

Why do so many cultural geographers assume that texts are powerful and readers so passive? In this section I suggest that this may partly be due to their view of culture as a sphere strictly divided into hegemonic and subordinate domains. This assertion rests upon Gillian Rose's argument that we have been working with a simplistic model of cultural politics, which has had the pernicious consequence of focusing our attention on the works of the elite. In 'The cultural politics of place' (1994), Rose identifies the theory of ideology used by cultural geographers:

...ideology is used to refer to the appropriation of meaning by dominant social groups; certain values are rendered commonsense and this process of discursive naturalization legitimates the social hierarchy by obscuring its oppressive social relations. (46)

This describes the work discussed above very neatly. Rose's main argument is that this concept of hegemonic, ideological meaning has created "a fascination with the images produced by the powerful"; Gramsci's influence has left us with what Rose terms a "binary model of culture" (47), divided into the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic. While this division seems useful, it has two consequences. The first concerns the question of 'naturalization':
...the particular use made by many geographers of the term ‘ideology’ focuses their attention on the reproduction of the status quo. This has the insidious effect of translating most geographers’ interest in power into an interest in the powerful. (48, emphasis in original)

In other words, because they assume that the power of the hegemonic group is fixed and will, in most cases, be reproduced by the dominated group, the study of power becomes a study of the powerful. The second consequence of the binary model is linked to the nature of the academy:

...this is a self-reflexive moment for many academics working in the field of cultural studies. Given the massive complicity of the academy with the powerful... cultural geographers considering their own role in what is understood as a bipolar field of culture feel they must position themselves on the hegemonic side of the fence. (48)

Wanting to avoid Othering the less powerful, and accepting their own position as part of the elite, cultural geographers have shied away from representing those outside the hegemonic group. However, as Rose shows, this results in a silencing of oppositional discourses that mimics the hegemonic oppression which geographers wish to challenge. In summary, Rose suggests that cultural geography may have avoided the ‘mass’, their media and their culture, because it has been assumed that while the elite produces, the mass simply consumes.

I wish to develop this to explain the conception of power I have criticised in 2.3.1.. If landscapes are the products of the powerful, and the latter are always able to convince the subordinate group, then it follows that landscapes are utterly convincing. Syllogistic reasoning like this has led to an assumption that ‘naturalization’ is utterly and instantly effective in transmitting ideology. In addition, this makes a text a simple conduit for hegemonic power; as Brosseau suggests, this conception of language sees it as transparent (1994). Are landscapes nothing more than lightning-conductors for power? This would imply that post-structuralist geographers have ignored the formal properties of texts, as well as the role of the author and reader: these interpretations are only studies of ideology, which is carried unchanged from producers to consumers.
Finally, I would argue that the binary theory of culture has reinforced these geographers' dismissive attitude towards popular culture. Pierre Bourdieu's exhaustive study of the making of "taste" (1986) demonstrates convincingly that the appeal of particular kinds of culture is not a matter of personal preference but is rooted in social difference. The cultural capital amassed by the geographers I have been discussing is immediately evident from a consideration of their research interests: the humanists concentrated on the canonical nineteenth century realist novel, and its twentieth century descendants; the cultural materialists on landscape painting, neo-classical architecture, and the landed estate, as well as the 'greats' of literature; the post-structuralists have also examined the landscapes of the powerful. Those few geographers who have studied media texts are, of course, the exception to this rule; but many of the geographers who have examined popular cultural forms have tended to address their media products as though they were 'high art'. A glance at the film-makers studied by geographers is illuminating. Aitken and Zonn chose Peter Weir (1993); Aitken, Bill Forsyth (1991); David Harvey, Ridley Scott and Wim Wenders (1989). The only one of these directors who might not be considered to be some kind of auteur is Ridley Scott, and it is arguable that through its popularity with critics, Blade Runner has become a 'classic', rising out of its low- or middle-brow origins.

In conclusion, these critics have ignored popular culture, or seen it as being entirely created by hegemonic production. My critique goes even further: I would suggest that there is yet another strand to this academic construction of the popular, and it lies in what Michel de Certeau provocatively calls "scriptural imperialism": the power of writing over reading (1984:169). Can we detect this force at work in cultural geography?

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Guardian readers voted the original version of Blade Runner as the 9th and the Directors Cut as the 65th best films made between 1980 and 1993, reflecting its 'classic' status for a largely high-brow audience.
2.3.3. Cultural Geography's Scriptural Imperialism

...one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years. The reader has always been the most under-privileged of this trio - strangely, because without him or her there would be no literary texts at all... For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author. (Eagleton, 1983:74)

The reader is indeed central to post-structuralism, and consequently to the work of post-structuralist geographers. However, I would like to argue that the theoretical emphasis on reading, especially in geography, has served to hide the existence of the 'real' reader: the person who actively creates meaning through their contact with the text. This is one form of de Certeau's "scriptural imperialism", a strategy operating out of the institution of the academy which is consistently used to characterise consumers as a mass which "is imprinted by and like the text which is imposed on it" (de Certeau, 1984:167, emphasis in original).

Before I return to de Certeau's ideas on the scriptural economy, I would like to discuss the absence of the reader in cultural geography.

In many cases, and certainly before post-structuralism became significant, cultural geography completely ignored the reader. The dialogue between humanistic geography and literature found no real role for the reader, beyond Tuan's suggestion that "literature provides a perspective for how people experience their world" (1978:14). While this idea encapsulates the nature of this project, and it is possible to see traces of it in Seamon's paper (1981) and elsewhere, it remains rooted in a method which speculates as to how readers might respond to texts, a model which I will return to in a moment. However, much of the humanist literature, and parts of the cultural materialist strand of cultural geography, has no explicit concept of the reader. Based largely upon the critic's own reading of a text, the implication of this kind of study is that the reader's experience is not worth discussing.

The second construction of the reader is the 'speculative' model I have already mentioned. This is described in more detail in 3.2.1., but effectively the critic reads the text in such a way as to construct an idea of the reader's
responses. While the formulations of cultural critics like Mulvey (1975) and literary theorists like Iser (1989) are useful for their recognition that the text cannot make meaning on its own, they are still unwilling to engage with the empirical reality of reading. In a sense, the speculative critic is like an archaeologist who attempts to reconstruct the nature of prehistoric cultures from their artifacts alone; it is almost as if we are examining the text to establish the practices of a dead people.

In cultural geography it is possible to discern this approach in cultural materialist and post-structuralist interpretative strategies. In general, cultural materialist approaches are not explicitly based upon this kind of model, although Cosgrove's analysis of the workings of perspective bears some similarity to the work of Mulvey and other 'speculative critics'. The post-structuralist geographers discussed in 2.2.3. are also working with a version of the speculative model, since post-structuralism turns the attention of the critic away from the text to privilege the act of reading. However, the text-reader relationship is, as we have seen, often reduced to one of 'effects', as textual rhetoric is assumed to fix the reader's interpretation. In this formulation the critic is once again attempting to predict readers' responses from textual clues. Jacquelin Burgess discusses this tendency in studies of 'the postmodern landscape', concluding

The analyst remains in the dominant position of telling readers what these landscapes mean for the people who purchase and live in them. (1990:140)

In summary, while the reader is central to post-structuralist thinking, in practice this interpretative strategy can only construct the reader theoretically, reducing the complexities of reading to broad generalisations. In this thesis I challenge these and other critical representations of the reader.

These problems are compounded by the model of power criticised in 2.3.1. and 2.3.2.. The static hegemonic model criticised by Gillian Rose (1994) turns the reader into a 'black box': hegemonic discourses enter to be simply reproduced and passed on. Rose's earlier work (1993) allows me to develop this argument further. Looking at the landscape as text metaphor, she illustrates a paradox in the model...
of the text offered by Barnes and Duncan:

The meaning of any landscape/text is open to interpretation and contestation, they [Barnes and Duncan] imply; the author of the landscape/text is dead. *But then I find their stress on the fixity of the landscape/text puzzling.* (1993:100, emphasis added)

This 'fixity' is the 'naturalization' discussed above. Rose sees this apparent paradox as an aspect of the masculinist and rational nature of geographical knowledge:

I suggest that the notion of solidity is necessary in order to imply the possibility of certain knowledge about landscape. For in all this work the only representations of landscape which seem able to retain their interpretive certainty (overtly at least) are *those of the geographers themselves.* (100, emphasis added)

In the midst of the web-like complexity of signs that make up texts, only the post-structuralist critic is able to make any sense of the world they represent. This frees the (masculine) geographer

from the interpretive rules that he applies to the texts of others, and renders him invincible as an author - all-seeing and all-knowing. He can reveal the contestation over another landscape image, and in doing so establishes the acuity and insight of his own reading. (100)

While I agree with much of Rose's arguments about the gendered nature of the critic's authority, I would also like to suggest that this power is located in the practice of criticism.

As Burgess and Rose suggest, there is a particular kind of reader involved in the encounter between the academy and the text: the critic. In fact, we could replace the word 'reader' with 'critic' in many of these studies without changing the nature of the argument, and this is especially true of post-structuralist criticism. More importantly, there is a strong sense that the critic is a *legitimate* reader, while others are simply consumers. This has been convincingly argued by de Certeau, who describes the root of this problem as 'scriptural imperialism':
In spite of the work which has uncovered an autonomy of the practice of reading underneath scriptural imperialism, a de facto situation has been created by more than three centuries of history. The social and technical functioning of contemporary culture hierarchizes these two activities. To write is to produce the text; to read is to receive it from someone else without putting one’s own mark on it, without remaking it. (1984:169)

In this sense, critics are also writers because they produce new texts in the form of legitimate readings. This scriptural imperialism is clearly visible in cultural geography, as Burgess and Rose both show. Once we dismiss this position as unacceptable, we cannot simply celebrate reading practice as resistance. It too is organized by power:

Reading is as it were overprinted by a relationship of forces (between teachers and pupils, or between producers and consumers) whose instrument it becomes. (de Certeau, 1984:171)

It is the critic who establishes a stable and proper meaning by exercising this power through the operations of criticism:

The use made by the book by privileged readers constitutes it as a secret of which they are the ‘true’ interpreters. It interposes a frontier between the text and its readers that can be crossed only if one has a passport delivered by these official readers... By its very nature available to a plural reading, the text becomes a cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve, the pretext for a law that legitimizes as ‘literal’ the interpretation given by socially authorized professionals and intellectuals... (171, emphasis in original)

De Certeau’s idea of the critic’s ‘passport’ is a very interesting one, since it suggests that this legitimacy can be earned by the ordinary reader if he or she follows the approved practices. We can therefore start to put together a picture of the operations of scriptural imperialism as it applies to critical readings. The critical ‘policing’ of readings is at its most evident in interpretations of canonical

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8 This is particularly ironic considering that the author has been pronounced to be ‘dead’; perhaps Barthes was simply announcing a coup!

9 See 7.3.3..
literature, but as critical interest in the popular grows it seems increasingly likely that readers will need passports to legitimate their consumption of other cultural forms. It certainly seems that the everyday practice of landscape interpretation has become a private hunting reserve. If landscapes can be read as texts, which seems likely, perhaps it is time that we listened to those readers whose interpretive practices are not sanctioned by the institution of criticism. It is this conclusion which leads me to attempt to develop a way of working with, rather than against, readers in Chapter 3. However, in the course of the thesis I will show that the readers of science fiction often fail to escape the shadow of the critic's power. This is perhaps the most iniquitous effect of scriptural imperialism, and one for which the academy, with its institutionalised practices of making sense, must take most of the blame.
He knew her, yeah, how she'd come through the door with a wrapped bottle under her arm, not even take her coat off, just go straight over and jack into the Hitachi, soap her brains out good for six solid hours. Her eyes would unfocus, and sometimes, if it was a really good episode, she'd drool a little. (Count Zero, 1987, §6:54)

That is precisely the idea I oppose: such an image of consumers is unacceptable. (de Certeau, 1984:166)

3.1. Introduction: Investigating reading

Cultural geographers, as I have shown, have failed to develop a satisfactory understanding of the role of the reader in making sense of texts. In this chapter I will look to other disciplines (literary criticism, media and cultural studies), in an attempt to build a coherent theory of reading. While many of these conceptions of the reader are themselves open to question, I feel that they can be synthesized to create a useful approach to the practice of reading. This approach lends itself to the development of a methodology which can be used to study the ways in which Gibson's readers make sense of the world of his fictions.

Methodologies provide a combination of theoretical and practical approaches which allow the researcher to relate material to analysis:

Being the juncture between the concrete acts and tools of analysis (methods) and the overarching frames of interpretation (theory), a methodology represents a heuristics, or mode of enquiry. (Jensen, 1991:6)

The methodology must be an integral part of the research, but should not be chosen before the issues and intentions of the investigation have been set, otherwise "methodologies become solutions in search of problems" (ibid, 6). As shown in the Introduction, my aim in this thesis is to describe and explain the ways in which readers develop meanings from William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction. Theoretically, this requires a sensitive understanding of the relationship between these texts and their readers. The methods and research practices used to illuminate this are based upon the technique of in-depth group interviews with readers of Gibson's novels and short stories, and an analysis of the transcripts

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produced by these meetings. This approach has important theoretical consequences for the research, as we will see in the Conclusion. It should also be noted that the methodology has evolved to reflect the changing conditions of my research, so that refinements in methods have led me to restate my theoretical concerns.

The chapter is constructed to reflect Jensen's assertion that methodologies are a synthesis of theory and method. I examine each in turn before combining the two to create a theoretically informed methodology for investigating reading practice.

3.2. Theorising the Text-Reader Relationship

Richard Johnson's valuable overview of the field of cultural studies creates a synthesis of different disciplinary approaches through his model of the 'circuit of culture' (1986:283). Meanings are transformed as they circulate from producers to texts to readings to the wider lived culture, and are then drawn upon by producers to begin the circuit once more. Johnson suggests that one of these moments of transformation offers the most revealing information about the creation of meaning: the gap between texts and readers. The relationship between the two is, as I will show in this section, a controversial one, and many interpretations have been offered in literary, media and cultural studies. However, many tend to assert a complete or relative autonomy for one side of the relationship which then determines the creation of meaning.

Johnson himself favours the argument that "texts imply or construct a position from which they are to be read" (299), and this idea underlies a great deal of work in cultural studies and literary theory. Recently, the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) has encouraged a shift in emphasis towards the reader as the privileged site for the production of meaning. I will examine these two broad approaches to the text-reader relationship in turn, and will then discuss recent criticisms of this turn towards the audience. What is needed, I will argue, is a sensitive understanding of the ways in which texts and readers relate to one another, one which stresses that meaning is produced as a dialogue between both participants.
This overview of interpretations of the text-reader relationship cannot do justice to the immense variety and complexity of this work. I hope to be able to draw out the key points - without oversimplifying the theoretical positions taken by the authors I discuss - by producing two parallel histories of the development of theories of reading in literary and media studies\(^1\). These developments are based upon a shift from texts to readers as the focus of study, following a retheorisation of reading as the site where meaning is produced.

3.2.1. **Literary Theory: From New Criticism to Reader-Response**

Interpretation in literary criticism has, unsurprisingly, remained text-based. However, criticisms of the objective fixity of the meaning of a literary work have led to an acknowledgment of the activity of the reader in producing meaning, and therefore a shift towards the reader's side of the text-reader relationship. In the most extreme formulations of this *reader-response theory*, the text is dissolved into the act of reading, making the reader autonomous of textual influence. However, this has not led to empirical investigations of reading of the kinds associated with contemporary audience work in media studies. In this tradition, the reader remains a theoretical abstraction, with the exception of David Bleich (1980, 1986). Bleich asked readers to discuss their interpretations of texts, and has produced valuable material on gendered reading (discussed in 7.3.4.). However, Bleich's work remains an anomaly within this literature.

In 'traditional' twentieth century literary criticism, exemplified by the Anglo-American New Criticism (see Eagleton, 1983), the authorial text is implicitly privileged as the site of meaning\(^2\). The only readers visible in this kind of literary criticism were the critics themselves. This implicit denial of the productive creativity of reading practice had ideological roots, as numerous authors have shown (Chaney, 1994; Williams, 1958). The elite culture defended

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\(^1\) I will be using the word 'reading' to refer to the various practices of 'making sense' which are used in the reception of any cultural text.

\(^2\) It was not until the development of post-structuralist theory, and in particular Barthes' *S/Z* (1975), that the role of the reader was adequately addressed (Eagleton, 1983:137-8, but see below on reception theory). Barthes, and to a lesser extent Eco (1979), were highly influential in shifting the emphasis from text to reader.
by Arnold, Leavis and Eliot enshrined not only canonical authors but particular ways of reading. Jane Tompkins summarizes the interlocking assumptions of the text-based New Criticism:

It assumes the value and uniqueness of the literary work of art; it assumes that literary meaning is contained in the words on the page; and it assumes that special training in the critical process is necessary if the student of literature is to grasp the full extent of what the work has to offer. (1980b:x)

Because the New Criticism attempted to define the objective meaning of works of fiction, it served to exclude other interpretations: these became misreadings. More explicit concepts of reading have been developed under the general description of 'reader-response theory'. This includes a wide variety of theoretical positions, including variations on New Criticism, structuralism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis, as Tompkins' collection of early work makes clear (1980a). More recent research has developed a sophisticated post-structuralist theory of reading (Iser, 1989). This body of work shares the conviction that meanings can never be simply recovered from a text, and that readers play an active part in the creation of meaning. Much of this research concerns theorising the identity of 'the reader' (Selden, 1985:109). There was a gradual shift towards the recognition that texts do not themselves possess meaning but are 'activated' by the process of reading. Michael Riffaterre (1966), for example, argued that readers, unlike structuralist critics, do not create meaning through an analysis of the organisation of texts. Rather they recognise certain elements of texts to be significant, and it is the way that these elements are processed in reading which leads to the creation of literary meaning.

The site of meaning was shifting from the text to the reader, and the work of Stanley Fish was instrumental in completing this shift (1970). Literature was the result of the process of reading, not an objective property of the text; but readers are constrained by the rules of linguistic and literary competence, ideas also explored by Jonathan Culler (1975). Fish developed the idea of 'interpretative

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See also Prince (1973) and Iser (1974).
communities' (1976, 1980), groups "who adopt particular kinds of reading strategies" (Selden, 1985:118). This had the effect of dissolving texts into reading strategies, collapsing the distinction between text and reader. Fish's later work represents the high point of the retreat from the text in reader-response criticism. However, the work of Fish and Culler provides us with some interesting ideas on conventions. These sets of rules, which can be detected in texts, are followed by author and reader alike. Author, text and reader are therefore interlinked, providing a way out of the trap of privileging one of these three sites as the source of meaning. There is an interesting parallel with Steve Neale's brief suggestions about the role of conventions in genre films. However, Neale ends up examining conventions solely within the text, as I have shown (1.2.), and the work of Fish and Culler also presents serious problems in attempting to keep text and reader together without giving one dominance over the other. These questions will be addressed in 3.4..

Other important strands of reader-response theory include psychological and psychoanalytic models of reading (Holland, 1975; Bleich, 1980), and a feminist critique of earlier work (Flynn and Schweickart, 1986; Flynn, 1986). I do not intend to discuss the first approach⁴, and the second is covered in Chapter 7. In summary, then, reader-response criticism presented a useful re-emphasis of critical attention, moving from the text to the reader. However, all of these theoretical positions fail to find a coherent model for the relationship between the two, although the work of Fish (and Culler) offers interesting lines of enquiry. There is also a concern with individual readers at the expense of theories of language which stress its social nature. As a result we are left with a theory of the reader, and little consideration of how forms of power operate within reading practice to produce a cultural politics of meaning. This denial of the social and political nature of reading is at the root of the refusal of these critics, with the exception of Bleich, to work with readers rather than simply theorising their existence.

⁴ My doubts as to the value of this work are discussed in 3.2.2. with reference to speculative research in media studies, an approach which also depends upon psychoanalytic theory.
3.2.2. Media and Cultural Studies: From texts to audiences

Within the broad field of disciplines which take culture and the media as their object of study, there has also been an important shift away from texts towards investigation of their audiences. However, this tendency is uneven throughout these disciplines, and has also been contested by those who see a dangerous retreat from ideas of media power in some constructions of the audience.

Text-based interpretations in media and cultural studies tend to make more or less explicit reference to the reader, and ideas of textual influence vary widely in terms of their sophistication, ranging from reductionist approaches comparable with the older ‘hypodermic’ model to Hall’s influential 1973 paper ‘Encoding/decoding’ (Hall, 1980b). However, this paper has been the object of subsequent debate over the power of the text to determine meaning by setting ‘preferred readings’ (see Morley, 1992:11-12, 26-29). I will return to this in a moment, but for now I want to address those interpretations which have a more implicit notion of textual determination.

1. Implicit Theories of the Reader in Media and Cultural Studies. Where the concept of textual influence is only implicitly addressed, there is a regrettable tendency to make casual a priori assumptions about the ideological influence of texts, and to read them off from the critic’s analysis. This approach becomes particularly controversial when it concerns cultural politics: texts are read for their racist, masculinist or bourgeois assumptions, and judged accordingly. Discussing cyberpunk science fiction, for example, Andrew Ross suggests that the subgenre is innately masculine (1991). Since he looks at a variety of cultural forms - fiction, videos, comics, role-playing games, and so on - Ross implies that the literary subgenre is associated with a distinct subculture. Without being so crass as to suggest that the masculinist characteristics of subgenre and subculture are causally related, he still implies that the first has some ‘influence’ over the second. A kind of academic commonsense makes this possible: as Martin Barker puts it, "It is a game of Hunt-The-Thimble where you know there must be one. Keep looking long enough, and eventually, something will be found that you can
call a thimble" (1989:154). I will develop my criticism of this approach further in Chapter 4.

This critique of reader-response work also applies to post-structuralist approaches to literary and cultural interpretation. Following Barthes’ shift from text to reader, text-based studies of literary and media texts are able to stress the role of the reader without examining reading as a practice. Texts are open to multiple readings, as readers are no longer constrained by the idea that texts reflect reality. However, post-structuralist interpretations rarely allow the reader this freedom, as they are unconvincingly shackled to examinations of textual ideologies, as is the case in Ross’s reading. This tendency is bizarrely contradictory. Why should critics worry about the ideological ‘effects’ of a text when the reader is free to play with its meaning? This argument will be more comprehensively addressed in Chapter 4.

2. Speculative Theories of the Reader. A more sophisticated text-based study of reading can be found in what Feuer punningly calls ‘speculative’ studies of media (1986, cited in Morley, 1992:180). This work includes a wide range of approaches that have tried to formulate theories of this relationship in terms of the ways in which texts position (or attempt to position) the reader (Mulvey, 1975, and ‘Screen theory’5). This strand of audience research can be considered to parallel reader-oriented work in literature, but it represents a more coherent body of work than this due to the influence of Screen. ‘Speculative’ work attempts to "imagine the possible implications of spectator-positioning from the text" (Morley, 1992:181). Although the theories differ, the method is essentially the same: the critic reads the text for mechanisms or strategies which attempt to position the reader, creating a set of dominant readings. In this respect it is a more careful and rigorous version of the text-based analyses discussed earlier. However, much of this literature finds it difficult to pin down the textual strategies which position the reader, and there is a consequent emphasis on the construction of

5 ‘Screen theory’ is the name given to the general approach of many contributors to the film and television studies journal Screen in the late 1970s and 1980s. This ‘theory’ is an amalgam of the work of Metz, Lacan, and Althusser.
subjectivities by the mechanisms of the unconscious. I have grave doubts about the theory of the reader contained within these studies. Effectively, readers are at the mercy of the texts or of the unconscious. Morley writes:

...I would argue that the psychoanalytically based work has ultimately mobilized what can be seen as another version of the hypodermic theory of effects - in so far as it is, at least in its initial and fundamental formulations, a universalist theory which attempts to account for the way in which the subject is necessarily positioned by the text. (1992:59)

There is also a tendency to see these subject positions as strongly determined by texts: only a few subject positions are created, and readings which fall outside of these positions are therefore lost to the speculative critic. Not all of this work is so reductive, of course, and theories of the interpellated subject offer more subtle analyses. However, these are still based upon textual readings which cannot ever capture the complexity of reading or viewing practice, as the recent turn to audience studies shows. Charlotte Brunsdon's criticism of the Screen approach is worth repeating:

We can usefully analyze the 'you' or 'yous' that the text as discourse constructs, but we cannot assume that any individual audience member will necessarily occupy these positions. (1981:32)

3. The 'New' Audience Paradigm. The Nationwide project (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978; Morley, 1980) represented a crucial step in the development of audience research, as it explicitly attempted to link text and readers through empirical research. Since then a new paradigm of audience research has been developed, linked to methodologies which combine textual analysis with qualitative audience interviews. 'The audience' is not a new idea; apart from institutional studies designed to test the effectiveness of programming (Ang, 1991) there is a long tradition of work, both theoretical and empirical, aimed at describing and explaining the nature of the mass media audience. What marks

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6 See Seiter et al (1989) and Ang (1989) for criticisms from this new position.
recent research of this kind as 'new' is its conception of the audience as creative readers who possess a certain degree of resistance to ideological influence (Moores, 1990). This rethinking of the text-reader relationship therefore moves the emphasis of study onto the reader. It is this latter position which best describes the work which has followed Morley's *Nationwide* research, although as we will see there are important debates over the activity and resistance of the audience within this new paradigm.

Interesting studies of the reader within this strand of audience work include Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985), and Buckingham's *Public Secrets* (1987) as well as a host of shorter pieces. All involve textual analysis and empirical research, and Buckingham provides a valuable production context. Radway and Ang are especially interesting because they provide evidence of the polysemic nature of their texts through the differing interpretations of their readers. In particular, Radway's readers prove capable of twisting the narrative coding of romantic fictions to suit their own assumptions of the genre's overall meaning. This empirical work provides useful examples of the activities of readers in making sense of texts, although it does not neglect critical attention to the role of the text in setting preferred meanings. In this way these studies presented challenging new ideas of the text-reader relationship.

The last important stage in the development of this 'new' audience research is an extension of Radway's concerns in *Reading the Romance*. As the practice of reading or viewing became more central to analyses of media reception, it was recognised that the context of this practice was being neglected. Radway's women readers, for example, fitted reading time in with the structures of their lives as working women, partners and mothers. Reading could also become an 'escape' from the commitments of household life. Morley's *Family Television* placed the practice of viewing within a particular context, the 'family' home, in an effort to create a 'thicker' description of the ways in which viewers make sense of television (1986). Reading therefore becomes a practice at the nexus of a whole host of interconnected discourses and practices: it takes its place as one important part of everyday life in western society.

One strand of cultural studies, largely associated with the work of John
Fiske, sees this new emphasis on the active reader and multiple interpretations as a liberating or empowering move. This formulation of reading sees no determining mechanisms in the text, and argues that meanings are created by reading practice. Readers make sense of texts in ways that suit them, and meanings are created which fit their experiences of the world (Fiske, 1987). This goes further than a useful corrective of the older 'pessimistic' model of the audience as passive dupes, creating a situation where, as Morley puts it, "the text is simply dissolved into its readings" (1992:27). This has led to a search for oppositional readings to support this view of the resistant reader, with a subsequent convergence with earlier work on subcultures (Hall and Jefferson, 1978; Hebdige, 1979). The fruits of this are various discussions of 'fan cultures', where media reception is contextualised within other forms of consumption and identity-construction (for example, Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1991, 1992; Lewis, 1992). I would agree with Martin Barker (1993) that it is largely replacing earlier work on subcultures as a romanticised site of cultural resistance. At the same time, others have suggested that these 'optimists' are in danger of losing sight of the power of media texts altogether (Morley, 1992). Morley continues to hold the relatively 'pessimistic' view that texts do construct preferred readings, that these readings are ideological in nature, and that they are rather more successful in persuading readers than writers like Fiske would suggest.

4. De Certeau: Reading and Power. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) offers a useful corrective to the 'pessimistic' view of readers as dupes, which also avoids the excesses of the 'optimists'. De Certeau challenges the perceived dominance of 'production' over 'consumption': the idea that "the efficiency of production implies the inertia of consumption", creating "the ideology of consumption-as-a-receptacle" (167). He argues that "in reality, the act of reading... has all the characteristics of a silent production" (xxi):

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^ For example, John Fiske argues that we should "dissolve" the categories of text and audience in favour of "the processes of viewing" (1989).

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A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place... This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient.

(xxi)

However, while the act of reading is creative, these productions are temporary, silent, and largely invisible. Readers do not ‘own’ texts and must appropriate them for their own uses. It is not enough simply to celebrate this appropriation; de Certeau seems to suggest it is as much about survival as it is subversion. We should not assume that these meanings are subsequently circulated within the wider culture: many are hidden, or provide only transitory pleasures. In this way de Certeau indicates the extent of ‘scriptural imperialism’, the power of producers over consumers. This is always contested by consumers, as we will see, but their practices must be situated within this structural inequality.

De Certeau’s central concern is with practice, and this has made his ideas attractive to those ‘optimists’ in media studies who would dissolve the text into the reading practices used to understand it. However, de Certeau’s discussion of practice is also based upon a notion of inequalities of power between producers and readers which can be seen most clearly in his distinction between strategies and tactics. A strategy is a mode of operating which becomes possible when a powerful subject separates itself from its ‘environment’, which then becomes the object of its operations: "Political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model" (1984:xix). Strategies draw their strength from (and, in doing so, constitute) ‘proper’ places, points of intersecting power relationships which legitimise this scrutiny of their objects. The strategies which are of most interest to this thesis are those de Certeau ascribes to the "scriptural economy", the collection of institutions like schools, the academy, criticism and authorship which police ‘proper’ reading practices (170-172).

Tactics, on the other hand, are situated in the ‘place’ of the other: they "cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality" (xix). They are the practices of the weak, operating in a system defined by the strategies of the
A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (xix)

Where the strategy is "a victory of space over time", the tactic depends on time, always seeking to turn events into opportunities. The strategist produces the structures of everyday life, while the tactician wanders back and forth across them, appropriating the products of culture for his or her own ends (xix). De Certeau describes readers as "nomads" and "poachers" on the "private hunting reserve" of "authorized professionals and intellectuals" (171):

...readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. (174)

Thus the difference between strategies and tactics is the difference between the strong and weak; not just a simple reflection of their relative cultural capital, but of the particular ways in which they can make sense of texts. This emphasis on the creativity of the reader is therefore also a political argument; the reader employs tactics to subvert or overturn the meaning of the text, even though this is done from a position of weakness. Tactics, which combine both thought and action, are practices situated in a particular set of power relationships, and any particular tactical move can be related to a complex social context.

There are, however, two points which need to be made here; one indicates a way in which this theoretical distinction can be used to examine reading tactics, while the other creates serious difficulties for such a study. Firstly, de Certeau argues that an emphasis on such microscopic movements does not return us to a concern with individuality; he is not interested in subjects as much as their modes of operation. His expression of this helps to clarify my own approach:

Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact. (xi)
Developing this, he argues that these tactical moves can be considered to be paradigmatic, that is, particular utterances within systems of language or action. They are not purely random:

It may be supposed that these operations - multiform and fragmentary, relative to situations and details, insinuated into and concealed within devices whose mode of usage they constitute, and thus lacking their own ideologies or institutions - conform to certain rules. In other words, there must be a logic of these practices. (xv)

While we must be very careful not to abstract these moves from their contexts, it is still possible to discern some common ways of making sense. De Certeau's discussion of reading is an attempt to recover the "logic" of these tactics.

The second qualification I must make is more problematic. The concept of tactics (indeed, de Certeau's argument more generally) is based upon the idea that they are largely invisible within modern culture and society. Discussing what is generally described as "consumption", he writes:

[It] is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products... (xii-xiii)

In addition to being ignored because it does not (always) create its own products, the tactic has no place, seizes opportunities "on the wing", and its users may actively seek to remain unobserved by those in power. Significantly, this invisibility is a response and result of the strategic nature of investigations into everyday life made by social scientists, amongst others. Discussing statistical attempts to capture culture, de Certeau says:

What is counted is what is used, not the ways of using. Paradoxically, the latter become invisible in the universe of codification and generalized transparency. Only the effects (the quantity and locus of the consumed products) of these waves that flow in everywhere remain perceptible... The practices of consumption are the ghosts of the society that carries their name. (35)

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8 This parallels Culler's interest in competence, which is paradigmatic within the syntagmatic system of language. See 3.4.
It is not only quantitative investigations which fail to see the trace of these uses; perhaps even the most sensitive ethnography is incapable of piecing the whole picture together. This problem is compounded by the silence and 'privacy' of reading. I will address these problems in 3.4.

From this brief discussion it is hopefully clear that de Certeau offers a critique of the conception of the passive audience, but one which is sensitive to the ways in which practices produce and resist power in specific contexts. This might seem to offer a middle position between 'optimism' and 'pessimism', acknowledging media power without conceding its absolute control. There is, however, an interesting ambiguity in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. While de Certeau recognises creativity and freedom within constraints, he seems unsure as to the relative importance of these two elements. One the one hand, his discussion of tactics occasionally suggests that every strategic practice is thwarted by the ruses of consumers. Can we be so certain that everyone has the ability to escape these strategies? De Certeau offers us a contradictory example of the effects of power on practice, saying that

The procedures allowing the re-use of products are linked together in a kind of obligatory language, and their functioning is related to social situations and power relationships. Confronted by images on television, the immigrant worker does not have the same critical or creative elbow-room as the average citizen. On the same terrain, his inferior access to information, financial means, and compensation of all kinds elicits an increased deviousness, fantasy, or laughter.

(xvii, emphasis added)

The first two sentences are hardly controversial: transformations in meaning are related to "social situations and power relationships", and "the immigrant worker" possesses different (and "inferior") cultural resources with which he makes sense of television. However, de Certeau suggests that this "elicits" a more tactical response, rather than a more constrained one. I would have thought that escaping the strategic messages of the text might require an increased deviousness in this situation. De Certeau's example is refreshing because it overturns the pessimistic view which assumes that black people (along with women, children, and others)
are most at risk from effects\(^9\)); but it also suggests an *inevitable*, if temporary, triumph of the weak over the strong.

My second main criticism of this strand of de Certeau's work concerns his suggestion that this work "can use as its theoretical model the *construction* of individual sentences with an *established* vocabulary and syntax" (xiii). In other words he is interested in the performance of practices within a structured competence, paralleling the linguistic distinction between individual sentences and the language from which their elements are drawn. When people make sense of texts, they draw upon a set of practices with which they possess a certain degree of competence. However, in privileging performance, de Certeau ignores the fact that it is always constrained by competence: it must operate within a system to make any sense at all. This competence is also unevenly distributed throughout society: we must be aware that in ‘making sense’ people draw upon different cultural resources as a result of their position within the wider culture.

To conclude, I will take a position between these two extremes. From the pessimists, I accept the role of power in media discourse, with the assumption that preferred readings are encoded into texts, and that some influence must be likely in many cases. From the optimists, I accept the central role of reading practice, arguing that meaning is created in complex ways and not simply transmitted. However, in joining the two, I would suggest rejecting the two most extreme positions. We must not presume that the media has a simple influence over its consumers; we must not expect all consumers to be interested in or capable of making the heroic transformations de Certeau describes. Neither the determining power of texts nor the capability of readers to resist must be taken for granted. Rather they must both be examined empirically, within the specific contexts of production and consumption. If we cannot break away from the habit of making these assumptions we risk presenting a one-sided view of the politics of reading which colludes with or fails to interrogate the dominant theory of ‘effects’\(^{10}\).

\(^9\) Morley points out that "television zombies are always other people"; this concept of the audience "is a theory about what television does to other, more vulnerable people" (1989:16).

\(^{10}\) Examples of some moral panics over reading are given by Barker (1984a; 1984b; 1989).
So (to use de Certeau's terms) we must examine whether, in particular contexts, readers can and do use specific tactics to escape particular ideological strategies. However, I want to extend the encoding/decoding model to include de Certeau's notion of practice. When texts are examined for preferred readings, I feel that we are 'freezing' the act of making sense. Rather, I would like to ask: how does the text suggest which practices should be used to read it? This allows us to see an equivalence between the practices which are used to encode and decode texts; and these practices are, I would suggest, linked by sets of shared assumptions which constitute a contract between producer and consumer (see 3.4.). Having established my own position on these debates, I would like to look at the methods and practices I used to examine its usefulness.

3.3. Working With Readers: Research practice

This thesis is based upon material gathered using a qualitative methodology: the in-depth group interview method. I decided that the group interview method was most suitable because it provided a forum for readers to talk about their own reading in the kind of detail which is difficult to achieve with quantitative surveys. This section therefore examines the methods and practices of my in-depth interviews with three groups of readers; I will not be covering the question of textual analysis here, since I am more interested in building a general model for exploring text-reader relationships at this point. The interpretative 'method' that I used to examine Gibson's fictions is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Qualitative research is concerned with the interpretation of discourses and actions, attempting to provide sensitive accounts and explanations of the experiences of research subjects. I use the word 'sensitive' for two reasons. Firstly, it is often carefully contextualised, so that interpretations arise from particular situations and are not simply 'read off' from the accounts of research subjects. Secondly, it is often highly reflexive in that the politics and ethics of research practice are examined. However, there is nothing intrinsically

11 For critical reviews of quantitative studies of the audience, see Ang (1991), and Morley (1992:174-177).
emancipatory about qualitative methods, nor are they always appropriate.

There has been something of a qualitative or empirical turn in media studies over the last fifteen years, spurred in part by the 'new' audience studies (Ang, 1989; Jensen, 1991). Within human geography there has been a similar growth of interest in qualitative work, as part of the flight from positivism, and linked to the rise of the 'new' cultural geography. While qualitative media studies have tended to use various forms of the semi-structured interview, intended as contributions "towards an ethnography of the audience" (Morley, 1992), geographers have considered participant observation (Jackson, 1983), groups (Burgess et al, 1988a; 1988b), as well as general interview and qualitative issues (Cook and Crang, 1994; Eyles and Smith, 1988; Pile, 1991). However, since there has been little research into the media, and a lack of concern for the reader in cultural geography (as shown in Chapter 2), I have been forced to concentrate upon existing research in audience studies in the following discussion as part of my justification for my choice of methods12.

There has been some debate as to whether empirical audience studies constitute 'ethnographies'. Several studies have used the term (Seiter et al, 1989b; Morley, 1992) and yet their methods have depended upon single or group interviews rather than participant observation, the method normally associated with ethnographic practice13. In fact, participant observation presents audience researchers with ethical and practical problems (Morley, 1992:181). As a result, a variety of interview techniques have been used, though the semi-structured, one-to-one interview is perhaps the most common14. Although these dialogues are easier to analyse than group interviews, one-to-one interviews are, if anything, more artificial than group discussions, heightening the tensions which may exist between researcher and interviewee. For this reason, I decided to work with readers in in-depth groups, as I will elaborate in 3.3.1..

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14 Audience research has also used other methods, including the letter (Ang, 1985) and the self-directed interview (Barker, 1993).
Before doing so, the ethical and political consequences of research must be considered: "what are the politics of audience "ethnography"?" (Ang, 1989:97). If the purpose of qualitative work is not the "gradual accumulation of scientifically confirmed "findings"" (Ang, 102-103), what am I trying to achieve? Ang clearly expresses my concerns:

...what we should reflect upon is the political interventions we make when talking about audiences - political not only in the sense of some distant societal goal, but, more importantly, in that we cannot afford ignoring the political dimensions of the process and practice of knowledge production itself. What does it mean to subject audiences to the researcher's gaze? ...How is it possible to do audience research which is "on the side" of the audience? (1989:104)

In responding to these questions, I will discuss the consequences of representation first, and then go on to talk about practice. The cultural turn within the social sciences has prompted a reflexive examination of academic representations, leading to what is sometimes called 'the crisis of representation' (Said, 1989). The recognition that writing cannot mirror the world, but must represent or construct reality means that the old certainties over writing have crumbled (Barnes and Duncan, 1992b; Duncan and Ley, 1993b). Since we are making rather than revealing truths, it is not just a question of truth or falsehood: there is a politics to these representations, in the sense that to represent means both to speak of and to speak for others (Spivak, 1988; Radcliffe, 1994; Duncan and Sharp, 1993). All academic representations construct truths which possess a certain authority (Cosgrove and Domosh, 1993), and this authority is inevitably bound up with the relationships of power which structure the world beyond the academy (Said, 1989). Geographers struggling with the implications of this have examined two main 'solutions' developed in anthropology and post-colonial studies: polyphonic and other hybrid writing strategies (Crang, 1992; Duncan and Ley, 1993a); and the use of spatial metaphors and speaking positions (Pratt, 1992). While Duncan and Ley reject these writing strategies in favour of a hermeneutic

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15 I recognise that this is arbitrary: all representations are a form of practice, and practice consists of making and interpreting representations. However, this division allows for a more straight-forward discussion.
approach, arguing that "the loss of representational control by the academic is more illusory than real" (1993b:9), Crang and Pratt see them as ambiguously (rather than inherently) useful.

As this chapter prefaces the presentation of the empirical material which forms the foundation of the thesis, it is the most appropriate point to consider these issues. I have briefly stated my position as an 'insider' in Chapter 1, but while I share an interest in reading science fiction (and an especial regard for Gibson's fiction) with my informants, there are several ways in which I could be considered an outsider. In the first case, I have never identified myself as a fan, and in several situations I was certainly guilty of perpetuating the dominant, pejorative, representation of the fan expertly dissected by Henry Jenkins (1992:10), in speaking to, of, and for my groups. This, unfortunately, illustrates the academic's practice of authority rather neatly: the very people who have made this thesis are represented to the academy as pathological Others in the way Jenson condemns (1992). I have taken great pains not to repeat this mistake in writing the thesis.

Secondly, can the research subjects speak within the thesis? Is this a monovocal or polyvocal work? The use of extended quotes allows their voices to be heard in a way which would be impossible with more abstract, quantitative representations. However, with the geographers cited above, I have doubts as to the emancipatory potential of such strategies, feeling that they cannot transcend the problems of my dual role as science fiction reader and academic interviewer. While I feel that my role as outsider was occasionally forgotten in our mutual enjoyment of talking about SF, there were many other situations where my status as academic was dominant. In conclusion, despite my responsibility to represent these people fairly, and the closeness I felt towards them, as a part of their groups, there are moments when my position as interested insider could not be maintained, and this is as obvious in the practice of writing as it was in the practice of interviewing. I have tried (but inevitably failed) to avoid the problems inherent in speaking of and for these people throughout this research project.

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16 This is partly a consequence of group work; see 3.3.2.
Rather than pretending that this is a dispassionate ('scientific') description, I must be honest about my place within the research, and try instead to use my authority to make a useful intervention into debates about the audience and taste. Andrew Ross (1991) suggests that this is the fundamental responsibility of the cultural critic, but these interventions are themselves trapped within the unequal power relationship between academic and research subject and cannot be undertaken lightly.\(^{17}\)

Finally, I am convinced that one of the most attractive features of in-depth group interviews is that they facilitate challenges to the authority of the researcher. However, I am not sure that the polyphony of group discussions can be successfully represented in the linear narrative traditionally associated with a doctoral thesis. As many of the critics of emancipatory writing strategies have noted, final control rests with the academic. I am painfully aware of the re-imposition of this control, as I have largely replaced the noisy disagreements and rambling discussions of the groups with the sound of my own voice: dissecting the transcripts, ordering these fragments to make sense for me and for my academic audience, making my own interpretations in terms which might mean nothing to the original speakers. In her review of empowering feminist research strategies, McDowell concludes that "it is becoming clear that the adoption of qualitative methods alone does not release the scholar from exploitative relations, or even the betrayal of her subjects" (1992:407), and my own experiences would seem to strengthen this argument.

3.3.1. The In-Depth Group

Focus groups have long been used in market research, and were taken up in media studies during the mid 1980s by Richardson and Corner (for example, 1986). Within geography the use of in-depth groups was pioneered by Burgess and Harrison at University College London in research conducted during the mid 1980s. This work rejected the market research tradition, adopting the principles

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\(^{17}\) I would also argue that Ross is more sympathetic to the consumers of New Age ideas than to readers of cyberpunk, and that his intervention in the latter case is unsubtle, prejudiced and flawed by his insistence on a purely textual study (see 4.2 and 5.2).
and practices of group-analytic psychotherapy to explore the environmental discourses of lay people (Burgess et al 1988a, 1988b; Burgess et al, 1990). While focus groups are being used by some geographers, there is still little published work on this method beyond Burgess and Harrison's in-depth group research.

In-depth groups can be distinguished from focus groups by their longevity and loose structure. The discussions upon which this thesis is based are comparatively short for in-depth groups, with three meetings for group A and four each for B and C. However, this number of meetings, spaced out over two, three, or four weeks, is sufficient to allow a group identity to be formed. Another key feature of in-depth groups is their emphasis on the group discussion, rather than on the role of the 'moderator'. Intervention is kept to a minimum, not to avoid interfering in otherwise 'pure' accounts, but more as an exercise in empowerment. Interventions can be classed as either 'questions', designed to start a major part of the discussion, or as 'prompts', designed to balance the discussion, maintain its flow or alter it without disrupting the conversation, and so on. Prompts can be questions, but are not designed to signal an end to the previous conversation, unlike the big 'questions'. In an in-depth group there should be very few 'questions', and as few prompts as seems sensible.

Before I discuss the advantages of in-depth groups I would like to consider some criticisms of the group method taken from Kay Richardson and John Corner's comments on the relative merits of group work and one-to-one interviews.

Our view is that, whilst both situations are clearly 'artificial' in a way that has to be remembered when using the talk as data, there are special difficulties with group work which suggest that research of this kind should involve a substantial element of one-to-one discussion, particularly in the early stages.

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18 I shall use the term 'moderator' to refer to focus group interviewers, and 'conductor' to refer to refer to in-depth group interviewers. See Burgess et al (1988a:319) for more on the conductor's role.

19 I am sure that Richardson and Corner's discussion concerns focus rather than in-depth groups, but their criticisms are applicable to both. It is just that they become much less problematic in the latter method, as I hope I will make clear.
The first 'difficulty' they discuss is the result of "...the variables of domination, inhibition and consensus produced by group dynamics" (488).

The production of "domination, inhibition, and consensus" is widely seen to be the main problem with group work (Jackson and Holbrook, forthcoming). This criticism can be addressed in two ways. Firstly, why is it assumed that group discussions invariably produce consensus? In my experience, only one group (Group C) worked in a generally consensual way, and this was an interesting special case (see Appendix A). In other words, this is a valuable research finding - if we are at all interested in the dynamics of a group, then the creation, working out and rejection of consensus is especially important. Richardson and Corner seem to suggest that group dynamics interfere with the process of group talk, while I would argue that no statement makes sense without reference to this dialogue. The question, surely, is not how to avoid consensus, but rather who dominates, who is inhibited, and why does this happen? If we cannot explain this then we are missing the point of qualitative research. More importantly, this view implicitly privileges other forms of investigation precisely because they do not 'produce' consensus - a rather questionable assertion.

My second response to this criticism considers the practice of conducting groups. In my groups I sometimes had to make a decision either to intervene to avoid domination or inhibition (shutting someone up, bringing another person out) or to allow the group to become subject to consensus. Sometimes it is better to do the latter, to see if this consensus is rejected or transformed at a later point, or to see how enmities and alliances are built up as a result; at other times I tried to make the participation in the group 'fairer', generally when one person obviously wanted to contribute but was unable to. Deciding which choice to make is an interview skill like any other; it rests on knowing your group, and being able to evaluate the possible effects of intervention on the group relationship. The important point is that consensus is not necessarily something to be avoided, although it is always worth testing if it is beginning to solidify too far.\(^{20}\)

Finally, Richardson and Corner assert that these 'variables' are

\(^{20}\) See Burgess et al (1988b:470-3) for an excellent example of managing conflict.
"...frequently productive of 'fragmentary' types of utterance whose subsequent use by the analyst as independent and complete statements would be most questionable" (1988). Even though this problem is partly a by-product of focus group work, I feel that Richardson and Corner's assertion reveals their idea of the nature of group talk - it is concerned with what is said rather than the way in which it is said. Since every utterance is a reply to something else, even the most fragmentary utterance positions itself in some kind of relationship with what has gone before. As a result no utterance can be independent, or complete.

Having answered these criticisms of group work, why did I choose in-depth groups in preference to focus groups? There are six reasons:

1. In-depth groups accept the social role and context of discourse, grounding dialogue and argument within group relationships. Experiences and opinions are shared, debated and challenged by the members just as they are in other conversational settings: as Volosinov would have it, dialogue establishes social relations between the group members (and see point 5 below). In explaining or justifying their positions, members examine their own commonsense beliefs, possibly causing them to change them. These shifts, agreements and disagreements also represent another chapter in the unfolding narrative of the 'group history', which develops without the interference of a 'moderator' in in-depth groups.

2. They allow a more equitable diffusion of power between researcher and researched. Group members have more freedom to choose the direction and intensity of the discussion, within the constraints of the group relationship. In extreme situations, the group can literally shout the conductor down; they possess 'safety in numbers'. The experience of conducting such a discussion can be refreshingly humbling. Several times I actually felt disempowered, as my role precluded me from responding to statements that I found offensive. Statements about racism, for example, which I would normally challenge in other social situations, had to go uncontested - not just because I wanted to allow them to develop in the group context, but also because a group consensus had formed.
which I felt unable to challenge. It seems unlikely that these situations would occur within a focus group.

3. However, while the in-depth group method reduces the conductor’s authority over the discussion, it also recognises and accounts for the artificiality of the situation more explicitly than other forms of interview work. This can be done by taking careful account of the socio-dynamics of group interaction, and by always remembering that the conductor plays a major part in this dialogue, even if he or she is silent throughout a meeting. This aspect of the group, captured in full and sensitive notes and transcription, refuses to allow the conductor to disappear from the research.

4. The group is also empowering in its therapeutic role. Even though I am not examining the ‘psycho-dynamics’ of the group, I would find it hard to dismiss the idea that members do not receive some kind of ‘therapy’ from the group. As a group identity is formed, and the members relax, the discussion often becomes humorous and supportive. Most members seemed to find the experience enjoyable. However, it must be admitted that some groups just do not work: members can compete for ‘leadership’ as well as working together, and this was particularly true in the case of Group B (see Appendices A and B).

5. A carefully transcribed discussion allows the conductor to situate each utterance in its context - that is, the social context of the group. Did the statement come as a rejoinder to another comment, as part of a long-running argument which has little to do with the content of the statement, as support for a friend, or as an ironic comment designed to reflect the speaker’s wit? This becomes more interesting and important in the case of a long-term group, when there is a rich group history for the members to draw upon, and members have formed strong positions, alliances, and oppositions. Without attention to these aspects of group talk I would have been unable to ‘thicken’ the individual statements. This is perhaps the most obviously dialogical feature of the group, illustrated by De Maré’s comment about group discussions:
Every communication establishes attitude, role and relationship between individuals. (1972, cited Burgess et al, 1988a:312)

6. Finally, the dialogues of in-depth groups can challenge the researcher's own views. The interviewees make their own choices as to what is relevant and interesting. This can unearth material that the conductor had not considered or foreseen. Crucially, this means that the researcher's preconceptions are challenged in the same way as those of the other members, making analysis a flexible and continuous process. This has one more important consequence. As a result of this, the transcripts are less the product of the researcher's interview practice, and more a mutually-constituted investigation, a collective act. At this point it becomes possible to talk of in-depth groups as literally polyphonic. As I noted above, the practice of writing reinstates my authority over the material, but at this stage it does not seem too naive to suggest that the transcripts are not mine, or even theirs, but 'ours'.

3.3.2. Research Practice

The research project developed as a result of the interplay between changing practical and theoretical needs. As a result the three groups are all different in some way, though the key difference is between Group A and the other two groups. Group A was originally intended as a pilot study, to assess the value of the group method, but the quality of the material produced by these discussions convinced me that it should be considered a group in its own right. However, practical problems resulted in Groups B and C being structured in a slightly different way to Group A. These differences, and the more subtle differences between Group B and Group C, will be discussed in terms of the stage of the research at which they occurred. This section is a brief summary of the research process; there is additional material in Appendix B, which is intended to be read in parallel with this section. Finally, information about each group and its members can be found in Appendix A.

1. Recruitment. The constitution of the groups helped define the nature of the discussions. Several different avenues were tried for recruitment, each with
important consequences for the particular section of the audience which might respond. Group A was recruited fairly quickly through informal contacts in October 1992. I asked one friend of mine to participate, and found the other five through another friend, who could in some ways be considered to be my key informant. Although he did not attend the groups, he recruited the second and third members. The second member recruited three of his friends on my behalf. Group B (April/May 1993) was almost entirely recruited through adverts in two important SF magazines, a professional fiction magazine and one produced by a fan organization. These adverts prompted replies from three members, and one recruited a friend. The last member of Group B and all the members of Group C were recruited through a third strategy. I placed flyers in a major SF bookshop in Central London, with immediate results. As well as finding the fifth member for Group B, I had three calls within a week, and one of these callers was able to recruit two friends to complete Group C (May 1993).

The importance of social networks can be seen in all three groups. This has important consequences for the nature of the discussions, but also emphasises the way in which reading science fiction is not a solitary pursuit but a practice socialised into relationships at work, in education, or in leisure time (see Chapter 7). There are educational and social links in Group A, workplace links in Group B, and educational links in Group C. Overall, my recruitment strategies, which were driven by necessity as much as anything, allowed me to gather a wide range of readers, although it must be said that they tended towards the ‘non-active’ end of the spectrum. Only three of the sixteen members could be described as ‘active’ fans; one other had past links with organised fandom, and another seemed to be edging into it. The others can perhaps be classified simply as ‘readers’. Would it have been better to actively seek out and encourage literary science fiction’s ‘others’? I could, for example, have attempted to find groups of women readers, and to construct an all-woman group to more closely examine the importance of

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21 Key informants can be very useful as Janice Radway’s research (1984) shows. While my broker is not involved in science fiction at all, he was immensely helpful as a recruiter.

22 The second and third strategies may have been more successful because I had started offering to pay for expenses.
gender in reading practice. While this would have been an incredibly useful corrective to received wisdom on the masculine identities of SF readers, I decided against it on the following grounds. Firstly it would have been difficult to find these readers, as it is generally assumed that men outnumber women by four to one in active literary SF fandom; secondly, it has been suggested that women readers were actively excluded from literary fandom (Jenkins, 1992:8). They would therefore be difficult to contact through fan networks, and might not attend for fear of further discrimination. Rather than adopt an examination of those historically excluded from the SF readership, then, I decided to examine the 'natural audience'. The apparent homogeneity of this audience could then be exposed as covering a range of subtle differences.

Having found my group members, the next stage was to interview them before forming the groups.

2. Preliminary Interviews. The preliminary interviews served several purposes. Practically, they gave the potential recruits an idea of the research process and the group interviews. This 'first contact' is obviously tremendously important for both interviewer and interviewee, as it sets the tone for future relationships. The interview also allowed me to ask questions about their media consumption (SF and other genres), which would have seemed awkward in a group. While the interview was obviously heavily structured by these questions, I avoided using any kind of schedule, following the flow of conversations, and writing short notes in a notebook. As well as providing more detailed biographical information, responses to these questions allowed me to tailor the discussion questions to the individual group identity, providing examples and establishing common interests. The interviews were often conducted at times and (public) places convenient for the respondent, and ranged from twenty minutes to an hour and a half in duration. These interviews, and my responses to them, form

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23 It is worth noting that the women who attended were both effectively invited by men, and not part of any fan networks.

24 Most interviews took place in situations where recording the conversation would be impossible.
the first level of analysis and helped to shape the rest of the research process.

3. Conducting the In-Depth Groups. The group discussions were based on a number of 'ground rules'. All the discussions were around ninety minutes long, were held on weekday evenings and were taped for later transcription. Thematically, the overall structure of the discussions was informed by my reading in science fiction criticism and my own interests. I produced a list of themes which I felt would be of interest to the group members and to myself as interviewer; each theme would then form the core of a discussion. There are, however, important differences between Group A's sessions, and those conducted with B and C, resulting from my dissatisfaction with some elements of Group A's discussions.

In chronological order, the themes I picked for Group A were: reading science fiction; technology; and societies/places. The last discussion was split into two: the first part discussed the question of dystopian or utopian societies, and the second looked at the landscapes, places, and settings of SF. These two were run together rather clumsily, but the material we produced was so interesting that I decided to expand the session. As a result the second two groups met for four discussions, which had these themes: reading science fiction; technology; cultures/societies; places. This is the most important distinction between Group A and the others. Before I discuss the nature of each 'themed' meeting, I would like to explain the methods I used in the discussion groups.

The most important tool I used was the 'guide', which I adapted from focus group research to fit the character of in-depth work. My guides were scribbled onto filecards for quick reference, and these were my only 'props'. The guides were compiled from a long list of ideas derived from theoretical issues raised by critical work on SF, boiled down to open-ended questions. The aim of these questions was to prompt a wide-ranging discussion, and to open up options rather than tightly structuring the conversation. The only other strategy I used apart from the guide was that of paper and pen exercises. Several times I asked the groups to write down a list of authors, objects, or places, which were then discussed. Both
techniques are discussed in detail in Appendix B.

After the interviews I would 'debrief' myself; this is usually done where there is a conductor and an additional observer in the group, but I had to make do with my own memory of all the details of the discussion. Extra (non-verbal) context like body language, glances, seating positions, mood, background distractions and so on were also noted to 'thicken' the material recorded on tape. These notes also represent the second level of analysis, after the preliminary interviews.

4. Transcribing. This is a necessary but "tedious" and "tortuous" element of conducting in-depth groups (Dahlgren, 1988:290). Burgess et al estimate that "a ratio of ten or twelve hours transcription to one hour of discussion would be realistic" due to the difficulties of accurately capturing the conversation when people are arguing, talking over one another, or talking quietly (1988a:320). However, as I said earlier, the ability to place individual utterances in their group context is one of the strengths of the in-depth group method, and this effort must be made. While transcribing I often made short notes as to the meaning of certain statements or exchanges in my research diary, building up a complex picture of the group and the subject matter. Since I was careful to start the analysis at this level I feel that the thematic and theoretical findings are much more carefully 'grounded' in the research. This was the third stage of the analysis, following study of the preliminary interviews and post-interview 'debriefing' notes.

3.3.3. Analysing Group Talk

Before I explain the nature of my analytic method, two related problems associated with qualitative interpretation need to be addressed. The first concerns the double hermeneutic, while the second further problematises this through consideration of the invisibility of what de Certeau calls 'tactics'.

The double hermeneutic refers to the successive acts of subjective interpretation, as the researcher interprets the interviewee's interpretations of their experience. In other words, we make representations out of representations, and cannot connect these up to 'truths'. This has important consequences for
audience research, as Morley notes:

In my own research, I have offered the reader a ‘reading’ of the texts supplied by my respondents - those texts themselves being the respondents' own accounts of their own viewing behaviour. (1992:180)

Thus my research focuses not on my critical reading of Gibson's texts, nor of some objective ‘recovery’ of my respondents’ readings of those texts, but on my readings of their accounts of their readings of the texts. What is captured in transcription is not the ways in which they read, but the ways in which they discuss their reading. This might seem to negate the chance of learning anything about reading, but we must not fall into the trap of assuming that the original act of reading, which is somehow ‘authentic’, is subsequently lost beneath further layers of interpretation. The important point is that while all readings are temporary, shifting and subjective, the researcher can still situate them within their context in a meaningful way. Morley borrows Geertz's suggested solution of 'thick description' to this problem of "explicating explications":

...rather than giving up and going home, on realization of this, the ethnographer's alternative is to try to pick his or her way through the piled-up structures of inference and implication which constitute the discourses of everyday exchange. (1992:182)

By combining the technique of "thick description" and an awareness of the role of dialogue (see below), it is possible to situate 'twitches and winks' (Geertz, 1993b) within their verbal and social context in a way which renders the problem of "explicating explications" irrelevant. In addition, building up such a "thick description" is easier using the in-depth group technique, compared to other forms of interviewing. It is also important to thicken the description by reference to the interviewer's presence, recognising that hermeneutics must account for the relationships between researcher and research subjects: "What is seen as unavoidable bias by the positivist is acknowledged by the hermeneutician as an inescapable part in the formation of knowledge" (Duncan and Ley, 1993b:8).

The second problem highlights the subject of the double hermeneutic. De Certeau describes the tactics used by readers to makes sense of texts as almost
‘invisible’, performed spontaneously and perhaps unconsciously. While a thick
description of reading practice is more sensitive to these traces than quantitative
investigations (where "what is counted is what is used, not the ways of using", de
Certeau, 1984:35), is it possible to make meaningful interpretations of such slight
practices? As I have noted, research is itself a form of strategy, and readers may
use tactics to keep their reading practice hidden from my gaze. Even without the
possibility of resistant interviewees, can we be sure that readers are themselves
aware of their tactical manoeuvres? Surely their discussions of these practices
formalise them in extremely untactical ways?

These are difficult questions. Certainly the nature of the double
hermeneutic complicates the interpretation of tactics. It might be possible to avoid
abstracting tactics from their context (and tactics are always context-dependent)
if reading practice was observed, but for practical and ethical reasons I have
already rejected this. In the end I have found no solution to this problem.
Practically I am left with the discussants' own interpretations of tactical reading,
and I must make do with that while recognising that I have only scratched the
surface of their practices.

Analysis follows the collection and 'treatment' of all the information needed
for the research project. This involves, in the simplest sense, reading through the
transcripts, and the preliminary interview and 'debriefing' notes in my field
notebook, and attempting to find similarities and differences between individuals
and groups through use of mind maps (see below). Certain themes recur; how did
different groups and interviewees construct these ideas, and how were they
developed in discussion? This material was also related to Gibson's Sprawl
fictions, and to other works of SF, and to the analyses of other critics. I used the
transcripts to recover a sense of Gibson's 'natural audience', and then
demonstrating the heterogeneity of this audience, bringing out other voices which

25 De Certeau suggests that these traces might be audible and visible: "...from the nooks of
all sorts of "reading rooms" (including lavatories) emerge subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics,
stretchings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body" (175).

26 Following Morley's discussion, see 3.3.1..

27 See 3.4..
disrupt or re-affirm such a reading. The aim is to be sensitive to the utterances of group members, refusing to generalise so that alternative readings are suppressed. In this way the final practice of analysis crosses from one stage to another, building on the findings of earlier interpretations without subsuming them to the demands of theory. Analysing the transcribed material was a process which attempted to ground interpretations in their specific contexts.

Once the transcripts were completed, each session was reproduced as a 'mind map', a technique which reduced the danger of theoretically over-determining my interpretations. Mind-mapping is a particular technique developed by Buzan (1972), but I have simply adopted the basic idea as a means to an end. Transcribed interviews inevitably take on the form of a discrete, chronologically ordered narrative, and while the development of a conversation over time does structure its meaning to some extent, it must be recognised that speech, unlike academic writing, does not progress in this orderly way: it doubles back on itself, takes diversions, starts radically new lines of discussion. I was interested in developing a technique which would allow me to escape the linear narrative and to look at the ways in which statements were thematically linked. The mind map allows such a re-ordering of material, and offers a more practical benefit: the entire conversation can be represented on a single piece of paper. Mind-maps are discussed further in Appendix B.

Finally, in analysing group talk my principal concern was to interpret content in terms of context: not just what is said, but also the way in which it is said. This approach, which is a consequence of my interest in Volosinov and Bakhtin's work on dialogue, and my dialogical analysis of group talk is based upon the following argument:

Any utterance... makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances. (Volosinov, 1973:72)

Or as Holquist puts it, "an utterance is never in itself originary: an utterance is always an answer", and presupposes another answer from the person to whom it is addressed (1990:60, emphasis in original). Although this is a feature
of all communication, not simply spoken interaction, it is particularly obvious in
group talk. In this sense, the utterance (statement) of a group member is in
dialogue with what has already been said, and what is expected to follow. Social
relations are established through dialogue. This allows a thickening of my
interpretation of the utterance, one founded upon an account of the dynamic
relationships of the group. Of course, this is not the only dialogue which needs to
be addressed: interviewees position themselves in relationships with others outside
the group; with authors and texts; and so on. These relationships are harder to
account for, but it is possible to add them to the context by careful examination
of the ways in which such subjects are discussed. All speech involves taking
positions towards the subject of the utterance, and analysis of this 'evaluative
accent' (Volosinov, 1976) helps the interpreter to establish the speaker's
relationship to the subject. The following passage, though rather long, clearly
states the principles of a dialogical analysis of speech utterances:

Two people are sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then
one of them says, "Well!" The other does not respond.

For us, as outsiders, this entire "conversation" is utterly
incomprehensible. Taken in isolation, the utterance "Well!" is empty
and unintelligible. Nevertheless, this peculiar colloquy of two
persons, consisting of only one - although, to be sure, one
expressively intoned - word, does make perfect sense, is fully
meaningful and complete.

In order to disclose the sense and meaning of this colloquy, we
must analyze it. But what is it exactly that we can subject to
analysis? Whatever pains we take with the purely verbal part of the
utterance, however subtly we define the phonetic, morphological, and
semantic factors of the word well, we shall still not come a single
step closer to an understanding of the whole sense of the colloquy.
Let us suppose that the intonation with which this word was
pronounced is known to us: indignation and reproach moderated by
a certain amount of humour. This intonation somewhat fills in the
semantic void of the adverb well, but still does not reveal the
meaning of the whole.

What is it we lack, then? We lack the "extraverbal context"
that made the word well a meaningful locution for the listener. This
extraverbal context of the utterance is comprised of three factors: (1)
the common spatial purview of the interlocutors (the unity of the
visible - in this case, the room, a window, and so on), (2) the
interlocutors' common knowledge and understanding of the situation,
and (3) their common evaluation of that situation.
At the time the colloquy took place, both interlocutors looked up at the window and saw that it had begun to snow; both knew that it was already May and that it was high time for spring to come; finally, both were sick and tired of the protracted winter - they were both looking forward to spring and both were bitterly disappointed by the late snowfall. On this "jointly seen" (snowflakes outside the window), "jointly known" (the time of the year - May), and "unanimously evaluated" (winter wearied of, spring looked forward to) - on all this the utterance directly depends, all this is seized in its actual, living import - is its very sustenance. And yet all this remains without verbal specification or articulation. The snowflakes remain outside the window; the date, on the page of a calendar; the evaluation, in the psyche of the speaker; and nevertheless, all this is assumed in the word well. (Volosinov, 1976:99, emphasis in original)

This marvellous example presents, in miniature, a working method for the analysis of dialogue, one which does not simply thicken the exchange by adding the 'extraverbal context', but which argues that this context is the exchange - "Discourse does not reflect a situation, it is a situation", (Holquist, 1990:63). In my own analysis of the transcripts, I have remained conscious of the fact that - as Volosinov's example shows so clearly - it is possible for utterances to have no content, but to possess powerful meaning because of their extraverbal context. Although the three factors which comprise the extraverbal context analyzed by Volosinov will not all be present in every exchange, aspects of the group dynamics provide an immensely complex context in which meaning is produced and contested. In particular, I would argue that speakers do not always share a 'common evaluation' of a situation, and that their utterances will betray this as they position themselves towards it. Concentrating on these inflections, or 'evaluative accents', helps the interpreter to establish differences of opinion amongst speakers.

From what I have already said about the nature of group work and the ease of situating utterances in their conversational context it should be apparent that the discussion group acts as a model for dialogical relationships. The group dialogue is, like any other dialogue, both a representation of powerful ideological discourses and a particular expression of the ways in which its members negotiate the potential meanings open to them. This dialogue is important methodologically because it is conducted within an artificial situation, that of a research exercise,
while allowing the fruits of other dialogical encounters to be discussed and modified. Although it is a snapshot of a contrived set of relationships, it functions with all the complexity of any conversational exchange. As a kind of 'thick description' and a simulation of 'everyday' dialogue it is a powerful research tool.

3.4. The Contract: A model of the text-reader relationship

This section concludes the chapter by combining the theoretical and methodological material from the previous discussions. My aim is to provide a 'model' of the text-reader relationship which can serve as a foundation for the analysis of the material presented in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. While this model is more complete, and therefore more useful, than the approaches discussed in 3.2., it is still not fully grounded in the specificities of talking about science fiction. In other words, though genre plays an important role in what follows, I am using the word in a general rather than particular sense. The generic peculiarities of SF are covered in Chapter 4, which represents a refinement of the model to fit the needs of the thesis.

It is easiest to represent these ideas in the form of a diagram (Figure 3.1., see page 93). Using 'models' and 'diagrams' creates an impression of order and predictability, but I have adopted these representations for practical and heuristic, rather than 'scientific', reasons. As I work through the diagram by making nine explanatory points it will soon become clear that the elements in this model are in a constant state of dynamic interaction: as one representation of dialogue, it is inherently unstable and complex. The main aim of this model is to suggest some answers to the question: how are meanings created in the interaction of texts and readers?

1. Privileging either texts or reading practice (or indeed authors or readers) flattens the complexity involved in the production of meaning: the process is a dialogical one. Meaning is created between authors and readers, as part of a 'conversation' between the words written onto the page and the practices readers
FIGURE 3.1. THE CONTRACT: A MODEL OF THE TEXT-READER RELATIONSHIP

WRITER ———> WRITING PRACTICE ———> MEANING ———> READING PRACTICE ———> READER

| Writing Styles ———> Textual Conventions ———> GENRE ———> THE CONTRACT ———> Competence |
| Personal Experience ———> + ———> |
| Competence ———> |

+——> +——> +——> +
use to make sense of them\textsuperscript{28}. For Volosinov, it is the space and relationship between the participants in a dialogue which is important:

\textit{...word is a two-sided act.} It is determined equally by \textit{whose} word it is and \textit{for whom} it is meant. As word, it is precisely the \textit{product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee}... A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor.

(Volosinov, 1973:86, emphasis in original)

The word or utterance is shaped by the imagined social relationship between speaker and listener, as is the answering utterance. This also applies to the relationship between texts and readers:

A book, i.e., a \textit{verbal performance in print}, is also an element of verbal communication... it is calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, \textit{printed} reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question...

(95, emphasis in original)

Like all dialogues, this exchange is not the civilized conversation of equals: the creation of meaning is a struggle between writing and reading practice. Both attempt to 'set' meanings within the power relationships of de Certeau's 'scriptural imperialism' or Morley's 'preferred readings'. The author does this through the use of writing \textit{strategies}, while reading practice is more likely to rely on \textit{tactical} moves. How does this struggle take active form within the text?

2. Authors rely upon \textbf{textual conventions} to set meaning. These range from styles of address to formal and narratological structures, which have been usefully analyzed by reader-response critics and others (especially Vladimir Propp, 1968). One strength of formalist and structuralist analysis is their recognition of

\begin{footnote}{28}Brosseau sees the text as an active producer of meaning within such a dialogue: "Such an active view of the text does not seek to undermine the active role of the reader... on the other hand, it does not subscribe to a conception of an autonomous and self-celebrating reader who transforms the text into a mere pre-text" (1995:91).\end{footnote}
the empirical existence of textual conventions\textsuperscript{29}. The fact that such conventions are recognisable both to critics and to other readers, implies that they are used by authors to suggest the reading practices which should be used to make sense of the text\textsuperscript{30}. Of course, these strategies are open to contestation within reading practice, but the fact that they are so prevalent in texts suggests that their use is often accepted by readers (even if they end up producing very different meanings to those intended by the author). Writing practice can be seen as being made up of three things, which parallel the three aspects of reading practice discussed in point 4: the authors' personal experience; their writing style, which is their use and inflection of the conventions used in writing; and their generic competence. This last point needs further explanation, as it is also vital to reading practice.

3. The term generic competence is adapted from Culler's 'literary competence' (1975). In Saussurean linguistics, competence is associated with langue, the total system of language, and is contrasted with performance (parole, the speech act). Culler suggests that the writing and reading of literature relies on a similar competence (familiarity with) literary conventions:

One can think of these conventions not simply as the implicit knowledge of the reader but also as the implicit knowledge of authors. To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel. The activity is made possible by the existence of the genre, which the author can write against, certainly, whose conditions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising.

(1975:116)

This competence is not 'natural' but acquired socially; it is learnt by authors

\textsuperscript{29} Brosseau makes a similar point: "If I concentrate on the formal aspects of the novel, it is not because of a formalist bias, or a structuralist conviction, but rather, because these considerations are most useful in exploring the way the text produces an original representation of the city" (1995:93).

\textsuperscript{30} For some interesting uses of Propp in audience studies, see Barker (1989) and Radway (1984).
and readers, and this plays an important role in science fiction, as we will see (Chapter 7 and point 8 below). Culler's emphasis on competence leads him to dismiss performance (reading practice) as irrelevant: he is interested in the "ideal reader" (123), a "theoretical construct" who possesses perfect competence (124). However, Culler does allow for the importance of genre:

   The operations [of conventions] will, of course, be different for different genres... The same sentence can have a different meaning depending on the genre in which it appears. (129)

   I think that this latter point is so important that I would rather speak of generic competence than 'literary competence': what is written and read as literature is merely another genre, although its conventions have been evaluated as superior to those of low genres like science fiction. This leads me to suggest that there are as many forms of competence as there are genres, each applying to a distinct set of conventions.\(^{31}\) Science fiction authors and readers may be particularly competent with the conventions of the genre, but may be at a loss when confronted with poetry or romantic fiction.

4. Examining the other side of the dialogue, meaning is produced from textual conventions by reading practice. I want to suggest that there are established ways to read conventions, which I call reading styles: particular forms of reading practice which are associated with, but not determined by, conventions. The fact that such forms of reading practice are so prevalent in the discussants' accounts of their reading suggests that conventions do play an important role in setting the 'right' way to read a text - although it is important to remember that these conventions are not simply codes set by the author but are to some extent 'agreed' by both writers and readers as part of the contract.\(^{32}\)

   Readers create meaning by drawing upon three elements of reading

\(^{31}\) Although since many genres draw upon the conventions of others (SF borrows from horror, detective fiction, fantasy, as well as 'mainstream' fiction) different kinds of competence may be needed to read any particular generic text.

\(^{32}\) There is therefore a kind of equivalence between writing and reading styles.
practice: their personal experiences; their use of reading styles; and their own generic competence, which is based upon their previous experience of these conventions.

5. The sum of all these writing practices, conventions, and reading practices can be described as a contract. I have already cited Barker's point that a convention represents "an 'agreed way' of coming together" (1989:9, and see 1.2.), and Barker develops this theme of agreement through the idea of a contract, a kind of social relationship between authors and readers. Criticising textual studies of Jackie, he offers an alternative perspective:

...a comic like Jackie could only connect with young girls because it offers to talk to them about topics which are already significant in their lives. And no matter how 'clever' or 'powerful' a conversation, if they have no interest in listening there can be no influence. (1989:256)

In other words, texts need to connect up with the experiences of readers by promising to fulfil their expectations.

With its regular features, its reliable format, and its repeated ways of dealing with issues, [Jackie] offers a contract with its readers... it offers a kind of relationship to its readers. We might say that Jackie extends an invitation to readers to join in and use its contents in particular ways. (256-257, emphasis in original)

Building on this, I suggest that both writers and readers draw upon the same conventions in their respective practices because there is a (mostly unwritten) agreement between them. However, this is not to suggest that the contract is drawn up by two equally powerful parties. Barker argues that "the mass media depend on developing sets of typified expectations. Readers learn what to expect, and what is expected of them" (258). In this way the power of producers over consumers creates an asymmetrical dialogue. Although conventions must mean something to the reader, they are not necessarily the ones they might choose themselves. This does not, of course, mean that conventions are

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33 In certain important cases, the contract is clearly and rigidly formalised - see point 8.
always read in the way that authors intend; readers may possess a similar generic competence to authors, but their *performance* (reading practice) may be very different. The contract allows us to relate certain generic writing and reading practices. The contract therefore constitutes conventions and practice through a shared, though contested, set of assumptions.

6. If we take this agreement at its most general level, we can begin to see how genres are constituted. Rather than simply acknowledging their empirical existence, or listing the textual conventions associated with them, we can begin to see them as the sum of all the contracts held between writers and readers - as a 'metacontract'. Genres are often felt to be innately conservative because they rely upon established rules and codes for producing meaning, but this criticism misses two important points. Firstly, all language is marked by socially constituted rules; it is simply that these are particularly obvious in generic texts. Secondly, these rules are always open to contestation and transformation. In particular, the ways in which conventions are used (through what I have called writing and reading styles) change as they cease to be relevant to the contract. While there may still be a need for a convention, the writing style used to express it may become stilted and predictable, and a new style may become necessary.

In the case of science fiction, for example, the convention of the 'info-dump' remains invaluable. The info-dump, or 'idiot lecture', is necessary because the reader is unsure of the nature of the time and place in which the story is set, so a narrator (the author, a character) has to present large chunks of this background information. However, this is normally utterly artificial, as one character tells another things that both already know. Resolving this dilemma calls for a constant reinvention of the convention. K. W. Jeter's SF novel *Dr Adder* relies on a particularly self-conscious reinvention (1987). The protagonist, Limmit, is attempting to make sense of a place which is utterly alien to him. He thinks

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34 This is obvious to competent readers: "idiot lecture: A way for the author to let the reader know some part of the BACK-STORY, by having one CHARACTER tell it to another... This is usually considered a clumsy way of inserting EXPOSITION into the story; the action stops dead, and the audience... tends to lose interest" (Rogow, 1991:160).

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"If only life was like a science fiction novel..." then he could be the recipient of an info-dump (36). However, "In reality, it never took place: the fundamentals of a society remained unarticulated, something to be lived upon, not talked about" (36-37). But Jeter still needs to talk about his world, for the reader's sake. His answer is to create a character (a social researcher!) who is happy to sell this information to Limmit, informing the reader at the same time as establishing the second character. Such writing styles re-invent the convention without altering the nature of its operation. I will suggest in Chapter 4 that the invention of cyberpunk as a subgenre of SF was achieved through the production of a set of new and transformed conventions.

7. Having discussed the contract, it becomes easier to understand the nature of 'misreadings'. I have argued throughout that no reading can be simply 'wrong', and I would suggest that we see them instead as contract-breaking readings. This also makes it possible to talk of 'miswritings', or rather, contract-breaking writing styles. These deviations from the contract are the result of writers and readers approaching conventions in ways which differ from those approved by the contract. Contract-breaking can be deliberate, leading to a reinvention of the convention (like Jeter's ironic twist on the info-dump). This reinvention can be described as a situation where the writer or reader rewrites their contract with SF, to fit their own expectations - expectations which are not being fulfilled by the present contract. On the other hand, contract-breaking can be accidental. Those readers who fall outside the 'natural audience' (Barker's term for the text's implied readers, 1989), will be unable to match their expectations and experiences to the conventions offered by the text. In addition, while a reader may be part of this audience, he or she may not possess the competence needed to remain within the contract: his or her interpretation of conventions will therefore be 'wrong' in contractual terms. It is possible to give a linguistic analogy: if performance (writing or reading practice) deviates from competence (the known rules of the generic contract), the result is 'ungrammatical' (gibberish in terms of those rules). This is not to say that these contract-breaking readings are wrong, or do not necessarily give pleasure to writers or readers. In the case
of practice which attempts to reinvent conventions, the writer/reader can display their superior competence; if the book flops because it breaks the contract, the author claims to be a victim of the conservatism of the genre; if an interpretation is judged to be wrong, the reader can fall back on 'personal opinions' or create an intricate justification for it through their competence.

The essence of these breaches of contract lie in the mismatch between the writers’ and readers’ expectations of each other. On the one hand, the writer produces for members of the 'natural audience' for their text, and may misjudge the nature of this audience. On the other, the reader may find the writer's assumptions and writing style (use of conventions) disagreeable because they are outside the contract.

8. This leads to the question of evaluating readings: can we speak of them as 'right' or 'wrong'? Even if a misreading is technically impossible, interpretations are judged in this way. Culler suggests that increasingly accurate readings are made as literary competence improves (120-121); in other words, some authors and readers are more competent than others. He writes that competence should be improved by education: readers should be taught the right way to read conventions, based upon a sound knowledge of previous interpretations. However, this sounds to me like the process of acquiring a "passport" to the "private hunting reserve" of the legitimate critic - interpretations are rigidly policed by the scriptural economy (de Certeau, 1984:171; and see 2.3. and Chapter 8). This evaluation of interpretations through strict enforcement of the contract is not restricted to the sacred site of Literature; science fiction is also policed by its readers. Henry Jenkins writes that there is a Star Trek 'meta-text' against which all fan interpretations must be judged. If they do not fit this meta-text (which I would see as a contract, since it is made up of all previously accepted interpretation), then they are judged to be wrong in some way. Jenkins quotes a fan on this issue:

*Star Trek* is a format for expressing rights, opinions and ideals. Most every imaginable idea can be expressed through *Trek*... But there is a right way.  

(1992:89)
I feel that this also demonstrates the establishment and contestation of the contract. The point of looking at these evaluations is not to see what is right and what is wrong, but how the contract and competence are used to decide between rival interpretations. In the extreme cases cited above, the study of literature and the *Star Trek* fan ‘community’, this policing of meaning is more pronounced because of the social organisation of, and relationship between, writers and readers.

9. Finally, it is also important to look at the positive aspects of the contract: the ways in which it is used to produce *pleasure*. Once a contract has been established, successful use of its conventions allows the reader’s expectations to be satisfied, and the writer to meet those needs. However, we need to be careful about pleasure: we should not assume that the ‘natural audience’, those who expect the contract to be fulfilled, are not *critical* of the text or writer. Indeed, Barker suggests that they may in fact be *more* critical, because their contracts are more firmly fixed and are therefore more likely to be broken:

> We need to be able to distinguish different kinds of criticism. Outsiders, who do not want this kind of story at all, may use dismissive criticism. ‘Casual’ readers, who perhaps enjoy them but to whom the issues are marginal, may half-criticise. But the ‘spontaneous’ or ‘natural’ readership will want the stories to live up to the promise of Jackie’s contract; and their criticisms will start from there. (Barker, 1989:256)

As Barker notes, this parallels the ways in which Ang’s letter-writers criticised *Dallas* (1985); the ‘*Dallas*-lovers’ were still able to "criticise it from the inside, in effect commenting on how well it lives up to its own criteria" (Barker, 1989:310 n22). I would stress the importance of this, but add that Ang clearly shows that it is harder for the *Dallas*-lovers to explain why they liked the programme than it was for the *Dallas*-haters to say why they disliked it. In other words, while the ‘right’ use of the contract creates (and is created by) pleasure, this pleasure operates within the contested field of *taste*.

In conclusion, I feel that this model allows me to begin to explore the space where meaning is created: the territory shared by writers and readers, which is
partially structured by generic and contractual conventions. The model depicts a complex and dynamic dialogue between writers and readers, and this can be extended to show that this is one dialogue amongst many.

...a verbal performance [in the form of a book] also inevitably orientates itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both by the same author and those by other authors... Thus the printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on. (Volosinov, 1973:95)

The book is written in dialogue, because it is oriented in respect to other books, and read in dialogue, as readers orient it against their readings of other books. Reading practice also brings in other dialogues: the context in which writing and reading takes place, the evaluations of others (reviews, recommendations, criticisms), and so on. It would be impossible to capture the fullness of all these dialogues, and so it is impossible to capture the whole context of writing and reading practice. This model merely provides a way of thickening the central dialogue.

The key elements within this central dialogue are writing and reading styles - the forms of practice developed by authors and readers to make sense of generic conventions. The remainder of this thesis examines these styles and the conventions associated with them. Since I am partly concerned to re-establish the importance of the reader in cultural geography, I will concentrate on reading styles, but this necessitates a return to de Certeau’s idea of scriptural imperialism. These reading styles may be part of a contract, but they may not be the ones that readers would choose themselves. Reading styles may therefore seek to resist the strategies of the author with their own tactics.
SECTION TWO:

THE WORLD OF GIBSON’S FICTION
CHAPTER 4
READING THE WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

He smelled the air. Another world and another atmosphere. It feels strange, he decided.
'Don't say', Mali said, 'that you find this place "unearthly". Please, for my sake'.
(Dick, 1969a/72, §7:63)

4.1. Introduction: Interpretation, SF, and novelistic space

It is time to begin a synthesis of the three concerns of the thesis: reading, geography, and science fiction. Although Chapter 3 established a 'model' of the relationship between writers, texts and readers, this abstraction must be grounded in the context of generic conventions and writing and reading practices. The aim of Section Two, therefore, is to examine the world of Gibson's 'Sprawl Fictions' within this generic science-fictional context. In addition, attention must also be paid to the ways in which "the literary meaning of the experience of place and the literary experience of that meaning of place" are produced and consumed (Thrift, 1983:12). Drawing these two aspects together to elaborate the model, this chapter introduces three important issues which have shaped Section Two - the nature of SF criticism; the conventions of SF; and lastly the role of place and space in fiction. The chapter concludes with a brief tour of the world of the Sprawl fictions, so that the model becomes tailored to the task at hand: the investigation of readers' constructions of science fictional places in the world of William Gibson.

 Chapters 5 and 6 then examine the discussants' constructions of important aspects of this world. Chapter 5 looks at cultural politics, especially the significance of 'women with guns', and at social-technological relationships through the figure of the cyborg; Chapter 6 concerns the two key spaces of the fictions, cyberspace and the city. Although the three chapters in Section 2 represent a refinement of the model, and produce more sensitive interpretations than are possible through textual analysis alone, they still make relatively 'rough' cuts across the empirical material. I want to argue that though this kind of analysis is invaluable, the transcripts need to be grounded still more firmly in the practices of readers. Section 3 therefore produces an even 'thicker' description.
4.2. A Critique of ‘Science Fiction Studies’

Since I need to take account of the role of genre in reading, it might be thought that the field of ‘science fiction studies’ would provide some guidelines\(^1\). However, I want briefly to review this literature to argue that it fails to develop a useful analysis of the genre, largely due to an emphasis on textual analysis at the expense of the reader. These flaws are most serious where they concern questions of cultural politics, and in Chapter 5 I contrast critical analyses of the ideologies of cyberpunk with the discussants’ accounts to work through some of the problems with the former approach. This leads me to offer an alternative view of the politics of these representations, based on their use by readers as ‘imaginative resources’. For now, though, I want to establish the basis for this technique.

‘Science fiction studies’ are best defined by their object rather than their institutional situation. It is possible to see a hierarchy of forms of SF criticism, ranging from the work of professional critics in film studies, literary theory and cultural studies (the journal Science Fiction Studies plus most of the works cited in this chapter), through works which are produced by fan critics and academics in a professional style (the journal Foundation), down to fan criticism (written by and for fans) which appears in fanzines and other non-academic publications\(^2\). The dominance of textual analysis declines as we move down from journals like SFS to fan productions, although some fans deliberately adopt this approach in their non-professional studies (see Chapters 7 and 8). However, before I go on to demonstrate the flaws of these textual studies of SF, I want to provide a brief summary of the prevailing paradigm in science fiction, to give a flavour of contemporary issues. This work is largely based on cyberpunk SF, and particularly Gibson’s fictions, which are primarily seen as an expression of postmodernism.

Much of the recent academic interest in cyberpunk and cyberculture has

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\(^1\) I use this term to refer not to the journal of the same name, but to the rather messy and incompletely institutionalised field which takes SF as its object of study.

\(^2\) I would also include Rogow’s Futurespeak (1991), an excellent insiders’ glossary of fan terms, in this category.
argued that they are symptoms of a postmodern world. In essence, they rest upon three points: first, after the 'radical break' with modernity, cyberpunk offers a way of understanding the new forms of culture and society associated with the postmodern; second, since writers on the postmodern, especially Jameson (1984; 1992), Baudrillard (1991) and Haraway (1991, 1992), draw upon the tropes of SF in their writing, it follows that the two are inextricably intertwined; and finally, since cyberpunk ('postmodernist SF') discusses the postmodern world in a postmodernist way, this represents the best possible site for analysis and criticism of contemporary culture. It is no exaggeration to say that cyberpunk has become the privileged literary form of SF for critics.

The crucial moment in the critical 'discovery' of cyberpunk which helped to establish the 'postmodernist SF' tag was the publication of a Mississippi Review special issue on the subgenre (1988). The guest editor, Larry McCaffery, later published it as Storming the Reality Studio (1991), padding out the original papers with excerpts from Baudrillard, Kroker, Lyotard, and others. McCaffery argues that cyberpunk is "the inevitable result of art responding to the technological milieu that is producing postmodern culture at large" (14). In his editorial introduction to the Science Fiction Studies special edition on 'Science Fiction and Postmodernism', Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. suggests that "with the catastrophic failure of traditional humanist thought, SF has rushed in with a treasury of powerful metaphors and icons capturing the reality of insecure borders" (1991b:306). Finally, in a major book on what he calls 'terminal identities', Scott Bukatman also finds solace in 'postmodern science fiction', as it alone is able to cope with the new relationships between the human and the technological. Again there is the assertion that the new (postmodern) world needs a new (postmodernist) literature, and that because SF has long been concerned with

3 While it is encouraging to see such well-intentioned support for science fiction, it should be remembered that these critics rather patronisingly discuss cyberpunk as a particularly sophisticated kind of popular culture (see 1.2.).

4 Another expression of this argument is that new social-technological relationships underpin postmodernism and the postmodern; that SF has always been concerned with these relationships; and therefore that cyberpunk is their most contemporary expression. See, for example, Csicsery-Ronay Jr., (1991c).
these themes, only SF will do:

There is simply no overstating the importance of science fiction to the present cultural moment, a moment that sees itself as science fiction... science fiction has, in many ways, prefigured the dominant issues of postmodern culture. (1993:6)

However, these claims have also been strongly contested; by the time of the South Atlantic Quarterly’s special edition, ‘Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture’ (1993), the cracks were beginning to show. The clearest illustration of this comes from Dery’s interview with Samuel Delany, one of the ‘fathers’ of the subgenre. Delany mounts a powerful attack on the institutionalisation of cyberpunk by SF critics:

... the continuing interest in the cyberpunks by academics, as something they persist in seeing as alive and still functioning, strikes me - I must admit - as a largely nostalgic pursuit of a more innocent worldview, which... to me has no more active historical validity once we pass the Los Angeles King riots. (Dery, 1993:756)

Part of his objection to this "pervasive misreading" (749) is that cyberpunk represents the discourse of a specific group of white males with access to expensive technologies, and this is the starting point of much of the contestation of the significance of the genre.

One of the major arguments presented as a critique of cyberpunk is that one of the aims of this ‘revolution’ was to displace feminist SF from its role as the key form of radical SF. This had already been suggested by Delany himself (Tatsumi, 1988), but has been most extensively discussed by Nicola Nixon (1992), who describes this contested displacement as "a literary turf war" (219). Nixon argues that when Sterling derides ‘70s SF as "confused, self-involved and stale" (1988:9, see 1.3.), he is attacking the work of writers such as Joanna Russ who did so much to make the genre radical and utopian. In its search for ‘fathers’ the subgenre also ignored those women writers from whom they borrowed: for example, Molly, one of Gibson’s main characters, seems modelled on Joanna Russ’s Jael from The Female Man (1975). Nixon even goes so far as to link this denial and rejection of cyberpunk’s ‘mothers’ to the post-feminist backlash of the late 1980s and 1990s.
Nixon's other main critique of the subgenre is that it is inherently masculinist at best and misogynist at worst. The controversy produced by such criticisms has led to a useful, although occasionally strained exchange. If anything, however, it has served to keep cyberpunk at the centre of SF criticism. In the vast majority of these discussions it has been William Gibson's work which has been under scrutiny, prompting me to focus on the Sprawl fictions. However, I have chosen to present a different kind of analysis (see Chapter 5).

Although SF criticism is in a powerful position to help us to understand 'the postmodern', it insists on generalising from a small body of texts or elements of the cyberculture to make grand statements about 'the state of culture'. Again, there is little interest in the reader in this criticism. Generally, the critic reads the text, assumes that this reading is unambiguous and will have certain 'effects', and then judges whether it is radical or reactionary. John Fekete caricatures this approach brilliantly in his review of McCaffery's collection:

... the world is sick and thus distorts everyday perception and experience; the job of art is to identify and resist the ever-new forms of this sickness, and the role of the critic/theorist, miraculously healthy when armed with the truths known to an anti-capitalist hermeneutic, is to provide due political praise or disapprobation. An obsessive, simplistic, and devastatingly short-sighted schema. (1992:398)

Though Fekete might not agree, I feel that this is bound up with the critics' constructions of readers. The most obvious example is John Huntingdon's immensely disappointing Rationalizing Genius (1989), which attacks the idea of audience studies with a particularly nasty version of the theory of the passive reader. His evaluation of Radway's Reading the Romance is one of the baldest assertions of effects theory that I have ever seen in an academic work. Huntingdon draws a parallel between interviewing readers and psychoanalysis:

...the individuals' defenses, whose compromised success has brought the patient to psychoanalysis in the first place, will work to prevent the analysand from perceiving the actual difficulty. In just the same way, the plain reader, far from seeing through the pleasure to the real operations of the text, will be, of all people, the least capable of such understanding. (23-24, emphasis added)
Huntingdon misses the point that most readers, unlike most analysands, do not feel that they have any kind of 'problem' with their reading! This problem is in fact purely an invention of critics like Huntingdon, who patronisingly wish to help readers understand where they have been led astray.

While SF criticism is rarely this hostile to readers, much of it relies upon textual analysis and an implicit theory of passive consumption. More promisingly, workers in cultural and media studies have approached SF texts as part of a wider circuit of culture. Tulloch and Alvarado's excellent Dr Who: The unfolding text (1983) examines the programme in terms of its 'production history' as well as its textual characteristics, and there have been some very interesting recent studies of fans which stress the consumption of SF (Jenkins, 1991; 1992), although this latter work presents a rather 'optimistic' picture. To this we can add Linda Fleming's interesting article on 'The American SF Subculture' (1977). Another fascinating deviation from the textual analysis paradigm investigates the position of SF in terms of the politics of taste (Luckhurst, 1991; 1993). Much of this work highlights the failure of textual analysis in SF studies, since it clearly shows that texts are part of a set of wider relationships between authors and fans.

While science fiction studies are not entirely moribund, they are largely concerned, as Fekete says, with attempts to "provide due political praise or disapprobation". This act of judgement becomes especially charged when issues of gender and race are at stake, as Chapter 5 will make clear. As the first step in providing a framework for an alternative account, I would like to offer an analysis of the genre through its textual characteristics.

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5 However, it is possible to glean something from Huntingdon's analysis; see 4.3.2. below.

6 Their research also included some audience work, which unfortunately is only presented in truncated form in an appendix.

7 Martin Barker uses SF as an example of the way that contracts are embedded in social relationships, constituted by fan writing, conventions, and so on: "There are a number of ways in which authors and readers interact, and future writing will be affected by this unfolding relationship" (1989:258).
4.3. Between Science and Fiction: Realism and the fantastic

All writers of fiction hypothesize virtual interactions of invented entities. Like science and engineering, however, SF makes plausible models of beings, places and times nobody has yet encountered.
(Samuelson, 1993:192)

In Chapter 1, I suggested that science fiction, like other forms of 'impossibility fiction' (horror, fantasy, the gothic), brings together realist and fantastic forms of discourse. All impossibility fiction is characterised by the tension between these two opposed forces, although this dialogue takes different forms in different genres. In science fiction the relationship between the two is particularly unequal, as scientific realism possesses a nearly monological power over the fantastic. However, science fiction still depends upon the fantastic, and can never entirely free itself from it. As Samuelson notes, it deals with things which do not exist; impossible things. The elements of the fantastic which remain are suppressed and ordered through the application of scientific rationality. In other words, all impossible elements must be 'explained' scientifically and thus made plausible. The nature of this relationship is not, however, set in stone: the fantastic always possesses at least the potential to disrupt and subvert this rational control, as the dialogue is an ongoing, though unequal, struggle. The fantastic can generate impossible meanings which act to subvert commonsense understanding. This potential can also be found in science fiction, but is often denied by its writers and readers, who work to rehabilitate the radical otherness of fantasy.

The relative importance of the two discourses is 'set' to some extent in the meta-contract which characterises the genre - although it may be very different for individual contracts between a reader and a text. It follows that the struggle between the fantastic and realism is visible within the text, as well as in the writing and reading practices used to give it meaning. Obviously, once we move

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8 The monological utterance attempts to deny the other a space from which to answer it; it tries to freeze dialogue. As such, "it is both theoretically and practically impossible" (Holquist, 1990:53) as "any monological utterance... is an inseverable element of verbal communication": a reply is always expected and received (Volosinov, 1973:72).
beyond the text, we cannot be sure about the success of these conventions, either
in conveying the author's intended meaning or convincing the reader. In
particular, readers can 'misread' the plausibility of SF, refusing to follow the
author's strategy of ordering impossibility; they create fantasy in the midst of
rationality. Similarly, readers of the fantastic can refuse to suspend their
disbelief, applying a rational explanation to a situation intended to deny this
strategy. The creation of rational meaning is a very delicate operation, as will be
demonstrated in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. However, for the sake of argument, I will
assume that the fantastic is generally written and read to create impossible
situations, while SF is generally written and read to 'manage' impossibility.

This section expands and clarifies these points, examining the dialogue
between the fantastic and realism, and concentrating on its appearance within
texts.

4.3.1. The Fantastic: Theorising the impossible

The fantastic, which can be considered as a genre, mode or set of discourses,
refuses to accept the rigidly-fixed boundaries recognised by realism:

Literary fantasies have appeared to be 'free' from many of the
conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused
to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with
chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between
animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death.

(Jackson, 1981:1-2)

There is a clear parallel with Bakhtin's account of carnival (1984a).
However, the fantastic is more than a simple negation of realism and rationality.
In Fantasy: the literature of subversion, Rosemary Jackson argues that the
discourse of the fantastic attempts to discuss true otherness. It lies beyond
language and is therefore beyond description and understanding:

Structured upon contradiction and ambivalence, the fantastic traces
in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that
which is represented as 'untrue' and 'unreal'.

(37)

As a result, the fantastic can only be theorised as an absence. Jackson's
analysis sees the fantastic as a literature of desire which seeks to expose absences and to transgress cultural restraints; as an indicator of a culture's particular fears and taboos.

Presenting that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be; it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame. (23)

Returning to the relationship between the fantastic and the real, Jackson argues that in a secular culture, the desire for otherness cannot be displaced into the "alternative regions" of the marvellous (the spaces of the utopia, and fantastic place) and so creates it through 'alterity': "...this world re-placed and dis-located" (19). The real is all that we have to defamiliarize. The fantastic attempts to make reality unreal. Fantasy and reality are different but related.

The fantastic is thus located in the space between the real and unreal, and the two elements must co-exist together. In terms of the structure of the fantastic, this allows a text to move between two poles: a realistic world of objects, presented mimetically, and an unrealistic and 'impossible' world. The presence of the unreal in the real serves to question our worldview while the realistic qualities of the impossible elements help us to accept their role, allowing us to suspend our disbelief. All impossibility fiction must therefore blend reality and unreality. However, the fantastic contains only the minimum amount of realism while science fiction uses only the minimum of fantasy.

It is possible to see this struggle between the real and the unreal within the text, and here the work of Tzvetan Todorov (1973) is enormously helpful. As a structuralist, Todorov refused to accept that the literary fantastic could be merely the reflection of forces beyond the text (unlike Jackson, who develops a psychoanalytic explanation). Instead, he argued that the blurring of the line

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9 This occurs, perhaps, because we have run out of 'blank spaces on the map': there is no longer any room on Earth for fantastic spaces and places. This echoes Baudrillard's thesis of the three orders of simulacra (1991); with the fantastic spaces of the utopian simulacra destroyed by imperialism and rationalism, the fantastic was forced to expand into the human unconscious.

10 The relationship between realism and fantastic is not a simple binary opposition. Like all relationships it is dialogical: each constitutes the other.

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between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ depends upon two things: the reader’s uncertainty over the truth of the narrative and the resistance of the text to narrative closure. Jackson describes the ambiguity of the text described by Todorov and its ‘effects’ on the reader:

The tale which introduces ‘strange’ events permits no internal explanation of the strangeness - the protagonist cannot understand what is going on - and this confusion spreads outwards to affect the reader in similar ways. (28)

Todorov thus defines the fantastic in terms of the inscription within the text of hesitation or anxiety. Three conditions must be met:

...the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described... this hesitation may also be experienced by a character... [and] the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text; he will reject allegorical as well as poetic interpretations. (Todorov, 33)

Thus the reader is constantly encouraged to attempt to understand and make sense of an ambiguous text rather than dismissing it all as a ‘mere fairy tale’. These excerpts from Gogol’s ‘The Nose’ provides us with a clear example of the hesitation produced:

An inexplicable phenomenon took place before his very eyes; a carriage drew up to the entrance; the doors opened; a gentleman in uniform jumped out, slightly stooping, and ran up the stairs. Imagine the horror and at the same time amazement of Kovalyov when he recognized that it was his own nose! ...Two minutes later the Nose indeed came out. He was wearing a gold-embroidered uniform with a big stand-up collar and doeskin breeches; there was a sword at his side. From his plumed hat one could infer that he held the rank of a state councillor. (1961/92:62)

Gogol gives no indication as to how Kovalyov recognises his nose; he also fails to explain how the nose is capable of wearing a plumed hat and being a state councillor. Considering Todorov’s three conditions for hesitation, the encounter takes place in a realistically described "world of living persons"; Kovalyov himself
hesitates to guess at the real meaning, as does the narrator (it is "inexplicable" even though it is "before his very eyes"); and the reader must not seek poetic or allegorical explanations (the nose is literally both a nose and a state councillor).

Having identified this hesitation as the key textual embodiment of the fantastic, we can now begin to examine the conventions by which it is produced. Firstly, the fantastic recognises and makes explicit the impossibility of literary realism, of mimesis. A lack of simple explanations and set meanings creates a gap between signifier and signified within the text; this can be seen in two (linked) fantastic conventions. The unnameable 'It' or 'thing', "...which can have no adequate articulation except through suggestion and implication" is frequently encountered in the fantastic text (Jackson, 38-39). Here the Other, the unreal, is a thing without a name; it is frightening because its nature cannot be understood. There are also names without things - nonsense words like Carroll's 'jabberwocky' or H. P. Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu'. Language begins to break down, denying the possibility of knowing and understanding. This is represented in the text by moments of invisibility and incoherency; characters and narrators cannot see or describe the nameless thing or thingless name

Secondly, Jackson writes that because this kind of text is antinomical, containing contradictory versions of the real and anti-real, the basic trope of the fantastic text is therefore the oxymoron, which holds contradictions together to create semantic impossibilities. Another implication of this is that the fantastic questions truth and suggests that there are many contradictory truths; it is therefore polysemantic. The oxymoron creates hesitation because it cannot be resolved.

Finally, one of the most effective of the many ways of producing a hesitation within the text is "a confusion of pronouns and of pronoun functions" (Jackson, 29), conflating the subject positions of the narrator and the protagonist,
Kafka's *Metamorphosis* disturbs us because Gregor's transformation is not described by 'I' (Gregor himself, who could be hallucinating) but by the objective and omniscient narrator of realist fiction. The character's uncertainty as to the reason for the change only adds to the reader's. For another example we can return to Gogol's 'The Nose', which is more disturbing because the narrator *also* experiences some doubt over the plausibility of the story; there is "a foregrounding of the impossibility of certainty" within the text itself (Jackson, 28).

The relationship between the real and the unreal takes this specific form in the fantastic. In other impossible genres the dialogue is different, as I will show below. What I hope I have demonstrated is that it is possible to understand the workings of the fantastic through its textual conventions.

### 4.3.2 Science Fiction: The rules of scientific realism

In this section I want to explore the creation of what I call scientific realism, since I will argue that one of the most important ways in which realism is created in SF is through the application of a particular form of scientific rationality. As a result, science fiction is generally *plausible* rather than fantastic, and *consistent with scientific principles*. The question of scientific realism has been most usefully developed by critics of 'hard SF', that part of the genre which foregrounds science and technology as both content and organising discourse (see for example Huntingdon, 1989; Malmgren, 1991; Samuelson, 1993; Westfahl, 1993). Since it is in hard SF that the clearest examples of scientific realism are found, I want briefly to discuss the conventions of the subgenre in order to draw out what are described as the 'rules' of this kind of plausibility. I do not want to discuss definitions of hard SF here; Gary Westfahl's etymology of these terms (1993) is extremely useful, but I feel that it is more helpful to consider the ways in which the term is used because this allows us to see how value is thereby attributed to certain SF texts and authors. The definitions and positions outlined by critics

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12 Describing something as 'hard SF' is not an objective evaluation, but a mark of distinction. The confusion (which Westfahl hopes to end) surrounding the use of this term is an indication of the multiplicity of ways in which it can be taken up and used by readers, critics and authors.
should be considered to refer not simply to the form of SF texts but also to writing and reading practices, which allow us to begin to piece together some of the principles of scientific realism. As a result this discussion focuses on textual conventions but must place them within the contractual relationship between authors and readers.

What are the principles involved in writing this kind of SF? Here is a fascinating statement from Robert Heinlein, an author not normally associated with hard SF:

A man who provides Mars with a dense atmosphere and an agreeable climate, a man whose writing shows that he knows nothing of ballistics nor of astronomy nor of any modern technology would do better not to attempt science fiction... The obligation of the writer to his reader to know what he is talking about is even stronger in science fiction than elsewhere, because the ordinary reader has less chance to catch him out. It's not fair. It's cheating.

(cited Huntingdon, 1989:71; emphasis added)

This statement, made in 1957, might be aimed at a specific author but it could equally apply to any SF which does not observe scientific principles. The author's main responsibility is to "know what he (sic) is talking about", that is, to get the science right. Westfahl agrees: "hard SF is committed to avoiding scientific errors in stories" (162, emphasis in original). This is complicated by the genre's place between realist and fantastic fiction, as David Samuelson points out:

In SF... scientific accuracy is also limited by the competing demand for fantasy. Even hard SF requires an element of the unknown, into which writers cast a net fashioned of reigning theory. (1993:193)

The effect of fantasy on SF means that the science can never be exactly right. Samuelson goes on to argue that "all SF writers "cheat" on known science", but whereas most SF authors ignore these problems or cover them up with 'verbal legerdemain', "the trick in hard SF is to minimize cheating, not just disguise it

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13 Huntingdon suggests Heinlein is referring to Ray Bradbury's 'Mars is Heaven!', originally published in 1948 (1989:89); Bradbury's Martian Chronicles hold up a fantastic mirror to the SF of the 1940s and 1950s.
with fancy footwork" (193, emphasis in original).

I feel that the reasons for this are as much to do with the reader as with the author's loyalty to scientific truth. This can be seen in the following paragraph, which is taken from an article by Hal Clement describing the process of building the world which served as a setting for his novel *Mission of Gravity* (1954), one of the most famous examples of hard SF:

The fun... lies in treating the whole thing as a game. I've been playing the game since I was a child, so the rules must be quite simple. They are: for the reader of a science-fiction story, they consist of finding as many as possible of the author's statements or implications which conflict with the fact (sic) as science currently understands them. For the author, the rule is to make as few such slips as he possibly can. (cited Westfahl, 1993:162)

Beyond any appeals to scientific knowledge, the SF story must convince its readers. This game, which is still open to 'cheating', is played by both writers and readers, and it is significant that both sides know the 'rules':

The enthusiastic readers of hard-core SF have always been emphatic in their disapproval when a story fails to meet their criteria for the form. Letters to SF magazines belligerently complaining that certain stories are not SF constitute clear evidence of a strong, popular instinct about the genre. (Huntingdon, 1989:70-71)

What Huntingdon calls a 'popular instinct' is, I think, one version of the contract. The criteria which underlie this contract are those of scientific accuracy and consistency, and Huntingdon argues that Heinlein drew upon these conventions to insist that SF authors should not 'cheat' when playing the 'game' (72). Similarly, Samuelson is aware of the problems of applying these conventions too rigidly, but uses it to define a tendency in hard SF:

[SF writers] have rarely paid more than lip service to this rule in its most limited form, but old SF hands call it "playing the game" to

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14 This form of the contract dates back to the earliest mass-market SF; Hugo Gernsback, often credited as the 'father' of SF, invited readers to write in if they could spot scientific errors in the stories published in his magazine *Amazing Stories*, and took professional advice on matters of scientific accuracy (see Ross, 1991:106-110, and Westfahl, 167).
minimize violations of natural laws. Given a coherent fantasy, extending science fiction rather than simply contradicting it, descriptions of the material universe should approximate to what is contemporaneously known to scientific investigators. (193)

What techniques do writers use when following these 'rules'? Many SF critics have suggested that there are two or three main kinds of SF, and that these are associated with specific conventions. I will look at the typologies of Westfahl (1993), Samuelson (1993) and Malmgren (1991; 1993) as illustrations of these strategies. Westfahl is interested in the strategies writers use to create scientific plausibility. He describes the first one in this way:

...play it safe: set the story in the near future and feature scientific advances that are either already planned or plausible in light of current scientific and technological knowledge. (163)

This 'microcosmic hard SF' is contrasted to the technique which produces 'macrocosmic SF':

...deliberately create the most spectacular and implausible environment or development possible while adhering to all known scientific facts. (163)

The difference is one of scale and, crucially, distance: it is the gap between present and future, in terms of technological advancement and scientific knowledge, which allows us to differentiate the two types. Westfahl acknowledges that the latter technique is "a high-risk strategy" because it is more vulnerable to readers' criticisms (163). The further we get from the real, the weaker the scientific legitimation becomes - the author risks implausibility or fantasy.

Samuelson provides three ways in which authors attempt to build what he calls "extension bridges" between "what we think we know" and "what we know we don't" (198). The first and most common is 'extrapolation' which must be consistent with current knowledge, and bears many similarities to Westfahl's 'microcosmic SF'. The second is 'speculation' which is freer than extrapolation,

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15 Westfahl considers another two strategies for avoiding scientific errors, but rejects them as "cheating" - they are outside the contract (163).
although "many SF writers feel an obligation to rationalize even outrageous speculations after the fact". The last concerns 'transformations', careful extrapolations which lead to "fictional worlds or worldviews we can hardly recognize as emerging from modern society" (199).

Extrapolation is common to hard SF, and speculation is integral to soft SF and even realist fiction. Samuelson seems to suggest that 'speculation' does not have to be scientifically realistic. Finally, transformations parallel Kuhn's paradigm shifts but remain rooted in plausibility. Samuelson cites Gibson's cyberspace as one such paradigmatic transformation. Developed from a close extrapolation of existing trends in computer research, this 'microcosmic SF' has, Samuelson argues, led to a radical change in the way we conceive of reality and constitutes a shift felt beyond the confines of the genre. He sees these techniques as attempts to build convincing realities so as to avoid becoming fantasies. The writer must justify the character of Elsewhere:

Regardless of its setting in time and space, SF depends on transgressions of what its readers think of as reality. To justify those transgressions, it establishes images of reality on grounds essentially theoretical. (198)

Not only does hard SF take science and technology as the objects of its fictions but it has built the scientistic worldview into its narrative conventions. John Huntingdon develops a similar idea in his study of the ideology of hard SF, arguing that "we judge hard-core SF, not by an appeal to our experience of the world, but by the scientific language it uses" (1989:72). Scientific accuracy has replaced empirical reality as a measure of validity or 'truth'.

Finally, Carl Malmgren echoes Westfahl's typology by dividing SF into two types, extrapolative and speculative, explaining that

the author may proceed either by extrapolation, creating a fictional novum by logical projection or extension from existing actualities, or by speculation, making a quantum leap of the imagination toward an other state of affairs. (1993:17)

Again the distinction rests upon the distance between the science fictional
setting and the reality of everyday Earth\textsuperscript{16}. We can develop these insights not as a way of classifying SF novels but as two broad strategies for constructing science fictional settings: \textit{speculative/macrocosmic}, where the fantastic is more pronounced; and \textit{extrapolative/microcosmic}, where the fantastic is contained by scientific realism. It is the latter form which is most plausible, most consistent with scientific principles, most coherent, most realistic.

These writing strategies and textual conventions create a realist narrative in science fiction. Other forms of realism are also produced, especially what Ang (1985) calls "emotional realism", and these are more fully examined in Chapter 8. It must be remembered that reading practice is capable of creating different interpretations of these conventions, and this can be seen in Chapters 6 through to 8. For now, though, this list of generic conventions allows a more grounded analysis of the Sprawl novels and the readers’ constructions of Gibson’s world. The last aspect of this discussion reunites the fantastic and the science fictional within the framework of Bakhtin’s study of Carnival.

4.3.3. \textit{Another Battle of Carnival and Lent?}

The two discourses I have been discussing are united in a dialogue which forms the central defining characteristic of the science fiction genre. SF depends upon impossibility since it breaks with the realist novel in discussing spaces and times which are unknown and even unknowable. The fantastic is allowed into the text to give the author and reader room for their ‘thought experiments’. However, the unreal is ordered and contained even more successfully than it is in the fantastic. The hesitation produced by the fantastic as it moves between the spaces of the real and unreal is generally resolved in SF, although this ignores more ‘speculative’ works of science fiction and the transformative powers of readers.

In other words, scientific realism replaces hesitation with consistency within the text, and allows the reader to make sense of the impossible and fantastic elements of SF. Carl Malmgren’s work on SF (1991; 1993) is enormously useful in developing this insight. The central premise of \textit{Self and Other in SF} (1993) is

\textsuperscript{16} See Malmgren (1991:11-15) for a more extensive treatment of these ideas.
taken from SF author Gregory Benford’s acute observation that "rendering the alien, making the reader experience it, is the crucial contribution of SF" (cited 15). What Benford calls "effing the ineffable" - making the strange understandable - represents the chief strategy employed by authors and readers in the transformation of the impossible into the plausible. I have explained above that Malmgren divides SF into two types, extrapolative and speculative, and I feel that this distinction is very useful in discussing the relationship between the subversive fantastic and rational science fiction. SF narratives, I would argue, are generally extrapolated "from existing actualities", and thus unable or unwilling to reach the subversive potential of the fantastic, while more speculative SF is able to suggest these disruptions of the reader’s commonsense understandings. The more outlandish the narrative, the more likely it is that it will be read not just as ‘unreal’ but as anti-realistic.

This is a fair description of the usual balance between the two discourses, but I believe that the fantastic always retains the potential to surface and subvert the scientific realism which attempts to suppress it. This is founded upon a dialogical interpretation. Even if scientific realism attempts to become a monological utterance, it must expect a reply; it cannot continually suppress its dialogical other. This is, I think, related to Bakhtin’s theory of Carnival (1984a), which he saw as a utopian and progressive force that would never be entirely contained by order and propriety. There is certainly a close link between the fantastic and Carnival. Jackson draws upon Bakhtin’s study of the menippea, an early form of satire, to illustrate the relationship between real and unreal in the fantastic:

It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm. (14)

Brueghel’s famous painting ‘The Battle of Carnival and Lent’ allegorically represents Carnival as a conflict between two traditions: the cultures of the people and the elite. Carnival seeks to invert hierarchies, mocking both the dominant order and the process by which it allocates value. It is centrally concerned with
the body, which is described through a set of conventions that Bakhtin calls 'grotesque realism'. This and other aspects of Carnival bear interesting similarities to the central concerns of the fantastic, and the relationship between the cultures of license and reform is very clearly also a dialogical one\(^\text{17}\). It is also possible to see Carnival in the novel, as the 'billingsgate' (language of the marketplace) of the former echoes the polyphony of the latter (Bakhtin, 1984b; Holquist, 1990:89-90). As a result it does not seem too ridiculous to see science fiction, and to a lesser extent other impossibility fictions, as a continuation of the 'battle between Carnival and Lent', as the fantastic (Carnival) seeks to overturn or challenge the order and authority of scientific realism (the new Lent).

However, three caveats must be made. Firstly, Carnival is specific to a particular time and place: Rabelais' writing draws upon cultural forms which were, strictly speaking, restricted to medieval and early modern Southern European societies. Weaker forms of Carnival, described by Burke as 'carnivalesque', can be seen beyond these narrow spatial and temporal boundaries, but the power of Bakhtin's analysis is reduced as new contexts alter the nature of Carnival\(^\text{18}\). As a result the carnivalesque becomes more of an ambiguous tendency latent within popular culture than its main form of expression. This is also true of impossibility fiction. The fantastic of the twentieth century is very different from Rabelais's world.

Secondly, historical research has questioned Bakhtin's enthusiastic support for the politics of Carnival. Recent research has shown that Carnival provided a number of cultural forms and practices which could be used to reinforce, as well as challenge, dominant constructions (Davis, 1975; Ladurie, 1980). This is particularly noticeable in the case of the carnivalesque - for example the charivari or rough music used to punish transgressors of sexual convention (Thompson, 1991b). In the case of the fantastic, this can perhaps be seen in the different ways

\(^{17}\) In the past, these two cultures constituted each other much more powerfully than they do today; Burke (1978) describes the role of church and state in Carnival before the 'triumph of Lent' led to greater controls, in part because elite and people were becoming increasingly distant from each other.

\(^{18}\) See Dentith on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* for a similar conclusion (1995:81-82).
in which Rabelais and Lovecraft represent the forbidden or impossible. The former involves laughter, the latter, terror. The affirmative and anarchic character of the early modern fantastic seems to have been replaced by a concern for the consequences of taboo-breaking.

Lastly, there remains the thorny question of establishing the real political importance of Carnival. Even when Carnival is truly subversive, its challenge to order is tightly contained. Carnival was firmly bounded in time (the period before Lent, feast days) and space (streets, markets, squares). Burke discusses the rituals associated with the 'death' of Carnival at the end of the festivities, which served "as a demonstration to the public that the time of ecstasy and licence was over and that they must make a 'sober return' to everyday reality" (202). Discussion of the power of these constraints on Carnival tend to polarise into the 'safety-valve' and 'subversive' camps19. Is it possible to assess the value of the fantastic in this way?

Rosemary Jackson certainly seems to subscribe to the safety-valve theory. She writes that fantasy expresses a culture's fears and taboos, both in the sense of representing them and in expelling them when they threaten its stability (3-4). In the act of naming the impossible, the fantastic allows us vicariously to experience it. Simultaneously it also makes possible an act of closure. However, this seems to contradict Todorov's idea of textual hesitation; if the narrative resists closure, the impossible cannot be resolved20. Generally, this seems to suggest that the strength of the subversive powers of the fantastic vary from text to text. The more effective the resolution, the less estranging it can be. This is most obvious in science fiction, where impossible elements are generally resolved by scientifically realistic explanations. In this sense SF is another example of what Burke calls 'the triumph of Lent'. However, such a negative evaluation of the genre can only be sustained through a static, non-dialogical reading. I suggest that the subversive potential of the fantastic remains latent within SF texts, and

19 See Burke (199-204) and Dentith (73-79) for reviews.

20 Jackson solves this problem by displacing uncertainty into the consciousness of the reader; a resolution is possible in the text and in conscious understanding but mobilizes unconscious fears and desires.
that moments of impossibility can be created in the practice of writing and reading SF, as well as taking the form of unresolved hesitations within the text. Examples of this are given throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Having established a generic framework for analysis, it is time to turn to the question of producing spaces in literature.

4.4. Reading Worlds: The thickening of novelistic space

The literary meaning of the experience of place and the literary experience of that meaning of place are both part of an active process of cultural creation and destruction. They do not start or stop with an author. They do not reside in the text. They are not contained in the production and distribution of the work. They do not begin or end with the pattern and the nature of the readership. They are a function of all these things, and more. (Thrift, 1983:12)

This section examines the production of fictional space in novels. While I agree with Thrift that the experience of place is produced by the dialogue between author, text and reader, rather than the property of any of these participants, at this point I am most interested in the traces of this dialogue as conventions within the text - those elements which serve as the focus for writing and reading practice. In other words, how do authors create descriptions of spaces and places in novels? What conventions are encoded into texts to achieve this? And how do readers make sense of them? I will answer the first two questions here, leaving the last to a fuller discussion in Chapter 8.

As a literary form, the novel is inherently geographical. The world of the novel is made up of locations and settings, arenas and boundaries, perspectives and horizons. Various places and spaces are occupied or envisaged by the novel's characters, by the narrator and by audiences as they read. (Daniels and Rycroft, 1993:460)

Novels do seem to contain spaces which are described by the author, experienced by characters and imagined by readers. Investigating this phenomenon was the original impulse behind the study of 'literary geographies'. However, following the critique made in Chapter 2, we need to find a new way of examining these spaces - one which recognizes the importance of authors, texts
and readers. I have suggested that studying conventions allows us to see the operations of this dialogue within the text, but once we begin to examine novels we find that some seem more 'geographical' than others. Compare Daniels' and Rycroft's comment with the following:

In order to construct a picture of Manchester as it appears in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, we have to build it up from a multiplicity of small details scattered, almost incidentally, throughout her texts.

(Preston, 1994:38)

Peter Preston is comparing Gaskell's descriptions of space with the extended "set-piece" descriptions of contemporaries like Dickens and Disraeli. It might seem at first that Preston's conclusion is based upon a rather 'literal' understanding of the role of place in the novel, looking for detailed, 'realistic' descriptions rather than the more subtle "arenas and boundaries, perspectives and horizons" identified by Daniels and Rycroft. In other words, we could accuse Preston of 'stamp collecting' or literary quarrying21. However, there is a more important point here, which qualifies Daniels and Rycroft's assertion.

The real problem is that novelists deploy different techniques for representing space for different reasons. Preston is aware of this, explaining the lack of extended descriptions of place in Gaskell's novels in terms of her status as a native of Manchester. In contrast, "Dickens and Disraeli, coming to the industrial city as outsiders, and seeing it first from a distance, are likely to conceive of it as a set-piece; to see it... as a landscape"22 (37). While novels must deal with space, there are differences in the way that they achieve this. The production of literary space is less marked in Gaskell's work than it is in Sillitoe's, though both are intimately concerned with the experience of two places, Manchester and Nottingham. Different authors place different values upon space and place. For some it is the central object, as a literary landscape, while for

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21 These criticisms have been discussed in 2.2.1.

22 There is a clear parallel here with Cosgrove's work on perspective and landscape painting (see 2.2.2.).

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others it is merely an abstract space in which characters and plots exist. While novels may be inherently geographical, we should not always expect them to be full of descriptions of spaces and places.

I can identify at least two broad kinds of conventions for representing novelistic space, which are generally (though not exclusively) associated with the realist novel and the modernist novel respectively. The first set of conventions strives to create an objective description of space and to attach real meaning to imaginary places, while the second constructs a more subjective experience of space. Preston (1994) is concerned that the first approach, common to other nineteenth century realist novels, is lacking from Gaskell's writing. It becomes clear, however, that she has rejected it for alternative approaches23. I would like to discuss these two textual, conventional styles in turn to illustrate some of the ways in which authors and readers produce experiences of space in literature. The first is developed from Lennard Davis' idea of "thick space" (1987), while the second draws upon Marc Brosseau's examination of the "geography of the text" (1995:95, emphasis in original).

While novels, like films, are literally 'flat', they represent three-dimensional spaces or what Davis calls "deep or thick space".

Space in novels, particularly realistic novels, must be more than simply a backdrop. That is, paradoxically, novelistic spaces must have dimensions and depth; they must have byways and back alleys; there must be open rooms and hidden places; dining rooms and locked drawers; there must be a thickness and interiority to the mental constructions that constitute the novel's space. It is almost impossible to imagine the novel as a form divorced from a complex rendering of space. (1987:53)

He argues that the development of this thick space was prompted by colonialism and capitalism and that "locations are intertwined with ideological explanations for the possession of property" (54), an analysis similar to the work of Cosgrove, Berger and others on landscape art (see Chapter 2). Before this

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23 Preston does, in fact, develop a more subtle analysis of space and place in Gaskell's work.
representational revolution, analogous to the ‘discovery’ of perspective, "most
narratives in most cultures... use[d] a fairly flat, simple backdrop that lacks the
thickness of novelistic space" (53). What interests me here is not the history but
the process of "thickening" novelistic space: the provision of detailed descriptions,
turning a backdrop into a literary experience of the meaning of place. As a
consequence, while the novel may be inherently geographical, to be more than just
a backdrop the author must work to produce novelistic space.

Davis uses the terms location and setting to describe more and less thick
kinds of novelistic space respectively. A setting is a real place like an office or a
city "which serves as a very generalized backdrop to the action which will occur",
like the setting in Defoe's Robinson Crusoe which is simply described as "his
chamber". The location is specific, deeper, more complex; Davis’ example is the
nine-page description that begins Balzac's Le Père Goriot (61). The location is
conventionally thickened through detailed description, presenting information from
all of the senses - although there is often a marked visual bias which makes it
possible to speak of 'literary landscapes' which draw upon the established formal
characteristics of landscape painting. This thickening of space is also intertwined
with the subjective position of narrator and characters:

The bone-littered side of the island must contain Crusoe's judgement
of it; the corn sprouting must embody a divine significance; the
fortifications must be the occasion for a discussion of prudence.
(Davis, 1987:83)

In this way we can see how writers produce thick spaces. But what about
contemporary novels which do not contain these spaces, using settings rather than
locations? Davis admits that thick spaces are more common in the nineteenth
century realist novel, and that "...later novels have become somewhat less
interested in place and more interested in the self and the language of the self"
(87). In addition, extended descriptions have become an accepted part of the
novel:

The difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century
descriptions of space... is that the historical and ideological
justification for space has dropped out. (96)
The commodification of space is no longer so hotly contested. The extended, realist, description of place has become less central to literature, and in the modernist novel it has arguably disappeared. The spaces of Joyce's Dublin are very different to those of Dicken's London, and to examine the spatiality of this kind of novel we need to move away from the conventions associated with thickening space and towards a new set of textual characteristics.

In his study of Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, Marc Brosseau (1995) notes that the spaces of New York are depicted in two ways: through fragmentation and motion. Firstly, they are fragmented in such a way as to replicate Park's description of the modern city as a "mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate" (cited 96). These "little worlds" are described, but their representations tend to be brief, and either impressionistic or functional. These are settings rather than locations, and reflect the decline of thickened space in the non-realist novel. A richer expression of the spaces of the city can be found in what Brosseau calls "kinetic description", where the movements of characters are represented through different descriptive techniques: repetitive patterns (a "daily path syntax"), or collages which reproduce the "spatial and temporal succession of the elements of the urban landscape" (100). In short, "the daily paths of an individual can be described in rhetorical figures" within the text (101).

These paths contingently cross those of others in the spaces of the city "as the narrative lines interweave and create a network fabric" embodied in the form of the text (101). These techniques give the urban experience textual form, what Brosseau calls the "geography of the text" (95). In his descriptions of these and other techniques, Brosseau provides us with a second set of conventions for representing space and place in the novel. In the modernist novel, space is depicted as lines of narrative and movement, and where extended description is used it rarely thickens space sufficiently to allow us to read it as a location rather than a setting.

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24 See Cosgrove on the decline of landscape painting (1984), and Davis' notes on the fate of landscape art and extended descriptions of novelistic space in the twentieth century (1987:101).
Science fiction has borrowed both forms of writing strategy, both sets of conventions. As I have argued above, there is a strong realist tradition in SF, where thick space is depicted through extended description. However, New Wave and cyberpunk science fiction has also made use of the kinetic style identified by Brosseau. It is possible to see both in Gibson's Sprawl Trilogy, although few settings are developed in great detail. In general, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 6, Gibson uses brief descriptions of settings (rather than locations) to thicken space, as well as kinetic descriptions of characters' movement within the city and in cyberspace (Bukatman, 1993:205).

To conclude this chapter, I will now introduce the world of the Sprawl fictions.

4.5. A World of Stories: Reading The Sprawl Fictions

'Johnny [Mnemonic]' was my first story that hinted at a world of stories... By now, I know a lot more about the world the character inhabits. It was easy to expand and amplify.

(William Gibson, in Fetherling, 1994:86)

Gibson's Sprawl fictions present a largely consistent near-future world and history, in which it is possible to situate individual stories and novels both in space and in time. This section provides the final part of my introduction to Section Two, as an 'info-dump' of the kind described in 3.4.. It serves as an introduction to this world into which more detailed analyses can be fitted. However, in presenting this material I am using a reading style I have otherwise avoided in the thesis - an account somewhere between the textual academic style and the critical fan style discussed in Chapter 7.

The Sprawl fictions are made up of the trilogy of novels - *Neuromancer* (N, 1984), *Count Zero* (CZ, 1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (MLO, 1988) - and a number of short stories from the collection *Burning Chrome* (1986). Of these, 'Johnny Mnemonic' ('JM', 1981) and 'Burning Chrome' ('BC', 1982) are true Sprawl

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25 One of the exceptions is METRO HOLOGRAFIX, the Finn's hideout, which is described in all three novels (see 6.3.1.).
fictions as they contain characters and settings which later appear in the novels, but 'New Rose Hotel' ('NRH', 1984) is recognizably set in the same world. While JM definitely precedes the action described in N, I am only partially sure that BC also does.

Gibson does not supply any dates for his fictions but from internal evidence it seems that the trilogy spans fourteen or fifteen years; that there is seven years between N and CZ and seven or eight years between CZ and MLO; and that MLO takes place some indeterminate amount of time after 2040. However, none of this seems too important to Gibson and in general we learn less about recent history than we do about the geography of the twenty first century. This world is, of course, constructed as the narratives unfold. The society and culture of this world is not the focus of the fictions: they are adventure stories, not guidebooks. As a result, Gibson does not discuss many aspects of his world of fictions. We are left with descriptions of the extremes of twenty-first century life and it is these which I will summarise here.

While governments do still seem to exist, power seems concentrated in the hands of multinational corporations, which have adopted the model of the paternalistic Japanese zaibatsu - "Company housing, company hymn, company funeral" (N, §2:51). Though the corporations have transcended their national origins, the strongest economies are the United States and Japan, with some European corporations named. The powers of the state seem to have been almost entirely privatized, although we hear about institutions which might be the relics of a central state: the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority, police departments and public security agencies.

Existing in a symbiotic relationship with the corporations is an extensive criminal society and economy, ranging from sophisticated corporate espionage (stealing research secrets and researchers) and computer crime (information has become the medium into which wealth and power are converted) to the world of

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26 If JM introduces Molly, and BC cyberspace, NRH sketches out the corporate espionage plot which provides one of the narratives structuring CZ.
'the street', including drugs, prostitution, scams and theft\textsuperscript{27}. The majority of Gibson's characters belong to one or both of these shadowy milieux and the street, in particular, receives more attention than any other setting. We are provided with very little information on the life of those between these extremes because neither the corporations or the underworld is particularly interested in them, except as consumers, and they therefore play little part in the stories.

A number of technologies have an important role in Gibson's world. Generally they deal with information, and many provide a direct interface with the wearer's body. 'Simstim', for example, allows the user to experience the feelings of the original recorder - they are simulated through the stimulation of the consumer's senses. Cyberspace, a virtual world of information accessed by a cyberdeck and an interface of some kind, is described in more detail in Chapter 6. Body alteration is also popular, ranging from cosmetic adjustments to grafted-on muscles.

Finally, a very brief summary of the events of the trilogy will be helpful. \textit{Neuromancer} concerns the efforts of Wintermute, an Artificial Intelligence (AI), to free itself from the corporation that created it. Once free it unites with another AI, Neuromancer, to achieve full consciousness, omnipotence and omniscience within cyberspace. \textit{Count Zero}, with three interlocking storylines, explains the consequences of this union. After uniting, the new intelligence fragmented into many, taking the form of Haitian \textit{vodou} (voodoo) spirits, or \textit{loa}. The \textit{loa} instruct a scientist to transform his daughter into what is, in effect, a human cyberspace deck. Angie Mitchell can access cyberspace without any technological link because she is an interface. This is more than a technological breakthrough, though; it represents the evolution of the first human subject of cyberspace.

\textit{Mona Lisa Overdrive} is even more complex, with five narratives which finally come together to conclude the trilogy. It transpires that when the AIs united, they became aware of another similar intelligence in cyberspace - but not one from Earth. They fragmented because they were unable to cope with this alien consciousness. At the end of \textit{MLO}, a motley collection of characters,

\textsuperscript{27} Organised crime links these two criminal worlds, especially the Yakuza, who have modelled themselves on the zaibatsus to become a multinational organisation.
including the loa and Angie Mitchell, are assembled. None has any existence beyond cyberspace. They prepare to renew contact with this other intelligence, which 'lives' in the Alpha Centauri system. The trilogy is revealed to be a kind of 'first contact' story.

Thus concluding the introduction to Section Two, I will now develop the ideas discussed in this chapter through detailed consideration of four aspects of this world of stories in Chapters Five and Six.
CHAPTER 5

LIFE IN THE NEAR FUTURE:
CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE POSTHUMAN

If, after installing new head, you are unable to discern the contradictions in capitalist modes of production, you have either installed your head improperly or head is defective. (Leyner, 1990/1, §17:143)

5.1. Introduction: Problems of interpretation

This chapter examines the discussants’ constructions of two aspects of Gibson’s ‘world of stories’: cultural politics and the posthuman. In interpreting their descriptions and understandings I have tried to avoid the textual criticism model described and criticised in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. It has proved difficult to find an alternative that does not demand the amount of detail required for the model discussed in 3.4. This chapter does provide two different ways of analysing the general discussion of particular topics. These approaches are designed as alternatives to the textual model, but they also demonstrate the drawbacks of any interpretation that does not discuss writing or reading practice. As a result, this chapter is not based on an analysis based upon the dialogue between the realist and the fantastic. Instead it studies different conventions to emphasise that science fiction draws upon a wide range of narratives and genres in its search for suitable textual conventions.

The first example concerns the readers’ understandings of the gendered and racialised aspects of Gibson’s fictional world and cyberpunk in general. The chief difficulty here was not to throw the baby out with the bathwater; to find a way of discussing power in texts without assuming that texts have almost unlimited influence over readers. The contrasting readings of critics and readers are compared in ways which avoid the problem of presenting the latter as misreadings, and finally I return to the generic and conventional nature of the Sprawl fictions as a way of making sense of the discussants’ ideas.

In the second part of the chapter I use the example of ‘the posthuman’, Bruce Sterling’s term for the various human-technological hybrids which are seen to have replaced the organic human body in cyberpunk and in some critical theory (see Bukatman, 1991; 1993). The group discussions coalesced around a central
dilemma, which produces a very different set of readings to those of the critics. A wide range of concerns are discussed by the groups, and the resolutions they choose present a mixture of ideas from cyberpunk novels and their own more personal experiences and beliefs.

Both sections approach these constructions as 'imaginative resources', myths which can be reworked in a multitude of ways. In the majority of cases this reworking reflects the structure of the genre and the desires of the readers.

5.2. Cyberpunk and The Cultural Politics of (In)difference

One was black and the other white, but aside from that they were as nearly identical as cosmetic surgery could make them. They'd been lovers for years and were bad news in a tussle. I was never quite sure which one had originally been male. ('Johnny Mnemonic', 14-15)

The first example concerns questions of race and gender in the Sprawl fictions, in particular the absence of cultural difference in Gibson's world and the imaginative resource of 'women with guns'. The first two sections discuss the interpretation of these issues by critics and discussants, while the final section attempts to bridge the gulf between the two by considering the place of these themes within the generic and narrative conventions which form part of the contract between author and reader.

5.2.1. 'Women with Guns': Reading the critics

Many analyses of cyberpunk texts have concentrated on their implications for cultural politics. There has been relatively little discussion of race and ethnicity though Delany presents fascinating readings of the Zion Satellite community and the Lo-Teks of 'Johnny Mnemonic' (Dery, 1993); Nixon investigates American fears of growing Japanese power in Gibson's fiction (1992); and, more problematically, Suvin discusses 'Japanese feudal-style capitalism' (1989). I will not be considering this material, simply because I feel that it is not sufficiently well-developed to present a thorough-going critique of the subgenre. More often, cyberpunk is read as a displacement or negation of the feminist SF of the 1970s (Tatsumi, 1988; Gordon, 1991; Nixon, 1992). The spaces of cyberpunk - cyberspace
and the city - are considered to be gendered in the most reactionary ways (Ross, 1991; Springer, 1991, 1993; Nixon, 1992; Bukatman, 1993; Wolmark, 1994) and many depictions of the cyborg are rejected as hysterical responses to crises of masculinity (Ross, 1991; Bukatman, 1993). All these readings, and an analysis of major cyberpunk characters like Molly and Case, lead various critics to dub the subgenre as "the vanguard white male art of the age" (Csicsery-Ronay, 1991a:183), "a baroque edifice of adolescent male fantasies" (Ross, 1991:145), and a part of the post-feminist "backlash" (Nixon, 1992). Responding to these criticisms, I want to concentrate on representations of masculinity and femininity in Gibson's fiction, as a way of comparing textual and audience analyses.

Much of this debate concentrates on the 'strong women' characters in cyberpunk and related SF: Molly Millions in the Sprawl fictions1; Ripley in the Alien film trilogy; Sarah Connor in the Terminator films; and Sarah in Walter Jon Williams' Hardwired (1986)2. Nicola Nixon sees the representation of these women as part of the cyberpunk revision of feminist SF novels like Joanna Russ’s The Female Man (1975). She compares them to Jael, one of the key characters of Russ’s novel: "a killer, an allegorical figuration of feminist struggle" (1992:222). The female protagonists of Gibson’s and Williams’ fictions are another thing altogether, as Nixon argues that "Molly and Sarah are effectively depoliticized and sapped of any revolutionary energy" (222). Taking another critical tack, Andrew Ross rejects Molly as a "survivalist" figure who is "capable of outmatching all her competitors on traditionally masculine terrain" (1991:158) and then goes on to look at two similar characters, Elektra and Abhor3:

[The three characters] preserve their strong status as "free women" at a heavy cost: the incapacity to establish human relationships in a milieu of loveless cruelty, sexual slavery, and addictions to power and

1 Molly appears in 'Johnny Mnemonic', Neuromancer, and Mona Lisa Overdrive (as 'Sally Shears').

2 The first three of these characters are particularly important to the discussants as 'women with guns', as we will see.

3 From the comic Elektra Assassin by Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz, Marvel (1986-1987); and Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless (1988), respectively.
Similarly, Claudia Springer points out that Elektra, Abhor, Molly and Sarah all share a fictional past: "the cybernetic woman who seeks revenge for the emotional and sexual abuse she suffered as a child or young woman" (1993:724). These victims who become "angry women" are, nevertheless, profoundly ambiguous representations, as we will see shortly.

Turning to the representation of masculinity in cyberpunk, Nixon's critique of Gibson is built upon the opposition between the individualistic, masculine American hackers, and the collective, feminized Japanese corporations or zaibatsus (1992:223-5). Andrew Ross is also interested in the links between "the cyberpunk image of the technobody" and the "crisis of masculinity" which marked culture in the 1980s (1991:152-3). Many other critics agree that the dominant image of the cyborg is a masculine one (see 5.3.). In Ross's reading (153-4), the style of "hard-boiled masculinity" which cyberpunk borrows from noir and detective fiction also acts to masculinize the city, and some critics argue (against Nixon) that cyberspace also represents a masculine space (e.g. Wolmark, 1992, and see Chapter 6).

The prevailing critical assessment of cyberpunk, therefore, is that it depends upon reactionary representations of masculinity and femininity. Although these critical readings are extremely useful in drawing our attention to potential interpretations by readers, I would argue that we need to be very careful not simply to compare these two sets of readings, concluding that everyday readers are effectively inferior critics because they do not reach the 'hidden' ideologies uncovered by Nixon et al. It is more productive, I feel, to reverse this method and to ask: do critics ever read as readers? Privileging the rare cases where this happens also has its dangers: for example, we must avoid thinking of the discussants as more 'natural' readers, making de Certeau's nomads into noble savages. However, this approach has its tactical advantages. When I suggest that the following passages might be considered to be closer to the productions of readers than critics, I mean that they are more prepared to admit a plurality of textual meanings than the previous analyses, or that the critic develops arguments
which are perhaps more 'personal'. The latter kind of reading is very interesting. Nixon and Ross are clearly frustrated and perhaps even angered by cyberpunk, but these criticisms tend to avoid any use of the personal pronoun or any reference to affect. In fact, Nixon (1992) even goes so far as to criticise Ross and Rosenthal for letting their enjoyment blind them to the real political agenda of cyberpunk:

...the conflation of aesthetic appreciation and good politics surfaces, in certain critics, as a form of leftist wish-fulfilment; that, in other words, if one likes the fiction, it must necessarily involve the articulation of a perceptible, revolutionary project. (231)

This marvellous articulation of effects theory warns readers that we must preserve our critical distance when dealing with texts. Other critics are more prepared to admit that there can be strange but progressive dialogues between pleasure and politics. Claudia Springer, for example, is interested in "the ambiguity of cyberpunk's angry woman and her ability to evoke multiple, even contradictory, responses" (1993:724). She sums up these contradictions as follows:

Molly, Sarah, and the other hardwired women they have influenced clearly embody a fetishized male fantasy, but they also represent feminist rebellion against a brutal patriarchal system. It is difficult to either condemn or celebrate them, since a single interpretation cannot entirely explain their appeal. (725, emphasis added)

Discussing the ambiguities of Sarah Connor, another of these 'women with guns', Springer makes a suggestion which is, I think, close to the ways that readers make sense of texts (even if we are left unsure about Springer's own reading):

As viewers of martial arts films know, it is enormously satisfying to experience vicariously the triumph of an underdog seeking revenge against the perpetrators of injustice. Women under patriarchy can experience the exhilarating fantasy of immense physical strength and freedom from all constraints when watching figures like Sarah Connor. Revenge fantasies are powerful, even when they are packaged for consumption by the Hollywood film industry. (726)

Of course, Springer stresses that just because this figure is not simply a
masculine fantasy, this does not make her a "feminist paragon": "she incorporates both but fully embodies neither" (726). Below I suggest that 'women with guns' are perhaps best understood as an imaginative resource tactically deployed by readers as a way of mixing politics and pleasure, however uneasily. We must consider not only the production but also the consumption of representations: "the presence and circulation of a presentation... tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers" (de Certeau, 1984:xiii). Tricia Rose makes a similar point in an interview with Mark Dery (1993). Discussing Sarah Connor as an angry mother, "a warrior of reproduction", she says:

The problem with the Terminator series and the Alien trilogy is that male imagination is driving the narrative, which is what makes a pistol-packin' mama like Sarah Connor so problematic. But the larger question is, once again, not "How was Sarah Connor constructed by the film-maker?" but "How do the feminist graduate students I know (many of whom idolize these characters) use these women in ways that re-write the narrative and maybe rewrite their life roles?"

(777)

A last comment along these lines, from Joan Gordon:

If science fiction can show what it means to be female in the world toward which we hurtle, I want to read it. (1991:200)

Here is a clear recognition of the power of the reader to make something new from both representation and narrative. Would Nicola Nixon argue that these readers have allowed their pleasure to cloud their critical judgement? If we agree with that, how do we explain the enjoyment of Tricia Rose's graduate students, or Joan Gordon, or Amanda, or the many women friends who tell me how much they enjoy Molly's character? I am not sure that we can - not without suggesting some form of 'false consciousness'. There is, however, one final question. Springer and Rose are both talking about women's enjoyment of this character. How do we explain male enjoyment of these 'women with guns'? Do the male discussants who admire Molly, Ripley and Connor see them as fantasy figures, or can they too construct them as empowering resources - albeit empowering for others?
5.2.2. The Disappearance of Difference: Reading the readers

Having used the critics to develop questions about the cultural politics of cyberpunk, we must now turn to the readers for some answers. We discussed the society and culture of Gibson's world in the third meeting, although Group C had already brought up questions of difference in their first meeting. I want to provide a very brief (and therefore uncontextualised) summary of their constructions of race and gender to compare with the two sets of critical readings described above. Two themes emerge. Firstly, the readers largely agreed that cultural difference had almost disappeared from Gibson's world, and that wealth (often expressed in terms of information) represented the only form of power. Secondly, they felt some ambiguity over the role of the 'strong women' characters in cyberpunk and related SF. Although the fact that Molly's role is normally occupied by a masculine character helped to support their argument about the 'end of difference', they still felt bound to justify her violent actions in a way which undermines this argument. I will discuss these two issues in turn.

The master trope in all of these discussions can be described as 'the cultural politics of indifference'. The readers rapidly and very naturally produced a (largely consensual) argument that the importance of race, gender and other forms of difference in Gibson's world had greatly decreased, or even disappeared altogether. This indifference took two forms. In the first, the categories of race and gender had been emptied of meaning as power was represented solely in terms of monetary wealth (Jael, B3:936-94), or as an "information divide" (Rob, A3:439-46). In addition, community and affinity had been destroyed by the cult of individualism engendered by the competition for wealth and information. This can all be summed up in Ragnar's comment that "cyberpunk's equal opportunities, because no one cares what colour or creed or class you are, it's just as long as you've money I can steal" (Ragnar, C1:1080-4). These ideas lead me to suggest that while this 'indifference' to anything except wealth has in certain cases ended

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4 Although Group A spent only half of this discussion talking about these themes (see 3.3.3.) and there is therefore less material from this group.

5 In other word, society is divided into the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor'.

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racism and sexism, this has not produced an unambiguously utopian society. Indeed, difference is still recognised, as we will see, but it is not respected.

Indifference has also been promoted by the mutability of seemingly essential characteristics of race and gender. These transgressions are a common convention of SF®, but have become an especially important feature of cyberpunk. In Group B, Jael explored this through the figure of Porphyre who appears in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (B3:998-1015). Gibson plays with the reader's constructions of race through the relationship between Angie Mitchell, the white simstim star, and Porphyre, her black hairdresser, who ironically refers to Angie as "missy" throughout the novel. Angie asks Porphyre whether he knows anything about African religions or vodou:

> He smirked. "I'm not African".
> "But when you were a child..."
> "When I was a child," Porphyre said, "I was white". (MLO, §25:196)

This was neatly put by MikeR: "If you had so much freedom in fact to alter your appearance, that your appearance could no longer be what defines you..." (B3:1017-21, emphasis added). Along with the idea of individualistic indifference, then, there is a sense that the categories of race and gender have been dissolved by technological alterations of the body. However, this consensual view, which I think does reflect one aspect of the Sprawl fictions, disguises internal tensions produced by the recognition that race and gender do still exist as forms of difference.

Race does play a part in Gibson's fictions⁷, and this was expressed in a particular way by the discussants, summed up in John's phrase: "everything still seems to exist but be more mixed together and not impacting together" (B3:943-6). Again, cultural difference commands no respect as there is little contact between

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⁶ For example, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is based upon an ambiguously estranging androgyneity, summed up in the sentence "The King was pregnant" (1983, §8:89).

⁷ Examples: the British Jack Draculas gang, who "hate anybody foreign..." (MLO, §9:75); the tension between Kid Afrika (black) and Little Bird (white), described by Slick Henry (white) as "an ignorant little redneck Jersey asshole" (MLO, §2:17); and in *Count Zero*, Beauvoir (black) reference to the white Barrytowners as "capers" (CZ, §13:113).
cultures. John felt unable to understand a Japanese fashion described in *Neuromancer*, because this "isn't comprehensible to the West anyway" (B3:946-66). Ragnar constructed an even more orientalised account of growing Japanese hegemony, which might lead to what he called "forced cultural integration" and conflict as the Japanese "try to enforce their ideas" upon the West (C3:289-315; 342-58). In the latter example a liberal indifference is threatened by racist fears - but Ragnar was quick to displace these fears onto others rather than admit to them himself.

The role of gender within this general framework of indifference is also expressed in a particular way, and this brings me to my second point. In terms of the representations of femininity, the main concern of the readers was the 'women with guns' discussed earlier. The discussants argued that these characters were as strong as, or stronger than, the male characters of cyberpunk, and that this was one of the key proofs that women were considered to be equal to men in these societies. However, this consensus on indifference was contested in both groups (by Jael in Group B, and Simon and Alvin in Group C) - though this was rapidly subordinated to the consensus view. I find it interesting that the apparent solidity of this reading was compromised by a large amount of discussion designed to *justify* the actions of these violent women. There are several violent men in the Sprawl fictions, but their actions are seen as 'natural'. Both Groups B and C struggled with the question: should they approve of these violent women? Two justifications are found. The first returns us to the theme of indifference: Group B argued that women are no worse off than men in Gibson's world. Exploitative relationships did not only exist between men and women, as Ross suggests (see above), but were present in all social interactions. The second justification, which will be examined in a moment, is based upon generic conventions.

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8 In particular, Peter Riviera's violent nature in *Neuromancer* was felt to be convincingly explained through psychology - and he is very obviously marked as a 'baddie' anyway). Turner, the mercenary in *Count Zero*, is far more moralistic but was not mentioned at all - partly, I think, because a violent man is a much more conventional figure than Molly could ever be.

9 Again, Jael was the only one to question this consensus, and even this dissenting voice was rapidly recuperated.
It is clear that the readers understood my question about 'the relations between the sexes' to concern the construction of femininity. It is also interesting that when I asked about race and ethnicity they did not consider 'whiteness' to be a racial or ethnic identity. Race and gender mean 'black' and 'female'. While I would agree that the discussants, mostly white men, are perhaps blind to the politics of their own subject position, I feel that this is not really that surprising. Within commonsense, including popular discussions of the politics of representation, race, gender, sexuality and other markers of identity are categories possessed only by those groups and individuals who are without cultural power; the positions of the groups who make these distinctions are rarely examined. The discussants may have felt, in other words, that I was asking "what is wrong with Gibson's representations of black and female characters?"

So how can we interpret these readings? I would like to suggest that there is little point attempting to compare the analyses of textual critics with these constructions, because that inevitably involves an element of judgement which usually results in the readers appearing naive or reactionary. But how else are we to make sense of the gaps between the critics and the readers?

5.2.3. Hasty Judgements and Situated Readings

It is clear that most of the critics who have looked at gender in cyberpunk agree with Nixon that the subgenre is more concerned with "keeping the boys satisfied" than "preparing the ground for revolution". Indeed, only two critics are prepared to accept that the portrayal of gender by established (male) cyberpunk authors could be potentially liberating (Gordon, 1991; and Springer, 1993). Yet the in-depth groups produce a 'consensus' view that the disappearance of gendered difference would lead to some kind of equality, despite the cracks I have already noted. How do we interpret this disparity?

It is tempting to suggest, as Nixon has of Ross's and Rosenthal's (1991) interpretations, that these are misreadings (229). The readers must therefore be

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10 It must be pointed out that these commonsense constructions are also found in academic criticism. In fact, critiques of 'whiteness' have only been developed relatively recently in academic theories of race (Dyer, 1988).
either less skilled at teasing out the gender politics of texts than the critics, or more prepared to accept (or even celebrate) reactionary constructions of masculinity and femininity. But if we consider the readers' conclusions about 'indifference' to reflect commonsense attitudes to race and gender, where do we place the blame? Do we blame the author, William Gibson, for his reactionary attitudes? Do we blame the text for reproducing racist and patriarchal ideologies? Or do we blame the readers, who are, after all, mostly white men, for constructing interpretations from particular positions? None of these responses seems very helpful: we have immediately short-circuited interpretation.

The gap between readers' constructions and the abstract world of the textual critics is indeed vast, but this fact cannot be used to establish a hierarchy of more and less accurate interpretations. In fact, I would argue that while critical readings are no less valid than those of everyday readers, the former are based upon a flawed interpretive method. All the critical articles mentioned above draw upon established ideas of ideology, deep structures, or oppositional politics to determine whether cyberpunk is 'good' or 'bad', but this approach merely uses the text as a source of 'data' to 'prove' a priori assumptions. For example, when Ross writes that "One barely needs to scratch the surface of the cyberpunk genre... to expose a baroque edifice of adolescent male fantasies" (1991:145), he suggests that he already knows the typical content of these fantasies in advance and that only a little scratching of the surface is needed to 'expose' them. Although all these critical arguments are excellent close readings, it is difficult for me to rid myself of the uneasy feeling that these critics had already made up their minds as to the meaning of the texts. In other words, their readings draw upon a politics which is largely outside the texts.

I do not want to argue that these politics are irrelevant to reading - indeed, I remain convinced that on a textual level the work of feminist critics represents the most powerful critique of cyberpunk. However, rather than saying that texts are produced by wider ideologies, I would argue that ideologies are created by the process of reading. Politics and power do not exist beyond society - they are produced by practice. Writing in a different context but from a similar point of view, Bruno Latour argues that "domination is an effect not a cause" (1991:118);
power is not located in particular sites (like the text) but is only realised through practice - through the consequences it has.

So can the "coarse, hasty judgements" (Latour, 128) of the textual critics tell us anything interesting about the discussants' constructions? Of course they can, but they raise a fundamental question: why did the readers not reproduce the critics' readings? There are two important aspects of the readers' constructions that we need to consider if we wish to make sense of power in Gibson's fiction. Firstly, the discussants, unlike many critics, treat the characters as actors in a narrative which controls and orders their behaviour. They are aware of genre and have already established a contract. Secondly, and partly as a result of this, the readers accept the positions taken by Gibson to a large extent because they seem realistic - in dialogical terms, they are already 'in place' to receive these interpretations.

Considering the questions of race and gender within a generic narrative allows us to see the consequences of the readers' constructions as part of their reading practice. This can help us to understand both the 'indifference' of Gibson's world, and the figures of 'women with guns'. In diminishing the importance of race and gender, the readers recognise that Gibson's plots are constructed around another hierarchy altogether: that of wealth. Much of the progress of these narratives depends upon gathering information and using monetary and material resources to achieve various ends. I think so many critics miss this point that it is worth spelling out: the Sprawl fictions contain some of the generic conventions of adventure fiction and action films. As a consequence of this, characters are strong or weak depending on their ability to overcome physical obstacles. In adventure fiction, women are often 'weak' in this regard, as Roberta Rogow wryly observes:

> It is refreshing at times to see women being depicted as actively participating in fight scenes, rather than being crowded off into a corner (where they might conveniently drop a large vase onto the villain's head), but it is also nice to see a woman (or a man) who can get what she (he) wants without resorting to violence. (1991:374-375)

I agree entirely, but this does not fit the generic conventions of adventure
fiction: not because of a gendered division of 'adventure labour', but because sooner or later someone has to resort to violence. If we wish to criticise this representation, then it must be done at the level of genre and convention. In this sense, Joan Gordon's espousal of "egalitarian toughness" does not sound so ludicrous:

It seems to me that for a woman to enter the human army as an average soldier with no distinction in rank, privilege, or job position is, on the covert level, a feminist act. (1991:198)

In a fiction dominated by a narrative logic that betrays all the hallmarks of what we think of as masculinist activity, egalitarian toughness does represent an achievement of sorts. It can also be read as a progressive argument, since these women are tougher than most of their male counterparts. Molly effectively acts as a bodyguard for both Johnny and Case; Ripley survives encounters with the alien which claim the lives of both male and female Space Marines; and Sarah Connor considers only the Terminator itself to be her equal.

Yvonne Tasker makes a similar point in Spectacular Bodies (1993), arguing that those critics who assume transgressive and empowering representations of women in action cinema are always ultimately rehabilitated by a patriarchal narrative are missing the ambiguity of these figures, and the importance within specific generic codings:

Alternatively, situating a film like Thelma and Louise within the tradition of popular cinema might... allow us to see it differently. Within many Hollywood action narratives, access to technologies such as cars and guns (traditional symbols of power) represents a means of empowerment... Within Thelma and Louise the possession of guns and the possession of self are inextricably linked through the dilemmas that the film poses about freedom and self-respect. (1993:139)

Going beyond the potentially transgressive aspect of such 'egalitarian toughness', we can examine the place of 'women with guns' within the narrative conventions of action drama. Tasker writes that the action cinema genre depends upon "action as display through the spectacular bodies of its muscular stars" (2, emphasis in original), and the movement of the generic narrative revolves around
these bodies, moving between the two poles of power and powerlessness. Conventionally, we want to see the heroine win - but not all the time. The protagonist both wins and loses, and his or her body is both the source of the strength needed to win and the site of the marks of defeat. Even more importantly, these figures rarely possess any other powers: "the body of the hero is the sole narrative space that is safe, [but] even this space is constantly under attack" (151). This seems to me to explain some of the ambiguities of 'women with guns': they simultaneously evoke vulnerability (threats to the body) and aggression (powerful bodies), and at different times the text will emphasise one aspect or the other in the interest of the narrative.11

This insight allows me to make one last link between the readings of the critics and of the discussants. Several writers have noted a pattern of emotional and sexual abuse in the past lives of cyberpunk's strong women (Ross, 1991:158; Springer, 1993:724). While Springer sees this background as the explanation for their anti-patriarchal anger, it is possible to turn this conclusion around, as the readers do, and see it as a justification for their existence as 'violent women'. While the motives of the violent men do not need to be understood, the readers spent a great deal of time debating the legitimacy of figures like Molly. Textually, the descriptions of the horrific pasts of these women also function to legitimate their aggression, although this is expressed in different terms to those the readers used.

In conclusion, then, if we determine the power of these women in terms of generic conventions, their physical ability makes them (quite literally) strong characters.12 Remembering the context of these representations also allows us to begin to explain why race and gender are felt to be unimportant and why the possession of wealth and information is so highly regarded. None of this means that we should necessarily accept the generic conventions of this kind of fiction,

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11 This is exemplified by the infamous scene in Alien where Ripley undresses, thinking that the Alien is destroyed. For critics like Newton this represents a sexual spectacle for male viewers (1990:86), but it also narratively signifies vulnerability which works because the audience suspects that the Alien, in the best tradition of fantastic creatures, is not really dead.

12 Compare these women to the female characters of film noir, for example, whose role as narrative agents is to deceive and betray the male leads.
of course. An author could make gender, rather than ability, the central concern of an adventure novel, but this would create a different form of narrative - one which these readers might not find as enjoyable, because it would fall outside their contract. Still, if we wish to make sense of the constructions of the readers we must remember the specificity of these fictions. Genre makes a great deal of difference.

The second way of looking at the readers' conclusions is also a part of the contract: those elements which connect up to the reader's own construction of reality. In all of the discussions examined above, I think that it is significant that the readers rarely question Gibson's construction of the world. Despite the challenges made by Simon and Jael to the consensus over the role of gender, there is a very strong tendency to agree with Gibson. This is not simply a function of his authority, or the enjoyment the readers receive from the text; they agree with him because it makes sense in terms of their own conceptions of reality. In dialogical terms, they have been convinced because they were already open to such an argument. Because the contract represents a social relationship between reader and author, informed by existing generic tradition, the idea of strong women in a generally 'indifferent' culture is already seen as plausible: "if they have no interest in listening there can be no influence" (Barker, 1989:256). The mixture of liberal pluralist and more problematically patriarchal or racist ideas seen in the groups' discussions reflects a set of commonsense views which are, unfortunately, part of the dialogue between authors, texts and readers. While I am more comfortable with this conclusion than with the strategies of blame preferred by other critics, I realise that it might mystify the workings of power in this kind of text-reader relationship. We are left with a dialogue in which there seems to be no source for this power. However, this seems to me to be more realistic than attempting to map the diffusion of ideology from author to text, from text to reader, and on to fans and other 'lived cultures'. The ideas expressed by the readers are, after all, in wide currency within British society, and to attempt to map the entirety of the networks of power which have created them is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I am conscious that in attempting to find new ways of interpreting questions of cultural politics in cyberpunk I have merely generated new questions. However,
I hope that by showing the importance of genre and convention, and by examining, however briefly, some of the ways in which imaginative resources are transformed by reading, I have at least shown the general framework for more carefully situated readings to replace the ‘hasty judgements’ of the critics.

5.3. The Posthuman: a dilemma and imaginative resource

For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh. (N, §1:12)

The term ‘posthuman’ refers to a set of social-technological relationships which are in some way new, either because we have only recently become aware that our subjectivities have always been formed as hybrid intersections of the human, natural and technological worlds (Haraway, 1985); or because we have recently entered the Information Age as ‘terminal subjects’ constituted through new relationships with technologies (Bukatman, 1991; 1993). Posthumans abound in Gibson’s world. Apart from technologically enhanced humans like Molly and Automatic Jack ('BC'), there are numerous artificial intelligences (Winternute and Neuromancer, Colin, the Dixie Flatline, and the loa), as well as those characters who exist on the interface of the material and cyberspatial worlds (Case, Bobby). In Mona Lisa Overdrive several characters cease to be human and become subjects of cyberspace (the Finn, Bobby, Angie, Gentry). It is even arguable that these transformations of identity are central to the Sprawl trilogy.

The material in this section is organised around a central dilemma which informs the majority of the readers’ constructions of the figures of the posthuman presented in science fiction. I have loosely borrowed the idea of the dilemma from the work of Billig et al (1988), who discuss dilemmas as unresolvable contradictions situated within the practices of everyday life. The dilemma of the posthuman takes the form of the fear that improving or replacing the ‘natural’

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13 I am consciously using a rather literal definition of Haraway's cyborg here; she uses the science fictional myth to refer to the site of hybridities of all kinds.

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human body with technology threatens our 'human identity'. Fears of loss and desires of power are brought together in the ambiguous figures of the posthuman: the cyborg, the android, and the robot. All three have been most extensively examined within science fiction, although all have spilled out of the generic treasury of images to become myths with a wider currency in popular culture. As a result the discussions that follow draw on a variety of sources. In particular, the cyborg has developed into a powerful contemporary icon, largely through the *Terminator* and *Robocop* films, and has attracted much criticism (see Bukatman, 1991; 1993b; Dery, 1992; Haraway, 1991b, 1992; Ross, 1991; Springer, 1991; 1993; Wolmark 1993).

Like Haraway I consider these figures to be 'imaginative resources' - tools with which we can make sense of complex cultural and political realities - although I am more interested in the readers' transformations of them than their status as 'ironic political myths'. In this I am following the line of enquiry begun by Tricia Rose (in interview with Mark Dery):

> The question is not cyborg possibilities in and of themselves, but how the cyborg has been constructed by patriarchal discourse and how it might be reinvented... I refuse to blame the technology; it's about its usefulness, and what we value. (Dery, 1993:773)

All three posthuman figures can be reinvented by authors and readers, and in this section I will show that the uses the discussants make of them are often unpredictable, taking the form of attempts to resolve the dilemma. First, however, I need to describe the ways in which this material was produced in the group context.

The discussions which form the material for this section were rather unusually constructed compared to the other 'themes', and I would like to describe this and to explore the consequences before I go on to look at the transcripts. Towards the end of each group's second session, I asked a question about 'the posthuman'. Directly intervening, I asked the discussants to consider three alternatives to their existence as organic human beings, and to choose one. Their options were robot, android, or cyborg, defined by myself to bring out what I felt where the most important differences between them.
This 'game' was intrusive for two reasons. Firstly, I asked group members to pick one option, and to explain their choice, which was much more restrictive than my usual practice of allowing them to take and relinquish positions. However, this was designed to simplify complex arguments, allowing the discussants to defend only one figure. In fact, they actively interrogated my definitions and their own original choices, so the discussion was not as constrained as the structure might suggest. The second problem is more complicated. At the end of Group A's last session, Jason pointed out that "the only thing I could become is a cyborg, you know, anything else and I'm not me" (A3:1270-2, emphasis in original). Trying to imagine being a robot or an android was like trying to imagine being someone else. However, the question was asked in this way because it encouraged more spontaneous, 'gut' responses.

The three choices were defined in the following way: the cyborg is a hybrid of organic and machine parts; the android is a simulated human, not mechanical but totally artificial; and the robot is a mechanical entity, not necessarily a simulacra of the human, with some kind of programmed intelligence. These definitions are deliberately arbitrary and overlapping, and do not necessarily coincide with the fictional posthumans of SF\textsuperscript{14}. However, my aim was to establish differences between the figures based upon my reading of textual critics. The cyborg, as we will see, allows us to discuss issues of the interface between human and machine; the android asks whether an artificial origin would affect our identity; the robot is problematic because it is often thought of as lacking 'free will'.

The choices made by the discussants are shown over the page, and in the following sections, they are represented by an (c), (a) or (r) after the reader's name. It should be remembered that MikeG was absent from this session, so Group B contains only four choices.

\textsuperscript{14} Using these definitions, for example, the Terminator is not actually a cyborg though Robocop is, and the replicants of \textit{Blade Runner} are androids, while the droids of the \textit{Aliens} series are not.
5.3.1. The Dilemma: "It would be fun to be different but exactly the same"

Discussing the posthuman allowed the groups to investigate notions of identity, consciousness and the meaning of the body. These exchanges are structured by the dilemma between wanting to improve the organic human body and fearing that this might somehow make the subject less human. I will argue that this structure bears little similarity to the way these ideas are presented in the Sprawl fictions. Each form of posthuman identity offers different options for improvement and loss, and I will work through each in turn before examining one aspect of this discussion in more detail in 5.3.2..

1. The Robot. Despite being chosen by only two discussants, the robot proved to be the most ambiguous identity, showing how imaginative resources can be extensively reworked by their users. For Maria (r), the robot is a way of avoiding the impossibility of resolving the dilemma. As I will show below, she makes her choice as a rejection of the cyborg, because it is a mixture of the human and the artificial.

   [...] I will be a... machine, I will get fed, I am going to be a little bit like computer, I'm not going to have emotions, I'm not going to know that I am a machine [...] (A2:2538-48, emphasis added)

Along with the suggestion of a lack of autonomy ("I will get fed"), there are more negative associations: no emotions, no self-awareness. Maria embraces these limitations precisely because they avoid the "wedding" between human and

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machine. Better to be all machine; best to be all human. In these terms, becoming a robot is equivalent to death.

In his evaluation of the robot, MikeR (r) sees it not in terms of death but as a promise of extended life and, possibly, immortality (B2:2030-5; 2220-32). These opposed interpretations stem from the holder's willingness to engage with the dilemma. Maria has effectively opted out of resolving the question, while MikeR follows the majority in attempting to find a compromise. In this case becoming a robot is conditional on it having full consciousness (see 5.3.2.).

The other discussants responded negatively, with Amanda (c) saying that the robot is not alive (B2:2038); John (a) saying "[...] it's a retrograde step, and if you lose your freedom of thought, all the things that make you human" (B2:2021-4); Group B also contested the robot's claim to immortality (B2:2147-80; 2239-54). In Group C, Alvin (a) echoed John: "[...] it's because of the mental limitations that you have no creativity" (C2:2831-33). Overall the robot was not a popular choice because it was seen to be limited, especially in terms of the extent of its consciousness.

2. The Android. The android seemed to be acceptable because it represented the most unproblematic resolution of the dilemma, and was felt to have few drawbacks. Alvin (a) felt that an android identity allowed him the potential to remodel his body while remaining "basically human", allowing a neat way out of the dilemma (C2:2512-17). Similarly, Ragnar (a) said "[...] it would be fun to be different but exactly the same [...]", suggesting that androids would experience things differently to humans (C2:2384-94). Piers (a), who was less sanguine about the posthuman, saw the android as a way of remaining nearly human while gaining new abilities and longevity. However, he phrased this partly as a rejection of the cyborg: "[...] I wouldn't feel that I'd been chopped about, and made incomplete in some ways [...]" (A2:2893-906). Because the android is created as a whole body, it retains the original unity which the cyborg has lost - and it is this loss that Piers really fears. Group C also saw the android as a way of avoiding the cyborg's problem of incompatibility of human and technological body parts. Simon (a) said "[...] you wouldn't have that human shock of having things put into
your body [...]" since the body would already be non-human (C2:2419-26). However, despite the apparent appeal of this resolution, there were still concerns: Chris and Rob (both a) stressed that their choice was conditional on the android having "human consciousness" (A2:2685-93; 2712-20); Simon (a) expressed a similar concern (C2:2416-19).

These concerns were largely felt to be outweighed by the advantages of android existence. Unlike the more extreme cyborgs, the androids tended to choose quite modest benefits. Simon (a) listed a set of mental and physical defences against the outside world, explaining

[...] it seems to me that humans probably wouldn't survive very long in that kind of environment [...] - I think you'd probably need to be an android, just to sort of get along [...] (C2:2659-78)

He also took the opportunity to create a perfect "tall and handsome" body (C2:2427-31). Ragnar (a) also considered body modifications of more drastic kinds (C2:2693-710). More ambitiously, Alvin (a) said he would change everything, "[...] even parts of the brain [...]" to speed up brain processes (C2:2540-3). However, this prompts some doubts; Mark (c) asks if Alvin's "basic personality" would stay the same, with this response:

Alvin: Yeah - well, it probably would change - [...] - being thrust into this different body, but -

Simon: Egomaniac or something [laughter]. (C2:2573-81)

Physical power might alter the 'basic personality', making the android 'inhuman'. This represents a weaker form of the concerns voiced about the cyborg. A similar fear of loss prompts a certain amount of caution from John (a):

[...] Basically, I want to be able - I want to be - I want to know for certain what I was losing, there isn't really much about being me that I'd care to lose. Things I'd like to gain, like better eyesight, and a more reliable memory, and things like that, sound achievable in those terms, but aren't - but I'd want to check. [...] (B2:2072-9, emphasis added)
The language of loss is more fully developed in discussions of the cyborg. The android is therefore most attractive for half the discussants because it avoids the most serious threats to human identity, while promising modest rewards. However, it is largely chosen as a rejection of the cyborg, with the artificial nature of the android avoiding problems of 'incompatibility'; it is still whole, even though its origins are not 'natural'. However, these certainties collapse when the nature of artificial consciousness, vital to the android, is considered (5.3.2.).

3. The Cyborg. This is the most problematic of the identities, as it promises great improvements on the merely human, but is most threatening because it provokes powerful fears of loss of humanity. It is therefore the most delicately balanced solution to the dilemma, and the one which provoked the most opposition.

At first it seems that the dilemma can be resolved through the same formulation expressed by the androids, summed up in Jason’s comment: "[...] I'd like to be a human but it would be nice to have a few extras" (A2:2614-17). James and Jason (both a) agree that any modifications should allow the cyborg to still look human (A2:2803-22); for James, this would be the only limit on modification (A2:2837-46). Amanda (c) says "[...] I just want to be a human person, but with lots of [...] extras [...]" (B2:2132-5). The attractiveness of the cyborg is enhanced by what Mark (c) sees as greater self-control over the nature of any improvements, and the prospect of reversing them (C2:2364-78). He contrasts this with the android, where design precedes creation: "[...] with the cyborg, erm, you are the creator [...], but the android, you have got something which is creating you [...]" (C2:2472-83, emphasis added).

Discussing improvements involves some self-conscious irony, especially in Jason’s case:

15 I think Jason was concerned that we would read his ideas a masculine power-fantasies.
It would have to be, um, you know, improved reaction time, greater strength, much faster... sort of [incomprehensible hubbub] - processor - um, for you know, large number-crunching operations, um some pretty severe weaponry I should think [laughter], for self-defence purely [laughs].

(A2:2629-38)

Becoming (half) serious, he concentrated upon powers of vision: "[...] some sort of echo or radar thing, just so that I'd know if someone was coming up behind me [...]" (A2:2659-68). Mark (c) also concentrated on sensory improvements, especially vision: "[...] obviously you'd like better eyesight, you'd like your eyes to see more beyond the visual spectrum [...]" (C2:2488-97). Along with Molly's razor-nails, Amanda (c) chose "Eyes, hearing [...]" (B2:2391-3). Steve (c) breaks this pattern, and also brings in the first discussion of loss:

Um, I'd try and keep my personality, basically. [...] try and enhance basic neurological work functions, reasoning, logical deduction, creativity, blah blah blah - but it is - how much that would affect your personality, I dunno.

(C2:2649-54, emphasis added)

The non-cyborgs are more concerned about the threats to human identity posed by the interface of human and mechanical. Maria (r) chose the robot because she flatly refused to consider the "[...] wedding between the um mechanical and the human. I just hate the concept. And then you will never be absolutely human [...]" (A2:2527-36). Ragnar (a) is also worried about the problems of joining human and machine, which leads to "cyberpsychosis"16 (C2:2382-5). Alvin (a) sees a similar problem in the prospect of an ageing human mind in a powerful cyborg body (C2:2547-56), and Jael (a) is also concerned about these problems of 'compatibility' (B2:2125-8).

Another expression of this fear is the idea of loss - losing the authentic, original, human body parts. Piers (a) says:

[...] I think of what's-her-name [Molly] in er, Gibson, with her eyes - and you smash the glass of and there's no eyes left [agreement from

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16 The term is taken from the Cyberpunk role-playing game, and refers to the aggressive madness resulting from body-technology incompatibility or to "an erosion of human identity" (Ross 1991:160, and see 5.3.3.).
Maria], and - I think of what you’re losing, even if you do gain these capabilities [...] 

(A2:2881-93, emphasis added)

His fears would be allayed if he could be sure that this loss was "reversible" (A2:3016-17). Rob (a) argues that the response to such potentially dangerous new technologies is "natural caution" and makes reversibility a condition of cyborg identity (A2:3282-9). For Piers, there is the further worry that such a process would lead to a loss of autonomy, opposing Mark’s idea that "with the cyborg, you are the creator":

[...] - it would probably be an expensive thing to do this properly, especially at the moment - to be turned into somebody else’s research machine and not entirely yourself [laughter from James]... this sort of paranoia comes into it for me. 

(A2:3218-25, emphasis added)

In conclusion, while those who chose this option are (largely) unconcerned about the threats to a bounded human identity associated with the loss of an original, organic, body, many of the other discussants made their choices as a conscious rejection of the cyborg.

The next section pushes the dilemma even further, making it unresolvable for even the most enthusiastic androids and cyborgs.

5.3.2. A Problem of Coding: The possibility of machine consciousness

No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. 

(Haraway, 1991b:163)

The obsession of contemporary science, which Haraway describes as "the translation of the world into a problem of coding" (164), can also be used as a metaphor for the discussants’ constructions of the posthuman interface between flesh and technology (cyborg) and the simulation of the human (android). While the discussants possess varying degrees of optimism about the simulation of human bodies, few felt that the human mind could be accurately coded and recreated. There is also a fear that if the human brain is the site of consciousness,
and therefore identity, alterations to the brain might lead to a loss of human identity. We have already seen this in Steve's idea that brain modifications might affect his 'personality', despite the fact that he is willing to replace other 'components' of his body. The brain becomes a privileged component which cannot be simulated and which may not be easily interfaced with technology. This can be seen through the discussants' constructions of another set of related posthuman identities.

Wishing to test the consensual positions which had grown up around the android and the cyborg as resolutions of the dilemma, I asked the groups to consider two extreme posthuman identities: the first possesses an entirely mechanical body and an organic human brain, while the second has an entirely organic human body with a computer brain. The first option was thought to be the ultimate (as in final) cyborg position, while the second met with great opposition. Maria (r) characteristically described it as "[...] a puking idea" (A2:3138), while James (c) decided that this figure was no longer human (A2:3122-3). Amanda (c) agrees:

Well, the second option isn’t an option, is it, ’cos I wouldn’t be me any more. [...] I don’t think your body makes you what you are, it’s your mind. (B2:2420-8)

She reiterated this later, saying "[...] there’s more to the human mind than you can put on a machine [...]" (B2:2520-22). MikeR (r), who had made this coding of consciousness the condition of his choice of the robot, remained cautiously optimistic:

If I could be persuaded that I could be downloaded in a sense that would still be me, then - I mean, I’d choose my moment, but I’d download. (B2:2702-5)

In Group C, Alvin (a) argued that intelligence was more important than biology as a measure of humanity: "[...] the brain performs the same function, no

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17 The idea of ‘downloading’ consciousness from human brain to computer is associated with Rudy Rucker's cyberpunk fictions: see Software (1982).
matter what it's made of" (C2:2791-2). John (a) was more dubious, arguing that you would have to have "trust in the technology" (B2:2475-91), echoing the discussions of reversibility and 'natural caution' expressed over the cyborg.

The last form of posthuman identity discussed was another form of 'coded consciousness', the Dixie Flatline construct described in *Neuromancer*. This is effectively the digitally recorded 'personality' of a dead hacker:

> It was disturbing [for Case] to think of the Flatline as a construct, a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man's skills, obsessions, knee-jerk responses... (§5:97)

Gibson's description of the Flatline's existence is not encouraging to the readers. Chris (a) worried about his lack of autonomy, since his consciousness could effectively be turned off and on; he described this condition as "total slavery" (A2:4045-7). Amanda (c) was more concerned with the quality of this existence:

> [...] - in the Dixie Flatline construct, I mean there's a lot missing, he said, you know, "I ain't gonna write you no poem", which is exactly, you know, that's what's missing, really. (B2:2569-75)

Amanda's idea of humanity is associated with creativity, the imagination, and this aspect of the mind cannot be simulated.

In conclusion, we can see that these problems with the imperfect machine simulation of consciousness, linked to the less well-developed concern about the incompatibility of human brain and technological components, further undermines the discussants' resolutions of the posthuman dilemma. Since two androids (Chris and Rob) and MikeR's robot insisted upon a perfect simulation of consciousness for their choices, and this problem would have to be faced by all of the other androids, their positions become increasingly untenable. As we will see, the posthuman presents an ambiguously attractive idea for the majority of the discussants.

### 5.3.3. Interpreting Uses of the Imaginative Resource

How can we use the critical literature to make sense of these interpretations? I have argued above that it is dangerous to assume that they
represent either the acceptance of commonsense ideas of the body and human essence, or 'misreadings' of some kind. In fact, the critics read the posthuman as symptomatic of the fears and desires of Western culture, First World patriarchy, and other super-abstractions, when they are in fact generic conventions written and read within fairly flexible contracts between authors and readers. I want to provide a brief summary of critical interpretations of the posthuman, and then to consider its role as a convention and imaginative resource.

Many critics agree that the cyborgs of the Terminator and Robocop films represent entirely reactionary and masculinist figures. In particular, Ross (1991), Springer (1991), Dery (1992), and Bukatman (1993) construct a binary opposition between the 'bad boy' armoured cyborg and Haraway's 'bad girl' hybrid: the aggressive 'bad boys', exemplified by Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator, seek to protect the boundaries of the masculine self, while Haraway's cyborg accepts and is constituted by the transgression of these boundaries. The armouring of the masculine cyborg is a panic or defensive move designed to protect the male body, as the ultimate site of patriarchal power relations, from the "crisis of masculinity in the eighties" (Ross, 152) or from the liquid feminine principle identified by Klaus Theweleit in his study of the Freikorps (1987; 1989 - see Springer, Dery and Bukatman). This oppositional pairing is even extended to an analysis of Terminator 2 which sees the battle between Schwarzenegger's Terminator and the liquid T-1000 as a struggle between masculine and feminine, hard and soft, bounded and transgressive (Dery, 1992; Bukatman, 1993). In general, these critics see the armoured cyborg as a negative use of Haraway's imaginative resource, and instead we are offered other cyborgs, largely from women and feminist SF writers, which are more successful realisations of Haraway's myth (Bukatman, 1993; Wolmark, 1994). These interpretations are interesting at the level of abstractions like 'the crisis of masculinity' or 'the feminine principle' - but what can these analyses tell us about the consumption of these representations? This is a question which, as I have argued before, is left implicit throughout this work.

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18 The muscular physiques of Scharzenegger and Stallone are read as responses to "the redundancy of working muscle in a postindustrial age, to the technological regime of cyborg masculinity; and, of course, to the general threat of waning patriarchal power" (Ross, 152).
More promisingly, some of these writers have discussed the cyborg in terms of its threats to human essence and identity, and this echoes one of the themes developed in the discussants' dilemma. Springer touches upon this theme:

Ironically, the attempt to preserve the masculine subject as a cyborg requires destroying the coherence of the male body and repacing it with electronic parts... the construction of masculinity as cyborg requires its simultaneous deconstruction. (1991:318)

Similarly, Ross points out that the idea of "the body as a switching system, with no purely organic identity to defend or advance" would lead to the body becoming subject to the domination of the capitalist technologies used to enhance it (153). He also points out that the idea of 'cyberpsychosis' as a threat to human identity draws upon older fears about the 'dehumanizing' effects of technology (160-1). These insights, though they are no less abstract than the previous set of readings, do at least give us some idea as to the nature of the fears involved in the dilemma: if human identity is tied to human essence, which is located in the natural, organic and whole human body, then alterations to that body create the risk of a loss of essence and humanity. However, the discussants also create a hierarchy of body parts, reflecting their importance as carriers of essence: the loss of limbs and parts of the body would be risked by some of the androids and cyborgs, but only MikeR (r) and Alvin (a) would risk replacing the organic brain with coded consciousness; in addition, Steve (c) and Alvin (a) worried that new bodies might create new personalities even if organic brains were retained. The organic brain is the privileged site of identity within the body.

To sum up, then, we can rephrase the dilemma in these 'critical' terms: the technologically improved posthuman body represents a powerful defence against masculine anxieties and a way of exerting exaggerated male power, but it also constitutes a threat to human identity through the loss of essence associated with the breakdown of the organic self. However, while it may explain the dilemma in its simplest form, this kind of analysis breaks down precisely because it prefers to deal with abstractions and not in grounded interpretations. This can be shown through a consideration of the different ways in which we might make sense of the discussants' use of the imaginative resource of the posthuman. I am sure that
Andrew Ross would see the readers' constructions as either masculinist fantasies of power and defence, or as fears of essence-loss which reproduce humanist conceptions of the body. In contrast, I see their use of these figures as a combination of imaginative play - an entirely different form of fantasy - and personal expressions of their sense of self.

In the first case, it must be remembered that these discussions of the posthuman generated a great deal of amusement, though this was tempered by some rather passionate rejections, and that this section of the interviews became known as 'the cyborg game'. The majority of the group members treated it as a chance to explore different constructions of being imaginatively through a particular set of conventions taken from science fiction and cyberpunk. At no point did I feel that the comments of any individual represented their deepest desires or fears - or rather, that they did not represent desires or fears which were in any way connected to the dilemma\textsuperscript{19}. In terms of the second aspect of their discussions - constructions of the self and the body - neither I nor the material is sufficiently sensitive enough to the complexities of these issues to be able to draw any clear conclusions. As a result my interpretations are necessarily provisional.

So how do the readers make use of the posthuman? Rather than the enthusiastic acceptance of the posthuman which might be expected from such a 'game', on the whole the discussants felt a deep ambivalence towards these figures. This can be seen in three key themes. Firstly, the dilemma makes a simple celebration of the posthuman extremely difficult. While some readers were prepared to remodel their bodies and even brains as cyborgs and androids, the majority recognised the existence of a limit to such modifications in the difficulty of coding consciousness. Despite the generally scientific tone which dominated these conversations, there was still some concern that the problem of coding consciousness was an insurmountable problem. Consciousness is seen to be tied to the biochemical operations of the human brain, but also to be transcendental in such a way that it cannot be understood and reproduced by science. The

\textsuperscript{19} In several cases, when discussing longevity and obsolescence, a few of the readers expressed more or less explicit fears of mortality - which has been around a lot longer than the cyborg.
humanity of intelligences like the Dixie Flatline was also felt to be questionable, strengthening this argument. Secondly, most of the discussants would rather be human than posthuman. The cyborg and android appealed as imaginative resources, as a way of examining complex issues of the self and the body in science fictional terms, but the reality of such an existence was hard to imagine and only ambiguously appealing. Finally, much of the exploration of these identities was not prompted by a desire for power so much as a fear of death. Although I have not had room to explore this material, again and again the theme of longevity appeared in these discussions, and several readers stated that they would probably look more favourably on the posthuman when they were older, in a bid for immortality.

Although none of the readings presents an entirely new interpretation of the posthuman, their complexity and variety tells us a great deal about the ways readers use this imaginative resource to think through ideas of the body, technology and consciousness. While they may still operate largely within the framework of dominant commonsense meanings, they offer more scope for an interrogation of cyberculture than the reductive readings of the critics.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated some alternative forms of interpretation which examine science fictional texts as generic narratives, built up of specific conventions which are understood due to their place within the contract between readers and authors. It is interesting to note that while gendered and racialised identities have become (largely) meaningless to the readers, Gibson's representation of the loss of 'human' identity is far less acceptable. However, I cannot explain this without falling back on interpretations made from outside the research context.

This shows that neither case study can provide a sufficiently complete account of the complexities of writing and reading practice. As a result they have relied more upon content than context, and cannot easily be fitted into the model produced in 3.4. In the next chapter I begin to provide this context, looking at the production and consumption of spaces in the Sprawl fictions.
He was thoroughly lost, now; spatial disorientation held a peculiar horror for cowboys.

( Neuromancer, §17:249 )

6.1. Introduction: Reading and Writing Gibson’s Spaces

Gibson’s ‘world of stories’ takes place in a number of settings and locations, presented in a variety of ways. However, the two most important of these imagined geographies are those of cyberspace, a landscape of information created in the story ‘Burning Chrome’ and developed through the Sprawl fictions, and the Sprawl itself, a term which has become a generic shorthand for the urban spaces of cyberpunk. In this chapter I investigate these spaces through an approach which develops the ideas described in Chapter 4, looking at these ‘imaginative resources’ as ideas of space which are written into the text as conventions and read through the application of particular reading styles. As such the chapter represents my first attempt to improve upon the textual analyses of other critics, building a foundation for the more grounded interpretations made in Section 3.

Each space is considered through writing conventions and reading styles in turn, so that the interpretations represent insights pieced together from Gibson, the readers, other critics, and my own reading. This approach therefore allows a rather more complex and open-ended description and analysis of these spaces than would be possible from a textual reading. In the interests of clarity I present some final conclusions in section 6.4.

6.2. Cyberspace: A landscape of information

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...

(N, §3:67)
Cyberspace, or *the matrix*, is Gibson's virtual dataspace, in which the combined knowledge of his information society is represented as virtual objects in an infinite space, organised as a regular grid. Users interface with cyberspace through their computers to perform operations upon this data. These operations, like all activities in cyberspace, are spatialised, as users move through the matrix, shift from one location to another, and enter and leave databases. These spatial metaphors represent ways for Gibson, his readers and others to make sense of the 'nonspace' of information, allowing them to create imagined geographies of the internet and other dataspaces - including the nonexistent but seemingly infinite space existing inside every personal computer (Turkle, 1984). Indeed, Bukatman argues that in the following quote Gibson "makes his own project explicit" (1993b:152):

People jacked in so they could hustle. Put the trodes on and they were out there, all the data in the world stacked up like one big neon city, so you could cruise around and have a kind of grip on it, visually anyway, because if you didn't, it was too complicated, trying to find your way to a particular piece of data you needed. (*MLO*, §2:22)

As Bukatman points out, "Cyberspace is a method of conceiving the inconceivable" (1993b:152). In this section I concentrate upon the writing and reading of cyberspace, drawing upon Chapter 4 to build upon the model described in 3.4.. A carefully situated reading of this space is developed, drawn from a conventional and generic study of the Sprawl fictions and the readers' second and last discussions. However, with a few exceptions the readers do not reflexively consider their reading practice, and there is still room for a final thickening of this material (see Chapter 8). Even without this extra level of analysis, the approach I have developed leads to some interesting interpretations, focusing on general issues of reading cyberspace in 6.2.2. and looking at the nature of realism and the fantastic in these readings in 6.2.3..

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1 Key metaphors for the appearance of data in this space are stars in the night sky and city lights; both appear in the excerpt reproduced above.

2 Cyberspace was discussed in both sessions because it is a technology and a space.
6.2.1. Writing Cyberspace: Conceiving the inconceivable

In Chapter 3 I described the SF convention of the 'info-dump', developed to allow the writer to describe the new and estranging features of science fictional places. Gibson uses an interesting twist on this convention to introduce cyberspace, describing it through children's media. The excerpt which begins 6.2. is the voiceover to a "kid's show" Case watches before we enter cyberspace for the first time in Neuromancer (§3:68). In Count Zero Bobby recalls a projection tank used at school to "teach us our way around in the matrix" (§13:118); and Angela Mitchell remembers a similar experience: "There's no there, there. They taught that to children, explaining cyberspace" (MLO, §7:55, emphasis in original). This descriptive strategy is interesting, as it tells us two things about cyberspace: firstly, that it is taken-for-granted, because children are taught about it at an early age; and secondly, that even though it seems complex and impossible to us, it is straightforward enough for children to understand. This allows Gibson to present us with these simple, 'childish' explanations and avoid more technical discussions, as well as establishing the ubiquity of cyberspace in his world. But beyond this introductory strategy, how does Gibson write cyberspace?

I would suggest that in the terms I introduced in 4.4., Gibson rarely 'thickens' cyberspace, instead depending upon what Brosseau calls the "geography of the text". In other words, his use of kinetic descriptive styles textually represents the spatial experience of cyberspace, rather than providing static set-piece descriptions. There are many possible reasons for this, including Gibson's famous ignorance of computers (Bukatman, 1993a), but I would suggest that it is in keeping with the impossible nature of such a space. While it can be ordered, cyberspace is too fantastic a space to be comprehensively detailed and thickened in the style associated with realist fiction³. Bukatman sees the kinetic style of Gibson's descriptions of both cyberspace and the future city as the traces of de Certeau's tacticians moving through these spaces (1993b:205; 210-5). In particular, movement in cyberspace is described in terms of speed:

³ Or perhaps it is truer to say that cyberspace was unimaginable before the publication of Neuromancer in 1984. Conceptualising information space has become less problematic since then, due in part to the popularity of Gibson's ideas.
Headlong motion through walls of emerald green, milky jade, the sensation of speed beyond anything he'd ever known before in cyberspace...

"Christ", Case said, awestruck, as Kuang twisted and banked above the horizonless fields of the Tessier-Ashpool cores, an endless neon cityscape, complexity that cut the eye, jewel bright, sharp as razors. 

(N, §23:302)

Bodiless, we swerve into Chrome's castle of ice. And we're fast, fast. It feels like we're surfing the crest of the invading program, hanging ten above the seething glitch systems as they mutate. ('BC':200)

Just as Dos Passos gives textual form to the urban experience in Manhattan Transfer, Gibson manages to create an impression of cyberspace speed and movement through the rhythm and pace of these descriptions. Other techniques produce a similarly textual representation of this space and movement. In Neuromancer, Case cuts back and forth between cyberspace, the real world, and Molly's experiences as they are transmitted to him through simstim technology (§4:77-87). This represents a new and disorienting extension of Dos Passos' fragmented city, adding cyberspace to the collage of spaces presented in the text (see Bukatman, 1993b:148).

Another of Gibson's descriptive styles is concerned not so much with movement in this space as the disorienting experience of the matrix as a whole. This is the style associated with sensory confusion - synaesthesia - and has its precursor in Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination (1953). In the following quote, it seems to be a consequence of Case's excessive speed through the matrix: "Case's sensory input warped with their velocity. His mouth filled with an aching taste of blue" (N, §23:303). And again: "Cold steel odor and ice caressed his spine" (N, §9:140). Here cyberspace is experienced as strange, impossible: smell, touch and taste are simulated and conflated in what is otherwise an entirely visual space.

Other examples of the fantastic nature of cyberspace occur throughout the fictions but they are situated within the dialogue with realism which characterises the genre (4.3.). While I would argue that the use of a kinetic style and particular

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4 See Bukatman (1993b:158).
devices like synaesthesia can produce fantastic descriptions of cyberspace, it must
be recognised that the matrix is an ordered fictional space. Unlike Dos Passos’
New York, cyberspace is constructed on a linear grid system, a set of
mathematical and geometrical points ordered in such a way as to make it
accessible and functional to its users. The kinetic style merely represents a
speeded-up version of the more sedate movement from point to point: "Case
punched again, once; they jumped forward by a single grid point" (N, §9:140).

Seen as a strictly structured grid or matrix, cyberspace is only fantastic because
its scale is infinite and the amount of data in it so intricately organised. Scientific
realism, in the form of mathematically and geometrically structured space,
provides a metaphor for, and a way of controlling, disorienting elements of the
fantastic in cyberspace. In fact, in attempting to find a way of making sense of
information space, Gibson has undermined its fantastic potential. Following
Rosemary Jackson, naming the unnamable immediately reduces its estranging
qualities. In this sense it is also significant that the ‘cyber-’ prefix is derived from
cybernetics, the study of control systems.

However, cyberspace is profoundly ambiguous because the dialogue between
realism and the fantastic cannot be finally resolved. The balance between the two
discourses varies depending on the conventions and their reading, so that
moments of subversion (of realism) and rational ordering (of the fantastic) coexist
within the text. The first time Case enters cyberspace in Neuromancer, we find
a confusion of ordering and disordering metaphors:

And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling
in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film
compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred,
fragmented mandala of visual information.
Please, he prayed, now -
A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.

Now -
Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray.
Expanding -
And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding
of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard
extending to infinity. (N, §3:68, emphasis in original)
Disorientation is provided by kinetic description, both in content (boiling, jerking) and texture (flowed, flowered, fluid), and by fragmentation ("film compiled from random frames"). However, the quote also makes use of a number of geometrical metaphors (mandala, disk, sphere) before describing the "transparent 3D chessboard" which represents the ordered grid of the matrix. Furthermore, in moving from an initial fragmentation of experience to concluding order, this passage narrates Case's control over the disorder of cyberspace (Bukatman, 1993b:205). This imposition of structure parallels the generic victory of scientific realism over the fantastic.

The opposite scenario does occur, though, when moments of fantastic uncertainty enter, however briefly, into the text. The key vehicle for this is Gibson's 'mysticism', criticised by Ross (1991) and Wolmark (1994) for its humanist and patriarchal overtones (and see Delany, 1988). I would like to develop Bukatman's counter-argument that the recoding of the artificial intelligences as vodou loa in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* works to destabilise, rather than reproduce, the order of cyberspace:

The interface of voodoo superstition with cybernetic certainty has a literally subversive effect upon the rational, geometric perfection of cyberspace. The modernist "mythology" of rationality, the mechanisms of instrumental reason, are undermined by a new set of postmodern tactical incursions. (1993b:214)

While Bukatman has recognised that Gibson's use of vodou estranges the geometrical cyberspace encountered in *Neuromancer*, he cannot provide a generic framework for such incursions. If we examine the description of these vodou operations, though, we can see that they replicate the textualisation of the fantastic discussed in 4.3.1. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this comes at the end of *Count Zero*, when one of the loa enters Virek's simulation of Güell Park in Barcelona. We experience a hesitation in the text, one which is also experienced by other characters, as at first the loa cannot be described: "something plucking at his [Bobby's] sleeve. Not his sleeve, exactly, but part of his mind, something...". Paco can only describe the situation as "anomalous phenomena in the matrix" (CZ, §32:318). Bizarrely the loa, Baron Samedi, manifests itself in
Virek's park as a wooden cross with all its ritual accoutrements, even though the reader 'knows' that it is an AI operating in a rationally designed computerised dataspace. The tension between the two interpretations - loa or AI - is not maintained for long (since it is explained away, to some extent, in *Count Zero* and more fully in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*), but it is still capable of being powerfully estranging. A less startling moment of fantasy is experienced right at the beginning of *Count Zero*, which acts to introduce (but not to explain) the nature of these new forms of consciousness:

> And something leaned in, vastness unutterable, from beyond the most distant edge of anything he'd ever known or imagined, and touched him. (CZ, §3:32, emphasis in original)

Note that this 'something' is unutterable (unnamable), and beyond Bobby's knowing or imagining: another hesitation experienced by the character.

Gibson therefore provides a complex and ambiguous fictional space for readers to explore, one which is rationally ordered but also open to fantastic uncertainty. To examine the success of these attempts to convey the experience of cyberspace, we need to turn to the readers.

**6.2.2. Reading Cyberspace: "It's real vague"**

The discussants' conversations about cyberspace describe two main ways in which they have responded to the writing styles discussed above. In the first, they grapple with what they see as the 'vagueness' of Gibson's descriptions of cyberspace, which I interpret as an anxiety over the lack of detailed 'thick' descriptions of space. Their solutions to this perceived lack are fascinating as they mobilise different explanations to account for this vagueness. The second response shows how some of the group members read cyberspace in a dialogue with their own experiences with information technology, especially with regard to the ways they conceptualise and make sense of informational space.

All of these reading styles can be located within the model discussed in 3.4., as they represent different mixtures of competence, personal experience, and tactical ways of reading. Without such a conceptualisation of reading, we would
be unable to understand the readers’ responses to Gibson’s descriptions. In particular we might be tempted to categorise their sense of vagueness as a ‘misreading’, suggesting that they are not as sensitive to the text’s real meanings as a properly trained critic might be. I would argue that their techniques of making sense are every bit as sophisticated as those of textual critics, and in addition that they possess a sensitivity to genre because of their specialised competence.

The central theme of these discussions, the vagueness mentioned above, can be seen in the following exchange:

MikeR: [...] - I think it’s somewhat vague how one approaches these things and then there’s a sense in which you steal data -

John: Yes. Oh, it’s real vague. [...]

Jael: It’s deliberately vague! [laughs] (B2:591-602)

One general reaction to this vagueness is frustration or uncertainty:

[...] it’s so sort of undefined in that he tells you bits of it, but he doesn’t actually say, "here’s what happens, here’s what happens", you know. It’s weird - you know, if you can go into a place where you have no body that you can see, you look down, nothing. (Ragnar, C2:1499-505)

What motivates this response? I suggest that it is rooted in the nature of the genre. While these readers might not expect thickened descriptions of other fictional places in SF or other genres, when they are confronted with a new and estranging space like the matrix, they look for a way to order it⁵. This is the origin both of Gibson’s attempt to describe cyberspace and of the desire of many readers for maps and descriptions of this impossible space. All attempt to ‘conceive of the inconceivable’. This idea is developed in Chapter 8, but for now I would suggest that this vagueness is an issue because it creates uncertainty in SF. How do readers respond?

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⁵ Compare with the readings of the Sprawl described in 6.3.2.
Some discussants appear to see the fantastic potential of this vague, impossible space. Following my analysis in 6.2.1., perhaps cyberspace cannot be adequately explained and delineated. Perhaps it can only exist as a blank spot on the map of Gibson's world. This seems to be the case in Jael's discussion of an (unnamed) story by Simon Ing which contains virtual reality environments called 'story-engines':

[...] the character [Melise?] finds herself in a story-engine which is like a small town on the coast of er... on the European coast, and the interesting thing about it is that it puts in limitations like, if Melise walks along the coast she will come to another small town, which is exactly like the small town which she left. So it's like - once it builds in these kind of like Dickian limitations, you know, it then becomes interesting because it has a touch of weird in there. (B2:836-49)

I would suggest that at this point the realist setting becomes fantastic, and that this slipperiness produces interesting, perhaps even disquieting, interpretations. This is why I find Jael's reference to Philip K. Dick so significant: one of Dick's most common narratives concerns a carefully detailed reality which begins to break down, creating a degree of uncertainty which is rare in SF. However, this comment does not concern cyberspace, although I can certainly see parallels with Gibson. In any case, we can see how the conventions of the fantastic can be effortlessly managed in Alvin's discussion of misuse of technology:

[...] - in fact, he makes it seem as if people misconceive technology, like the way all those er - I can't remember the [?] - how they saw the AIs as being voudou - (C2:1928-32)

Alvin seems to suggest that Gibson's characters have been 'left behind' by technological developments and that the strangeness of the loa is simply a function of their sophistication. This is an excellent example of a reading style through which fantastic elements are explained away through the use of a

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7 The pocket universe that Case finds himself inside also has these fantastic 'limitations' (*N*, §20-21:276-90), and see 6.2.3..
framework of scientific rationalism. It is certainly not a 'misreading'.

Other examples of this realist reading style are more creative. Perhaps the most interesting is the idea developed in Group C, beginning with Alvin's contribution:

You never get a clear idea of how - I mean, for example, how Case is manipulating cyberspace in a way, [agreement from Ragnar] [...] You're never sure, so I mean cyberspace is very vague. [...] I mean, in that way he sort of leaves it up to you, to view it in the way you want [agreement from Ragnar], he sort of leaves it very open-ended, 'cos that's why it's supposed to be an extremely user-friendly computing environment. You can sort of like perceive it the way you want, maybe someone else would actually perceive cyberspace in a completely different way, although functionally it would be the same [agreement from Ragnar]. [...] (C2:1507-26, emphasis added)

In this construction, vagueness becomes the reading equivalent of "user-friendly" software, reading Gibson's writing style through a technological metaphor. Ragnar then reverses the metaphor, suggesting that this convention-turned-technology is actually like reading literature (C2:1528-44). Finally, Mark saw a contemporary parallel to this user-friendly vagueness in his own experience of multi-user games (C2:1546-62).

A second realist explanation for vagueness also depends upon technological factors. Mark suggests:

I see them [cyberspace representations] all minimalist sort of style, because the processor count, the speed the information sort of travel, and obviously the basic [...] not gonna have the detail [agreement from Ragnar] - [...] - it looks a bit more abstract. (C4:1390-9)

Mark explains the 'basic' nature of Gibson's cyberspace in terms of the ease of running this kind of system. Similarly, Ragnar suggests that the determining factor is actually "commercial viability", and that this would lead to the standardisation of information (C2:1401-13). Through these ideas, the readers colonise the blank spaces of Gibson's descriptions of cyberspace, providing realist explanations for vagueness which are consistent with the technology Gibson is describing.
One final response involves the use of other representations of cyberspace to thicken Gibson's description. Ragnar, frustrated in his attempts to visualise cyberspace, turns to film:

Like, you know, *Tron*, even before I'd heard of the idea of cyberspace, that you know, [?...] a good movie, but a very good representation of cyberspace, and the basic idea as well, inside a computer, and um... you know, for the time it was really excellent, [...]  

(C2:1542-8)

Ragnar's impression of cyberspace draws upon *Tron*, which has arguably 'set' a powerful representation of cyberspace in the way that *Blade Runner* has for the Sprawl®. This use of a visual medium allows the reader to produce the thick space which is lacking from Gibson's descriptions.

It should be noted that not all of the readers ignored the kinetic style of Gibson's representation of cyberspace. This contribution from Simon captures something of its character:

I don't think it's anything you can see with your eyes, it's more like something you see in your mind, and it's all coming at you so fast that you just get a - [agreement from Ragnar] you can never get a real picture of what it's like, but you get these pictures and the information in numbers and things, it's all flashing around really fast, because it works at the speed of the computer I suppose, and the mind tries to pick out what it could.  

(C4:1314-24)

Again there is a technological explanation for this, since cyberspace "works at the speed of the computer", and therefore makes a naturalistic description difficult. I am not suggesting that this is a 'correct' reading, but that it is closest to the one that I think Gibson intended: speed, a confusion of images.

The second way in which readers make sense of cyberspace involves their personal experience of the spaces of information technology. This process is properly dialogical: reading Gibson makes sense of these technologies but using

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8 In Group B, John also mentioned *Tron*, though he has never seen it and does not want to (B2:555-64), and MikeR hadn't seen it either. I think Group C were more familiar with it because it was aimed at a teenage audience; they would have been around this age when it was released.

9 See 8.3. for a fuller account of this strategy.

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them shapes reading Gibson. These readers ignore the question of vague
description, concentrating on the spatial practice of using cyberspace. Rob
compares cyberspace and the internet:

But he's - yeah, really he's just like writing say '84, just after the
building of the American internet - got going, you know, in the
eighties, which was like, an international... network where you've got
all this public access, and you could just like um, get across to it from
the UK, wander around from site to site, and do that sort of thing -
he's just taking it like ten stages further even though it's actually a
whole body type experience. You can wander about it now, just going
on different machines [agreement from James], and seeing what
they've got, seeing if they've got freebie stuff, and wander around
America doing this, so...

Cyberspace, like the Internet, allows the user to "wander around from site
to site", a wandering that could easily take you across America. In the first
session, Rob described the links he made between Neuromancer and his job
working with computer networks:

[...] I'm wandering around, you know er, computer networks all
around the world, so I could be sort of er, sort of talking directly to
a computer in Houston, Texas, and at the same time I could be
getting stuff back from one in Washington, and it's all instant, it's all
happening right there on my screen, but I can do the two things at
the same time, or more. So it is almost like, you know, you're
actually physically there, somewhere in Houston there'd be a hard
disk that's turning because it's getting information and it's like
porting it through the network back to me -

Here Rob is not just wandering around in this space - it is "almost like"
being simultaneously in Houston, in Washington, and in London looking at his
screen. What is also fascinating is the idea that actions made in London can
cause physical motion in Houston. What is missing from this description, though,
is the sense of speed associated with cyberspace. John's description of his
experience of cyberspace actually focuses on this issue:
the interesting thing about the perceived feeling of working with cyberspace, is the absorption, the tremendous perceived speed of doing everything is that working with computers with a screen and a keyboard or mouse can be like that now, if you're sufficiently well-practised in what you're doing, and the equipment is reasonably fast. I have - I basically spend my entire working day either writing programmes, writing about programmes or doing desk-top publishing, and it is frequently the case that I disappear entirely, I'm just about consciously perceiving the screen but I'm not really looking at it, if you want to attract my attention you have to touch me [sounds of agreement]. It's somewhat of the same absorption as getting stuck into a very good piece of reading, or really being carried away with an idea - he took the same experience and he gets it over very well. (B2:906-31, emphases added)

Like Rob, John sees something of Gibson's work in his own everyday contact with computers, but it is what we might call transcendence which is obvious here. The sense of being elsewhere (or nowhere) when reading or thinking is quite common, and here it is extended to the interface between cyberspace and the human, creating a fantastic disappearance of the computer operator through the speed and absorption of work.

In conclusion, though the fantastic is present in some of these readings of cyberspace, realist readings are generally used to explain and order this potentially impossible space. I would like to finish this discussion of cyberspace by looking at this question in more detail through the readers' different constructions of cyberspace and virtual reality.

6.2.3. Cyberspace: The world of the computer

In defining and discussing cyberspace many of the discussants were careful to differentiate it from the virtual reality technologies described in cyberpunk or experienced in real life. In fact, it becomes possible to see the two as different conventions, representing different formulations of the realism/fantastic dialogue. The essential difference is that VR simulates everyday, taken-for-granted reality while cyberspace presents a world which takes the 'world of the computer' as its referent.

James clearly distinguishes between the two in his exploration of cyberspace:
[...] there is a difference between the virtual reality that Gibson offers and virtual reality that they're predicting, which is a complete - you know, the idea is that the graphics are so good that it will be indistinguishable from reality, erm, whereas Gibson's world is very much made up of computer lines - [...] - and grids - [...] - it's obviously a computer world [agreement from Jason], you know, he doesn't try to make it like reality. [...] (A2:3527-51)

This recognises the ordered, geometrical nature of cyberspace, which is in some ways the antithesis of reality. In Group B, John echoed this reading, suggesting "[...] it is a virtual reality in that appears to be, in that we perceive it in the same way as the normal one - [...] - but it's modelling something completely different" (B2:525-33). MikeR develops this in a very interesting way:

[...] man is starting to behave like a computer as it were, so he's not, he's not trying - it isn't virtual reality, it's not an attempt to represent data as files, for example, as one of those, environments, for example - you've gone beyond that, and you do not steal data by stealing the files, or quickly looking through a book and then walking out with it under your arm, it's somehow far more basic than that - (B2:614-25, emphasis added)

A VR environment would represent real world objects as nearly identical simulacra: data might be represented by files in a filing cabinet, or by books. In cyberspace, data are represented by polygons, which are not, generally speaking, 'natural' objects. MikeR sees this as vitally important:

[...] we have gone to the computer, we've not made the computer manifest itself in a form which we are familiar with, we have gone into another world, which is one which is more familiar, which - in some ways you imagine it as a natural state of the computer. (B2:658-65, emphasis added)

Cyberspace does not simulate the real world for our benefit; it simulates the "natural state of the computer". This is a fundamental change in our constructions of information technology, perhaps the absolute antithesis of 'user-friendly' icons and menus. The readers recognize that the ruling metaphor for Gibson's cyberspace is the 'world of the computer', and seem to suggest that this most rationally ordered of worlds possesses an estranging quality because it is so
unnatural. This apparent paradox is also explored by Group C:

Alvin: So it follows the rules of the universe, because it is the universe that was created by man.

Mark: You still get a sort of sense of fitting into a system [...] , rather than a system fitting into you, and it's - [...] (C4:1286-312, emphasis added)

Even though this is a human world, it has become unnatural to us, to the extent that we 'fit into this system' rather than the other way around. "We have gone to the computer".

From these constructions, the readers seem to have established a largely consensual position that the ordered world of cyberspace is different from virtualities that simulate reality. These comments add a further twist to ideas of cyberspace, suggesting that in its geometrical perfection it is potentially alien and disorienting - we have come through scientifically realist explanations and out into the fantastic once again. In addition, though they did not suggest this, I believe that virtual realities can be positioned as a more fantastic information space, since in their simulation of reality they create the possibility of getting lost in a world of doubles, a theme which runs through fantastic literature. Virtualities are also more flexible than the 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace, since they do not have to simulate reality accurately. The pocket universes created by Wintermute and Neuromancer in Neuromancer, Virek's Güell Park in Count Zero and Bobby's virtual chateau in Mona Lisa Overdrive are all examples of such fantastic spaces which, because they do not conform to the world of the computer, become disorienting spaces. Potentially, of course, virtualities do not have to conform to any rules and could be truly fantastic spaces of the kind discussed in Chapter 8. While none of these ideas are directly supported by the discussions, I feel that contemporary moral panics over the 'dangers' of VR are tapping into these fears of fantastic spaces.

Again these ideas must be treated with caution and a concern for the narratives in which they are found. If we consider the 'holodeck' in Star Trek: The

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10 See Jackson (1981), and 8.2.1. on the 'world of mirrors'.
Next Generation, for example, we can see that this fantastic space is narratively designed to provide alternative settings in which the crew can interact in new ways, adding further complexity to their characterisation. Despite the impossibility latent in a device like the holodeck, Ragnar reminds us that this environment can be totally controlled by the user (C2:232-9). Depending upon their presentation by the author, these technologies can be fantastic or even more structured than cyberspace.

In conclusion, Gibson's writing of cyberspace allows for different degrees of fantastic hesitation. While this is recognised by the readers, in the majority of cases they use scientifically realist reading practices to order this potentially disorienting space. The geometrically structured world of the computer is not enough for some of these readers, and they must supplement it with ordering metaphors drawn from extrapolations of Gibson's ideas or from their own use of information technologies. The dialogue between realism and the fantastic can therefore be seen to be at work in the writing, textual form, and reading of this space.

6.2.4. Conclusions: Interpreting cyberspace

It is time to consider the readings of cyberspace which have been offered by textual critics. In general their ignorance of, or lack of attention to, the nature of generic conventions as well as their dismissal of the reader contribute to interpretations which are, at best, half-baked. Significantly, a review of the relevant literature finds so many conflicting interpretations that it undermines the critical model while demonstrating the polysemic nature of these fictions and the creativity of readers (even critics can be creative). For example, Nixon (1992) and Stone (1991) both argue that the matrix is a feminised space while Wolmark (1994) and Springer (1991) describe it as masculinised. Even at the level of textual analysis, it is possible to 'play these critics at their own game' and show how their interpretations demand a suppression of important parts of the text. Wolmark, for example, argues that the AIs achieve "a kind of mystical "Oneness"" which makes them "the ultimate patriarch" (120), ignoring the fact that this consciousness fragments into many smaller entities immediately after the end of
Neuromancer, and that in Mona Lisa Overdrive there is a suggestion that there is a struggle between these entities, or at least between the loa and Continuity, the corporate AI. There is therefore no holistic tendency within the fictions as a whole, but a series of movements between unity and fragmentation which remains unresolved at the end of the trilogy.

In general, criticisms take one of two positions. Firstly, it is argued that the geometrically ordered (and therefore masculinist) form of cyberspace serves to deny the transformations of gender and identity possible in a new space:

Cyberspace is a vehicle for allowing the fluidity of social and sexual relations to be confined within the rationalist configurations of information technology.  

(Wolmark, 1994:118)

Secondly, that through their use of cyberspace, (male) users masculinise an originally feminine space, imposing order on it by force as "metaphoric rapists" (Nixon, 1992:229). These two readings, along with variations on these themes by Ross (1991) and Bukatman (1993b), move us no closer towards making sense of the readers' constructions.

However, there are several points raised by these writers which might help to add a further thickness to the discussants' ideas. Firstly, Springer's theory (1991) that cyberspace represents a male desire to leave the body and to become a pure, albeit still sexualized, consciousness, might help us with the theme of speed seen in both conventions and readings. Perhaps this speed and freedom of movement is a consequence of leaving the 'meat' behind and becoming pure will? However, if we return to the readers, we see that they felt uncomfortable with Gibson's presentation of this bodiless experience, reading it as a vagueness which they found unsettling. Despite their gender, few of the discussants expressed a simple desire for this freedom. In terms of leaving the body, their ambivalence over the figure of the posthuman would also seem to suggest that they were quite happy to stay firmly rooted in their bodies.

Secondly, perhaps the idea that the form of the matrix is gendered can...
explain the realist/fantastic writing and reading of cyberspace? At a very abstract level it is possible to see the order of cyberspace as masculine and the chaos of the loa as feminine, mapping the realist and fantastic onto these binary positions. But what does this tell us about the readers' constructions? Furthermore, since cyberspace seems to be a rather more ambiguously ordered space than these critics would admit, how can it be simply and unproblematically gendered?

In conclusion, the interpretations of the critics fail to convince because they ignore the role of genre and reading. In contrast, the constructions of the readers are carefully grounded, competent and at least implicitly aware of the social relationship which binds authors, conventions and readers together. This is not to say that there are no political ramifications of these readings. I would have preferred the discussants to challenge the orderly world of Gibson's cyberspace, and see a certain conservatism in their failure to do so. However, unlike the critics listed above, I am not prepared - indeed, I am not able to - apportion blame to Gibson or the readers. Instead I am more interested in the way that the use of these conventions embodies a particular politics. In this way the conventions can be seen as the conduits of the power which is expressed in writing and reading practice, the technologies which transform subversive fantastic elements into conservative realist understandings.

6.3. The Sprawl: Gibson's urban spaces

...in fact Neuromancer is not really in the real East coast, it's located in the Sprawl, which is a sort of imaginary construct which allows me to avoid having to be very specific about the architecture.

(Gibson, in Catterall, 1994:29)

The Sprawl is Gibson's term for the megalopolis that covers the East coast of the US, which he also calls BAMA: the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis. I have adopted it here as a general term for the urban spaces of Gibson's world or the 'cyberpunk city', although there are great differences between his descriptions of New York and those of Istanbul or Paris. Perhaps it is better to treat the Sprawl as a particular kind of urban space: a near future urbanism retro-fitted onto the contemporary city. Certainly the cities of Europe seem to have changed
far less than those of America and Japan. London, in particular, is still recognizable.

Unlike cyberspace, the Sprawl is not an impossible space. As a new form of an older space, it presents little in the way of the fantastic, although there are some strange places within this urban space, and like cyberspace it approaches the fantastic in its scale and complexity. Unlike cyberspace it does not function as an ordering metaphor but rewrites older representations of the city. The second half of this chapter looks at these conventions in Gibson's writing and the readers' constructions. The readers' mapping of these spaces, taken from their final sessions, is divided into a general discussion (6.3.2.) and an examination of the dialogue between their own experiences of urban life and their readings of Gibson's Sprawl (6.3.3.). Because of the structure of Group A's sessions, we had less time to discuss these ideas than the other groups and as a result the bulk of the material is derived from Groups B and C. Conclusions are drawn in 6.3.4..

6.3.1. Writing the Sprawl: Heterogeneous styles and spaces

One of the key metaphors running through the Sprawl fictions (though it is most marked in Neuromancer) is technological: places, people and sensations are described as though they were artificial, constructed. This extends to the 'info-dumps' Gibson uses to introduce us to the Sprawl.

The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel. (N, §1:9)

This, the opening sentence of Neuromancer, provides a clear example of this utterly science fictional writing strategy "which brazenly announces that henceforth everything here, even the sky... will be a mediated second nature" (Ross, 1991:155, emphasis in original). Similarly, BAMA is introduced through the image of a computer-simulated map of data exchange in the megalopolis (N, §3:57), giving us little in the way of a traditional description. In fact, Gibson is not as concerned with detailing the structure of BAMA as he is in providing thickened descriptions of places within it and conveying an impression of the experience of this urban space. The mediation of the Sprawl through informational
and technological metaphors is part of the dialogue between urban space and cyberspace which Bukatman sees as central to Gibson's work:

Just as Chiba City, the Sprawl, and Freeside were endowed with some of the attributes of cyberspace, so cyberspace is characterised as a field "like city lights". (1993b:150)

This is made explicit in Case's realisation that moving through the Night City crowds was "like a run in the matrix" (N, §1:26).

One of Gibson's favourite techniques is the collage or *bricolage*, although this is not restricted to representing space. Gibson's cityscapes are presented as highly heterogeneous spaces, jumbled, growing in upon themselves. Like Dos Passos, he creates the impression of a "spatial and temporal succession of the elements of the urban landscape" through descriptions of a rapidly changing sequence of locations (Brosseau, 1995:100). When this is coupled with the kinetic style also used to write cyberspace, the result is a loose list of sensory impressions:

She was moving through a crowded street, past stalls vending discount software, prices felt-penned on sheets of plastic, fragments of music from countless speakers. Smells of urine, free monomers, perfume, patties of frying krill. (N, §4:71)

Sally leading her past the columns of St Paul's, walking, not talking. Kumiko, in a disjointed trance of shame, registering random information: the white shearling that lined Sally's leather coat, the oily rainbow sheen of a pigeon's feathers as it waddled out of their way, red buses like a giant's toys in the Transport Museum, Sally warming her hands around a foam cup of steaming tea. (MLO, §9:78)

These lists recreate the jumbled, impressionistic experiences of walking through New York and London. Other forms of *bricolage* and juxtaposition can be found. Gibson is fascinated by gomi (Japanese for junk) and creates spaces filled with and built out of rubbish, *bricolages* of the detritus of urban culture. Perhaps the best example in the Sprawl fictions is the Finn's twenty first century equivalent of Fagin's den, the old Metro Holografix shop:

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12 In this sense they are like living things. Gibson's organic metaphors are rarely noted; for example, he likens the structure of London to "coral-growth" (MLO, §34:250).
The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic. He could pick out individual objects, but then they seemed to blur back into the mass: the guts of a television so old it was studded with the glass stumps of vacuum tubes, a crumpled dish antennae, a brown fiber canister stuffed with corroded lengths of alloy tubing.

Here Gibson combines the form of the *bricolage* with the theme of waste and ruin which is so central to depictions of the cyberpunk city (see Bruno, 1990; Olalquiaga, 1992; Sponsler, 1993; and 6.3.4.). The key juxtaposition here is between the wealth and sterility of the corporate culture, and the waste and deprivation which it produces.

The form of the novels also creates a textual impression of juxtaposed spaces. *Neuromancer* has only one narrative line, but this is cut across as Case switches between cyberspace, Molly's simulated impressions, and his own real-world position: he can be in three places at (almost) the same time (see 6.2.1.). *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* possess multiple narratives, told from the point of view of three and four characters respectively, and the narrative cuts back and forth from one setting to another. However, this is not as developed as it is in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. Gibson's narratives are designed to come together as the plot progresses, even if all of the characters do not actually meet. While the interweaving of these lines was, for Dos Passos, a recreation of the contingent meetings of urban life, Gibson subordinates this to the needs of the plot. Nevertheless, it can still be effective. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* we cut from London to a post-industrial wasteland, and from a Malibu beachfront house to a Florida squat in the course of the first four chapters.

These lists and juxtaposed impressions are, as I have said, less central to Gibson than they are to Dos Passos. In Gibson's writing of the city, the successive images represent tracks between thicker spaces, both settings and locations. In this Gibson shows a dependence upon the realist conventions of representing space which characterise some SF (see Chapter 8). Apart from the Finn's Metro Holografix hideaway which appears in all three of the Sprawl novels and in 'Burning Chrome', these spaces tend to be prosaic and banal: hotel rooms, offices and other standardised spaces. Here is one such thick location, a New York loft:
Overhead, sunlight filtered through the soot-stained grid of a skylight. One half-meter square of glass had been replaced with chipboard, a fat gray cable emerging to dangle within a few centimetres of the floor. Blank walls, no windows, a single white-painted steel firedoor. The walls were coated with countless layers of white latex paint. Factory space. (N, §3:58)

The very ordinariness (and emptiness) of this space allows Gibson to capture it comprehensively in description. Other locations are more central to the playing-out of the narrative, for example the description of Swain’s billiard room in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which contains just the kind of ‘hidden places’ and ‘locked drawers’ which, Davis argues, constitute realist novelistic space (§14:118-20). Whether these spaces are central or tangential to the plot, they can be thickened because they are anything but impossible, and this makes the Sprawl a lot less ‘vague’ than cyberspace.

However, Gibson sometimes presents us with locations which are fairly ‘thick’ but also heterogeneous in their relationship with their surroundings. Perhaps the best example is the area colonised by the Lo Tek, in the spaces just under the ragged geodesic domes that partially cover the Nighttown area of the Sprawl (‘JM’). The Lo Tek and other subcultural groups, live in the ‘useless’ and abandoned spaces of the city, in the cracks in its fabric, where they create new spaces "jury-rigged and jerry-built from scraps that even Nighttown didn’t want" (‘JM’, 31). Spaces like these are much more science fictional than the generic loft space described above, and in their newness they possess a certain amount of fantastic potential. However, their position as spaces in the interstices of a familiar urban environment reduces their estranging quality. For me, the most fantastic real world space in the Sprawl fictions is the Villa Straylight, a reinvention of the Gothic house inhabited by a mad and incestuous family, but this space is hardly urban - in fact, it is fantastic precisely because it is a private, rather than a public space.

The urban spaces of Gibson’s Sprawls are therefore represented in a variety of ways, with an emphasis on juxtaposition and *bricolage*, mixing kinetic, *almost* stream-of-consciousness paths through crowds with static thick descriptions of both prosaic and unusual spaces in the city. Generally speaking, the Sprawl is
presented in realist terms, particularly through its thickened description, but in their heterogeneity Gibson's urban spaces possess the potential to surprise and estrange. The extent to which these conventions are mirrored in reading practice is explored below.

6.3.2. Reading the Sprawl: The street finds its own uses for space

'The street finds its own uses for things' is a phrase running throughout Gibson's writing (eg 'BC', 215); although the 'things' are usually technologies, I would suggest that they can also be spaces. The discussants saw the Sprawl as a pattern of heterogeneous spaces, with the street - the criminal subculture in which many of the characters exist - existing in the cracks between more legitimate and everyday spaces. What surprised me was the desire of some of the readers to create ordering metaphors as a way of making sense of the Sprawl, in much the same way that the idea of cyberspace allowed them to understand informational space. Despite its apparently realist portrayal, the city can become disorienting through its scale and complexity, in the same way that the geometrical order of cyberspace becomes unknowable through the sheer density of information. The following sets of readings therefore combine an acceptance of heterogeneity with attempts to homogenise this space.

For Jael, BAMA represents "[...] a very complicated space [...]" (B4:843), and this complexity has several components. James discussed cultural heterogeneity at 'street-level':

> [...] the thing that ties in with Gibson and all the modern cyberpunk people is a very Japanese influence... erm, there's a very cross-cultural, street-level thing [agreement from Piers], so that you know, you've got sushi bars and... erm, shops selling automatic shotguns [laughs] and rubbish like that, so you know it's very street-level, you've got everything... [sounds of agreement] [...] (A3:874-82)

Also referring to Blade Runner, James sees the cyberpunk city as a multicultural space, at least at street-level. There are also overlaps between the functions of spaces in what Mark called "the multi-faceted city" (C4:493). This includes "places where the industrial thing overlaps into the places where people
live" (Alvin, C4:194-9); work, even industrial production, is not separated from residential spaces. This heterogeneity is developed in the following discussion of the Sprawl:

**Alvin:** It’s just more like the new built over the old.

**Ragnar:** Yeah, like a retrofitting kind of thing. It’s bigger, and it’s not supposed to get bigger, like the Sprawl is three or four cities joined into one -

**Alvin:** Yeah, they get rid of /?/] just to do whatever they like, like that coffin hotel he described where it’s just basically cobbled together from whatever was available.

(C4:502-13)

Not only is the city composed of disparate elements all jumbled together, but some of these spaces are themselves *bricolages*, like synecdoches of the city itself. Alvin’s "cobblers", *bricoleurs*, are also at work in MikeG’s excellent reading of Gibson’s textualised city:

Yeah, the spaces sort of accidentally emerge in the interstices of the er, of places which have actually been built there, I think is - I’ve come across that idea not just in science fiction, I don’t know if anyone remembered a kid’s programme called the *Double Deckers* - [...] now they seemed to inhabit one of these spaces, you know, you went through a hedge, and you know, there was this double-decker bus there, and it was in the midst of double-decker buildings, which had obviously been built there with some purpose, but then this space had been created and enclosed between these buildings. It’s a lot like the Sprawl, it’s a lot more dense, then there will a lot more of these spaces.

(B4:1046-68)

In agreement with this, Jael utters the credo of Gibson’s *bricoleur* tacticians: "yes, the street finds its own use for things" (B4:1070-1). In other words, some of the Sprawl’s inhabitants have transformed parts of the city to suit their needs. The perfect example of this, given above, is the subcultural space of the Lo Tek. MikeR says "[...] so there’re kind of spaces where these people can exist in a... a kind of equivalent of down-and-outs in modern cities [...]" (B4:1029-32). Alvin sees this as a consequence of overcrowding in the city:
It's almost like the way things are in LA, practically like the way things are in Japan, probably worse, but every small bit of available space is taken advantage of, there are people living there. Perhaps not the corporates but outside that - wherever they can find a space in the city they just make it their home, like in Johnny Mnemonic where they're living in the roofs -

(C4:549-57)

For some of the readers in Group C this mixture of spaces and interstices is restricted to the most urban parts of the Sprawl. As the name implies, the city is surrounded by miles of suburbs, "[...] huge areas of just nothingness [...]" (Simon, C4:602-10). This point was part of a wider discussion about the homogeneity of contemporary suburban spaces (supermarkets, hospitals, 'box' architecture) which were placed in opposition to the variegated city (C4:616-31; 633-92; 742-9). Importantly, the prefabricated modular form of the city was seen to provide the raw materials for further acts of transformation, and again the Lo Teks were used as an example:

[...] It's like they're using modular bits or abusing them, and using them how you want rather than you know, you're sort of taking lego bricks and sticking them, you superglue them together in different ways. (Ragnar, C4:751-6)

Obviously these constructions all agree that the Sprawl is a complex and varied place, whether due to overcrowding or the activities of the street. This complexity can, however, be simplified and ordered, and three of the readers used different metaphors to do so.

The first is a metaphor of stratification. MikeG sees this as a convention in SF generally, though not perhaps so much in the Sprawl fictions:

I also suspect that underneath the Sprawl, below street level, there's a lot of forgotten stuff. I mean, that's another thing that's been treated as well, in the - not particularly in Gibson, but the stratification, the layering of things being built on other things, or it may be that Gibson isn't far enough in the future for that to have really taken off. (B4:1074-84)

John strengthens this idea with reference to an older metaphor:
In some ways it's like going back to the - looking at the - it's an urban jungle. Okay, look at a real jungle, it has several sets of ecologies - [...] Here's a treetop ecology - [...] - intermediate forest, ground, your underground, your deep... throwing that sort of imagery at it, it can be relatively interesting [sounds of agreement from Amanda].

These metaphors, and especially John's idea of a jungle ecology are ways of restoring order to an urban landscape which has become complex and chaotic. As we will see in Chapter 8, the metaphor of ecology is a common way of creating consistency within otherwise heterogeneous or disorienting places. Bukatman argues that the "unbounded urbanism" of SF can be seen in vertical cities like these, and that they represent new and disorienting spaces. "The street, once the central site of circulation and exchange, and around which urban space was once conceived, can now be located (only with difficulty) at the nearly invisible bottom of a narratively and spatially decentered environment" (1993b:128). These metaphors allow an imaginative ordering of this decentered space because they organise otherwise boundless vertical spaces.

The last example deploys a different metaphor, which is even more applicable to Gibson's cities:

Jael: [...] I see it [the Sprawl] as a space of signs and signals... everything actually means something in the Sprawl, although a lot of the Sprawl denizens are illiterate, they've learnt how to read signals, signals in like the way a person walks, and what they carry and their dress, erm... the relative affluence or otherwise of an area, um... [...] -

Amanda: But that's no different to today, really, is it?

Jael: Yeah, but it seems to be like - [...] - very heightened, very concentrated, it's an area where you're constantly bombarded with signals, and to some extent your survival is based on being able to read these signs and signals as you encounter them in the city.

(B4:1242-69, emphasis added)

The city becomes a text for its inhabitants, who must make sense of it through a metaphor of reading. Although Amanda suggests that the city is
already "a space of signs and signals", she concurs that this is exaggerated in the Sprawl. Jael's suggestion that the ability to make sense of the city might be necessary for "survival" also seems to be an attempt to wring some meaning out of the otherwise baffling experience of urban life.

In conclusion, the Sprawl is read as a complex mosaic of juxtaposed spaces, including those interstices created by the *bricoleurs* of the street, but its complexity can be flattened and understood through metaphors which impose a structure upon an otherwise disorienting space. Despite its apparently straightforward depiction, the readers obviously see it as a fantastic SF space which requires organisation before it can be understood. This is possibly a consequence of the relative scarcity of kinetic and fragmented techniques for describing space in SF as a whole; it might therefore be a question of a lack of competence. These writing styles belong to the modernist novel and to more experimental forms, rather than the science fiction novel, which tends to depend much more on realist conventions. Faced with a rather strange textual geography, the readers seek alternative forms of mapping which they may have developed in their encounters with the impossible spaces of SF (see Chapter 8).

### 6.3.3. Reading the Sprawl: Reading and urban life

In their last sessions, I asked the groups to discuss those world cities which either seemed to be, or possessed the potential to become, places like the Sprawl\(^{13}\). I would argue that they produced these interpretations through a dialogue between real and fictional urban spaces\(^{14}\). Their reading of Gibson (and other cyberpunk texts) helped them to make sense of particular aspects of urban space, and at the same time their real-world experiences shaped their reading of Gibson's Sprawl. The readers considered and rejected a variety of contemporary cities for different reasons, creating a kind of composite Sprawl through their emphasis on particular characteristics or urban life. Indeed, Alvin pointed out

\(^{13}\) This material is drawn exclusively from Groups B and C, for the reasons noted in the introduction to 6.3..

\(^{14}\) This mirrors the constructions of cyberspace made through dialogue with experiences of informational spaces (see 6.2.2.).
that "It's like the modern cities all have different aspects of different parts of cyberpunk [...]" (C4:875-7), and Ragnar agreed that most large cities had the potential to be cyberpunk cities (C4:897-901). Having established this, I asked them about similarities between London and the Sprawl. I would argue that the master metaphor for the discussions that follow is heterogeneity; however, there was an important difference between the two groups in their evaluations of this.

At first Group B were sceptical of London's potential for becoming a Sprawl with Jael dismissing it as "[...] wet, cold and uninteresting [...]" and MikeG saying "It's ruined by its parks and green spaces [...]" (B4:1418-28). However, Amanda saw some possibilities:

I think London has got... pockets of... cyberpunk, I mean in a way it's a mentality as well as the actual landscape, you know - 'cos you kind of go somewhere, and all of a sudden, you find - even in say um a weird nightclub, you know, and it's all flashing neon and technology and everything. And then you go away and it's not there any more. And you turn a corner and you see this amazing building, perhaps, with all the windows reflecting the light, when you see something like the Lloyd's building at night, which I suppose isn't exactly cyberpunk, but it's quite kooky. And then you turn the corner and you've got, well, the geography's not very good - the Houses of Parliament, you know, which is not at all. So I think London's like a chessboard in a way, 'cos you've got [sounds of agreement] so many different kinds of landscape in London. I think some cyberpunk, though it's not what I'd say predominant, no.

(B4:1449-74, emphasis added)

Amanda's idea that it is a "mentality" as much as a "landscape" matches Gibson's impressionistic writing of the city. While neon lights and mirrored buildings are hardly futuristic, they can be transformed by the urbanite's imagination. On London's "chessboard" of landscapes these cyberpunk feelings exist alongside the older parts of the city. However, a chessboard implies an ordered pattern of contrasts, perhaps resembling the matrix of cyberspace. Here Amanda seems unsure as to the extent of this heterogeneity.

John, the only born-and-bred Londoner in Group B, was not so sure, saying "I don't think enough of it has the preoccupation with style and appearance" (B4:1485-7). Amanda agreed, strengthening the heterogeneity metaphor in the
Yeah, the people are patchy, I mean, there’s so many different types of people in London, from, you know, the ultimate conservative, to the [high set?], to the drugs, to the - and in a way it’s like having a patchwork quilt covered with bits of all different kinds of um, you know, technologies, and different kinds of cultures. So it’s like a place that is many landscapes all in one, [addressing this to Jael] so I don’t think you can just dismiss it as being boring, ’cos it’s not. If you come from Birmingham, you’d know it [laughter from Mike R].

(B4:1495-509)

The patchwork quilt and chessboard metaphors rework the jumbled collages of Gibson’s fiction to a greater or lesser extent through their dialogue with Amanda’s experiences of London. It is impossible to say which has shaped the other, partly because this question was not directly asked. However, it does suggest that the experience of heterogeneity is produced between life and fiction.

A similar metaphor is developed by Jael:

[...] Camden is a very strange place... like, there are two Camdens, you can forget about the Camden by day, it’s just like, you know, a tourist’s shopping bazaar - at nights, during the weekend it turns into a completely different place, [...] it’s a bizarre cultural mixing space, in Camden you have um Italians, er Brazilians, Portuguese, Spanish - it’s a place where lots of people from the EEC come in and they um mix together, and strange hybrids are produced, so... it’s an area where lots of bands are formed, it has a big art scene [...]

(B4:1733-54, emphasis added)

Camden approaches ‘Sprawlness’ through its cultural hybridity and artistic, almost bohemian, culture. However, Amanda is not convinced, and there is a useful elaboration of this idea:

Amanda: Not very cyberpunk though, is it, Camden? I mean -

Jael: In a way - in a way it is, in its atmosphere and the kind of um... cultural mixing -

Amanda: I think the multicultural thing is, yeah, but...

Jael: Mm-hm.
MikeR: [to Amanda] Actually, you were talking about it being a patchwork quilt, and a very heterogeneous city [agreement from Amanda], and perhaps in that sense it is. (B4:1757-73)

Through the idea of cultural mixing, the multicultural space is joined to the earlier theme of the 'heterogeneous city': not only are the spaces of the Sprawl immensely complex, but the cultures which inhabit those spaces, and the relationships between them, form another kind of 'patchwork quilt'. Amanda seems to be applying this picture of the Sprawl to London:

Maybe what he means is you can take one sort of aspect from one part of London and another from another, and you put them all together, [laughing] and you've actually got the cyberpunk content that's he's talking about. Because they don't all exist in any one place, that's for sure [...] (B4:1775-83)

MikeR agrees, suggesting that "London does lay claim to being a very diverse" city in terms of its architecture and culture (B4:1785-94), while Amanda lists the areas of North London associated with particular social groups (B4:1796-808). These constructions suggest that while London may not possess the potential to become the Sprawl, its 'patchwork quilt' of spaces and cultures mirrors the heterogeneity of Gibson's future city.

This was not the only way that this group discussed the Sprawl, as they also considered the street technology characteristic of cyberpunk. There was an interesting discussion of dance culture and punk as proto-cyberpunk subcultures, with Amanda feeling that the drugs and 'neon' of the former created "the atmosphere of the Sprawl" (B4:1568-83), while John argued "there was much more of that kind of imagery and thinking back in the mid-seventies" - not the technology as much as the 'mentality' (1585-7). MikeG discussed the Manchester music scene as an intersection of the street and advanced technology (B4:1659-72). Even though these conversations attempted to define the Sprawl through the content of these spaces, they kept returning to questions of 'atmosphere' and culture - in other words to the experience of the city.

In contrast, while Group C saw London as a heterogeneous space they were
more ambiguous about whether this made it more or less like the Sprawl. For example, Simon argued that London might 'feel' cyberpunk but would never 'look it' because there would still be old buildings mixed in with the new (C4:913-6). Alvin demurred, saying "but the old buildings are sometimes a part of the cyberpunk feel, if you look at something like Blade Runner, for instance [...]" (C4:919-21). There is some disagreement as to whether mixed architectural styles are part of the Sprawl. Similarly, while Ragnar and Alvin agreed that certain parts of London already 'felt' cyberpunk\textsuperscript{15}, Steve disagreed:

No, no, I don't agree, and it's got the extremes. The City is, like you say, it's a corporate city, but the various poor areas, you've got parts of the East End, the South, erm, the suburbs, you know... there's a lot of contrast, lots of different kinds of people, lot of different kinds of areas. (C4:983-9)

These "extremes" between spaces actually reduce the similarity of London to the Sprawl. Only particular kinds of spaces (like the City) are cyberpunk, while others ("poor areas", the suburbs) are not part of Steve's idea of the Sprawl. In this way Steve argues against the view advanced in Group B, that the Sprawl is built upon these contrasts.

Even when heterogeneity is valued positively, the way in which it is constructed is rather different, and this is exemplified by the following:

Ragnar: But you know even like Tottenham Court Road, you've got... Soho there, you've got Tottenham Court Road, sort of techno alley, you've got Centre Point -

Simon: Yeah, there's a lot of Chinese and Japanese so you get a - [...] - Blade Runner feel to it [laughter].

Ragnar: That's it, just coming up through Centre Point, you know, the Tottenham Court Road tube station, you can sort of literally walk right under... so - at night-time, when it's all lit up, it's really mad. [...] (C4:1057-73)

This area becomes cyberpunk because it contains corporate, technological,

\textsuperscript{15} The City, Docklands, Tottenham Court Road, Piccadilly - see below.
orientalised, and 'bohemian' spaces (Centre Point, the Road itself, Chinatown, Soho). The intersection of these places represents an overlapping of cultures and uses of space. Note the reference to Blade Runner; Simon's comment recognises the idea of the orientalised western city popularised by this film and cyberpunk fiction. However, he does not seem to want to make any reference to this beyond seeing a parallel between these fictional and real spaces\(^\text{16}\).

Ragnar goes on to make a similar list, suggesting that the Trocadero (Shaftesbury Avenue/Piccadilly) is "cyberpunk heaven", because of the VR and arcade machines and the Blade Runner-styled Food Strip (C4:1073-95). In this and other comments the group displays a fascination with the ruined, dark, noisy and orientalised inner city which is missing from Group B's constructions. For example, Alvin sees the London Underground as a cyberpunk place because it is "decayed", concluding:

\[
\text{ [...] Basically I mean any kind of... network of back alleys or things like that, where it just sort of gets dark and neglected, in a way, has a feel - (C4:1041-52) }
\]

While the heterogeneity of these spaces is recognised, it is not as clearly developed and it is clear that certain aspects of city life are more cyberpunk than others. For the members of Group C, and especially Ragnar, the Sprawl is a romantic, dangerous and exciting place. Group B did not seem to have this combined fascination with, and fear of, London. I asked Group B if they had ever felt like they were in the Sprawl, and if so where. MikeR answered:

Just possibly Hulme, in Manchester [agreement from MikeG] - ermm... but I don't think, I don't think London makes it [laughs], not unless you're paranoid. (B4:1697-704)

All three groups agreed that the Sprawl is a dangerous place\(^\text{17}\) but MikeR suggests that the fear he associates with life in the Sprawl is inappropriate in

\(^\text{16}\) I do not think there are any racist connotations to this comment, although it is hard to tell because of its brevity.

\(^\text{17}\) From (A3:1109-22; 1162-8); (B4:2433-43; 2461-3; 2478-87); and (C4:1984-91).
London. This is a significantly different position to Ragnar's or Alvin's. While I am sure that MikeR is not as concerned for his safety as, say, Amanda or Jael might be, it is a useful corrective to the discussions of some of the other male readers, who seem to temper their fear with a romanticisation of the inner city.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the trope of heterogeneity plays an important part in these dialogical readings of Gibson and urban space. However, the way that it is used by the readers does vary, and I would argue that this is mainly due to their different histories of living in or visiting the city. This seems to explain the difference between Groups B and C and it is possible that they represent groups of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' respectively.

Certainly, Group B were on the whole more used to London than Alvin, Mark and Simon. Ragnar and Steve, the only born-and-bred Londoners in Group C, presented rather different interpretations. Steve, like John in Group B, was unwilling to see resemblances between the Sprawl and London. It is possible that this reading is the result of 'over-familiarity' - it is hard to imagine the Sprawl in such a well-known space. Ragnar, however, sees the Sprawl everywhere, despite his familiarity with the city. Without any further information on their experiences of London, it is difficult to explain this difference.

The interpretations of Amanda and Jael lie somewhere between these extremes of familiarity and romanticism. I would argue that their construction of London's heterogeneous spaces represents a particular strategy for making sense of the city. The 'chessboard', 'patchwork quilt' and 'cultural mixing space' metaphors recognise stronger or weaker patterns to the organisation of life in London, although they do not suggest complete understanding. This in turn is related to the depth of their experience of urban life. Living in the city for several years, they have acquired a certain amount of familiarity with its structure and culture, though they still fall short of John or Steve's insider's knowledge.

Finally, how do these interpretations of the dialogue between fictional and real urban space related to Gibson's textual descriptions? Bringing together the discussions in 6.3.2. and 6.3.3., I would suggest that the readers are more comfortable with the patchwork of London than they are with the Sprawl. Their greater familiarity with the former space means that they do not need to order it
through the metaphors of stratification, ecology or reading they used to make sense of Gibson's depiction of the Sprawl. It is also significant that they see both places as heterogeneous, suggesting that this interpretation of urban space is shared by author and readers. In conclusion, Gibson's representations of the city make sense to the readers because they are contractually held, not as part of the genre, but as a result of shared real-world experience.

6.3.4. Conclusions: Interpreting the Sprawl

How can the textual interpretations of the critics help us to understand these constructions? A variety of readings of the Sprawl have been offered (Bukatman, 1993b; Ross, 1991; Sponsler, 1993; Wolmark, 1993), though as with interpretations of cyberspace many ignore the generic specificity of the conventions used to represent the city in science fiction, and ignore the reader altogether. As a result I wish to conclude by looking at two critics who allow a thickening of the two themes of heterogeneity and dialogical experiences of urban space.

In interpreting the readers' reading of heterogeneity (6.3.2.) I have found it useful to return to an important essay on cyberpunk urbanism, Giuliana Bruno's 'Ramble City' (1990). Bruno reads Blade Runner as "a metaphor for the postmodern condition", with a particular emphasis on architectural pastiche (184, and see Jameson, 1984). The film, like Gibson's fictions, "creates an aesthetic of decay, exposing the dark side of technology, the process of disintegration" (185). While I am not concerned with postmodernism here, except as an architectural style which emphasises bricolage through pastiche, it seems to me that Bruno creates an interpretation of the theme of ruins which parallels the readers' constructions of heterogeneity and juxtaposition.

Bruno lists some of the juxtapositions visible in Blade Runner: its space "bears, superimposed, different and previous orders of time and space"; it mixes affluence and decay, new and old; the city is inhabited by "eclectic crowds of faceless people"; "Even the language is pastiche" (186). Taking postmodernism as an artistic or architectural, rather than social or philosophical, development, it is possible to build upon Bruno's analysis to argue that Gibson's writing of the city draws upon a 'postmodern' style. The key here is Bruno's assertion that
"postmodernism recycles; therefore it needs its waste" (185). This explains the ruins which are central to cyberpunk - they are not areas of discarded waste, but zones of new possibilities.

The Sprawl needs interstices, heterogeneous areas which are the result of constant recycling. The ruination of the Sprawl is part of a wider process of deconstruction and reconstruction; spaces are transformed as existing structures break down or are broken down. *Gomi* becomes new forms and spaces which are "jury-rigged and jerry-built from scraps". Perhaps the clearest example of this is the Bridge from Gibson's *Virtual Light* (1993), a space which has been transformed from a transport link to the encrusted habitat of a heterogenous community, grown in upon itself by the constant accretion of new structures and the filling in of gaps. In this it resembles the Villa Straylight, a place which holds an especial importance for Gibson as it is described in detail in *Neuromancer* and returned to in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. It is possible to suggest that Gibson sees these spaces as new, estranging, and possibly utopian *bricolages*.

The complexity and fragmentation of these spaces was recognised by the readers, as was the importance of subcultural *bricoleurs* like the Lo Tek. However, I have shown that they used a variety of ordering metaphors to map Gibson's chaotic spaces more clearly, which I have interpreted as a response to his unfamiliar kinetic and fragmented style. As a result some of the estranging properties of these spaces has been lost.

To interpret the second theme (6.3.3.) I have drawn upon the fruitful dialogue between the writings of Gibson and Mike Davis (1990, 1992). In much the same way that the readers made sense of London through reading Gibson, and vice versa, one of the resources that Davis uses to read Los Angeles is science fiction, particularly the Sprawl fictions and *Blade Runner*. Davis writes that the relationship between Los Angeles and *Blade Runner* has become something more than fictional. The film has become "L.A.'s own dystopic alter ego" (1992:1), as it has become enshrined in discussions of the planned future of the city as a plausible, but unwanted possibility (Klein, 1991). While Gibson's Sprawl fictions do not directly refer to L.A., they suggest a similar, though perhaps less pessimistic, future for the city. It is this that has led Davis to draw upon Gibson
in much the same way that the readers do, using it as an imaginative resource in a way which bears little resemblance to the critical analyses discussed above\(^\text{18}\).

The dialogue has been extremely productive. Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990), drawing on *Blade Runner* and a variety of other (often non-canonical) SF films, received an appreciative jacket blurb by Gibson, and it certainly influenced his depiction of the city in *Virtual Light*:

Rydell’s Los Angeles owes much to my reading of Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz*, perhaps most particularly in his observations regarding the privatization of public space. (*Virtual Light*, acknowledgements, 295)

In my opinion, *Virtual Light* could not have been written without *City of Quartz*. In return, Davis’ ‘Beyond *Blade Runner*’ is presented as "a vision of Marxism-for-cyberpunks", and he writes:

William Gibson... has provided stunning examples of how realist, "extrapolative" science fiction can operate as prefigurative social theory, as well as an anticipatory opposition politics to the cyber-fascism lurking over the next horizon. (1992:3)

Davis' critical use of Gibson's Sprawl is particularly appealing because it replicates, unselfconsciously, the reading practice of the discussants in dialogically making sense of fictional and real spaces.

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated that an analysis of the writing and reading of science fictional spaces need not reproduce the problems inherent in the textual approach. A concern for genre, and a sensitivity to the ways in which novelistic space is produced and consumed, illustrates how meanings are formed and transformed within a particular context. By showing how the writing and reading styles associated with these spaces overlap but do not coincide I have begun to illustrate the complexities of the text-reader relationship as it applies to geographical themes. However, I have produced rather broad-brush pictures of this process, and the next section narrows the focus down even further to examine the production of space through individual reading practices.

\(^{18}\) Davis is ‘a critic reading as a reader’, in the terms I discuss in 5.2.1..
SECTION THREE:
CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY AND A THEORY OF READING
CHAPTER 7

INVESTIGATING READING:
COMPETENCE, CONTRACTS, AND READING PRACTICE

It was about then that Giles Peach was put in the way of the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs... The illustrations were windows into alternate worlds, and he quickly saw a way to boost himself over the sill and clamber through. He fingered this volume and that, amazed at mastodons and sunlit jungle depths, and he traced with his finger the smoky line of cloud drift beyond the domes of the city of Opar.

(Blaylock, 1984/8, §1:16-17)

7.1. Introduction: Grounding reading

Section Two provided some investigations of the generic conventions of Gibson's fictions, relating them to writing and reading practices. However, there are still problems with these constructions: we can identify conventions and reading styles, but we cannot say why or how readers use them. Section Three therefore provides closer readings of these practices.

This chapter examines the practice of reading SF which depends upon three things: competence, the contract, and reading styles. Readers must develop generic competence to make sense of the sometimes bewildering worlds of science fiction. The acquisition of these skills helps to shape readers' contract with the genre, as they learn what to like and dislike. To some extent this is part of the generic meta-contract shared with other readers but they also develop their own tastes and ways of reading. In 7.2. I describe the readers' contracts in these terms. The remainder of the chapter concerns the reading styles used by the readers to make sense of SF. These styles represent agreed ways of reading generic conventions and are therefore based upon competence and organised by the contract. After discussing these styles in 7.3., I present some anaytical conclusions in 7.4..

These grounded interpretations of reading can be worked into the model described in 3.4., and in Chapter 8 I bring all these concerns together in a discussion of the ways that science fictional places are read as different forms of practice which are brought to bear upon generic conventions.
7.2. The Contract: Learning how to read SF

The ghost was her father's parting gift, presented by a black-clad secretary in a departure lounge at Narita. \( \text{(MLO, §1:7)} \)

The presence of impossibility within science fiction makes it challenging to new readers who must learn to make sense of baffling sentences like the one above, the first line of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Readers who persevere acquire a set of skills for decoding these impossible ideas\(^1\). In doing so, they are initiated into a contract which is dialogically constituted between the reader's tastes and the generic meta-contract. This is not an entirely solitary process, as many actors and institutions shape readers' contact with SF. This section traces the way the discussants came to SF, and shows how this experience formed their contracts.

7.2.1. First Contact: The acquisition of competence

A reader's first encounter with SF, and subsequent explorations, teaches each individual the basic skills needed to understand an SF text. However, such skills are not simply 'handed down': the learning process is dialogical, as readers' understandings of generic conventions are altered or supported every time they read, view, or discuss SF. However, the initial stage of learning these conventions and generic reading is important. Many of the discussants had been exposed to SF from an early age and so their first contact with SF was within the home. Not surprisingly, the most common ways in which the discussants became involved were through domestic media and families and friends, and there is a certain amount of overlap between the two in the form of the family TV set.

Within the family, fathers played an important role. Firstly, several readers were introduced to SF through their fathers: both Mike G and Ragnar mentioned their father's interest in literary SF (B1:52-3, 484-91; C1:15-9). Fathers who were not readers themselves also encouraged their sons' interest, as James's father "made" him watch Star Trek (A1:100-10) and Mark's father suggested that he read the *Eagle* (C1:23-7). Jael's older brother was also important, as Jael was able to

\(^1\) An excellent example of the use of these skills is given in Shippey (1991b).
use his "library" of SF books (B1:74-7). Mothers who read SF are obviously in a minority - only John's mother had any interest in SF (B1:7-39) and Amanda's mother took her first SF book away from her (B1:64-9). Finally, Piers' friend's brother left his SF books behind when he left home, giving Piers access to this resource (A1:228-32). The importance of fathers and brothers is not surprising given the gendered audience for SF. However, we should not simply dismiss this social fact or automatically assume that it represents a direct transmission of gendered reading practices. The links between sons and fathers might be made as a result of shared enjoyment of the genre: in other words they may possess similar contracts.

The other important point of first contact with SF is through television, films and comics. James admitted that "I'm ashamed to say it started with Star Trek" (A1:103-5); Jason watched both Star Trek and Dr Who (A1:138-43); and Steve mentioned Space 1999 (C1:37-42). Films were mentioned (A1:79-81) and Star Wars was particularly significant (C1:30-5). However, Group B were very much a group of readers rather than television viewers or film-goers. In a way, the members of the other two groups had more or less 'grown up' with SF. For example, Alvin's first words to the group after introducing himself were "I guess - I mean it's just I couldn't ignore science fiction when I was a kid" (C1:45-7). This could be because media SF became more prevalent during the periods in which Groups A and C became interested in SF, arguably due to the success of Star Wars in reviving the commercial viability of the genre. Indeed, amongst the media SF texts mentioned are two which could be described as 'canonical': Star Trek, which has become an almost-permanent fixture on British television, and Star Wars, which appeared (rated 'U') in 1977, when most of my interviewees would have been in their teens².

Beyond domestic introductions to SF there are several important institutional contact points. The first is school which surprisingly was only

² Most of Group C would have been too young to see Star Wars when it first appeared, but would have been able to see the sequels (1980, 1983). All three films have been shown on British TV and are available on video. The marketing of Star Wars would also have reached far beyond the film's actual audience.
mentioned twice. Piers had to read *The Hobbit* at school, creating an interest in fantasy fiction like Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series and this in turn led onto her SF books (A1:211-27). Piers’ account shows how fantasy and SF can be taught as established texts at some schools. However, the other mention of school describes a very different evaluation of the worth of SF. Mark says:

Yeah, 'cos I remember at school, doing my GCSEs, just before that or something, I sort of went to the tutor to find out what sort of books to read, and you mention science fiction they sort of stare at you as if, you know, you can’t possibly read these. (C1:150-5)

The relationship between education and reading SF could be reversed later on, as several of the group members attributed their choice of degree to their interest in SF.

The other institutional link is the public library, mentioned exclusively by Group B. Mike G and Amanda both remembered borrowing SF books from libraries (B1:53-5;62-4), and Mike G and John also mentioned their father and mother respectively doing this (B1:52-3;36-9). Amanda’s mother, who returned Amanda’s first SF book to the library, could be seen to be ‘policing’ this access to SF. However, it was not the genre she objected to - rather she thought that one of the stories was "dirty" (B1:64-6).

These points of access to science fiction do not, of course, give us a clear or comprehensive picture but they do show some interesting routes and contexts in which people learn to read SF. Many of the differences between the groups cannot be adequately interpreted, especially since several interviewees only mentioned the first SF book they read and not how or why they started reading them. For example, I would imagine that others besides Mike G, Amanda and John borrowed SF books from local libraries, which often have excellent collections of paperback fiction. School libraries are also good places to look for SF. To explore these ideas we would need a much fuller ethnography of reading, and this is beyond the scope of the thesis. However the material presented here shows some of the domestic and institutional contexts in which competence is learned.

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7.2.2. The Meta-contract: Creating a ‘Canon’

In 7.3.3. I argue that the creation of canons - accepted bodies of ‘great’ works - in popular fiction reflects a particular type of reading practice. The canon is accepted by readers who reproduce the taste-making practices of the dominant culture. This represents the power of a meta-contract, in that works are judged according to shared but externally-imposed criteria. The text-reader dialogue therefore becomes part of a wider set of social relationships, partly structured by the asymmetries of scriptural imperialism. However, in return for their acceptance of the canon, the readers receive what are, in effect, ‘set texts’ from which they can acquire competence.

A common list of authors emerged as the readers discussed the first SF books they had read, producing a ‘canon’ of SF authors which would, I think, be accepted by many other readers and also by those outside the SF audience. The ‘canon’, as constructed by Groups A and B, consists of three individual authors: Isaac Asimov (A1:145-7; 182-5, B1:42-8), Robert Heinlein (B1:73-4), and Philip K. Dick3 (A1:147-50). There were also two groups of authors who were read together: Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Dick (A1:232-5), and André Norton, Heinlein and Clarke (B1:52-7). The first group made up the largest part of the collection of books left behind by Piers’ friend’s brother, while the latter represents Mike G’s borrowing from a children’s library. It is not surprising that we would find these books in a library or a friend’s collection: the authors are amongst the most famous, prolific and established SF writers of this century. Mike G’s example also shows how books by these authors become concentrated in public libraries, and how they are often borrowed by children4. In these ways the canon is preserved for new readers.

It could be argued that there is room for Star Wars and Star Trek in the contract (7.2.1.), but the canon seems strongest in the form of literature, probably because the group members can draw upon the established idea of canons in

3 Group A was recruited to discuss both Gibson and Dick, making it more likely that members would mention Dick.

4 Asimov, Heinlein, and Norton have all written SF explicitly for a child or teenage audience.
literary criticism (see 7.3.3.). Given this, it is interesting that Group C do not mention any authors in this way - their texts are films, TV programmes, and comics. Because of their age, they would probably have been exposed to media SF first, coming to literary SF through an interest in other forms.

The discussions also show how the canon can be rejected later as readers' contracts change. Jael, for example, has this to say about his first SF novel, by Heinlein:

...I can still remember er, two things about it. One was a, um, little piece of dogma in it about preserving all viable zygotes, in retrospect - I was thinking about it in the bath about four days ago - I see it as like, you know, a very nasty piece of crypto pro-life propaganda...

(J1:77-84, emphasis added)

Jael has altered his opinion of the book in the light of his further reading and experience, and is now able to judge it from outside traditional SF.

In conclusion, these texts are of crucial importance in establishing the nature of SF and its conventions. As a set of 'primers' they create a kind of original contract and they are useful introductions because they have been approved by the SF audience. However, later reading may refer only loosely to this contract, as the reader grows 'out of' or away from canonical authors.

7.2.3. Shifting Contracts: Dissatisfaction and new interest

Many of the readers, like Jael, suggested that their interest in SF has changed over time. How do these changes come about, and what do they mean for the contract? The interest of some of the readers has decreased, representing some kind of shift in the nature of the contract. It is interesting to explore whether the reader's expectations have changed or whether the genre has moved away from the original contract. Since all the members still read SF and were keen enough to join the groups, they must still have something invested in the genre. For James, SF is now "just there", taken for granted (A1:114-6). Others have re-written their contracts as their own situations have changed. Rob, as we have seen (6.2.2.), is now interested in SF because it links with his experiences at work (A1:84-91) while Jason is also interested in its relations to real-world
technological issues (A1:150-7).

A common shift in the contract is prompted by dissatisfaction. Several discussants described their present attitudes to the genre as being "more discerning" (Jason, A1:157-9), "more focused" (Steve, C1:78-9), or in the case of Ragnar, of reading "the older stuff" (C1:73-6). This dissatisfaction requires a re-writing of the contract and stems either from a feeling that the genre has changed (James, A1:116-22), or that the reader has. For example, Jael nostalgically remembers his first experience of SF: "The books you read in your youth, you'll never recapture the wonder of that time" (B1:319-21).

The most dramatic way in which dissatisfaction creates new expectations concerns what MikeG describes as a 'rekindling' of interest, and it is significant that Gibson was often the catalyst for this. MikeG was getting bored with the genre but Interzone magazine and Gibson prompted him to start reading more again (B1:163-83). Similarly, Jael had lost the "wonder" of his first contact with SF, but "Gibson changed all that" (B1:327-31). In Mark's case, dissatisfaction led him to abandon SF in favour of fantasy when he was twelve (C1:95-100). The author who brought him back to the SF fold was not Gibson but Greg Bear, who remains one of Mark's favourite authors (C1:101-6). Mark isn't entirely sure why he "went completely off" SF but Alvin suggests that one of the things that can lessen interest in the genre is "people's attitudes" (C1:108-16). The low value placed on SF by others can influence the contract. It is therefore also open to modification from outside the SF audience.

Other responses to this question suggest that individual contracts may not have changed to any great extent. Chris replied that he "kept up" with SF, implying that he did not think he had made any serious changes to his contract (A1:129-31). Several claimed that SF was not that important to them, or was simply a leisure activity (MikeR, B1:142-9; MikeG, B1:2-186). John, however, freely admits that it still "takes up a large chunk of my life" as a fan (B1:129-32).

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5 Readers are derided through associations with 'fans' (see Jenkins, 1992; Jenson, 1992) and criticisms of the genre itself (Luckhurst, 1991, 1993). While the discussants talked at length about this problem of contested taste, I am unable to discuss this material here because I am constrained by thesis word-length limits.
Interestingly, both Amanda and Maria state that they do not read that much science fiction, describing it as valuable because they like "Anything kind of slightly offbeat..." (B1:292) or "reading books which I find inspiring" respectively (A1:194-8). Positioning themselves outside of the SF audience, they enjoy SF for qualities they can also find elsewhere in literature. SF is just one of the genres they enjoy. As I will argue later, these two women readers possess weaker contracts with SF because they do not form part of its' 'natural audience'.

To conclude this section, studying the acquisition of competence and the establishment and transformation of the contract shows that these vital components of reading SF are shaped in dialogue with many other social practices. The importance of homes, schools and libraries in these accounts, for example, illustrates just how complex the place of reading is within the wider culture.

7.3. Making Sense of SF: Reading styles

In 3.4. I introduced the idea of reading styles: established ways of reading which represent distinctive uses of textual conventions. In this section I present some of the reading styles described by the discussants. I have therefore moved the emphasis away from the text to show readers actively creating meaning through the use of particular reading practices. While the readings discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 also constitute distinctive styles, they were tailored to the practice of making sense of specific conventions as 'imaginative resources'. The styles presented here are used by the discussants to read SF as a genre.

In categorising these general styles, I am concerned with distinct practices: I am not suggesting that they can be neatly mapped onto individual readers. In fact, it is significant that the same reader can use different and even contradictory styles to make sense of a text. Effectively reading styles are tools to be taken up and abandoned almost as the reader chooses. However, individuals do not have complete freedom to use different styles, as textual conventions invite ways in which they should be read. This invitation can be rejected by the creative reader, but it is significant that it is possible to detect a fair amount of agreement between the readers as to the 'correct' way to read conventions. In particular, their discussions of reading revolve around the dialogue between realism and the
fantastic described in Chapter 4. The conventions used to negotiate between these discourses are read in very definite ways. This underlines the importance of the contract and the nature of conventions in signalling an agreed relationship between author, text and reader. In other words these styles are, to a certain degree, set in reading practice, and it is this which creates the generic meanings associated with science fiction.

I have defined five of the most important styles from the discussants' accounts of the aspects of SF that they like and dislike - their contracts. Having used their competence to select a work which looks like it might fit their contract, the reader is looking for elements which they find pleasurable. Reading styles therefore unite competence, the contract, and taste in a creative process of making meaning. As analytical categories they smooth over some of the complexities of reading practice, but it is difficult to grasp it at all without some such generalisation. It is also interesting that some of these styles of reading are closely related to the genre of science fiction while others might be applied to other forms of fiction.

Obviously it must be remembered that these ideas are the discussants' own interpretations of their reading 'operations' through their descriptions of their contracts. Their actual reading practice is unlikely to be this straightforward. Not only is it possible for the reader to take up all of these positions (and more) in the course of reading a novel but their orientations to them are flexible. The social context of reading also enters into the reader's practice: I would argue, for example, that reading on a train can lead to a different set of readings than those which might be experienced reading in a room where others are talking, or where attention is divided between the page and the TV. These aspects of reading practice cannot be traced in the comments made by the group members: they are discussing de-contextualised practices, if that is not a contradiction in terms. However, they provide the foundations for an analysis of practice.

These five styles illustrate particularly important aspects of practice. The

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6 It should be noted that it was the readers' discussions of these orientations to SF that led me to develop the textual analysis outlined in Chapter 4; the critics discussed there were chosen because they complemented the readers' analysis, and not the other way around.
first two are central to reading science fiction; the third shows how strategic power enters into reading practice; the fourth touches on gendered reading practice; and the last displays the pleasure of reading. The first two seemed common to all the readers, because we were, after all, discussing science fiction. The others were used less frequently; for example, only Mark really develops what I have called 'reading beyond the narrative' (7.3.4.). However, this does not reduce their importance. Instead, we might ask why the others do not make use of these styles, since they are clearly productive. Finally, following De Certeau, some can be considered to be 'tactics' while others are perhaps closer to 'strategies'; I will discuss some of the problems of this terminology for my research in 7.4..

7.3.1. SF as Realist Fiction

It might seem odd that I consider some of the ways in which the discussants read SF to conform closely to mainstream reading practice; after all, as we have seen SF differs from the realist text in that it contains impossible elements. I will argue that to read SF in this way is to attempt to deny its fantastic potential, effectively rewriting the text as a mainstream realist novel. In the material presented here and in 7.3.2., it can be seen that it is very difficult to separate the realist and fantastic styles, and this is, I suggest, a consequence of their dialogical relationship. It is impossible to read for 'consistency' in SF without encountering the counter-discourse of 'difference'.

The notion of 'consistency' developed in Group A and echoed in the other groups can be thought of as having three related elements. Firstly, readers using this style are looking for coherent narratives: that is, they hope stories will be internally consistent and not leave questions unanswered or situations unresolved. This is common to all 'mainstream' realist fiction, with only certain genres and avant garde forms seeking to challenge the coherence of narrative. It is also one of the most important qualities used to ascribe value to an author - a failure to 'tie up loose ends' reflects poor quality writing.

Secondly, consistency can be extended to cover the mimetic qualities of fiction: the closeness of its constructed world to our empirically observed 'reality'. The realist novel claims to mirror the real world (Lodge, 1977) and the discussants...
were also looking for 'common reference points' which allowed the reader to make sense of ideas which might otherwise be read as fantasy. However, the gap between realism and fantasy is wider in SF than in realist texts because the former contains elements of the fantastic.

Finally, in SF the question of 'plausibility' (ie convincing mimesis) often rests upon scientific constructions of realism. Authors who break scientific 'rules' risk their constructions being judged as 'implausible' by competent readers (as I have shown in 4.3.2.). Of course, realist fiction also adheres to scientific laws: for example, suspending the law of gravity is a valid practice in fantasy but jars the reader of mainstream fiction. However in SF this concern with scientific or technical plausibility is arguably central to writing and reading styles.

The fantastic transforms these elements of realism in SF. It disrupts narrative coherence, distorts or avoids the mimetic depiction of reality, and mocks the scientific ordering of the universe. As we will see below, these qualities of the fantastic are largely contained and diminished in SF, at least in terms of the discussants' reading styles. Despite this, it is still capable of weakening the mimetic claims of the genre. This makes the realist reading style more uncertain in SF than in the classic realist text. Bridging the gap between the fantastic elements of SF and the realist style which makes them plausible is one of the key practices of authors and readers who wish to employ the realist style. It is therefore an important part of the contract and involves particular forms of competence.

The following material demonstrates the threatened centrality of this style largely through the comments of Group A, although it can be seen in the other groups. In particular, Piers placed great value upon consistency:

[...] the one thing that really makes me choose a science fiction author is, I like it to be consistent, alright? I like it to be something that's got its own, or believable world, all the bits tied together, they're there... I hate it when there's a loose end that has er just been, err, he invents a new gimmick to get out of a sort of dangling plot line [sounds of agreement]. If he can't write a thoroughly consistent story... usually based on the world we know now, then I'm not interested, because it's - it's cheating [laughs].

(A1:371-87, emphasis added)
Piers' rather forceful but self-conscious statement of his position betrays the vital role this idea plays in his contract with SF. Firstly, the desire for consistency applies to the narrative as a whole: a "believable world", with "all the bits tied together" rather than left "dangling". Secondly, despite the impossible nature of many SF elements, this consistency is "usually based on the world we know now": in other words, it must be mimetic. The word "cheating" is also important, as it echoes the idea that SF is a game conducted between author and reader, and that the rules must be observed by both (see 4.3.2.). Later, Piers returns to this game, expanding the role of consistency within his contract to take in scientific plausibility:

I'm always impressed at the author that's sat down and said, "well within what we know of the physical laws of the universe, it just ain't possible"...

(A1:644-73)

Here the principle has been extended to cover consistency with "the physical laws of the universe", where the reference points are not just to reality but to fundamental scientific laws.

Rob also mentions the mimesis produced by this style:

You need some sort of common reference points, from, from what he's writing about, I think someone like Gibson writes, um, he sets it well in a different world, but there are reference points so you can actually grab a hold -

(A1:430-54)

The idea of "common reference points" is explained here as a mechanism for ensuring that the reader can actually "grab a hold" or make sense of the narrative, even when it describes "a different world". This clearly demonstrates one of the key ways in which readers are invited to order the fantastic by reference to their own experiences.

This reading practice is associated with realist fiction generally, as is shown in two replies to Piers' comments. Chris argues that creating a consistent world is part of the writer's "skill" and therefore a marker of good SF, thus attributing value to this style because it meets his own contract (A1:389-99). Jason extends this beyond the genre, saying: "[...] It's all books I demand consistency from"
However, the importance of the realist style is threatened by the fantastic and the following comments show that creating consistency and mimesis requires active work on the part of readers and authors.

In Group A, Maria was the first to note the entangling of what the group called "difference" and consistency:

[...]
I can very well accept something, umm, a science fiction writer who will not base his world in our world but, still, I would like his own world to have some kind of... coherence and order. I wouldn't like to have a chaotic system. But I would welcome even the weird, or the strange, or the alien, I mean I wouldn't mind, as long as it has a certain order. [...] (A1:415-28, emphasis added)

There is a simultaneous desire for "imagination" and for "coherence and order". I would argue that this is not simply a contradiction, it is an unresolvable dilemma, a consequence of the realism-fantastic dialogue. However, it should also be noted that Maria is actively seeking the fantastic, as long as it has some internal coherence. It is not an obstacle to her enjoyment as it is for Piers. The difference between their positions is evident in Piers' next statement, based upon an SF author's discussion of the problems which would be faced if teleportation became reality:

[...] it was obviously very difficult to reconcile this idea that we certainly don't have with a believable consistent real world and the guy obviously thought long, deep and hard about it, [...] then constrained it within the story and used its limitations and his understanding of what he thought it would have to be to construct the storyline, as opposed to just saying "it's possible to teleport, full stop", and you could tell when you were reading the books that the guy had really thought about it - unless he's done, unless he's done his homework, this thing at the end of the day won't hang together - and that's what I mean by consistency. (A1:559-81, emphasis added)

Consistency creates the structure for this story, something Piers approves.

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7 It is important to note that readers are often aware of this production of consistency. MikeG laughingly notes that Jack Vance "explains magic" (B1:1990-5, emphasis in original), and Ragnar suggests the T-1000 from Terminator 2 becomes plausible because of its "pseudo-scientific explanation" (C1:803-13).
of. What is interesting here is that Piers applauds the author's deliberate effort in ironing out fantastic inconsistencies, and I would argue that he is himself involved in a similar activity when he reads.

What, then, are the consequences of reading in this way? Some are concerned with practice: readers who adopt this style draw upon their own constructions of social reality, their competence with mainstream realist styles, and (possibly) their scientific competence at the expense of reading for the fantastic. There are also political consequences. If we were to follow the arguments of McCabe (1985) we might say that adherence to the principles of realism leads to a reproduction of dominant ideologies. A more politically progressive reading would concentrate on those elements which defamiliarise the world we take for granted, thus illustrating their ideological construction. However, McCabe's interpretation is a textual one, and ignores the fact that readers are quite capable of turning commonsense into estrangement (or vice versa) without textual prompting. By accepting that readers choose to take this position, and that in doing so they are drawing upon their own experience of culture and society, I would suggest that the often reactionary consequences of such a reading are part of the reader's wider interaction with culture and politics.

However, the consequences of this reading style do seem to be conservative. Firstly, those who employ it actually weaken the generic character of SF, by reading it much as they would read mainstream realist fiction. Secondly, they work hard at reducing the power of estrangement, whether it exists within the text or not. Lastly, it has been argued that this concern with linear narrative and coherence is a masculine strategy (see 7.3.4.). There is obviously a limit to the power of fantasy, however, and in its most extreme form, as in the case of many of the texts Rosemary Jackson describes, fantasy approaches a state of 'unreadability'. Acquiring a taste for this type of fiction involves learning another kind of competence and we cannot blame readers for not wanting to make the jump from realism to such an anti-realistic genre. It must also be said that readers might not experiment with authors like Sartre, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Kafka because they are still canonical, rather than popular, authors. However, I do find it interesting that it was Group A who developed this theme at length,
given its constitution; five men with educational and/or occupational backgrounds in science or technology, and one woman, Maria, who is more open to reading for difference (although she still draws upon the realist practice, even in her reading of horror texts).

7.3.2. Reading For the Fantastic

One of the central arguments of this thesis is the close and dialogical relationship between realism and fantasy within the genre of science fiction. It has been argued that elements of the fantastic are often subordinated to the principles of narrative coherence and mimetic realism, but it must be stressed that this generic characteristic is not 'fixed'. Readers quite often read fantasy into realist descriptions and plots, and conversely they may explain away the fantastic in realist terms. The style I will describe here involves actively looking for and enjoying fantastic elements, or recognizing their importance to the genre.

As I have shown in 7.3.1., the readers found it difficult to discuss one part of the dialogue without considering the other and a similar tension can be observed in the material that follows. It shows that the discussants enjoyed reading for the fantastic in three main ways: firstly, the sense of otherness summed up in the word 'elsewhere'; secondly, the way challenging stories and ideas can 'push' you into new ways of thinking; and lastly, the fantastic elements which might be waiting in the future. I will also suggest that all of these practices involve some element of realism, and that the fantastic is often ordered by realist reading practice.

1. Otherness. This is limited in its effectiveness because of the generic framework. Almost immediately after Piers' espousal of consistency, Jason mentioned that he looked for "[...] different societies with some different ethos behind it" (A1:408-13). Similarly, Alvin argued that people misunderstand SF because there are "some things you just can't look into in ordinary fiction" and that SF can "go outside reality" (C1:128-38). Steve also suggested that the genre was flexible because "You can write about everything that you can't see in reality, I suppose" (C1:1975-6). Science fiction requires this difference because it deals
with new ideas and possibilities. However, this is merely a functional use of the fantastic, creating a fictional 'elsewhere' in which realistically described events happen.

Maria makes the fantastic more central in her discussion of "imagination" (reproduced in 7.3.1.). Although she still wants order, Maria can accept that the fictional world is not like ours, and welcomes the weird, strange or alien. Jason and Maria then express it more strongly through the ideas of 'magic' and 'difference':

Jason: [...] a big part of it is being transported to somewhere which is obviously very different to this world [sounds of agreement] in some way or another - but there are still reference points.

Maria: Well, exactly. [...] [difference] is a very important word, because I feel that I am transported to another world, in which I can stay when I need it... [...] (A1:512-28)

Note the importance of "transported", and the feeling that SF settings are somehow 'elsewhere' because of their difference. However, Jason's return to 'reference points' shows how difficult it is to discuss difference in SF without qualifying it with notions of coherence or some relationship to reality. While the fantastic is enjoyable, it must still be fitted into a consistent framework.

A similar temporary escape to 'elsewhere' can be seen in Amanda's comments:

Lack of logical constraints... I was thinking of it more from the point of view of writing, because in science fiction you really can do - I mean, obviously it's got to be thought out, but you can go anywhere you like, you know - I mean, the historical novel, you are bound to the facts up to a point. (B1:818-26)

Compared to the historical novel, which is constrained by the "facts" which make up 'history', SF can "go anywhere" - it enjoys a fantastic freedom. However, this has to be "thought out", and I feel that this is a similar case of

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8 This implies that the historical novel is primarily ordered by a commitment to historical 'truth', in the same way that SF relies on scientific plausibility.
subordinating the fantastic to realism.

2. **New ways of thinking.** Group B discussed the fantastic in the form of ideas. Discussing the marks of good SF (and therefore his contract with the genre) John said it "[...] has to be challenging, has to make you question the assumptions with which you started reading it" (Bl:2144-52). Amanda's reply seems to be reject John's definition as too strong and too functional. She says that SF is more likely to be different - "wild and wacky" - than other fiction, but "you're either going to think about it or you're not", suggesting that good SF does not have to challenge your initial assumptions (Bl:2154-64). Amanda seems to be describing the pleasure of this provocation rather than its effects. She goes on to say "You don't always want to be thought-provoked, do you?" (Bl:2175-6).

Jael offered perhaps the clearest expression of the fantastic nature of science-fictional ideas:

[...] It's like, SF has an imperative which is different to that of any other fiction, even fantasy... like, what makes an SF novel or story good is to see something, read something, experience something that you've never seen, read or experienced before, something that... moves you out of yourself, that shocks you out of your skin, it's like... takes you somewhere else. That's a quality that I call push, does a book have push or it doesn't - most SF novels nowadays don't, they just don't, but every once in a while you come across something that makes you scream, and that's what makes it good, something that makes you scream and want to throw the thing in the air and say, "Jesus... Christ, I never thought of that!", and um... that's what makes it good. [...] (Bl:2289-310, emphasis in original)

Jael seems to be describing the effects of the fantastic as described by Jackson and Todorov: the "push" that "moves" the reader, "shocks you out of your skin", or (again) "takes you somewhere else". However the pleasure of this 'push' is located in the realm of ideas which redefines the nature of these fantastic elements. All of this is important but I wish to emphasise the pleasurable nature of ideas, because this is present in many of the readers' statements about 'difference'. Group C provide a final example:
Simon: [...] Erm... but a good one [novel], I think, is something which just introduces you to a new idea, a completely new idea, that you can go, "wow!" [laughs]. And you know, it could change your life, you never know [laughs].

Mark: Yeah, I prefer something with an edge of mystery, something sort of unknown about it, not necessarily awe-inspiring, but something that makes you... errr - perhaps takes your thinking in a different direction. (C1:354-70)

Note the similarity of Simon’s comment to Jael’s excitement, again located in the newness of ideas, and also Simon’s laughter, implying greater self-consciousness about describing this. Here the difference of SF works through its ideas, or its ability to "take your thinking in a different direction". Mark’s contribution is even closer to the hesitation associated with the fantastic.

3. **The Future.** In Groups A and B the pleasure of ideas was also linked to another version of the SF fantastic: the future. In Group B, MikeR explains:

And if I were reading, you know, a book - it might be science fiction or it might be something else - but actually think that the impact that science has had, is having and will have on, you know, what we are and what we do, is very important, and you get pretty well in and explore that in science fiction [...] (B1:2183-91)

Here the enjoyment is one of thinking about the future through the medium of scientific and technological possibilities (not predictions). This parallels the uses made of the imaginative resources of ‘women with guns’ and the posthuman discussed in Chapter 5. MikeG makes a similar contribution:

[...] I get a lot of enjoyment from reading something, and seeing - yes, this can happen... and I think maybe like, in my work and the things I see around me at the university, I can then see, sort of - yeah, and this is like how it’s going to happen, this is going to be something like the mechanism by which it will happen. I mean, I would find it very - very barren, just reading SF as fantasy... but the - to me the most enjoyable thing, the thing that gives me a real buzz, is to actually see, yes, these fantastic ideas presented in these books, they can happen, and we’re on the way to them and... [...] (B1:2319-35)
MikeG's excitement about seeing the future take shape around him is based upon a strong faith in progress. However, there are also subtle clues as to the limitations of the fantastic. For MikeG, reading SF as fantasy would be "very barren", and I think this applies to MikeR as well. It is the 'reference points' between these strange and exciting possibilities and the present day world which makes SF interesting and enjoyable: watching fiction become fact as the present turns into the future. Move these ideas out of this linear notion of time-as-progress or time-as-change and they cease to be possibilities, becoming only fantasies which can never be made real.

What are the consequences of these operations between realism and fantasy? Many critics working in science fiction studies argue that it is the tension between the genre's fantastic and realist modes which gives it a radical position (see 4.3.2. and 8.2.). The presence of fantastic elements allows SF to become, in Jackson's words, a literature of subversion. By stepping back from the real world, SF can defamiliarise reality and categories of gender, race, sexuality, and so on. For example, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) describes a planet of hermaphroditic humanoids, where biological gender is not essentially fixed. Characters can therefore show both 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits in a way which undermines the strict categories of 'Man' and 'Woman' (but see Lefanu, 1988). It is implicitly assumed that this kind of narrative automatically leads the reader to question commonsense, thereby creating a radical, consciousness-raising text. Feminist critics of the genre argue that women writing SF achieve a double estrangement since their fantastic texts also disrupt the conventions of a masculine genre. The reader is shown that SF reproduces the hegemonic constructions of the culture it supposedly seeks to criticise (Wolmark, 1994:21).

However, the textual emphasis of these ideas creates problems when the reader is re-introduced to the field of study, as I have argued in Chapter 4 and demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6. In addition, the most estranging texts are also the most marginal in terms of readership. This is partly due to reader resistance to their political positions but it must also be said that many radical SF novels employ avant garde writing techniques which may act to discourage readers with
more 'traditional' forms of competence. As a result, grounding such ideas in readers' accounts of their own practice allows us to see just how radical these estranging conventions can be, and I would like to examine this material to gauge the power of the fantastic in SF.

The three ways in which the discussants read for difference have different implications. The first involves finding a real pleasure in 'magic' or being transported 'elsewhere', although this is tempered by constant references to the realist position. The challenge of ideas also draws upon this fantastic pleasure, though it manifests itself in a much more self-conscious way, and replaces the hesitation produced by the fantastic with certain conclusions, even though these might still "take your thinking in a different direction". Considering what the future holds places the fantastic into a discourse on technological progress, weakening the power of difference by looking for plausible 'possibilities'. These operations represent common tactics used by readers as they consider notions of fantasy, and the significance of this difference is largely determined by the relative importance given to realism in this reading style.

Reading for fantasy can achieve many of the 'effects' Rosemary Jackson describes, including the pleasure of estrangement, a critical examination of the politics of the real (especially the construction of sexuality), and a therapeutic articulation of the hidden fears of the dominant culture. However, I would argue that when readers of SF incorporate the mode of realism into these activities, the more anti-rational tendencies of the fantastic are suppressed, while the relationship between the fantastic and reality becomes the central engine for producing meaning. As a result it is harder to sustain the celebration of difference and magic than it is to read SF as a comment on the reality of here-and-now. Difference allows writers and readers the kind of conceptual legroom they need to ask "what if...?". In this way difference is made to serve the realist mode, allowing readers to consider "possible futures" or to see their present-day society 'reflected' in settings which are otherwise "elsewhere". This construction of the fantastic is therefore used not to question the implications of the traditional realist form, but

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9 For example, I wonder what some readers make of Delany's Tales of Neveryon (1979), which includes material from Derrida, Lacan, Said and Foucault.
to give it renewed flexibility.

Though the relationship is largely structured by the realist mode, this is in a constant state of tension with the contradictory mode of the fantastic; not only is this relationship constantly reshaped by readers, but the unresolvable nature of the dilemma means that it must be constantly policed. If the fantastic goes too far, disrupting the otherwise realistic nature of a narrative, some readers will feel that their contracts have been broken, and will lose enjoyment. The importance of plausibility seen in the discussants' descriptions of the realist mode is a direct consequence of the slipperiness of this contradiction. Unlikely objects and happenings must be carefully worked into narratives, through special effects in film, and internal coherence in literature. It is possible to go too far in the opposite direction, as well. Fictions with too close a relationship to the real may fall outside of the genre, breaking the contract for quite different reasons.

7.3.3. Reading as a Critic

This style refers not to the reader's opinion of a text or author, but to the way it echoes the strategies of the critics, the tastemakers of de Certeau's scriptural imperialism. I will suggest that some readers draw upon the value judgements of the elite when reading (or at least when discussing their reading). This appropriation also shows in the ways in which the discussants attribute value to authors and texts which shapes their reading practice, through the interaction of readers' contracts and their evaluations of the status of the genre.

The two most obvious 'critics' were John and Jael in Group B, and they illustrate this reading style very clearly (others drew upon it, but with less confidence). The style can be seen in their use of the lexicon of literary criticism (text, discourse), their concentration on authors (with the emphasis on the uniqueness of their ideas), and their construction of literary contexts (both in the form of canons and in terms of 'precursors'). I wish to expand upon the last of these tactics to demonstrate how it works. The list of authors mentioned by Group B represents a canon of the more 'intellectual' side of SF (Ballard, Delany, Zelazny, Banks, Le Guin, Sterling), along with those 'slipstream' authors often associated with this kind of SF (Pynchon, Carter). Working within this canon,
Jael distinguishes between "mirrorshades fiction" and "cyberpunk", privileging the former:

[...]

- mirrorshades fiction is fiction written by *Mirrorshades* writers,
cyberpunk is fiction written after the mode of Gibson *[laughter from John]*, that's a very important distinction. [...]

This excerpt contains all three elements: the discussion of "the mode of Gibson" (Jael talks about "modes of writing" shortly after this statement); the importance of authors in defining boundaries (cyberpunk writers follow Gibson; the other canon is defined by a collection of short stories, and their authors, rather than a grouping of themes or styles); and the formation of canons with a nod to the theme of 'precursors' (cyberpunk writers are merely following Gibson).

The idea of precursors can be found in all three groups. It is used to establish the uniqueness of an author's ideas and to legitimize their reputation by placing them in a long line of 'great authors'. Group B find several antecedents for Gibson. MikeG mentions John Brunner's *Shockwave Rider* (B1:173-82), John says that Alfred Bester's novels are "proto-typical for *Neuromancer*" (B1:207-48) while Jael thinks "Delany is more important as a precursor of Gibson or *Neuromancer* than Bester" (B1:2026-78). In Group C, Alvin and Ragnar disagree over the 'inventor' of the human-machine interface in cyberpunk (C1:909-31) and H. G. Wells and Robert Heinlein are lauded for being ahead of their time (Simon, C1:1008-12; Ragnar, C1:1151-6). Similarly, in Group A, Rob tries to find out if Niven 'invented' the idea of teleportation (A1:583-6, 637-42).

If these readers were discussing traditionally canonical authors their constructions would not be so jarring, but what is the point of thinking about SF in this way? Looking at studies of fandom by Tulloch and Alvarado (1983) and others, John Fiske argues that some fans use 'official' ideas of authenticity to ascribe value to their fan texts:

Authenticity, particularly when validated as the production of an artistic individual (writer, painter, performer), is a criterion of discrimination normally used to accumulate official cultural capital but which is readily appropriated by fans in their moonlighting cultural economy.

(1992:36)
Fiske goes on to suggest that studies of fans "show a slight but regular tendency for the more official or aesthetic criteria to be used by older, male fans rather than by younger, female ones", and that this is linked to the relative position of the fan in society (36). These fans are therefore adopting the norms of official culture to transform their popular texts into literature.

The critical style can be further explored through Bourdieu's ideas of 'natural' and 'acquired' tastes. Bourdieu argues that tastes mark divisions within the bourgeois class, and one of the most important of these lies between the connoisseur (or mondain) and the pedant (1986:66-74). The former's tastes are 'inherited' through constant contact with art and cultured people in the family home while the latter's must be 'acquired', learnt through formal education. The knowledge of the connoisseur is a form of unconscious experience and does not need to be articulated. "By contrast, all institutionalized learning presupposes a degree of rationalization, which leaves its mark on the relationship to the goods consumed" (66). Bourdieu writes:

The fact remains that the 'pedant's' situation is never entirely comfortable. Against the 'populace' and with the mondain aristocracy - who have every reason also to accept it, since they have an interest in birth-rights - he is inclined to accept the ideology of innate tastes, since it is the only absolute guarantee of his election; but against the mondain he is forced to assert the value of his acquirements, and, indeed, the value of the work of acquisition... which is a blemish in the eyes of the mondain, but in his own eyes his supreme merit.

(74, emphasis added)

Thus the pedant sets him or herself against the popular by aligning tastes with the elite but cannot demonstrate natural taste; unlike the 'connoisseur' the pedant must display their knowledge through the language of criticism. This is obviously complicated by the status of the genre itself - although Gibson writes novels (the form of literature), they are still science fiction. Even the most pedantic critic might not want to assert the value of SF.

I suggest therefore that this style of reading is an attempt to overcome the low status of the genre by adopting the language and outlook of the critic, and thereby achieve parity with the 'scriptural imperialists'. In class terms, the
majority of my discussants fit the pedant's situation rather than those of the mondain or the 'populace'. Their school or college educations allow them to draw upon the "rationalized", pedantic judgements of official culture, which they use in an attempt to transcend the low status of SF. In this way the tastes of the dominant culture serve to disempower the 'critical' reader in two ways: firstly, because the genre is devalued, and secondly because any arguments the pedant makes runs the risk of offending those with "naturally acquired" tastes.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that this reading style can also be critical in the oppositional sense of the word. Jael, for example, employs it to attack Heinlein's pro-life arguments (7.2.2.), and uses it throughout the next three sessions to criticise misogyny, racism and other forms of oppression. This produces a style which echoes that of many academic critics of SF, and can perhaps be explained by Jael's familiarity with critical texts and by his own politics. However, we cannot tie readers to a single style; paradoxically, Jael also shows great pleasure in retelling stories from the fictions he reads, emphasising his enjoyment rather than his critical mastery of them. This reminds us that readers take up and discard reading styles, and are capable of reading the same text in contrasting ways.

7.3.4. Reading Beyond the Narrative

This reading style emphasises aspects of the text which are not simply part of the narrative diegesis. There are two main forms of this, although the two can be linked together: the world of the fiction and the character interaction which occurs around the plotline. Interestingly, in some cases readers will actually produce this material themselves, taking small clues from the narrative to create a much more complete picture; this is the impulse which leads to fan production, and has been identified as a typically fannish reading style (Jenkins, 1992:107-9).

In terms of fictional worlds, Ragnar explained his enjoyment of Asimov in the following way:

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10 This can be thought of as a mode which reads paradigmatically as well as syntagmatically, i.e. across the grain of the narrative. See Jenkins (1992:109).
[...] he is a bit like Star Trek, in that he's got a big universe, he's living there, and all he's doing is writing down stuff that he's seen, which is quite interesting, because he's basically just got a universe there, and he just adds to it.

Obviously some authors do try to create internally consistent "universes of their own" and in Chapter 8 I look at this practice of 'worldbuilding' in more detail. However, this may not be valued by a reader, and the universe can be conceived in very different ways. Mark demonstrates this with his own reading of Asimov:

Yeah, because a lot of his ideas come from actual characters and the way they talk to each other [..], balance is like [..], dialogue but the prose. Specific characters are responsible for the environment I suppose, in a way.

The universe ("the environment") is created by the interaction of the characters, rather than by the author mapping it out. For Mark, reading beyond the narrative creates worlds or universes through character interaction.

Looking primarily at these relationships between characters, several readers mentioned characterisation as a way of marking value upon a text. However, this was done in the 'critical' style which equates good characterisation with quality writing. Mark, in contrast, offers an excellent example of reading beyond the narrative when he discusses David Eddings’ fantasy fiction:

[...] because the best thing about that is the characters, the interplay between them all, they - the book itself is very basic, you know, a quest for the orb and defeat the dark powers, that sort of thing, but it's the interaction between characters that makes it so interesting. I mean, he carries it on for the whole ten books, and it's still the same plot throughout the ten books, but you just want to read it to find out how the characters - how they interrelate to one another. The humour in it, it's just spot on, you can relate to all the characters in it. It's brilliant as like a character study sort of thing, and everything else.

Interestingly, Simon agrees, saying "Like a soap opera. [...] You never get to the end of the storylines" (C1:1587-92). For Mark it is the interplay between the characters that makes them enjoyable, rather than the narrative; Simon's
suggestion of a parallel with soaps also recognises this point. So what are the implications of this style?

In 'Gender Interests in Reading and Language', David Bleich discerns some significant differences between the ways women and men read prose fiction:

...men perceived a strong narrative voice, but women perceived the narrative as a "world", without a particularly strong sense that this world was narrated into existence. Perhaps another way of articulating the difference would be that women enter the world of the novel, take it as something "there" for that purpose; men see the novel as a result of someone's action and construe its meaning or logic in those terms. (1986:239, emphasis in original)

And again:

The men retold the story as if the purpose was to deliver a clear simple structure of the chain of information... Details were included by many men, but as contributions towards the primary informational end - the end of getting the 'facts' of the story straight. The women presented the narrative as if it were an atmosphere or an experience. They generally felt freer to reflect on the story material... and they were more ready to draw inferences without strict regard for the literal warrant of the text, **but with more regard for the affective sense of human relationships in the story.** (256, emphasis added)

We seem to have a slippage between gendered identity and gendered reading here. While Mark gives no indication of being freer with the narratives of Eddings' work, he is certainly under no illusions about their worth as plots (neatly parodied as "a quest for the orb and defeat the dark powers"). The most important point is Mark's concern for "the affective sense of human relationships", which is interpreted as a feminine style of reading (though not essentially so)\(^\text{11}\). Mark is becoming increasingly involved in media fandom, and seems to have successfully learnt the (feminine) reading style associated with it.

What is so interesting is the way in which this inverts the usual process of

\(^{11}\) While Henry Jenkins contrasts the "female fan culture" of *Star Trek* with the "predominantly male discourse" of the *Twin Peaks* computer discussion group to support Bleich's ideas, he, like Bleich, resists attributing this to the reader's biological (essential) gender (1992:109-112).
appropriation; it is much more common for women to adopt masculine reading strategies (through necessity), than it is for men to make any effort to learn to read the romantic novel, the ‘woman’s film’, or the soap opera. In fact, neither Maria or Amanda give any indication of reading in this ‘feminine’ way, but I would suggest that this is because of their taste for high literature. It could be that these two women have learnt to read in the masculine mode of the official culture, just as Mark has learnt to read in the feminine style of the fan culture - although it is difficult to tell from the material.

However, there are other kinds of ‘universe’ that we must consider. When Ragnar mentioned Asimov’s universe, and compares it to Star Trek, he is possibly constructing those universes in a different way to fans like Mark. Jenkins suggests that among the possible fan readings of Star Trek are "those that focus primarily on the program hardware or on the military chain of command, readings that are common to male computer net fans or to role-playing fans but not typical of... female fanzine readers and letterzine writers" (1992:97). I would suggest that universes which are driven by a concern for internal consistency and ‘rules’ are more masculine than those which are constituted, like soaps, through the interaction of characters. We must therefore be careful with the practice of ‘universe-building’, as it can take several forms, and does not necessarily have to involve the ‘feminine’ readings that we can discern for Mark (see Chapter 8).

7.3.5. Reading For Affect

This reading style is based upon the idea of ‘affect’, which is an important part of traditional genre criticism. However, my approach suggests that affect is generated by the readers’ use of specific conventions and not by the text itself. The reader is reading to emphasise their affective response to fiction, and the two most obvious responses in these discussions were humour and fear. This style therefore emphasises pleasure, but was felt to be inferior by some of the discussants, who distinguished between ‘good SF’ and ‘entertaining SF’. This was particularly true of the more ‘critical readers’, and especially John and Jael. As a result, I think this style is less self-conscious than many of the others and presents a mirror-image of the critical style. Its pleasure is embodied in laughter
and goosebumps, and not intellectualised as 'ideas'. It is also not as closely linked to the genre as the realist and fantastic styles, though in the case of fear we can see some traces of Todorov's fantastic hesitation.

The importance of humour is evident to several of the discussants. In Group A Piers says that the fiction of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett is "there for a laugh" (A1:1148-51). Maria feels that this is damming them with faint praise:

Yes I know, but they are writing for me, and they make you laugh and that's very, very important. (A1:1153-6)

Piers suggests that Adams is simply entertaining, while Maria argues that humour is "very important". It is important to remember that these two authors are 'famous' for their humour and no other authors were commended on it. In a sense these books are largely read for their humour alone, although the importance of this element is contested by Piers and Maria.

In Group C Alvin also used humour as a mark of quality SF (C1:1596-601). His choice of a 'funny' author is Neal Stephenson and he describes just what it is that makes Snow Crash funny:

But erm, I found certain bits, it's just the setting of that, some of it just makes me laugh, and some make me smirk - like what he does to the Mafia, like franchises everything - [...] And although it's, you know, plausible - even though some of it is plausible, it's just so funny, I mean these armed pizza delivery men! [laughter]. (C1:1651-63)

Stephenson's book is therefore funny because of its setting, a warped reflection of our world. Ragnar then suggested that Douglas Adams is only enjoyable because he is funny (C1:1671-4), and Alvin puts this down to his funny style (C1:1689-93).

Finally, we come to an interesting comparison. Spurred by Ragnar's assertion that Adams' novels represented something new in SF, Steve mentioned Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat novels (C1:1695-702). Ragnar's argument demonstrates another version of James' view of Pratchett:
Yeah. But other than just taking... the whole genre and making fun of it - [...] - every element was making us laugh at a piece of science fiction, *The Stainless Steel Rat* was funny, but it was still within the science fiction genre - [...] - it was still interacting with it, whereas in this universe, Adams' universe, anything can happen.  

Harrison's books are funny science fiction novels; Adams' books, like Pratchett's, are funny because they comment on SF from a space which is almost 'outside' the genre, taking a step back from the conventions of SF narrative so that "anything can happen". In conclusion, some SF is funny within the generic conventions, both plausible and humorous (Harrison and Stephenson). Other SF is funny because it comments on the genre at a 'metatextual' level (Adams and Pratchett), and may not be worth reading as 'serious' SF because its function is only to mock (though James disagrees, arguing that he can read Pratchett for the narrative and the humour).

The second important affect of SF is fear. Maria, who is very keen on horror, describes this fear as it was produced by her reading of Gibson:

> What I love... is somebody to inspire fear inside me, to feel my adrenaline bursting, you know, in my veins, I want to feel sweat, I want my bumps to go out, you know, so - I mean, and I - "Oh, I can't imagine these things would happen", and I think, one - actually perhaps the only reason that I like *Neuromancer*, it was this... fear, "oh my god, imagine this society happening, me living in this society", it was a nightmare, and it was horror, and I felt scared and I felt frightened and I couldn't breathe, and I had to close it and open it again, and it was exactly the same feeling I had when I was reading ghost stories and vampire stories and zombie stories and all this kind of stuff. [...] And, you know, but, and I will give credit to Gibson because he made me feel like that, and I do appreciate...  

(A1:3432-66)

The bodily affect of reading fear is clearly evident here (adrenaline, sweating, goosebumps, difficulty breathing), as is Maria's enjoyment of fear. Interestingly, it seems to be the fantastic nature of horror and SF which creates this fear. "I can't imagine these things would happen", and "imagine this society

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12 See Tulloch and Alvarado (1983); Douglas Adams' script for *Dr Who* is described as 'metatextual'.
"happening" display something of the uncertainty which Todorov argues must be produced in the reader by fantastic texts. However, none of the other readers discussed this aspect of Gibson's world, leading me to conclude that Maria has produced it herself through her own attitude towards his fictions, and the application of reading styles she has learnt through her competence in making sense of and enjoying horror fiction.

The question of fear is also explicitly discussed by Group A in their third session. Piers says he cannot watch *Alien* (A1:3541-2); Jason and Piers admit to being scared by the 'Monster from the Id' in *Forbidden Planet* (A1:3555-82); James argues that SF and horror both use the trick of suspense in haunted houses and space ship tunnels (A1:3584-600); and then Jason and Maria discuss how they feel more scared by "psychological horror" than "blood and guts stuff", and by the feeling that "something like that could happen to you" (A1:3631-702). All of these discussions mingle aspects of the fantastic and the 'reference points' associated with realist fiction, as the unlikelihood of it happening in 'real life' combines mimesis and the fantastic in a productive opposition.

As I have said, reading for humour or for fear can be seen as less self-conscious styles. A reader who is prepared to make this contract with a novel can read simply for 'entertainment' though for some this is seen as an inferior style. This style approaches the 'popular aesthetic' identified by Bourdieu:

> Everything takes place as if the 'popular aesthetic' were based on the affirmation of continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function... (1986:32, emphasis added)

The function of a text, read this way, is to 'affect' the reader; this desire therefore implies a closer relationship with the text than that of the dominant or critical style, which involves an "aesthetic distancing" (ibid, 34). This should not be confused with the effect of the text upon the reader, although lack of distance is often considered to lead to an inability to escape media effects (see Jenkins, 1992:60-1). The problem with the style is that it is not actually an aesthetic, hence Bourdieu's quote-marks. It denies "the clear-cut separation of ordinary dispositions from the specifically aesthetic disposition" (1986:33), and refuses to
articulate enjoyment. In other words, unlike the pedant, the user of this practice does not need to explain his or her pleasure. This not only echoes Ang's ideas about the weakness of the ideology of populism, which cannot readily be articulated (1985), but also suggests that "ordinary dispositions" are what de Certeau would call tactics. The non-articulation of pleasure makes this tactical reading style almost invisible to the researcher. In this case I have directly asked the readers to account for their pleasure and we can see its traces in Maria's description of goosebumps and adrenaline, and in Alvin's laughter. This pleasure must, however, be contextualised. These moments are not necessarily simple manifestations of the popular 'aesthetic'. In SF, humour and fear can become caught up in the discourses of realism and the fantastic in ways which make the readers' position very complicated.

7.4. Conclusion: Reading styles as strategies and tactics

I conclude this chapter by considering the theories of reading examined in Chapter 3 in the light of the practices employed by the sixteen readers who make up the discussion groups. The principles of de Certeau, in particular, are complicated by the moves these readers make. I will argue that few of these styles could be considered to be tactics as defined in The Practice of Everyday Life. Interrogating de Certeau's theoretical constructions allows me to include the ideas of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu, the theories of gendered reading I have already touched upon, and the ideas of competence and the contract developed throughout the chapter. The ways in which people read are certainly complex and often transitory, but we can still learn a great deal from them.

Firstly, I think it is important to reiterate de Certeau's point that what is at issue here is not a set of sixteen individuals, but the ways in which they use a set of practices. By picking out five reading styles I have shown some common ways in which the discussants make sense of Gibson's SF, as well as some inflections of these established practices. None are used rigidly or out of context and all are used in slightly different ways by the group members. Secondly, in suggesting some common practices, I feel that I have illuminated one of the central problems with de Certeau's definitions. Which of the styles are tactics,
and which strategies? Some seem to fit one of the theoretical definitions better than the other, but it becomes difficult to spot a tactic when it has been rationalised by the reader. I would suggest that reading for the fantastic, for affect, and beyond the narrative are the most tactical of the styles, but the other two could be used tactically, even ironically or self-consciously, by readers to achieve very different effects to their more commonly strategic practice. The two 'strategies' - reading for realism or as a critic - seem to draw much more powerfully on a 'proper' place, but can we say that they reproduce the practices of de Certeau's "social elite" of professional readers?

These problems lead me to qualify de Certeau's ideas. While immensely useful in conceptualising the practice of reading as part of "everyday life", they are (as he himself admits) merely the starting point of such an enquiry. Examining a particular set of practices requires a much more sensitive appraisal of other questions. In the case of literary science fiction, we must be careful to consider the status of the genre; the roles that gender and age play in creating a 'proper' place from which to judge (something de Certeau largely ignores); and the conventions of the genre which create a competence that plays a fundamental role in providing readers with the material for the tricks and ruses he describes.

While de Certeau's idea of 'scriptural economy' allows us to trace the ways in which elite readers set preferred meanings, Bourdieu's examination of the sociology of taste, discussed above, usefully suggests an interpretation of the logic of these practices in terms of class positions. Although de Certeau shows how Bourdieu's work constantly reimposes homogenous theoretical constructions upon the strategic moves he observes, Bourdieu's *Distinction* is immensely valuable for discerning the strategies and tactics employed by "tastemakers" to reaffirm their superiority. The difference between 'pedants' and 'connoisseurs' discussed above (7.3.3.) provides us with a useful example, one which reflects the acquisition of cultural capital. Without this extra complexity we would not be able to work out

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13 Reading for the fantastic is the most problematic, and depends on its context much more than the other styles. If read merely as a subordinated complement to the realist style, it fits the definition of strategy fairly closely; if read to experience the fantastic, it can be seen as an oppositional tactic.
the nature of the 'place' from which tastemaking strategies claim their legitimacy.

The low status accorded to science fiction (although complicated by the privileging of literary SF) makes this consideration fundamental to my thesis. As we have seen in the case of the critic's reading style, the problems of taste enter into the strategic moves readers make to justify their reading pleasure. In fact, this is perhaps the central concern of several of the discussants, structuring their evaluation of the genre, their attitudes towards the image of the fan, and the ways in which they read. Reading for realism and as a critic both bear the traces of Ang's 'ideology of mass culture' (1985); many of these readers (Piers, John, Jael and others) seem to draw upon the strategies of the elite to prove that their favourite books do have some legitimate 'place' in the world of literature. This is done against a backdrop of criticism of incoherent, commercial and "trashy" SF which clearly replicates the practices of the elite and mirrors the ways in which Ang's 'Dallas-haters' criticised the programme.

The place of these readers, both within and outside the cultural elite, creates a fascinating set of movements backward and forward across the line between 'high' and 'low' culture, with a correspondingly complex use of strategies and tactics. I would argue that this is a situation typical of what is sometimes called 'middlebrow culture'. Andrew Ross, for example, demonstrates how advocates of "New Age science" draw upon a scientific culture from which they are excluded because they still accept science's right to make sense of the world even though they cannot ever exercise this right themselves (1991). This does, in fact, seem to reflect the tactical use of the strategies of others. By demonstrating their knowledge of the 'right' way to read, and mimicking the strategies of the elite, these discussants attempt to gain access to their store of cultural capital. This is a different kind of 'poaching': it is the strategies rather than the cultural products of the elite which are appropriated. In fact, what these readers wish for, in de Certeau's terms, is access to the "treasury" of culture enjoyed by the elite:

The use made of the book by privileged readers constitutes it as a secret of which they are the "true" interpreters. It interposes a frontier between the text and its readers that can be crossed only if one has a passport delivered by these official interpreters...
Although we can see that this passport, and the approval of the elite, is what such reading styles wish to achieve, none of the more strategic styles is simply devoted to this end. In some cases, the discussants draw upon contradictory tactics, like reading for affect, or use these strategies to criticise the elite. While Alvin seems to subordinate reading for the fantastic to the realist style, for example, he is still able to deploy the latter as a strategy when he criticises people for not understanding that SF can talk about things outside the real. This desire for a passport, while transitory and a product of the power of the tastes of the elite, runs into grave problems when used to defend SF because the agents of scriptural imperialism are still largely indisposed to allow science fiction readers access to their privileged position\textsuperscript{14}.

But who, exactly, uses this strategy in this way, and why do they feel that it will grant them the 'passport'? To put it another way, why do they wish to emulate the social elite of the scriptural economy? Examining this question leads to a further qualification of Bourdieu's argument. John Fiske sees two flaws in \textit{Distinction}:

\begin{quote}
The first is its emphasis on economics and class as the major (if not the only) dimension of social discrimination... Bourdieu's other weakness, for my particular purposes, is his failure to accord the culture of the subordinate the same sophisticated analysis as that of the dominant. (1992:32)
\end{quote}

Investigating the importance of gender, race, age and sexuality to popular culture within Bourdieu's formulations allows us to begin to see the specific relevance of strategies and tactics used by SF readers.

Fiske sees fandom largely as a compensatory practice which "offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital" (33). It can also be used to express an opposition to dominant culture, as in the case of teenagers who adopt the popular to differentiate

\textsuperscript{14} Roger Luckhurst brilliantly illustrates that even such accepted 'professionals' as Andreas Huyssen draw upon the strategies of 'official culture' when attempting to rescue certain authors from the SF ghetto (1991). SF critics often feel their own marginality within the academy, as tastemakers without license (Shippey, 1991a; Jenkins, 1992); I have often felt this myself.
themselves from the culture of older generations (parents, teachers) who possess
the cultural capital that they may later acquire. Even this brief example
demonstrates the "peculiar mix of cultural determinations" that makes up fandom:

One the one hand it is an intensification of popular culture which is
formed outside and often against official culture, on the other it
expropriates and reworks certain values and characteristics of that
official culture to which it is opposed. (34)

In my discussion of the style of reading as critic I concluded that the search
for "authentic" authors replicated the strategies of the tastemakers. Fiske's
development of Bourdieu seems to me to be of great use in explaining why some
of my readers use the strategies of the elite, and why others rely much more on
tactical movements.

Those who are subordinated (by gender, age or class) are more likely
to have developed a habitus typical of proletarian culture (that is, one
without economic or cultural capital): the less a fan suffers from
these structures of domination and subordination, the more likely he
or she is to have developed a habitus that accords in some respects
with that developed by the official culture, and will therefore incline
to use official criteria on its unofficial texts. (36)

Occupying a position between high and low culture, and largely possessing
more economic capital than cultural capital, the discussants could move into either
cultural sphere. However, considering their gender and acquired (educational)
cultural capital allows us to see why many of them gravitate towards the official
criteria. It has already been mentioned that literary SF is gendered as masculine,
while media SF more closely fits a feminine category; I would follow Fiske in
suggesting that the prevalence of official criteria and a corresponding distrust
of the popular is related to the 'gender' of the genre as much as the readers' gender
or class position. For example Amanda and (especially) Maria draw upon
'masculine' strategies to create official values in this way, even though Maria holds
a Masters degree while Amanda has no post-school education. It might be argued
that these readers have even more to gain by reading in this way, tactically
adopting the masculine strategies of the dominant class to avoid the low status of
both their gender and their cultural class.

The acquisition of cultural capital through education is, however, very significant; Maria shows much more of a 'connoisseur's' appreciation of Gibson than Amanda does. They draw upon the same strategies, but with differing degrees of confidence and success. This is also the case for readers like John and Jael, who often substitute their own generic competence for the literary competence used by elite readers, and who also demonstrate an autodidactic learning of literary criticism. John and Jael are weak in cultural capital compared to Maria, but draw upon gender confidence and a sanitised version of their own fan knowledge to mimic the strategies of the elite. Of course, the educational capital of readers like John, Mike G, Mike R, Piers, James, Chris, Rob, and Jason is also devalued in the eyes of the literary tastemakers. Their knowledge of science, though an important part of SF competence, is worse than useless in the world of literary criticism.

Like Fiske, I have so far not been able to bring out questions of race and sexuality in this research. In fact, these were largely absent from the discussions. I feel that this is part of the generally liberal culture of the SF audience - for example, no one mentioned the ethnicity of Maria and Jael at all, not even in the session which discussed race and gender. As an African-Caribbean Londoner Jael is presumably more subordinated than Maria, who as a Greek-Swedish woman is more likely to be considered to be 'white'. Literature and SF would both seem to offer a democratic, colour-blind form of enjoyment. While some would question this assertion, Jael does not seem to see a problem with it - or is perhaps unwilling to mention this to an otherwise all-'white' group. As for sexuality, it was not even brought up as an abstract issue. I would not like to assume anything about the sexualities of the discussants. Since I have no information on this issue, I would be extremely wary of making any interpretations as to its significance.

Finally, a cautionary note about this kind of analysis is needed. Discussing theoretical work on proverbs, de Certeau points out that this kind of study is either interested in their content (paradigmatic) or their construction (syntagmatic), but not in the ways in which they are used. This is a general
problem of research:

Only what can be transported can be treated. What cannot be uprooted remains by definition outside the field of research. Hence the privilege that these studies accord to discourses, the data that can most easily be grasped, recorded, transported, and examined in secure places; in contrast, the speech act cannot be parted from its circumstances. (20, emphasis in original)

Throughout this chapter there has been a move away from particular statements in their contexts and towards a set of abstractions which might seem to have been "uprooted" from their circumstances. It is difficult to avoid this while still remaining readable, but I hope that I have sufficiently stressed the fluidity of the discussants' strategies and tactics. They are not intended to stand in for the complexities of reading and interpreting, or to act as simulacra of everyday life.

We should therefore redefine strategies to acknowledge that the places they operate from are very complex for they are constructed from sets of interlocking power relationships. We can see this from the example of SF readers and their awkward position in relation to 'official culture'. Once we have an idea of the ways in which such a set of strategies order culture, it is possible to imagine how tactics work within these structures, and how subordinated groups attempt to either subvert, adapt or adopt the official strategies through these tactical moves. These issues are explored in Chapter 8.
...there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore. (Shelley, 1818/1993:10)

We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of the Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is as arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin... We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. (Lem, 1961/87:72)

8.1. Introduction: Exploring the Places of the Fantastic

The writing and reading of fantastic fiction opens up doorways into other worlds, strange and unfamiliar places, because it contains elements of the unreal which lead us - like Walton, Shelley's bold explorer - away from "the common pathways of men." The strange and unfamiliar places of science fiction and the fantastic form a set of alternative geographies lying outside the known world of realist fiction and everyday experience, a fascinating challenge to readers and critics. Can these places be described, let alone 'mapped', by the academic explorer?

I have argued that the fantastic resists understanding. However, in Chapter 6 I have shown that readers find it relatively easy to order and understand the places of Gibson's world. The subject of this chapter is the ways in which reading practices are used by these explorers to avoid becoming 'lost in space'. The chapter therefore follows two acts of transformation. Firstly there is the question, unanswered by cultural geography, of how readers understand descriptions of places in literature, away from the visual cues of the filmic or televisual mise en scène. Understanding the transformation of the written word into an experience of place is an essential part of the discipline of geography. The second transformation is situated within the dialogue between realism and the fantastic which I see as central to SF. Using conclusions drawn from the preceding chapters, I examine some of the writing styles used to build science fictional worlds in 8.2. Material from the group discussions is examined in 8.3.
to develop an interpretation of the ways in which reading practice creates experiences of place in science fiction. I conclude the chapter by returning to the model outlined in 3.4., placing the central themes of the thesis within the generic dialogue between authors, texts, and readers.

8.2. Worldbuilding: Writing science fictional worlds

Throughout the thesis I have argued that the genre of science fiction is built upon a tension between scientifically realistic forms of explanation and fantastic forms of uncertainty. As part of this generic dialogue, the construction of places 'Elsewhere' involves textual conventions of both types. Samuelson's assertion is worth repeating:

All writers of fiction hypothesize virtual interactions of invented entities. Like science and engineering, however, SF makes plausible models of beings, places and times nobody has yet encountered. (1993:192)

The creation of "plausible models" of places that do not exist obviously involves some notion of realism (plausibility), which is always undermined by the fantastic (fiction). In science fiction realism is often constructed as scientific plausibility, and the fantastic element results from a setting which is different from our own world in time or space. For the purposes of this section, I am suggesting that reading the fantastic elements of SF results in readers becoming temporarily 'lost in space', while scientific and realist elements provide conceptual maps. I examine the role of place in the fantastic first, and then compare it with realist 'worldbuilding' in SF. The relationships between these sets of generic conventions is then discussed to construct an account of the practice of writing SF spaces.

8.2.1. The Places of the Fantastic

The topography, themes and myths of the fantastic all work together to suggest this movement towards a realm of non-signification, towards a zero point of non-meaning. (Jackson, 1981:42)
Jackson’s description of the spaces and places in the fantastic is part of her wider argument about the production of uncertainty (see 4.3.1.). Her interpretation of the ‘topography of the modern fantastic’ (42-48) gives us three general types of impossible places, represented through specific conventions.

The first kind of impossible geography is the **empty place**, "...with relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses" (42). Both space and time have been emptied of meaning, disorienting the traveller; here there is no other, only the self. In *Fantasy*, Jackson suggests that solipsism is one of the great fears of modernity, and the empty place is the geographical expression of such fears.

A second common location is the **place of fog and mirrors**: here meanings are obscured, shifting, or turned back upon themselves, so that stable meanings and understandings are denied. The mirror is an important fantastic convention: not only does it seem to reflect and distort the real world, but in doing so it seems to create another world that we may enter, like Alice, ‘through the looking-glass’. This "preoccupation with problems of vision and visibility" (43) is central to the fantastic; vision is associated with the constitution of the unified self, with certainty, and control. As Jackson argues:

> In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the unreal is that which is in-visible. (45)

The third site is the **labyrinth**, another topographical metaphor for non-signification. Jackson cites Sartre’s assertion that "the labyrinth of corridors, doors and stairways that lead to nothing, the signposts that lead to nothing, the innumerable signs that line the road and that mean nothing" found in the fantastic are representations of the meaninglessness of signs (41). The traveller never arrives at a final meaning, and the journey from signifier to signified can never be completed.

This thesis is not concerned with the wider aesthetic and philosophical

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1 However, classifications like these inevitably involve a rationalisation of the fantastic.
questions raised by Jackson's work. However, even from the perspective of audience work, her analysis would seem to present a problem to the cartographer of fantastic places. In the first kind of place there is no world for us to "read", and in the other two we cannot glimpse its form clearly enough to know where we are. By actively resisting the reader's attempts to make sense of them, these conventions for writing fantastic places subvert ideas of the real. I have already shown how the strategy of 'reading for the fantastic' in SF can actively celebrate this uncertainty, finding pleasure in the irrational or using it to criticise the assumptions of everyday reality (7.3.2.). However, this reading style is always opposed to the realist strategy, with important implications for SF 'worldbuilding'.

8.2.2. Realistic Places: The practice of worldbuilding

The writing of science fiction places is sometimes described as 'worldbuilding' by authors and critics. In 4.3.2. I described the rules of scientific plausibility which structure the genre, and in this section I want to expand this material to discuss the conventions by which realist descriptions of worlds are produced in SF. In addition to scientific realism, writers draw upon two other forms of mimetic conventions: 'classical' realism and emotional realism.

The first term refers to the conventions used by the mainstream novel to produce a mimetic description of commonsense experiences of the world. These writing practices - objective narration, detailed 'thick' descriptions, and others - were developed in the nineteenth century 'classic realist text' (Lodge, 1977; McCabe, 1985; Davis, 1987). As such they provide the background reality for SF which grounds other forms of realism in its mimetic description. However, even this most straightforwardly realist style cannot guarantee its claim to mimesis; it is subverted by the fictionality of literature and by the dialogical characteristics of the novel outlined by Bakhtin (1984b). As I have already shown, the presence of fantastic elements further tests this mimesis and necessitates the use of other forms of realism to contain the impossible in SF.

'Emotional realism' is derived from Ang's examination of viewers' readings of both the denotive and connotative levels of Dallas (1985). While the Dallas-haters felt that elements at the denotive level were unrealistic (life isn't full of
tragedies and surprises), the *Dallas*-lovers concentrated on the connotative level, which they felt to be 'emotionally realistic'. These fans avoided judging the programme on its relationship to empirical reality:

...the concrete situations and complications are rather regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery. (44-5)

It fulfils their contract because it contains references to their own lives at an emotional if not an empirical level: viewers might not be members of a Texan oil family, but they know about families. This realism fits the ways these viewers feel about life:

...what is recognised as real is not knowledge about the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling'. (45)

Emotional realism strengthens the straightforward mimesis of the 'classic' style. Fictional worlds are judged to be realistic if they conform to the reader's subjective experience of the everyday. In this respect, realism is never simply a quality of the text: it is something which readers create from their understanding of the contract, and the form of this contract determines whether the experience is pleasurable or not. In other words, where this kind of realism is important to the reader's contract, its absence will create feelings of dissatisfaction.

The SF author, like other authors, must create plausible people and places. The fantastic elements (the speculative projections) and the emotionally realistic elements (representations of experiences which are similar to those of today) must exist side by side - often in a state of tension. For example, in Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1953) natural resources are very scarce, based upon the speculative projection that wastefulness would only increase in the future. However, many of the characters behave exactly as their real-world counterparts would in 1950s America. While scarcity has changed the way they live, the size of their homes and even their conceptions of value, they still fall in love, go to meetings, feel fear, envy, and disdain. Emotionally, little has changed. Henry Jenkins sees this kind of realism as a result of reading practice rather than
the character of the text, which means that "It is therefore possible for viewers to ascribe "emotional realism" to texts [like Star Trek] which break even more than Dallas does with empirical reality". He continues:

What counts as "plausible" in such a story is a general conformity to the ideological norms by which the viewer makes sense of their everyday life. Such a conception of the series allows fans to draw upon their own personal backgrounds as one means of extrapolating beyond the information explicitly found within the aired episodes.

(1992:105)

Jenkins argues that this is a gendered process developed by women readers (see 7.3.4.). However, some of the male discussants I interviewed also showed a concern with emotional realism. Where Jenkins sees this realism as an integral part of (feminine) fan viewing, I prefer to interpret it as a particular reading style which can be applied to all texts by different kinds of readers who are, however, looking for different components of their own structure of feeling.

Jenkins also illustrates how emotional realism is used by fans to judge the value of individual episodes of Star Trek:

The fannish ideal of "emotional realism" also insures that transgressions of "common sense" assumptions about social reality will be harshly criticized not simply as ideologically motivated but as violating the integrity of the represented world. (116, emphasis added)

Providing emotionally realistic descriptions of fictional worlds therefore strengthens their mimetic claims, but also successfully needs to fulfil the readers’ contracts.

The 'classically' and emotionally realistic conventions which I have briefly discussed here are used to write mimetic fictional worlds in many kinds of fiction. The rules of scientific plausibility are also used in SF to contain the genre's impossible elements through extrapolation. How do these realist and fantastic forms affect the conventional representation of place in SF?
8.2.3. Ordering the Fantastic or Suspending Disbelief?

I am starting with the presumption that scientific plausibility allows the reader to make sense of the impossible and fantastic elements of SF (4.3.2.). Science fiction places are therefore generally plausible rather than fantastic, and their form is consistent with scientific principles. Where the fantastic does appear, it is contained through the practices Benford describes as "effing the ineffable" (cited Malmgren, 1993:15). However, if we follow Malmgren's typology, we should say that speculative SF is more likely to produce uncertainty than extrapolative SF, because the distance between fiction and reality is greater in the former (1991).

Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia* trilogy² provides an excellent example of the writing of this practice of containment and ordering. The planet of *Helliconia* orbits three suns, and consequently its seasons last longer than its civilisations; in this way it is so different from Earth that it becomes virtually unthinkable. However, by accepting the principles of astronomy, and applying them to the situation that Aldiss presents us with, we can begin to imagine that the existence of *Helliconia* is theoretically possible after all. In this way the impossible becomes 'manageable' through scientific plausibility: I would argue that Helliconia is an extrapolated location.

In contrast, Malmgren supplies us with "an extreme example of speculative Otherness" (1991:42) in the form of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1970), a planet which is a cypher to the scientists who investigate it. The nature of this world cannot be easily described here, since none of the characters can do more than guess at its nature; throughout the novel there is a suggestion that the planet, or at least its surface, is a conscious entity. Solaris, with its wilful and disorienting refusal to be understood, is indeed an excellent example of the fantastic place. One of the themes of the novel, expressed in the passage which prefaces this chapter, is the arrogance of human science in assuming that the ineffable can be 'effed'. This is represented by what Lem calls "geocentrism", leading us to map the Earth onto the planets that we might find beyond our own solar system. This is in itself a

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metaphor for worldbuilding in SF: in imagining other worlds we have used our own (scientific and commonsensical) understandings of Earth to reproduce images of this planet throughout an imagined cosmos. "We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors".

Further evidence of the limits of this imaginative creation is given by Samuelson who points out that although we can detect the existence of other stars, we have yet to 'prove' that there are other planets beyond the solar system (1993:208). For me, the implications of this are astonishing: our scientific justification for imagining other worlds has rested on the assumption that because our sun has planets, other stars of a similar kind will probably have them too. Even though the Hubble telescope is now apparently sophisticated enough to supply the appropriate proof, this still means that the classic SF worlds created before this recent discovery were actually only vaguely plausible. Indeed, writers describing Mars and Venus, our nearest neighbours in the solar system, tended to map Terran landscapes onto them in an attempt to make them fathomable. Mars became an arid planet, covered with the sands of the Sahara or the landscapes of the American West and South African veldt; Venus the planetary equivalent of the tropical rainforests of Africa or the Amazon (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983). This bears out Lem's claim that in SF "we simply want to extend the boundaries of the Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos". Many of those marvellous worlds were clearly extrapolative, based upon the only world we have experienced.

Discussing these examples gives some idea of the way in which fantastic places are ordered. However, I wish to sound a warning here, as I feel that Malmgren's opposition between 'extrapolated' and 'speculative' fictions, like Rosemary Jackson's (1981) distinction between the 'modern fantastic' and other, less 'subversive' forms of fantasy, could be seen as a way of attributing value to some literary forms at the expense of others. Jackson, in particular, goes to great lengths to define her preferred form of the fantastic, creating what can only be described as a 'canon of subversion'. I feel that both critics have valuably illustrated the central strategies of the fantastic and science fiction, but that their emphasis on whole texts blinds them to the more subtle way in which these acts
of subversion and rehabilitation operate.

It is important to remember that authors and readers create *moments* of fantasy in the act of writing or reading across a much wider range of texts than either Jackson's or Malmgren's typologies would allow. In particular, readers can 'misread' the plausibility of SF, refusing to follow the author's strategy of managing impossibility and creating fantasy in the midst of rationality. Similarly, readers of the fantastic can refuse to suspend their disbelief, applying a rational explanation to a situation intended to deny this strategy. The creation of rational meaning is a very delicate operation and, as such, cannot be analyzed in such a reductive way. However, for the sake of this argument, I will assume that the fantastic is *generally* written and read to create impossible situations, while SF is *generally* written and read to 'manage' impossibility. To ascribe values to either form at this level of definition, is, however, meaningless.

Instead, the critic must develop a more flexible understanding of the ways in which meanings are transformed from author to reader, so that we can start to trace *common strategies* of reading for and managing the fantastic. Our claims must be made from particular instances, so we can see how readers follow or reject textual clues. *Helliconia*, for example, could be read as a fantastic place by readers with no desire to accept the strictures of astronomy: part of its appeal to readers is its peculiar nature. Conversely, *Solaris* could be 'understood' by other readers who despaired of the inadequacies of the scientists sent to investigate the planet: these readers might offer their own explanations for the planet's actions. I will give some examples of this 'misreading' later, but the fact that *Helliconia* and *Solaris* are *generally* read as plausible and fantastic respectively suggests that there *are* strongly established ways of writing and reading which either promote or deny fantasy.

How does emotional realism fit into this relationship? I believe it provides a foundation for scientific plausibility. Generally, the worlds of extrapolative SF are not so very different from our own and they can be realistically rendered without any props. The isolated elements of the fantastic which enter these worlds are then ordered through scientifically plausible explanations. However, the fantastic can clash with emotional realism:
The greatest weakness in Hal Clement's classic of world-creation, *Mission of Gravity*, is the characterization of its aliens. They look like centipedes with lobster claws, act and think like Renaissance sailors, and talk largely like '50s engineers, at least as they are represented in American SF. (Samuelson, 1993:205)

Although Clement's use of scientific laws allows him to invent creatures which are both strange (fantastic) and well-adapted to their environment (plausible), for Samuelson, at least, they are unconvincing. From this passage it seems that Samuelson would rather they were more alien, and this is one important kind of relationship between emotional realism and the fantastic. More speculative SF subverts both scientific plausibility and emotional realism. The human protagonists of *Solaris*, for example, become increasingly irrational as they study the planet and their behaviour becomes less predictable.

Generically, then, these two kinds of realism are sufficient to create a plausible description of science fictional places. Emotional realism attempts to show that the behaviour of characters is 'normal' and understandable while scientific plausibility provides the conceptual scaffolding for those elements of the fantastic which are part of all SF. I hope I have shown that the realist control of the fantastic is not absolute and that more speculative SF, like Lem's *Solaris*, is capable of subverting the real. I will now demonstrate the ways in which these ideas can be applied to Gibson's fiction. The next section therefore brings together the writing and reading of Gibson's 'world of stories' as a preface to 8.3..

### 8.2.4. Credible Futures: Gibson's World

The triumph of [Gibson's short stories] was their brilliant, self-consistent evocation of a credible future. (Sterling, 1988:10)

These stories paint an instantly recognizable portrait of the modern predicament. Gibson's extrapolations show, with exaggerated clarity, the hidden bulk of an iceberg of social change. (ibid, 11)

One of the claims made for Gibson's work is its relevance: it depicts 'a future that is recognizably and painstakingly drawn from the modern condition' (ibid, 10-11). One of the key elements of Gibson' world, then, is that it
extrapolates from 'today'. The other is that this extrapolation is credible. I want to locate my analysis of Gibson's world here, as it illustrates the creative strategies of readers, critics like Sterling, and Gibson himself as they build a world between them.

In the preface to the collection *Burning Chrome*, then, Sterling twice describes this future as 'recognizable'. I take this to mean that it fits Sterling's own conceptions of the future of Earth; it certainly seems to be credible for the readers in the discussion groups. This shared 'recognition' implies the workings of the contract; in other words, part of the enjoyment of reading cyberpunk is a result of its recognizable representation of the present and its extrapolation of a credible future. But what makes these depictions recognizable and credible? I hope to be able to answer this question by briefly returning to the readers' constructions described in Chapters 5 and 6.

I would suggest that the idea of 'indifference' discussed in 5.2. seems credible to the readers because it represents both an emotionally realistic mimesis and an extrapolation of the individualism of contemporary culture. As I have shown, 'women with guns' were seen as emotionally realistic characters, since their actions were (ambiguously) justified by their earlier suffering. Gibson extrapolates the growing importance of information as a form of power to suggest that it would replace current forms of domination and subordination, and this was largely accepted by the readers as a plausible extrapolation. Ideas about the mutability of gender or race which see identity as something 'cosmetic' also rely on extrapolations of cosmetic surgery. Generally, the readers did not disagree with Gibson's extrapolated ideas, suggesting that they find them plausible. Indifference is therefore both emotionally realistic and something which will only become more pronounced in the future.

The figure of the posthuman is more speculative, despite the current availability of prosthetics and the existence of (nonsentient) robots. The ambiguous attraction of the three posthuman types was partly due to the personal nature of these discussions; none of the readers could extrapolate their own current existence. However, these technologies are mostly extrapolative: artificial intelligence research is being carried out, prosthetic technologies are becoming
increasingly sophisticated, and cloning and biological engineering have already produced new non-human hybrids. It is also interesting that the discussants wished to preserve their human identities, suggesting that the posthuman must also be emotionally realistic. I think that this lies behind the tendency to assume that these new technologies will not change our personalities; using this imaginative resource is impossible without this form of ordering.

Gibson's spaces are also generally extrapolative, although cyberspace can be read as a more fantastic place. Despite its roots in the internet and bulletin board culture, it represents what Samuelson calls a 'transformation' of our conceptions of information space (1993:199). The readers emphasised the extrapolative nature of this space through their descriptions of the dialogue between fictional cyberspace and their own use of information spaces. Emotional realism is, however, largely lacking from their accounts which might partly explain the ambiguously fantastic nature of this space. The Sprawl was more clearly extrapolative and emotionally realistic, as the readers' accounts of their own experiences of London show. Gibson's urban spaces represent an exaggerated version of the contemporary city, itself experienced as a collage of impressions.

In conclusion, the readers' constructions generally agree with Gibson's, suggesting that their contracts have been fulfilled. The plausibility of his world is therefore constituted from the classical mimesis derived from the mainstream novel, the emotional realism of his characterisation, and his careful extrapolations. Importantly, this plausibility is pleasurable for the readers, as it matches their own structures of feeling and constructions of reality, as well as the generic contract. However, they also enjoy the transformations Gibson has wrought on this world; the speculative elements are another important part of their contracts. Having established this, I now want to describe the practices by which they make sense of the places of SF.

8.3. Reading Place: Constructions of science fictional worlds

What reading practices do readers use to turn words into imagined geographies, literary experiences of place? Are the practices used to read science fiction different to those which are brought to bear on mainstream fiction? This
section looks in detail at the discussants' constructions of science fiction places and at their descriptions of their own reading practice. This represents a different form of analysis to that offered for cyberspace and the Sprawl in Chapter 5, which was not fully grounded in reading experience. Here my examination of the ways in which people read geographies is based not upon their descriptions of places but their descriptions of the ways in which they read those places.

The material presented below is taken from the last session with each group, where they described science fictional spaces and places which had special significance for them. I have interpreted it in three sections. In 8.3.1. I create a model of reading for place which shows some of the most common practices. These practices, I argue, parallel the writer's production of novelistic space discussed in 4.4.. In other words, readers also thicken space. This therefore represents a set of reading styles, of which the realist style is the most important. It is probable that these practices are also used to read places in mainstream fiction.

However, as Chapter 6 demonstrated, there is another common way of producing space which creates Brosseau's 'geography of the text', an experience of places through their textual form, rather than a thick geography in the text. Subsection 8.3.2. examines the way readers make sense of 'thinner' spaces, with reference to Gibson's writing style. Finally, I consider the difference the fantastic makes to these ways of reading place in 8.3.3..

8.3.1. Thick Spaces: Generic worlds

Several of the readers begin their construction of places with a 'blank background'. Piers clearly describes this:

[...] unless an author actually puts some effort into describing his, er, background, I often find that I don't actually have to have my mind invent too much scenery in which the thing happens, I mean - unless he actually describes it in some detail, I find myself thinking of a very sort of minimalist stage set, you know, barren plains, maybe a bit of grass, windswept slaty sky and you've got... whatever building construction nearby described in detail, but I don't actually flesh out my landscapes that much without the author giving me key references. (A3:842-52)
Unless he is offered extra descriptive detail Piers imagines a "a very sort of minimalist stage set". Jason agrees, drawing a comparison with film:

[...] unless it’s brought out to me, I’ll leave large parts of the background blank, I haven’t particularly fleshed it out... I’m following particular areas, but er... you know, unlike film, I won’t fill in all the, all the holes. (A3:1037-42)

Jason also begins with a blank background onto which he adds details when he needs them. I would suggest, then, that when we read, we often begin without a conception of place. This kind of placeless location is, as Jason points out, impossible in film. Using Piers’ and Jason’s metaphors, we think of the text as an empty ‘stage’ or blank ‘background’.

So how do these readers begin to "flesh out" or "fill in" these blank spaces? Piers provides one very clear set of associations which he connects with his reading of C. J. Cherryh’s *Downbelow Station* (1983):

[...] - its discussing this planet, and it's wet, soggy and miserable. Now I grew up in Lincolnshire [laughter], and this place reminds me of - like the salt marsh, sort of estuarine, boggy, peaty [laughter from James], it could actually be the top of Kinderscout, mainly it’s the Wash, only a whole fucking planet covered with this rivery grassland [laughs] [laughter], around King’s Lynn - so that was one place that actually hit it bang on the, er, nail... (A3:825-34)

The first way in which we actively create geographical meaning from written fiction, then, is through personal reminiscence: "the readable transforms itself into the memorable... the viewer reads the landscape of his childhood in the evening news" (de Certeau, 1984:xxi).

Jason suggests a second kind of thickening which is also part of the ‘work’ of reading:

[...] There’s lots of holes there, I’m just sort of filling in the right particular area I’m generally - if it’s left [out?], it’ll be references which I see every day, so an office block is an office block. (A3:1042-6)

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It is interesting that they use such visual metaphors, suggesting the primacy of visual perception; when we read, we often think of it as 'seeing'.
Obviously, Jason will connect the words "office block" with an idea or image from his experience of office blocks. However, office blocks differ: could a reader understand a mirrored postmodernist skyscraper if s/he had never seen one? It is more than a simple question of intertextuality, then, and more a matter of connecting words to ideas through a strategy of personal experience. This differs from the first strategy of reminiscence because the memories are drawn from the ubiquities of everyday life rather than the emotional geographies of the past. Similarly, MikeR suggested that we "[...] draw on experience" (B4:2152), and Mark says that we "[...] draw upon visual past experience" (C4:1537) to make sense of representations of places.

The third strategy involves reading textual conventions. Piers describes this as he discusses Cherryh's *Downbelow Station*. First he reiterates his point that unless the author provides "detail", he imagines only a "[...] very barren background" (A3:1010-5). He continues:

That particular book she did make it quite clear, and fitting it in with her alien lifeforms, and er... so the weather conditions and what it was like - and the ground, it was very important to the actual plot, the conflict between the - the Downbelow station, the people that were actually on the planet and station, that was actually the meeting point for a large interstellar trading operation, and it - it was actually a very complex story, so yes, it's not surprising that I had a picture of that planet. (A3:1005-25)

The importance of what Davis (1987) calls 'thick spaces' might seem obvious here, but readers are quite capable of filling in these gaps without cues from the author. Indeed, Piers does not simply accept Cherryh's description, since he associates her fictitious planet with his childhood surroundings. Generally, if authors provide full descriptions of places then the imagined geography ceases to be a setting and becomes a 'location'. In Cherryh's book, place is "very important to the actual plot", in the way that it is in nineteenth century realist novels. The third way in which spaces are thickened is therefore due to the writing strategies of the author, though the effectiveness of this is always open to question. In another example, Jason discusses the writing of place as he describes Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974):
[...] she did a very good job - not... or not too obviously by saying this was here, this was there, but doing it through the story and the way the characters were interacting, you got a very vivid image of what the planet was like, more than usual, and... [...] (A3:1032-7)

Creating novelistic space "through the story" was also discussed by Mark. His chosen thick space, from the opening of Aldiss' *Helliconia Spring* (1982), is also interesting because I have suggested that Helliconia is an extrapolated space (and see 8.3.3.). How did Aldiss achieve such a powerful evocation of place?

Erm... I think it was going through all the five senses, and sort of making sure, you know, you've got all of them, like you've got the intense cold for a start, I mean, a bit like an extreme... sort of thing, you know, but you can relate to that, and you... and visually you've got the whole sort of panoramic spectacle of all these animals rushing over the tundra, and er... what else was there? Erm... yeah, after that they tend to move down into the sort of the remains of all the trampled animals and things like that, and you've got all the sort of the heightened responses to the [...] and the blood of the animals and things like that. It just sort of sparked off very strong senses from every direction, I think. (C4:1616-36)

This fictional experience is more memorable because it affects all the senses, and is not simply visual. However, the provision of so much sensory detail - "almost a whole two chapters" (C4:1408-9) - made the book unreadable for MikeR (8.3.3.). Obviously Mark's contract relies on this kind of textual strategy, and his pleasure is evident in the way in which he describes it.

The last practice by which readers thicken spaces is by reference to other texts¹. Here is an excellent example:

Piers: I think the *Blade Runner* thing's got a lot to answer for [agreement from Rob and Maria] in our perceptions nowadays of cityscapes in er, in science fiction.

Jason: I had that idea though, before I ever saw *Blade Runner*.

Piers: Yeah, but now it's very hard to get out of it. (A3:781-8)

¹ I am avoiding the word 'intertextuality' here because everything, including the practices I describe here, is intertextual. Using this term in this way elides important differences between the ways in which these links are made.
We can see that "the Blade Runner thing's got a lot to answer for", as it helped to 'set' a powerful idea of the cyberpunk city within both the writing and reading of SF texts. This practice is therefore related to the reader's construction of the genre through the contract. Another example which uses a different generic landscape, the setting of the western, can be seen in Piers' description of Philip K. Dick's Martian Timeslip (1964):

[...] it reminded me of the sort of mesa and butt - butte, er, type scenery [sounds of agreement], that you often see - perhaps spaghetti western only larger scale [agreement from Maria], that type of feel, the Grand Canyon type country, erm... [...] (A3:834-41)

This also provides an example of Lem's 'geocentrism': Dick's Mars becomes the landscape of Arizona through this reading. Jael is also aware of these kinds of links in Gibson's world; however, he discusses them in a very 'critical' way.

[...] if you want the feel of the bar where we encounter - can't remember the name - the one-handed Russian barkeeper, you know, you're expected to look into film noir for that kind of - [...] For um, that feel. So I think a lot of it is in media imageries that he's slyly referring to. (B4:2159-75)

Jael recognizes the references to noir and hard-boiled imagery, but makes this a function of the writer's strategies. He goes on to find 'precursors' for this imagery, emphasising that the way in which readers make these references depends upon their version of the contract (B4:2203-10). This is an important point, which I will return to in 8.4..

These four practices for 'filling in the blanks' give us some idea of the ways in which readers create experiences of place. I see them as different kinds of dialogue which readers become involved in as they read for place. Firstly, the practice of personal reminiscence is a kind of internal dialogue, as the reader is effectively in dialogue with an older version of themselves (Holquist, 1990). It is very much a reader's tactic, as "a different world slips into the author's space" (de Certeau, 1984:xxi). Secondly, personal experience can be contractual as it rests upon constructions of the everyday world that are shared by author and reader: it represents a dialogue with classic and emotional realism. However, it
is not intrinsically related to the genre. Thirdly, the style of reading for realism can be used to transform textual conventions into experiences of place, a dialogue which represents the core of the contract between author and reader. I call these conventional readings. Finally, a generic dialogue allows the reader to link Neuromancer and Blade Runner, and is also contractual as it relies upon an established set of generic ideas. Other forms of generic competence presumably allow other links to be made. By entering into these dialogues, the reader thickens the spaces of the novel. There are obvious parallels with the model discussed in 3.4., and these are explored more fully in 8.4..

8.3.2. Enjoying The Scenery As It Goes By: Gibson’s spaces

Drawing upon Brosseau, I have argued that Gibson’s spaces are often ‘thinner’ than those associated with the realist novel because he implies them through the textual representation of the experience of space (Chapter 6). Presumably, then, it would be more difficult for readers to use the strategies discussed above where thick spaces are not provided. They could choose to thicken these spaces regardless of the author’s conventions but as the material below shows, some tended to accept these thin spaces as they were.

The fact that Gibson does not rely on thick spaces is clearly acknowledged by Group B. They compare him to authors who do provide detailed descriptions:

John: There are people who’ve done more, but they do it at much greater length, they make the description much more a feature of the book. I’m thinking particularly of Little, Big, where the - certain bits of the imagery, of the house and the grounds are really put down in fine detail. You get the impression that if Crowley didn’t have a small - didn’t have a large scale map of the place, by the time he’d finished writing it, he could have done. But Gibson gets a great deal of descriptive density into very few words.

Amanda: Because I mean Dune - I mean the Dune series was incredibly descriptive, you’ve got whole worlds there, but it is six great thick books [agreement from John]. It’s a different style, it’s three quite small books.

(B4:2004-26, emphasis added)
These choices are interesting: John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981) is a work of the fantastic, though John suggests it is mappable, while Frank Herbert's *Dune* series successfully orders the fantastic in SF (see 8.3.3.). Returning to Gibson, Amanda says that she did not read him for place:

[...] the first time I read any of them, I didn't really think about landscape really, because I was so excited by what was happening, I couldn't take the time to construct it, so I just kind of had an impression in my mind which was enough background really to um, to read the novel perhaps, if you know what I mean. And it's only actually re-reading them *[laughs]* since we started this discussion group, that I've noticed erm... you know, like, finding out points about the landscape and actually where the action is happening, even - you know, like is it in the Sprawl, or is it wherever *[agreement from MikeG]*. 'Cos you know - which part of the Sprawl? 'Cos you don't really take it - it's so fast-paced, that you don't take the time to construct it, it's too complex to construct quickly, and you get bored with doing that, 'cos you just want to find out what happens next.

(B4:1872-98)

At first this looks like another version of the 'blank background'. However, this inattention to landscape is also due to the fact that Amanda was reading the fictions for the first time. Drawing upon Barthes' *S/Z* (1975), Henry Jenkins suggests that the desire to resolve the narrative is strongest on first reading. On subsequent readings, "Interest shifts elsewhere, onto character relations, onto thematic meanings, onto the social knowledge assumed by the author" (1992:67). Or, perhaps, onto the fictional landscape. The strategies used to thicken spaces may not be taken up by some readers, or at least not until a second or later encounter with the text. MikeR takes up Amanda's point that the pace of the narrative makes thickening space difficult:

It’s like - not having reread them, I - erm to look at how he does it, but I got very much that sense of speed *[agreement from Amanda]* and somehow he implied enormous detail, even though I'm not sure it's really there - [...] You cut and paste something in your mind which is an amalgam of things that you're familiar with.  

(B4:1900-12)

However, the last sentence echoes Piers and Jason's comments about 'filling in the holes'; some sense of place is 'implied' here, partly through personal
experience. This exchange develops this point:

John: [...] - when he mentions Istanbul, when he first brings us to Istanbul - Istanbul was about a two sentence quick riff about the history - used to be Constantinople, Byzantine Emperors, Turkish conquest, and so forth, just a really quick run through the history [...] to get up to speed. 'Remember it's been here a long time, it's all very corrupt'. 'Say - go!' [laughs, laughter]

Jael: It relies on our familiarity with things without us realising much of the time we're doing a lot of the constructing ourselves. (B4:1949-63)

John's description of Gibson's writing style suggests that it relies on very superficial cues to evoke a sense of place, and again this is because description is subordinated to the speed of the narrative. Jael's comment extends MikeR's point but underlines the fact that it is the reader who does the work. However, the lack of detailed descriptions makes this production more difficult for the reader. Amanda suggests that thickening space is a style of reading which may be used if the reader wishes:

I think what he's done really is the most any writer can be expected to do, he's described the landscapes up to a point and then it's left to the reader really to fill in the gaps, and to make the landscape whole if they can be so bothered. If they don't, well, then they can just enjoy the scenery as they go past, kind of thing.

(B4:1982-2003, emphasis added)

In conclusion, where thin spaces are the norm, the reader can choose to fill in the blanks left by the author, or to let the narrative carry them along. Of course, as I have shown in Chapter 6, the narrative rush towards resolution is itself a writing strategy which conveys an impression of the geography of the text, though this is not addressed here.

8.3.3. Reading Fantastic Worlds in SF

These strategies, and presumably others like them, form a set of practices which transform fiction into experiences of place. However, non-realist fiction is
complicated by the presence of the fantastic, and it is possible to see this in the discussant’s accounts. How does this affect reading for place? If reading or writing SF often involves an effort to contain these fantastic elements, what are the consequences for experiences of place?

We can begin to answer these questions if we return to Piers’ second comment about Downbelow Station. Describing Cherryh’s planet, he says that she made the setting "quite clear" by "fitting it in with her alien lifeforms", and "the weather conditions" (A3:1016-1017). I believe that Piers is suggesting that there is an ecology to Cherryh’s world: all these fictional elements are parts of a coherent whole. When fantastic elements are ordered in this way, they lose their ability to subvert the real and I would argue that the metaphor of ecology plays an important role in the scientific ordering of fantastic places in SF. Frank Herbert’s Arrakis, the setting for the Dune series, is the most obvious example. An impossibly arid planet, complete with unthinkable ‘sandworms’, is carefully structured as a coherent ecological unit, moving from ‘fantastic’ to ‘plausible’. In this case the ecological explanation is part of the text but Piers is reading Cherryh’s planet in the same way. We have seen before how keen Piers is on ‘consistency’, and on coherently ordering fantastic elements, like teleportation, so that they cease to be truly impossible (Chapter 7). An ecological structure is a good example of such consistency.

Piers also acknowledges the effects of the fantastic on the writing of SF:

[...] it’s only when the environment is important to the plot they actually go into it, and it depends how alien you want to get [agreement from Jason], a lot of these, er, stories, happen on earth-like planets, so you automatically shove in earth-like features, and it’s only when you want to get seriously alien, and they have to work on it, then you get a different question, I suppose.

(A3:1074-81, emphasis added)

5 It should be noted that Group C did not allude to the fantastic in their discussions of reading practice, strengthening my belief that this group were the least interested in fantasy. They consistently used technological metaphors to order SF texts, particularly in their reading of the nature of the loa (6.2.2.).

What I think Piers means here is that a "seriously alien" environment needs more description than an earth-like one. In this way the fantastic can be ordered by attempting to capture it in words as a complete description allows us almost complete understanding. However, because Gibson's world is largely read as extrapolative rather than speculative, he does not need to use this descriptive technique to manage the fantastic. MikeR suggests:

[...] - some people, it seems to me, go to a lot of trouble to describe something which you wouldn't expect to encounter. Now, erm you know people do try and describe things which are supposedly very different from what we know, and go to some lengths to fill it in, colour it in for us, whereas I think Gibson doesn't do that, I think we've all said that this basically is about the here and now, with some things bolted up, and er... he draws on that, and it's because he's using that that he can use shorthand and construct what seems at least to be a detailed picture. But he is using these shortcuts, whereas other people trying to draw something quite fundamentally different, are forced to lengthy descriptions. [...]  

This passage seems to suggest that Gibson only has to provide the barest amount of information because his world is extrapolated and credible. Those authors who have to "draw something quite fundamentally different" - elements of the fantastic - are "forced to lengthy descriptions" in an attempt to make them comprehensible to the reader.

Although this extra description is required to order the fantastic, it can be counter-productive as the text gets bogged down in expository detail, and this is clearly shown in MikeR's discussion of an author who is "forced to lengthy descriptions":

[...] what about Brian Aldiss? I remember trying to read *Heliconia Spring* and I think I gave up actually because it was just all this description, and I thought 'oh god, I can't stand this', and I stopped.  

Jael agrees, saying "I gave up too" (B4:2107). However, readers react differently to this detail, depending upon their contracts. MikeG enjoyed the detail:
There wasn't an awful lot... I mean the planets themselves - the planet itself was not all that different in everyday life to our own, sort of pastoral - in a sort of pastoral sense. His main - his main thrust of these books was the differences in the ecology in a rather broader, erm, sweep - I mean, when I say it's not very much different from our world, during its sort of hot phase it's not very different from our own, during its sort of ice age phase, well, it's like an ice age really, except you've got these er creatures who are dominant during the winter, the Great Winter periods of the cycle, while the humans are dominant during the Great Summer part of the cycle.

(B4:2109-28)

MikeG's contract is obviously different, as he reads Heliconia as a pastoral, Earth-like planet, even though its solar system is fantastically different to ours. Significantly, he refers to the ecology of the planet as a way of structuring and reducing its difference. This passage reminds me very strongly of Lem's 'geocentrism'. However, compare the last comment with MikeG's first description of Heliconia:

There's something that, I don't know, very much struck a chord in me - I mean, I think I probably read... the relevant Heliconia book at a time when I was very sensitive to the changing of the seasons, and... the yearly cycle, and the part in it that I remember was the festival of - I think it was called Mictric [?], which is where in northern latitudes of Heliconia, there was the final setting of the bright sun, Freya, and you knew, the people knew that when that sun set they would never see it again in their lifetime [laughs, laughter from John]. It was just gone. That idea, and the whole idea of the whole planet - of the ecology of the planet shifting to far greater extent than we experience here, would be the Great Year in a binary system... it just made me shiver to think of the sun going down and not seeing it again, even though you have a sort of other sun to keep you busy.

(B4:216-41)

There was a nine second pause after this statement, which was surprising because although this was near to the beginning of the meeting the conversation had been very relaxed. I think the silence was a response to the very personal context with which MikeG surrounded his reading - although none of us knew
what it was. Apart from this, I find the comment a marvellous example of the ways in which a realist reading can be transformed, almost against the reader's will, into a fantastic one. MikeG has a degree in astronomy and physics, and it seems that Heliconia's binary system is plausible to him. However, the strangeness of experiencing such a world is still capable of making him shiver - the bodily traces of the style of 'reading for affect'. Managing the fantastic through speculative or extrapolative strategies does not always succeed in resisting the irrational.

Further proof that the fantastic can survive the ordering of scientific plausibility comes from Jael:

In a way lunar landscapes are far more alien than imagined landscapes of say Mars or Venus or whatever, 'cos of its absolute hostility, its airlessness, the hard radiation, er, the barrenness. The lunar surface is one you cannot really imagine touching with your bare hands, it won't happen, it just won't happen. It'll remain like that whatever you do, unless you cover it over, and then it becomes an enclosed human space. (B4:751-62, emphasis added)

I find this a fascinating idea. Because we know that these planets are airless, cold and exposed to high levels of radiation, we would armour ourselves in spacesuits of some kind. This would allow us to walk on the surface, but prevent us from fully experiencing the planet: there are some places which we will never be able to experience directly - until they become "human space". For me, and I presume for Jael, that is a startling thought: scientific knowledge can be estranging.

To conclude, these constructions illustrate the theoretical relationship between realist and fantastic places suggested in 8.2.3. through the readings of the discussants. In particular, they show that the fantastic occasionally resists the certainty of scientific plausibility. When these considerations are added to the practices examined in the two previous sections, we can see that reading places in SF is, in fact, qualitatively different to mainstream fiction.

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7 In addition, the final meeting of a discussion group is often influenced by feelings of 'mourning' (see 3.3. and Appendix B).
8.4. Conclusions: Reading place

Having described some of the typical ways in which readers experience the places of SF, I would like to consider these practices within the model established in 3.4. Meanings - including spatial meanings - are produced as part of a dialogue between authors, texts, and readers. In particular, I argued that there is an equivalence between the practices employed by authors and by readers, and that this is due to their shared competence and acceptance of the contract. Each side of this dialogue is considered here with reference to the production of space and place in SF.

Writing, I have suggested, involves the combination of personal experience, generic competence, and writing styles. In 8.2, I considered the authorial and textual production of space, which largely depends upon the generic competence of the author. This competence provides the author with a stock of writing styles, particular uses of generic conventions, which are written into the text. In science fiction, these styles and conventions are drawn from three kinds of realist writing: 'classic', emotional, and scientific realism. The two styles for representing place that I have concentrated on here are the thickening associated with the realist novel, and the thinner ‘textual geographies’ of the modernists. However, these forms of description are challenged by the fantastic, so that worldbuilding in SF must involve the ordering of its impossible elements. This has previously been established at a theoretical, textual level by writers like Jackson (1981) and Malmgren (1991, 1993) and 8.2. represents a synthesis of this critical writing on SF and the fantastic. However, these discussions of the rules of worldbuilding rarely consider how (or why) the reader plays the 'game'.

In my analysis of the readers' accounts of their own reading, I suggested that they use a variety of different practices to make sense of descriptions of science fictional places. Like the author, the reader draws upon personal experience, generic competence, and reading styles. In 8.3.1. I showed that personal experiences, both memorable and banal, play their part in producing experiences of space. Generic competence is perhaps the most important readerly resource. Firstly, it creates a familiarity with reading styles (conventional readings). In addition, it allows the reader to make those associations which I
have described as part of the generic dialogue; references to other SF texts and images will therefore be understood by competent readers. The role of reading styles can be seen in the ways that the textual conventions described in 8.2 are used by readers. In particular, the hesitancy which can be produced by the fantastic can be read as pleasurable, disturbing, or frustrating, depending on the styles brought to bear upon it.

While there are presumably many more textual conventions or writing and reading styles which could be used to make sense of SF, the ones discussed here provide us with some idea of the practices which can used to be read the places of the genre. However, by illustrating the parallels between the practices of authors and readers, I may have given the impression that they are equal. It is time to return to the question of power in reading, and to examine these operations in terms of the ideas I have taken from de Certeau, Bakhtin, and Bourdieu.

I would like to collect the four practices described in 8.3.1. and developed in 8.3.2. into two main kinds of operations: personal and contractual. The former is made up of the styles of personal reminiscence and personal experience, while the latter includes conventional and generic readings. The key difference between these two types of operations is the extent to which they are governed by the generic contract, and it is this contrast which I will develop here.

More personal operations seem to be closest to de Certeau's tactics because they are relatively free of the authority of scriptural imperialism. This is most pronounced in unusual cases like Piers', where textual landscapes evoke powerful memories. When Jason finds an image or idea of an office block to match the signifier 'office block', he is recalling more banal experiences. At their strongest, these moves rewrite the text as "the readable transforms itself into the memorable" (de Certeau, 1984:xxi). This kind of practice probably accounts for the idea that reading is 'subjective'; it is tactical and personal, and in theory those who employ it are free to poach their way across the text. There are fewer examples of this tactic than there are of the other two main kinds of practice (conventional and generic), perhaps suggesting that it is relatively rare. However, de Certeau writes that tactical acts of consumption are difficult to spot, and even harder to

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articulate - the readers may not even be aware of such opportunistic practices (see 3.3.4.). In addition, due to the power of scriptural imperialism, many readers believe that it is the text which is responsible for the production of meaning. It is therefore hardly surprising that the discussants did not consider their own practices to be as important as Gibson’s. However, I think that there are other reasons for the absence of these tactics which are linked to the particular reading styles used by the discussants.

Readers who use contractual practices construct experiences of place based upon their competence, their understanding of textual conventions (what I have called conventional readings) and those which are somehow related to it (generic readings). These operations are performed through a contract with the author, since both are to some extent constrained by the rules of the genre, such as the realist-fantastic dialogue in science fiction. However, I see a qualitative difference between conventional and generic readings, as the former seem to rely upon the author's writing styles much more than the latter.

Conventional readings are, in fact, structured by the asymmetries created by scriptural imperialism. As such, writing styles are strategic in that they operate from a 'proper' place of authority. Although these operations are situated within the contract, relying upon conventions which are shared by both author and reader, this dialogue is skewed in favour of the former. Martin Barker suggests that the spaces of media consumption are constructed largely by producers (1989); in effect, their contracts are to some extent written for them, though they represent the audience's genuine needs (see 3.4.). However, this is complicated by genre and by form.

Linda Fleming (1977) suggests that the close contact between SF writers, critics and readers leads to a more open exchange of ideas than is the case for the dialogue between the producers and consumers of comics examined by Barker. This might suggest that SF readers possess more power to write their own contracts, imposing conventions and styles upon authors rather than the other way around. However, Jenkins' (1992) study of female fans of media SF points to their relative powerlessness to impose their will upon network producers and directors. These consumers of SF are weaker in cultural capital and power, and
although Jenkins documents their success in forcing re-runs of shows through letter-writing campaigns, they generally choose to create their own fictions tactically rather than meet the strategic power of the producers head on. Are the (mostly male) consumers of literary SF more powerful than these (mostly female) media SF fans?

It is difficult to tell, given that there are no substantive studies of the ethnography of literary SF fandom to compare with Jenkin's work. However, the material I have discussed in this chapter suggests that generic conventions for representing spaces and places are generally accepted by these readers. Tactical resistance is shown in the more personal readings, and it is easy to imagine that contractual operations might deviate from accepted ways of reading. These tactical readings would take the form of unusual reading styles which would transform the generic conventions, re-writing the generic contract to create more individual versions of the genre. It is interesting to speculate as to the reasons why these kinds of 'misreadings' are largely absent from the group discussions.

I would suggest that the strategic power which is working to close off alternative readings is due to the acceptance of the legitimacy of the proper place of 'literature' by many of these readers. If we consider the emphasis placed upon contractual reading by Groups B and C, it becomes clear that some readers are more prepared to surrender their freedom to the author and the text than others. John and Jael, the two most accomplished 'critics', were more loyal to the author than the other members of their group, adopting the evaluative strategies of the elite to escape the low status attributed to SF readers (7.3.3.). In aping their cultural 'betters' they also reproduce the critics' respect for the author, a crucial foundation of scriptural imperialism. These deferential readers accept the site of consumption which has been created for them. In contrast, though Piers in Group A can also be something of a pedant, his capacity for reflection (shown in the comment about his childhood) prevents him from simply accepting the power of the author.

Returning to the distinction I made earlier, the strategies of producers are theoretically less powerful in the case of generic readings: consumers are not forced to make the link between one represented place and another. Readers of
Neuromancer, for example, do not necessarily have to connect it with Blade Runner. However, the competence needed to make these links is itself a double-edged sword. Competence of this kind is valued by the 'critical' reader: one of the aspects of the fan image identified by Jenkins (1992) and Jenson (1992) is the acquisition of knowledge. This in itself is no problem, but the way in which this competence is performed reproduces the critical strategies of the elite. Comparing the connotative links made by readers in Groups A and B, for example, we can see that the former simply establish the power of Blade Runner in 'setting' and image of the Sprawl while Jael attempts to find 'precursors' for both places. In demonstrating his superior competence in competition with John, his rival critic, Jael neglects to consider other, less established kinds of association. Reading for place in this way can therefore also be made to serve a purely contractual end. Despite this, the fact that Piers and Jason do make relatively straightforward associations which lie within the generic contract but are not determined by the author's strategies does suggest that these kinds of contractual operations are more open-ended than conventional ones.

It seems, then, that the power of the author suffuses these contractual readings to a great extent. Only the personal readings are truly tactical. However, this general picture is complicated by individual contracts. There are 'misreadings' of represented spaces, where the reading styles suggested by the author are, in fact, rejected by the reader. The most important of these is the thickening of space associated with realist descriptions of fantastic places. In 8.3.3. I suggested that one of the conventions that writers use to order the uncertainty of fantastic places is detailed description. For some readers, this extended description falls outside their contract with the genre. Both MikeR and Jael gave up on Helliconia Spring for this reason, though MikeG and Mark accepted Aldiss' invitation to thicken space through this style.

In conclusion, this kind of analysis paints a general picture of readerly acceptance of a deferential role. I have argued that deference is produced by the idea of the 'author' enshrined in elite ideas of culture, and that in some cases it is performed most strongly through what I have called the critical reading style.

Nevertheless, as the material presented in the last four chapters has
repeatedly shown, readers do resist the strategic power of writers, both through the development of personal, extra-contractual, readings, and through their refusal to perform the expected operations upon textual conventions.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS:
READING, SCIENCE FICTION AND GEOGRAPHY

...it is always good to remind ourselves that we mustn't take people for fools.
(de Certeau, 1984:176)

9.1. Interpreting Gibson's World of Stories

As an exploration of spaces Elsewhere, this thesis has considered a number of ideas through the focus of William Gibson's cyberpunk SF, which lies at the intersection of the fields of geography, science fiction, and reading. The Sprawl fictions and other works of SF and fantasy explored in the course of the research do seem to offer readers experiences of new spaces, though these are shaped by generic conventions - particularly the relationship between texts, readers and authors that I have described as the contract. In consequence, Elsewhere can be the space of the Other, where commonsense notions are mocked, distorted or torn apart, but to make such a claim for the SF genre as a whole ignores the specificity of individual texts and readings. This thesis has compared the claims of SF critics to the grounded interpretations of readers, and I am now in a position to trace the dimensions of Gibson's Elsewhere through my analysis of the discussants' constructions. In this section I want to summarise the approach I developed to interpret these readings, discussing my conclusions in 9.2..

In the Introduction I asked three questions: Do readers get 'lost' in the impossible spaces of SF? Has the reader been lost to geography, science fiction studies, and some aspects of media studies? And does losing yourself in reading inevitably involve a loss of resistance to textual ideologies? I want to answer these questions through a summary of the thesis and a synopsis of the conclusions I have made over the course of the last eight chapters.

In my reviews of three relevant literatures, I concluded that the interpretive strategy I have called 'textual criticism' is unable to present more than a fraction of the potential meanings of texts, including representations of place and landscape in various cultural forms, in science fiction, or in other media texts. Drawing on audience studies and the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) and
Mikhail Bakhtin (1973; 1984a; 1984b) I suggested an alternative which sees the production of meaning as a **dialogue** between authors and readers which is expressed in the practices they use to read or write texts. In other words, novelistic space - or any other form of representation - must be actively *produced* by authors and readers. The marks of this practice are visible within the text in the form of conventions and other formal characteristics: textual criticism, for all its sophistication, often treats its object as if it possesses no internal organisation. As Marc Brosseau suggests, it is seen as a ‘transparent’ medium (1994). Finally, this dialogue, like all dialogues, is a social relationship which produces (rather than reflects) power, and the power which structures the relationship between authors and readers can be described as ‘scriptural imperialism’ (de Certeau, 1984).

The validity of these criticisms is borne out by the success of the **in-depth group methodology** used to trace the interpretations of readers. Throughout the thesis my conclusions have been driven by these readings, and my aim has been to link writing practice to the discussants’ accounts of the ways that they make sense of textual conventions. The group method allowed a much fuller discussion of these practices than would be possible with other research methods, and following the discussants’ explorations of Elsewhere has proved both more valuable and more enjoyable than making my own interpretations of the texts. In particular, the in-depth group clearly illustrates the complex dialogues between texts and readers (through their accounts of reading) because these are situated within more general dialogues (the group discussions). This method is therefore better suited to this kind of work than the focus group, which constrains the formation of group dialogues through the intrusiveness of the moderator.

Turning to the central questions of the nature of SF and the constitution of fictional space, I have argued that the approach described above requires an examination of the relevant **textual conventions**. In examining conventions I have been careful not to privilege the text at the expense of its producers and consumers. I would argue instead that conventions do in fact represent a bridge between writing and reading practice as textualized forms of the social relationship between authors and readers (Barker, 1989). However, conventions
take specific forms in different genres. Following the discussions over 'consistency' and 'difference' reproduced in Chapter 7, I developed a theory of the **generic framework** of SF, arguing that it is constituted by a dialogue between realism and the fantastic which takes a number of textual forms and which can be seen in writing and reading styles. The dialogue is asymmetrical, as scientific realism generally serves to contain and order the fantastic elements of SF. However, I have found traces of this fantastic impossibility in many texts and readings, and I argued that scientific realism can never be completely successful in its attempts to order the fantastic. There are also established conventions for the representation of space and place in cultural forms, of which the word 'landscape' is only the most famous example (Cosgrove, 1984). Though there are presumably many conventions for representing space in the novel, I have identified two broad kinds of writing strategy, thick spaces and kinetic description, which are generally associated with realist and modernist novels respectively (Davis, 1987; Brosseau, 1995).

Having provided myself with an alternative to textual criticism, I used this approach to investigate four themes from Gibson's fictions in Chapters 5 and 6 - the cultural politics of Gibson's world; the figure of the posthuman; cyberspace; and the Sprawl. Over the course of these chapters I emphasised the gaps between critical readings and the interpretations of the discussants, and showed that the meanings produced by the latter were far more sensitive to generic and formal conventions. A number of ways to organise and analyze the transcript material were suggested. Firstly, the figures of 'women with guns' and the posthuman were seen as imaginative resources with which readers thought through ideas of gender and the body, presented in a particularly science fictional form. Secondly, the two main spaces of Gibson's world were seen as being written and read according to the particular conventions of SF and novelistic space discussed above. Lastly, in Section Three (Chapters 7 and 8) I suggested that these and other readings could be more firmly grounded in the discussants' own accounts of their reading practice.

These alternative approaches provided me with some fascinating answers to the three questions raised in the introduction, and these are summarised in the following section.
9.2. Mapping Gibson's World: SF, Power and Novelistic Space

This thesis synthesises three fields of research, namely the study of science fiction, reading, and geography. Rather than attempt to unravel each of these strands, and therefore simplify the complex relationships between them, I have chosen to present a series of five short discussions of the most important points. These represent my conclusions on the value of my approach for the following research problems: the nature of interpretation; reading practice; textual power; the practice of criticism; and cultural geography.

1. Interpretation. How useful have the interpretive approaches discussed in 9.1. been for the analysis of SF and geography? The generic dialogue suggested in Chapter 4 provides a valuable framework for the analysis of SF texts, since it brings together authors and readers through sets of textual conventions. Rising out of the discussants' accounts of their reading practice (especially sections 7.3.1. and 7.3.2.), my understanding of this dialogue was clarified by the work of Rosemary Jackson (1981) and other critics of impossibility fiction. This theoretical position has proved particularly useful in interpreting the readers' constructions of SF spaces (Chapters 6 and 8), showing that all geographies of cultural representations must pay particularly close attention to the role of genre. In contrast, the purely textual readings of critics working in 'science fiction studies' often treat SF novels as if they were 'transparent', and therefore not organised by narrative, form, and genre. Because the critics' aim is to demonstrate that cultural artifacts are simply conduits for ideology, they elide the differences between SF and the fantastic, or between novels and films. This problem is also evident in geography, as the textual metaphor allows critics to dispense with the problem of textual organisation along with its producers and consumers (2.3.).

Textual critics also flatten the complexity of reading, because they suggest that it unproblematically communicates ideology from author to reader through some form of 'naturalisation' (2.3.1.). Arguing against this, in Chapters 5, 6, and 8 I have shown that readers of SF draw upon a number of extra-textual dialogues, including their personal experiences of information technology and urban life, to make sense of seemingly impossible ideas. Any study of reading must therefore
begin with a sensitivity to genre and to reading practice.

Drawing upon these conclusions, it is possible to provide an answer to the first of my three questions. Readers of SF rarely become 'lost in space', for two reasons. Firstly, the generic dialogue includes enough realist material to allow them to order and understand the geographies and themes of SF. Secondly, as active and creative producers of meaning in their own right, they draw upon a wide range of cultural forms and personal experiences to make sense of representations, and are not simply programmed by the text.

However, in certain cases the fantastic elements of the genre are written or read to produce an unsettling sense of 'Elsewhere-ness'. This is a crucial point: it is not sufficient to produce a theory of the nature of SF at the textual and generic level, as writers like Carl Malmgren have done (1991, 1993). Rather, we need to avoid making any assumptions about the potential interpretations of readers in favour of studying their actual readings. The discussants' interpretations of Gibson's world can be explained by the workings of genre and reading practice, but their diversity and complexity suggests that we must be cautious of any method which would see genre as a powerfully determining factor. In other words, it is not enough to know what science fiction is, since we still need to know what readers do with it.

As a result, it is vital that the reader be placed within the frame of any enquiry into the meaning of cultural forms. Unfortunately, my reviews of geography and science fiction studies conclude that the reader has been 'lost' to these analyses, answering the second of the questions posed above. In the case of geography, there seems to be two reasons for this. Firstly, geographers seem to have accepted the practices of scriptural imperialism as the most suitable interpretive method for studying cultural forms. Secondly, popular culture has been largely ignored because it is assumed that its consumers are powerless to resist the strategies of the hegemonic group. My argument against scriptural imperialism and my demonstration that readers can tactically resist these strategies support my suggestion that an alternative form of interpretation is needed. This leads me on to the question of reading practice.
2. **Reading Practice.** In Chapter 7 I used material from the interviews to build upon the model developed in 3.4., showing that reading requires the right kind of competence (so that readers are able to make sense of conventions) and is partially structured by a contract (the dialogue between authors and readers). This transforms my conception of genre from the theoretical framework presented above into a socially constituted relationship. Competence is learnt through familiarity with the genre, and is not a 'given'. Crucially, in their encounter with the canon of SF authors described in 7.2.2. these readers transformed their individual reading practice into the approved reading styles associated with the generic contract. These styles are described in 7.3., along with other styles - reading for affect, reading as critic, and reading beyond the narrative - which are, I suggest, part of reading practice beyond the confines of the science fiction genre. Despite their transgeneric nature, these three styles are all embedded in social relationships.

Chapter 8 provided an example of the ways in which such a theory of practice could be used to interpret readers' encounters with fictional space. Two main kinds of operations used to read novelistic space were found, which I have called **personal** and **contractual** readings. Of the latter, the most important present variations on the generic styles of reading for realism and reading for the fantastic. This shows the importance of generic and contractual considerations. In the same chapter I produced the mirror image of these reading operations, comparing them to the writing styles Gibson and other SF authors have used to represent space. The (surprisingly) close fit between these written conventions and the readers' constructions suggests the existence of a strong contract between the two. However, several readers seemed to possess slightly different contracts, and were unhappy with the amount of extended description used by some SF authors to contain fantastic spaces.

Beyond these generic styles, the most important form of reading practice identified by the thesis is the critical style. Investigating the origins and consequences of this style has lead me to provide some answers to the final question: to what extent does reading involve a loss of autonomy and result in a lack of resistance to textual power?
3. **Textual Power.** Before I go on to discuss the practice of criticism, I would like to summarise the investigation of textual power conducted in Chapter 5. Drawing upon the textual model, critics like Nicola Nixon (1992) and Andrew Ross (1991) have condemned cyberpunk for its misogynous representations of 'women with guns'. While I certainly do not want to give the impression that I condone sexist representations, I argued that they can only be sexist if they successfully pass on the authors' intended meaning. However, Claudia Springer points out that "it is difficult to either condemn or celebrate them, since a single interpretation cannot entirely explain their appeal" (1993:725). In fact, despite the readers' evident admiration of characters like Molly, they did feel a certain ambiguity over her violent actions. I showed that they felt the need to justify her behaviour by reference to her history of abuse, and that this justification is also written into Gibson's text in a form borrowed from the action film (Tasker, 1993). Providing this kind of narrative explanation for the nature of a representation tells us some of the ways in which readers make sense of 'imaginative resources'. The question of ideology is therefore shifted from the text, or the reader, to the level of narrative and genre.

As a result, readers will generally interpret these ideological figures through their relationship with the genre. Since none of the readers strongly disagreed with Gibson's representation of these characters, it seems likely that their ideas about gender roles have already been met by their contracts. In other words, the readers were not 'convinced' of the meanings of these 'women with guns' by Gibson's writing; rather they like Gibson's representation of these characters because they seem realistic and fit their expectations of gendered identity. In the case of this kind of power, "if they have no interest in listening there can be no influence" (Barker, 1989:256).

4. **The Practice of Criticism.** A different kind of power can be seen in the relationship between producers and consumers characterised by the critical style. This necessitates a discussion of scriptural imperialism, as this is one of the main forms of power visible within reading. It is important to stress that scriptural imperialism does not inevitably produce these readings as a result of the
power of the critic. Like all forms of power, it must be performed through practice. The deference to authors shown by critical readers cannot be explained by arguing that the former are strong while the latter are weak. Instead we need to ask: why do these readers accept the authority of the writer and the value of criticism?

The answer seems to be that they feel the need to gain the approval of the literary elite. I have argued that readers who adopt this style do so to escape the low status attached to science fiction and its readers, though their possession of what Bourdieu (1986) calls 'acquired' cultural capital means that their attempt to join the cultural elite is ultimately impossible. In addition, the logic of the operations involved in this attempt means that their enjoyment of texts is transformed from the 'popular aesthetic', which prioritises pleasure, to the critical style, which emphasises knowledge. In their performance of this style, then, critical readers enact a kind of tribute to the author, to the literary elite, and to the place of criticism.

I do not want to give the impression that I have judged these kinds of interpretations to be 'misreadings': they are as valid as any other. In fact, these amateur critics make good readers, since they often possess a great deal of competence. Their contracts with the author are, however, slightly different. Both Ien Ang (1985) and Martin Barker (1989) note that those readers who are most involved with their texts are often the most critical of them, suggesting that their contracts are closer and therefore must be fulfilled more completely. However, the criticisms Ang and Barker are discussing are usually made from within the contract, while the critical style I have described takes up a place within the scriptural economy, outside the contract. Their concern with good characterisation, plotting and style is therefore subtly different to the contracts of other committed readers. Although they are members of the 'natural audience', they produce interpretations from a position beyond this site.

It is this point which has lead me to suggest that the critical style is the result of the performance of scriptural imperialism by legitimate critics. In Chapter 2 I argued that the practices of scriptural imperialism suffuse geographers' encounters with cultural forms, and that this criticism is carried out
at the expense of non-legitimate readers. It seems to me that the practice of criticism - in geography, in literary theory, and in everyday forms like television reviews in newspapers - has proved extraordinarily successful. Not only does it police the correct meanings of virtually all cultural texts, but it insists that it is the only valid form of interpretation. Those readers who accept the arguments of these critics collude in this process of distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' interpretations. In doing so, they run the risk of interfering in the pleasures of other readers, much as the professional critic rejects the meanings produced by everyday 'consumers'.

Over the last four years I have often watched people disagreeing with each other over the 'real' meaning of a film, novel, or television programme. Those discussions drew, almost inevitably, on the practices of the critic to establish the correct reading. Either the text is privileged and the reader ignored, or the reader is denigrated as a passive or reactionary dupe. My reaction to these arguments is to ask: why do we feel that we need to discuss texts in this way? Is a discussion of the pleasure that they give the reader not enough? Questions like this draw upon what Ang (1985) would call the ideology of populism, the counter to the ideology of mass culture (which I would identify as part of critical practice). The ideology of populism is weak and can only triumph through tactical moves because of the power of the ideology of mass culture or critical style. As a result it is not enough to say that we enjoy a text (Bourdieu's 'popular aesthetic'), but I feel very strongly that it should be sufficient.

It is bad enough that the institutions of criticism - including the academy - should have provided everyday readers with practices which can be used to create critical interpretations. It is depressing to realise that the readers who have used this style in this thesis were driven to do so because their favourite form of culture has been denigrated by the critics as escapist, infantile or dangerous. But the power of scriptural imperialism does not end there. It is only when everyday readers are not able to present any kind of overt challenge to these criticisms that we can see just how powerfully criticism has colonised the spaces of taste and pleasure.

This thesis has occupied a position between 'optimism' and 'pessimism' on
the question of textual power. I have consistently attempted to find resistance to the power of authors, texts, and critics because this thesis is an attempt to correct the extremely clumsy and pessimistic theory of textual power shared by many cultural geographers. The carnivalesque power of the fantastic, the traces of the 'popular aesthetic' discerned in the style of reading for affect, and the transformative creativity of readers have all been stressed. And yet the power of producers to fix the audience's position has also been made clear. It seems that scriptural imperialism powerfully structures the dialogue between Gibson and these readers, despite the tactics of resistance and 'impertinent absences' enacted by the latter. While this power may not be taken for granted, and should always be examined within the context of specific practices, it does seem to favour a more 'pessimistic' conclusion than writers like John Fiske might expect.

However, pessimism does not have to lead to fatalism. One of the most appealing aspects of Bakhtin's dialogism is the idea that power is never simply fixed in dialogue. Rather it must always be deployed or performed. As a result, the power of scriptural imperialism does not reside in the place of criticism, but in its practices, which can be challenged in two ways. Firstly, I would like to suggest that we as academics should avoid these practices where possible. Giving up our representational power altogether is impossible, as I have argued in 3.3.. However we can resist the temptation to make textual interpretations; to make ungrounded assumptions about the motives of ordinary readers; or to hide our own reading pleasure. Hopefully this thesis is not guilty of these charges. Secondly, as a corollary of this we need to give others the space in which to make their own interpretations: to work with readers and not against them. I am not suggesting that there would not be disagreements around the family television set, or contested interpretations of a novels' meaning. I am simply hoping that by withdrawing the mechanisms by which criticism reproduces itself in audiences we can let these discussions develop in ways which make more sense to those involved in them.

5. Cultural Geography. What can we learn from this research in terms of the study of representations of space and place in cultural forms? Firstly, I
have shown that it is possible to work with the readers of spaces, a conclusion which throws the validity of the textual model into question. The in-depth group method proved extremely effective in producing alternative readings of Gibson's spaces. In particular, it would have been impossible to guess at the more personal readings produced by Piers or MikeG. Without this kind of grounded research, de Certeau's theory of tactics would remain an abstraction. Despite the problems of tracing tactical moves, it has been possible to see these operations in the discussant's own accounts of their practice. I would argue that the success of this method, coupled to the more theoretical ideas on reading described above, suggests that geographers must actively involve the consumers of spaces in their research. The textual model can no longer be seen as a useful form of interpretation.

Secondly, I have demonstrated that it is possible to go beyond the 'binary model of culture' criticised in 2.3.2. by studying one example of the many 'middlegrow geographies' which exist between the elite and the popular. However, it has been shown that the politics of taste produced by science fiction's place between these two poles plays an important role in shaping readers' interpretations. In the case of science fiction these geographies are structured by the nature of the genre, which reminds us that we must pay attention to the specificity of the cultural forms we are investigating. In addition, novels, films, and television programmes are not all simply 'texts': they have different formal characteristics which play some part in suggesting the ways in which they should be read. Genres also cut across these formal categories and must be considered.

Finally, the approach to literature adopted in this thesis sees it as part of a social relationship uniting authors, texts and readers, as well as critics and others. The model produced in 3.4. allowed me to situate the representation of space within this relationship, and I would argue that this attention to context creates a more nuanced description of the nature of 'novelistic space'. There are presumably many more conventions for textualizing space, and individual authors will approach these differently according to their writing styles. Acknowledging this might rejuvenate the field of 'geography and literature' and produce a strong body of work along the lines of Brosseau's reading of Dos Passos (1995), though with more consideration for the role of the reader.
Dos Passos' New York is obviously a very different place from the spaces of Elsewhere. However, this thesis has shown that the apparently marginal site of Elsewhere can provide geography, science fiction studies and audience work with new perspectives on old debates, as well as completely new fields of study. As I suggested in the Introduction, Elsewhere can be a place where established ways of thinking and seeing can be turned upside down and transformed. For myself, my excursion to Elsewhere has not reduced my appreciation of SF or of Gibson's fictions; rather it has increased my interest in the way they offer me, and other readers, imaginative resources with which to rework the spaces of everyday life. I hope that Elsewhere - which has often been seen as an excuse for daydreaming, escapism, or fantasy - will soon be accepted as a rich "sampler of lands" from which readers create their own imagined geographies.
APPENDIX A: INTRODUCING THE GROUPS

Each group is firstly considered as a whole, to provide the context for the dynamic relationships between individual members. This is complemented by descriptions of each discussant, largely taken from the preliminary interviews (see 3.3.2.).

A.1. GROUP A
James    Rob    Jason    Chris    Piers    Maria

This group was an unusually close one due to the pre-existing relationships between individual members (see Appendix B). Despite James knowing no-one besides myself, he participated fully in the discussions, though with a tendency to allow Piers and Jason to carry the conversation. Chris was the quietest, although he gained confidence in the second and third sessions; Rob, like James, tended to sit back and only contribute when he had an important point to make. Maria could be quiet for extended periods but was also ready to offer her contributions when she felt the need. Jason and especially Piers tended to contribute most. However, these discussions were not simply a dialogue between Piers and Jason, with occasional comments from the others. Unlike the other groups, it was rare that a consensus was firmly set by one member. I think that the pre-existing friendships between members helped in this respect; discussants felt able to challenge each other without having to risk bad feeling. In particular, the exchanges between Jason, Piers and Maria could rapidly shift from disagreement to leg-pulling. In addition, I feel that this group tended to defer to me more than Groups B and C did, but more out of a desire to help me with my research than out of any respect for my authority.¹

The preliminary interviews for Group A were very short, as I was more concerned with 'vetting' applicants than gathering further information about them in the early stages of the research.

¹ It should be noted that three of the group - James, Piers, and Maria - had competed or were completing postgraduate research degrees, and Jason was waiting to hear about PhD funding. I think this created a sense of shared understanding between myself and the group.
JAMES. James is white, in his early twenties, and lives in Hertfordshire. At the time of interview he was unemployed but had just finished a computer science Msc at Salford University. James has never been involved in fandom of any kind. His favourite SF authors include William Gibson, Alfred Bester, James Blaylock, and Jack Womack; he also reads some horror, historical fiction, E. L. Doctorow, and others. James reads some comics, especially manga (Japanese comics) and enjoys animé (animated manga films) like Akira. Favourite films tend to be SF, action and horror.

ROB. Rob is white, in his early twenties, and is from Norfolk though he has lived in London since he began his degree at London University. He works with computers, building and developing network systems. Favourite SF authors include William Gibson and Philip K. Dick. Rob has not been involved with SF fandom.

JASON. Jason is white, and in his early twenties. He had just completed a degree in engineering at a college of the University of London, and was intending to go on to do a PhD in Robotics. Favourite SF authors include William Gibson, Ursula Le Guin, and Ian Banks. Jason has no links to SF fandom.

CHRIS. Chris is white and aged around twenty. He was doing a degree in engineering at a college in the University of London at the time of the interviews. Favourite SF authors include William Gibson, Philip K. Dick and Ian Banks.

PIERS. Piers is white and in his early twenties. At the time of the interviews he was completing his PhD in chemistry at the University of London. Piers is keen on William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, Larry Niven, Ian Banks, and Ursula Le Guin amongst others.

MARIA. Maria is of Greek-Swedish origins and in her early twenties. Maria holds an arts degree in archaeology and literature, and a Masters in philosophy. At the time of interview she was unemployed. Unlike the other group members,
Maria did not consider herself a ‘science fiction reader’, preferring more literary works and fantastic/horror fiction, although she had recently been introduced to SF. Favourite authors in the genre include William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, and Isaac Asimov.

A.2. GROUP B

MikeR  MikeG  John  Jael  Amanda

This group was by far the most uncertain about the ‘point’ of the discussions. In particular, John and Jael persistently asked about the nature of my thesis and were not satisfied with my answers. While I welcomed their challenging questions, this did tend to constantly remind the group of the artificiality of the discussions.

In general, the dynamics of this group were the most problematic (and therefore the most interesting). From the first the group was dominated by the relationship between John and Jael, whose manner and display of competence marked them out as ‘experts’. In the first meeting their shared interests and common approach to reading served to bring them together - they dominated the group by nattering away as if they were old friends. However, by the second session friendship had deteriorated into competition, as they struggled for leadership of the group. This was particularly galling for Amanda, and may have been facilitated by the absence of MikeG, whose humorous and conciliatory approach might have defused the situation. At the beginning of the third session, I pointed out what was going on, and asked John and Jael to desist\(^2\). After that the sparring was more good-natured and less frequent.

The two Mikes and Amanda contributed less than John and Jael, but none seemed nervous or cowed by the ‘experts’ except in the second session. Amanda’s contributions became more confident, and she showed little willingness to back down in the face of disagreement. MikeR was less forthright, but equally determined to defend his position when necessary. Both he and MikeG made very

\(^2\) My intervention was too heavy-handed and provoked an embarrassed silence. However, bringing this problem to the group’s attention did allow the other three members to contribute with more confidence, so I feel that it was worth doing.
thoughtful and deliberate statements, and MikeG played an important role by offering both serious and amusing contributions, lightening the tone when the 'critical' discussants were in danger of making the conversation too formal and argumentative. Despite the rather difficult group relationships, I did enjoy sitting in on these discussions; I hope I haven't given the impression that any of these discussants is a humourless ogre! The material gained from the two Mike's interviews is less complete than it is for the others, due to the circumstances in which they were interviewed.

MIKER. MikeR is white, in his thirties, and has lived in London for some time though he comes from Birmingham. He is a research chemist for a multinational chemical company and holds a doctorate. MikeR was briefly involved in a science fiction fan group in Birmingham, but was not involved in any fan activity in London; this was one of the reasons for his joining the group. He only been reading Interzone regularly for a short time before my research began. MikeR's favourite SF authors include Ursula Le Guin, William Gibson, Ian Banks, Isaac Asimov, and Compton.

MIKEG. MikeG is white, in his thirties, and has lived in London since he went to university there to do his degree. He is originally from Manchester. He works in the computer centre of a University of London college. MikeG has not been involved in SF fandom. His favourite authors include William Gibson, Ian Banks, J. G. Ballard, Flann O'Brien, and the fantasy novels of Jack Vance.

JOHN. John writes computer software instruction manuals for a company based in North London. White and in his early 30s, he was born and raised in London. One of the most obvious 'fans' in the groups, he is a member of the British Science Fiction Association and a Friend of Foundation. In addition to reading Interzone and other professional SF magazines, he also reads fanzines and news magazines like Ansible, as well as participating in newsgroup discussions on SF on the Internet. John also attends both SF and role-playing conventions. John's interest in role-playing games (RPGs) covers fantasy and superhero games
but not, interestingly enough, science fiction or cyberpunk RPGs.

Apart from SF, John reads some thrillers, and a little historical fiction and horror. Within SF he reads a wide variety of authors, ranging from cyberpunk (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, and K. W. Jeter) to Samuel Delany, Angela Carter, and Thomas Pynchon. However, he does not read a great deal of the older 'canonical' authors described in 7.2.2., and is more interested in what we might call the 'elite' end of the genre. John does not read much fantasy, and is not particularly interested in TV or film.

**JAEL.** Jael is black, in his early twenties, and has lived in London for some time. He was attending a course at the London College of printing at the time of the interviews.

Jael is a fan of a particular sort; he doesn't attend conventions but does like to meet friends at book signings in bookshops like Forbidden Planet. He reads a great deal of magazines, including several on 'cyberculture' (boing boing, wired, and at one point Mondo 2000), many small press/fan publications, New Scientist, and all the music and style magazines as well as Time Out and City Limits. Jael has had a few short articles published, presumably in small press publications, and edits an amateur magazine with an interesting cyberpunk-slipstream-chaos theory orientation.

Jael provided a long list of reading matter, including academic works (Marshall McLuhan, Alvin Toffler (described as "really important"), Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and Camille Paglia), some hardboiled fiction, Angela Carter, and numerous SF/slipstream authors (including Delany ("core name"), Alfred Bester, J. G. Ballard, Joanna Russ, Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, and Pat Cadigan). Turning to cinema, Jael likes SF and action films, but not on video. favourite directors include Ridley Scott, Walter Hill, Katherine Bigelow, and James Cameron. He reads some manga but not to the extent of the members of Group C. His favourite TV programmes are A Different World and The Late Show, and he has little time for media SF, only admitting to watching Star Trek for the sake of "nostalgia". Jael listens to a variety of music spanning Peter Gabriel and old Genesis and gangsta rap.
AMANDA. Amanda is white, in her early thirties, and was working for the Civil Aviation Authority at the time of the interviews. She was hoping to go to University that autumn to study English.

Amanda’s tastes in reading are extremely wide, and can be grouped into SF (including Huxley, Le Guin, Zelazny, Orwell, Ian Banks, Frank Herbert), Russian literature (Gogol, Dostoevsky, Pushkin), the fantastic/magic realism (Blake, Kafka, Eco, Kundera), as well as historical novels, thrillers, and others. Amanda writes poetry, short stories, and factual pieces, though none have been published.

Visual media come second to literature for Amanda; she watches little TV and very few films, though she does like *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Betty Blue* and *Blade Runner*. She plays some computer games, but no RPGs. Musically, Amanda likes "a bit of everything": hard rock, Mozart, jazz, blues, and soca.

A.3. GROUP C

Alvin    Steve     Ragnar     Mark     Simon

Like Group A, this group was partially structured by the pre-existing relationships between Ragnar, Mark and Simon. Ragnar seemed to hold a dominant position over his two friends; however, this control was not exercised in any obvious way, and Mark and Simon were generally happy to allow Ragnar to talk. Neither was afraid to offer dissenting opinions, and Ragnar was always prepared to let others speak. As a result, while the close ties between the ‘Watford Three’ were very important to this group, none of the personalities involved were as intrusive as the ‘experts’ in Group B. In particular, Alvin’s enthusiasm helped to keep a dialogue alive, and he proved an effective foil for Ragnar. Steve was quieter, but not through shyness; like the other ‘quiet’ discussants, he seemed to prefer to sit back and get involved only when he wanted to.

This group was particularly prone to reach a consensus position very rapidly, and I feel that this was partly due to the familiarity the Watford Three had with each other’s opinions, and also to the fact that the group’s interests and positions were remarkably close. This seemed to be a function of their age and to common consumption practices and tastes; the group gelled from the very
beginning as the members realised how much they had in common. However, consensus positions were broken down, partly at my instigation, when Mark and Simon would challenge Ragnar, or when Alvin would present a particularly idiosyncratic and focus-shifting opinion. In general, these meetings were relaxed and humorous, and were perhaps the easiest to convene.

**ALVIN.** Alvin had just finished his A level exams when the interviews began. A Singaporean, he lived in London until he was five, and then moved with his family to Singapore; they had returned relatively recently.

Although he reads widely, Alvin only listed his favourite SF and cyberpunk authors: William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, Neil Stephenson, Elizabeth Hand, Bruce Sterling, some Niven, John Shirley, and Lucius Shepard. Alvin was a member of the SF Association of Singapore, and co-editor of its magazine; two of his stories were published in this magazine. He did not seem to be involved in British fandom, but reads *Interzone, bOING bOING, Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, Black Ice*; he used to read *Mondo 2000*.

Alvin is very keen on comics, although he avoids superhero titles, preferring *manga* (*Appleseed, Dirty Pair*) and *Sandman*; he used to read *Aliens*. His taste in films (mostly watched on video) is also wide-ranging, though he prefers SF/horror; his favourite directors are Ridley Scott and David Cronenberg. Apart from *Star Trek*, Alvin watches television documentaries and music programmes. Favourite music includes industrial/rock groups like Nine Inch Nails, Front 242, Faith No More and the Red Hot Chilli Peppers. Alvin played many role-playing games in Singapore, including the *Cyberpunk* RPG, but did not attend conventions.

**STEVE.** Steve is white, a Londoner, a staff nurse at one of the central London hospitals and slightly older than the others - in his early twenties? He reads a wide range of SF authors, including William Gibson, some Philip K. Dick, and the *Mirrorshades* cyberpunk authors; he has also read Larry McCaffery's *Storming the Reality Studio*. He also reads some Raymond Chandler and Stephen King, but has little time for sword and sorcery-type fantasy, preferring the original Celtic
legends. Steve is a fairly committed media fan; he was the editor of the *Aliens* fanzine *Pass the Ammo*, and attends one or two *Star Trek* or media SF conventions a year (it used to be five or six a year).

Steve is very keen on comics, both *manga* (*Appleseed, Akira, Dirty Pair*) and UK/American titles like *V, American Flagg, Aliens, Ronin* and *Dracula*. Apart from the *Aliens* films, his favourite viewing is *animé* like *Akira, Dirty Pair, Dominion Tank Police* and *Robotech*. Steve watches *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Red Dwarf*, and (not surprisingly) *Casualty*, but not the soaps. As far as music is concerned, he likes Guns ‘n’ Roses, L7, and the Banshees, but not pop or house. The only RPG Steve plays is *Cyberpunk*.

THE ‘WATFORD THREE’

Ragnar, Mark, and Simon were interviewed together. All three are white, in their late teens, and were concluding the first year of a Media Production HND at West Herts College in Watford. The three live together in a shared house in Watford. It should be noted that because they were asked about their tastes in a group, their choices may not entirely be their own. In particular, Ragnar tended to answer first and so may have set the agenda for Mark and Simon.

**RAGNAR.** Ragnar is a Londoner. He provided a long list of SF authors: William Gibson, Walter Jon Williams, Bruce Sterling as well as ‘canonical’ authors like Isaac Asimov, Harry Harrison, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein. He also mentioned horror authors Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Shaun Hutson; Brett Easton Ellis; and the singer/writer Henry Rollins. Ragnar has no contact with SF fandom, but is involved in a number of RPG groups and organisations. He plays several RPGs and wargames including *Warhammer, Battletech, Star Wars*, and *Call of Cthulhu*, and participates in Multi User Games through his computer. Ragnar also avidly consumes comics, including *200AD, Akira, Aliens, Predator, Star Wars*, and *Elektra*. He does not read any SF magazines, but reads several professional RPG zines.

Favourite film directors range from names associated with American SF, horror and action movies (John Carpenter, Ridley Scott, Quentin Tarantino, James
Cameron, David Cronenberg and George Lucas) to the work of European auteurs (Werner Herzog, Luc Besson, Fritz Lang, Wim Wenders), as well as the animé films *Akira*, *Appleseed*, *Robotech*, and *Bubblegum Crisis*. Ragnar watches "mainly [channels] 2 and 4": any SF programmes on TV, along with science documentaries, *Without Walls*, *The Late Show*, *The Bill*, *East Enders*, *Neighbours*, and film documentaries. Musically, Ragnar listens to industrial (Nine Inch Nails, Front 242, Sheep on Drugs, Nitzer Ebb), some grunge, and rap (Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, Ice T, Bodycount), as well as Henry Rollins.

**MARK.** Mark is from Bishop's Stortford. His list of SF authors includes Greg Bear, William Gibson, John Wyndham, Brian Aldiss and Orson Scott Card. He also reads more fantasy than many of the other discussants, especially David Eddings and Raymond Feist, and other authors including Clive Barker and Peter David's *Star Trek* novels. Mark is interested in SF fandom; he is a member of the *Dr Who* Appreciation Society and reads the British *Blake's Seven* fanzine, *Horizon*. He has not been to any conventions but has had short stories set in the *Dr Who* universe published. Although he plays *Warhammer* and *Call of Cthulhu* RPGs, he seems to prefer computer Multi User Games. Mark is not that interested in comics, although he reads *2000AD* and its various offshoot magazines, and *Sandman* (occasionally).

In terms of films, Mark largely echoed Ragnar's list of SF, horror and action directors: John Carpenter, Ridley Scott, Wim Wenders, James Cameron, and George Lucas. Apart from SF programmes, Mark likes *Brookside*, *Coronation Street*, and *The Bill*. Musically, he listens to ambient and techno (The Orb, Tangerine Dream, 808 State), grunge (Pearl Jam, Nirvana) and film soundtracks.

**SIMON.** Simon is from Suffolk. His reading list was perhaps the most unusual, concentrating on the early classics of the genre: Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, John Wyndham, and Jules Verne. More recent SF authors included Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Heinlein, and Simon also enjoyed H. P. Lovecraft's fantastic/horror fictions. Apart from the Lovecraft RPG *Call of Cthulhu* he also plays *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*; unlike the other two, he
does not play Multi User Games. Simon does not read any comics or magazines save 2000AD and the Eagle, though he might look at a film review in Starburst.

Simon simply echoed Ragnar's choice of action/horror/SF film directors (as listed for Mark). Favourite TV includes SF programmes, science documentaries, Without Walls, but no soaps. His taste in music is as eclectic as his choice of SF authors, ranging from Russian classical music, to punk (Dead Kennedys, Stranglers, Damned), trad jazz, and film soundtracks.
APPENDIX B: NOTES ON RESEARCH PRACTICE

This appendix supplements the information given in 3.3. Sections B.1. to B.4. parallel the discussion of research practice in section 3.3.2., while B.5. presents additional material for 3.3.3..

B.1. RECRUITMENT

I used three main approaches to recruit members for the group, and tried one additional method which was unfortunately unsuccessful. These strategies are discussed below.

THE 'BROKER'. I began by contacting people I already knew. In-depth groups are very good at highlighting personal relationships between members, and even between members and moderators. I would argue that group interviews actually play down the importance of these relationships by placing them within the wider group context. I didn't feel that I was compromising the research, then, when I asked James, a good friend of mine for ten years, to join the group. The other members came through a 'broker', a friend of mine who put me in touch with the second and third members, Rob and Jason. I already knew Rob through my broker, and Jason was the final link with the other group members, recruiting two friends of his (Chris and Piers). The last two already knew each other - they attended the same college and both knew Jason - but they seemed to be only casual acquaintances before the first meeting. Jason and Rob also seemed to know each other casually through their mutual friend, my broker. I was intending to only recruit five members, but as the result of a mix-up Piers's partner Maria turned up at the first meeting; as a fan of both Dick and Gibson it seemed silly to turn her away. Maria is a friend of Jason and seemed to know Chris as well.

ADVERTS. I intended to recruit the second and third groups through placing adverts in two SF magazines. The first, Interzone, is the premiere monthly British professional (ie 'non-fan') SF magazine, publishing short stories by new and established authors. The editor, David Pringle, very kindly published my
letter asking for readers, and I received replies from MikeR, John and MikeG. John mentioned the meetings to Amanda, a friend who had worked with John, and she subsequently contacted me. The second advert appeared in Matrix, the magazine of the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) and resulted in one reply. However, I was unable to use this person, because she did not wish to travel across London after the evening discussions.1

BOOKSHOP FLIERS. The third recruiting strategy found the last member of Group B and all five members of Group C. Forbidden Planet is the country's largest comic and specialist (science fiction, fantasy and horror) book retail chain, and its flagship branch is on New Oxford Street in London. Through Mark Bennett, a contact on a cyberpunk magazine, I managed to talk to Kev at the New Oxford Street branch, and he agreed to place fliers for my research around the store. The same day I received a call from Jael, who had seen the fliers and wished to join Group B. Group C was filled very quickly, as I received calls from Alvin, Ragnar, and Steve within a week of placing the fliers. I asked Ragnar if he knew anyone who might be interested, and he suggested Mark and Simon, two friends from college.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES. In an attempt to find a 'broker' similar to Radway's 'Dorothy Evans' (1984), I approached the proprietor of another London science fiction bookshop, but found that he was too busy to help. I had a similar failure with the writer of an important SF fanzine, who I asked to help publicise my research; this was partly due to my clumsiness in approaching him, and partly (I feel) with my status as an 'outsider' in the world of fandom. One successful link I made which was not used in the final recruitment of groups was eliciting the aid of the UK branch of the Philip K. Dick Society. Though the PKDS had recently closed, its organisers very helpfully sent me addresses of its London members. My intention had been to form a fourth group of Dick readers as a contrast to the

1 In this way the timing of my discussions acted to discourage some women from attending. This was not something I could help, as my access to interviewing space was limited to weekday evenings, but nonetheless it presented another factor which limited the range of respondents.
Gibson groups (B and C), but due to a narrowing down in my focus I was unable to use this source.

**B.2. PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS**

The key issues at this stage were 'vetting' potential discussants and gathering information which could not easily be provided in group work.

**INTERVIEW FORMAT.** After conducting the discussions with Group A I realised that certain questions, aimed at eliciting individual replies, broke up the format of the discussion. For example, listing favourite authors and media texts took up a great deal of the first session with Group A. The preliminary meetings therefore developed into much more intensive interviews and more material was gathered. As a result, the interviews for Group A members are much less structured than those for groups B and C, and the quantity of information is much smaller.

**SELECTION.** If I thought that the interviewee had some vested interest in joining beyond that of simply participating, such as a desire for friendship above and beyond the support usually provided by the group, or if I felt that they would not in some way 'get on' in the group, I would turn them down. In fact I didn't need to do this, since all the interviewees seemed to be good group material. I think this was because only the more extrovert readers would respond to an advertisement or flier - the form of the discussions closely matched their expectations.

**SETTING OF INTERVIEWS.** Around half were conducted in pubs, several in a cafe, and one interview was carried out in the respondent's house. This last interview was unusual in that it was carried out with Ragnar, Simon and Mark simultaneously, which sometimes led to the formation of group, rather than individual, tastes. Since these three friends share many preferences anyway, and yet still managed to bring out differences of opinion, I decided to use the material.
**MEDIA CONSUMPTION.** Key questions included favourite authors, films and directors, television programmes, comics and other media products; whether the respondent was interested in computers or role-playing games, which became an important issue for groups B and C; and whether the respondent was or had been involved in any creative or fan activity.

**B.3. CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEWS**

Most of the meetings were conducted in the Geography Department at UCL, although the first two meetings of Group C took place in the Meditation Room above the Bloomsbury Theatre. Ironically enough, this last space turned out to be a less than relaxing environment and we returned to the Department for the last two meetings. Group A met in October and November, 1992; Group B in May and June, 1993; and Group C in June 1993, compressed into two weeks. The speed at which the Group C meetings were concluded definitely had some affect on the nature of the group, but was necessary due to the fact that the five individuals were only available for two weeks. As I wanted to interview them together as a group, feeling that they were qualitatively different to the other groups, I had to compress the interviews into this time. As a result I think that the identity of Group C was never as strong as that of the other two, since the members knew each other for less than a fortnight compared to between fifteen and twenty-two days for groups A and B.

A number of different techniques were used to convene the interviews.

**GUIDES.** A guide is a list of the topics that I hoped to discuss, structured to provide a potential narrative. Successful use of the guide depends on referring to it to further the discussion rather than slavishly following its prompts. If subjects are raised in a different order to that suggested by the guide, then the discussion can follow its own course; if topics are left out, they can be introduced later on, but at the risk of intervening too obviously and calling attention to the role of the convenor. The guide is to be used to ‘track’ the conversation, using the prompts to maintain a smooth progression of points while simultaneously making sure that everything has been covered (Morgan, 1986:57). When subjects arise at the
beginning of the discussion, they can be carefully reintroduced later without breaking the natural flow of the conversation. This is more difficult than it sounds, as it relies on maintaining the right level of convenor involvement.

The guides were written onto filecards, one card per session. There were two sets of guide cards, one for Group A and one for B and C (the second set were rewritten to take account of the practical and theoretical implications of the first group).

How structured were the guides? In the case of focus group work, Morgan (1986) points out that the shorter the amount of time that the group has together, the more structured the discussion must be to ensure that all the topics are covered. As I was limited to three or four meetings, the level of convenor involvement was relatively high. This places important limits on the number of questions that can reasonably be asked before the discussion becomes more like a focus group session. In the Group A meetings, for example, the quality of the material and the group relationships were both compromised in the second session when I made the mistake of asking too many questions. The solution is to plan the guide very carefully, choosing questions which are very general, open to different interpretations, and which lead to a thorough interrogation of the topic. In groups B and C I asked three or four main questions, with many smaller interrogations of the subject matter which were to be used only where they fitted into the discussion. While it is very rewarding to sit back and let the conversation follow its own path, it is also important to be able to question consensus, offer alternatives, and to emphasise individual positions through intervention. It is, in the last instance, a research skill like any other.

**PAPER AND PEN EXERCISES.** Discussants are asked to write down three or four authors, themes or images which are then offered to the group for general discussion. This allows members to form individual opinions which are then discussed within the group framework, creating shared and contested views. The major disadvantage of this tactic is that it severely breaks up the flow of conversation, and for a brief time it restores the convenor to centre stage. However, this was usually so successful that my intervention was quickly
forgotten, and it can be used extremely effectively to end a particularly moribund line of enquiry, or to clearly start an entirely new one.

CONSEQUENCES OF TECHNIQUES. It must be recognized that both the guide and the paper and pen exercises compromise the nature of in-depth group research. In particular, the guide did structure the conversations more than was perhaps necessary. However, the alternative would involve more meetings, to allow ideas time to surface, and this would require more money for expenses, more time interviewing and transcribing, and more investment on the part of the interviewees. The guide was therefore adopted for largely practical reasons. I also feel that the use of such techniques was justified because I am uneasy with the suggestion that group conversations can simply evolve without convenor involvement. I was as much a member of these groups as any of the interviewees, and some of my interventions were very similar to their own comments, suggestions, and questions. The more explicit interventions, made as convenor rather than group member, were necessary on two grounds. Firstly, my research questions were more specific than those explored by, for example, Burgess et al (1988b). While reading science fiction is an important part of the discussants’ everyday lives, it is only one aspect of them. In a sense, it was slightly ‘unnatural’ for many of these people to spend ninety minutes talking about SF every week. It made more sense to me to not ignore this problem but to place it centre-stage when necessary: asking specific questions to prompt focused discussions.

Secondly, overt interventions played an enormously useful part in my ‘management’ of the group identity. Again this seems to run counter to the image of in-depth groups as free forums for discussion, but I feel that this idea is perhaps rather naive because it ignores the fact that members create relationships which are actively disempowering to others in the group. Existing and newly-formed friendships create exclusive relationships, and frictions and blatant confrontations

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2 Radway (1988) makes a similar point; we need to be careful not to claim too much for this kind of audience ethnography, because reception is part of a set of much wider practices which would require a more complete investigation of ‘everyday life’.
can rapidly sour the generally supportive atmosphere of the group. I feel that shifting the conversation by starting a new topic or using a paper and pen exercise is often a more sensitive way of dealing with these issues than more obviously calling attention to them by wagging my finger at the discussants. While this may seem like a rather paternalistic attitude to ‘my’ groups, I was not prepared to sit by while individual members were mocked or ignored, or when potentially bitter disagreements occurred. In any case, I am fairly confident that many of the interviewees were happy with these interventions, seeing it as a ‘natural’ part of the research process.

B.4. GROUP IDENTITY

Having discussed the nature of the interviews, I would like to turn to the process of the formation and evolution of the group identity over the course of the meetings. This group identity is stifled in focus groups but is perhaps the defining feature of in-depth groups. There is a kind of ‘metahistory’ common to all the groups; although their identities were obviously different, their development shows significant similarities. Awareness of this is obviously central to any attempt to ground statements in a ‘thicker’ context.

The first meeting is a chance to ‘break the ice’, as interviewees introduce themselves to one another. In my case, I asked them to discuss their history of SF reading and their personal tastes, providing opportunities to share affinities and express differences. A complex set of relationships have formed by the end of this session; the members are relaxed, and they now have ninety minutes of group history to draw upon later.

Paradoxically, the second meeting is characterised by uncertainty: ‘why are we here?’ Having overcome any doubts about the group, members now feel more confident in challenging each other, the convenor, and the aims of the research. I certainly experienced this for groups A and B, although in the first case this was more marked because I did not follow the guide sufficiently carefully. In Group B, certainly, two members of the group had taken on roles as ‘experts’ (Appendix A, A.2.), and they began to compete for dominance in a way that they would have felt unable to do in the first meeting. This occurred to a lesser degree in Group
C, largely because of the dynamics of that particular group (Appendix A, A.3.).

In the third meeting (Groups B and C) the mood was more subdued. For B and C the third meeting can best be described as 'business as usual', and I would imagine that longer term groups reach a stable identity after the first two meetings, one which lasts until termination. I had brought Group B's attention to the leadership contest that had affected their previous meeting, and this effectively put a stop to the competition (Appendix A, A.2.). For Group A, of course, the third meeting was the last one.

The last meeting is marked by feelings of closure: members must ease themselves out of supportive relationships and leave new friends. This can often result in morbid conversations (Burgess et al 1988b:473). This did occur in Group A, but was to be expected as we were expressly talking about 'fears'. The mood of the final meeting of groups B and C can perhaps be characterised by a return of the feeling of 'why are we here?' from the second meeting, while Group C, rushing to finish the interview before Steve went to work, may not have had time to reflect upon the 'death' of the group. Both Group A and Group C finished very abruptly: In the first case I had to leave suddenly, and in the second Steve had to get to work. In these groups the feeling of termination was replaced by one of suspended tension, as members rushed to get everything said before time ran out.

All three groups were concluded with a brief session where I invited members to ask me questions about the research or myself. This was most successful in the first group, with whom I feel I had the best relationship. Group B returned to the central question of 'how does your work fit into geography?', which had concerned them throughout the interviews. My response was defensive and the discussion became very polarised. Group C seemed to have nothing further to say. This was probably due to the feeling that time was short;

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3 In talking to Jacquelin Burgess I have since realised that this is a common experience in final meetings.

4 It should be noted that neither of the other groups made this into an issue. I am convinced that this was related to the 'critical' stance of two of the members of Group B; part of their competition for dominance concerned challenging my role as conductor. See Appendix A.2 and 7.3.3..
they gave the curious impression of having ‘talked themselves out’ over the four sessions.

B.5. ANALYSIS - MIND MAPS

How were the mind-maps drawn? The overall theme of the session was placed at the centre of the map. Moving further out, particular sections of the conversation were interpreted as general themes; less central ideas, or ‘subtopics’, were then related to these themes\(^5\). These abstractions become increasingly specific and less generalised with increasing distance from the centre of the map. These themes and subtopics are then linked to each other, either because the discussants constructed them as somehow related, or because I felt that such a link was theoretically interesting. In this way re-ordering the information inevitably involves an act of interpretation (deciding a hierarchy of themes and the relationships between them). As long as the researcher is aware of this, and does not pretend that all of the themes have simply risen from the transcripts, this technique provides a useful preliminary form of analysis. Of course, it also destroys the temporal narrative and the dynamic context of utterances, so it should only be used in parallel with other techniques.

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\(^5\) Themes and subtopics were sometimes suggested by my own questions within discussions, and sometimes by the interviewees' comments; it is important to take account of this.
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