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‘Trust No One’: Science Fiction and Marketing’s Future/Present

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INTRODUCTION

Science fiction seems to stir up some extreme reactions. On the one hand dismissed as cultural trash produced for purely commercial gain and consumed by dreadful obsessives terminally disengaged from ‘serious’ concerns. On the other, a genre which usefully offers scientific extrapolation and social criticism. Hence we find a self-satisfied distancing from the vulgarity of mass consumption contrasted with an over earnest maintenance of a ‘methodology’ which produces prediction and/or critique.

In this chapter, we argue that marketing is not mere ‘subject matter’ for science fiction, something that science fiction has periodically addressed, usually by attacking its wanton and socially destructive materialism. Marketing and science fiction, we argue, has an implicate relationship. Most obviously the demands and opportunities of commerce were, and continue to be, significant in the development of the genre. Indeed the relationship between reality and its literary representation is not uni-directional. There are some well-known examples of this complicity that illustrate how science fiction has impacted upon actual technological change. We are all familiar with Arthur C. Clark’s conceptualisation of the geo-stationary satellite, an idea that he regrets not having patented. It has also been argued that mobile phones were inspired by *Star Trek’s* communicators. Ronald Reagan’s short-lived outer-space laser defence system

was dubbed *Star Wars* and the associated imagery, drawn from a film where a clean cut Western hero triumphed against the forces of an evil empire, was helpful in mobilising support (Davies, 1990:1). In the late 1970s Sperry Univac, a large IT company, sponsored a series of seminars exploring the potential social consequences of contemporary science fiction. It fell to John Pascoe of Sperry UK to write a foreword to the published proceedings. He explains that Sperry's interest in the project was prompted by business considerations,

A clue is found in the description of our activity. We live and work in a technology that changes at a very rapid rate, a rate unique in the history of all technologies, and one that may to the outsider sometimes seem frightening. Between twenty and forty per cent a year improvement in performance for the same price- the industry refers to this as the price/performance ratio- is the historic norm since the industry began in the early fifties and no end is in sight. Our own computers today are probably half the size and cost of their predecessors of as short a time as three years ago. Had this rate of technological advance, of improvement in the price performance ratio been matched in the aircraft industry over the last thirty years, you would by now be able to cross the Atlantic in seconds for less than the price of a packet of cigarettes. At this point our interest in science fiction and its relation to reality might become a little clearer, for some aspects of the science fiction future are for us no more than our tomorrow

(in Malik, 1980:vii-vii).

John Pascoe was the *marketing* director of Sperry UK at the time. Here we have science fiction as a tool for new product development.

We want to suggest that science fiction is not simply a literary genre that comments upon the future/present. Although we open the chapter with a review of what might be called *reflectionist* engagements by science fiction with marketing, this provides a point of opposition. Our motivation in writing about marketing and science fiction is not simply to draw attention to a useful ‘resource’ which we can then interrogate for meaningful messages. We seek not merely to draw attention to these parallels, but to begin to unsettle the positions that produce them. In this attempt we allow ourselves to draw one comparison; that the extreme characterisations with which we opened this paper, a self-satisfied distancing from the vulgarity of mass consumption opposed by an over-earnest maintenance of a ‘methodology’ which produces prediction and/or critique, can also be seen within contemporary debates in marketing. We argue that much contemporary science fiction has a disturbing effect, that it increasingly threatens (without entirely dissolving) the boundaries that made its *reflectionist* commentaries possible. We value science fiction’s engagement with marketing not because it offers support for a particular position, but because it disturbs *in toto*. However we do not see ourselves entirely moorless in this environment. With reference to a process of ‘alienation’ found in science fiction, we suggest that we are drawn to contemplate the boundaries produced by its disturbances. A purely detached, coolly critically, position is impossible. But this does not mean that we are passively beguiled.

Let us begin, however, by considering some conventional accounts of marketing in science fiction.

SCIENCE FICTION ON MARKETING

For Isaac Asimov (1971: 285) science fiction offers a mode of thought to question and imagine change, 'We've got to think about the future now. For the first time in history, the future cannot be left to take care of itself; it must be thought about'. His work was therefore a form of 'social science fiction', a means to speculate, extrapolate and moralise over the effects of technological, political and sociological change. Indeed for those who had not appreciated its serious intent, critical texts have been produced which direct us to its pedagogic value. Both Greenberg et al (1975) and Ofshe (1977) are collections of science fiction stories for sociology students to be used to sharpen social awareness via comprehension and discussion exercises.

Such 'purposeful' science fiction is therefore a forum where alternative realities are presented which reflects the social trends and preoccupations of the time. The assumption is that science fiction produces evidence that can be read as critiques of contemporary society and its possible future directions. These readings are, according to Kuhn (1990), both sociological and psychological in nature. By revealing these preoccupations science fiction, in *reflectionist* mode, captures the cultural moment. The classic example is the association of 1950's science fiction cinema with the Communist threat. Thus both *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Thing from Another World* (1951) were seen to mirror the perceived dangers of the Red Menace. Where such lessons cannot be directly 'read off' the film's symbolism, Kuhn (1990) sees

science fiction as reflecting the largely repressed mental states shared across societies. Consequently the *Godzilla* cycle of films in Japan are interpreted as expressions of subconscious fears of the consequences of the nuclear bomb. Similarly Tarrat (1977) argues that aliens and extraterrestrial forces are actually externalisations of civilisation's conflict with the drives and sexual desires of the primitive unconscious. Therefore under a reflectionist interpretation, whether concerned with sociological critiques or repressed psychological desires, science fiction is a representation of reality. Its value lies in the messages that it produces.

There are many examples of science fiction having something (usually critical) to say about marketing. Perhaps the most famous example is Pohl and Kornbluth's (1953) *The Space Merchants*. Here advertising agencies have taken over many of the roles of government and advertising executives are the elite of society. However, the hero, Mitchell Courtney, an estranged ad-man, begins to understand the error of his former ways. Realising the disastrous ecological consequences of materialistic values, he joins an underground conservation movement, which attempts to expose the manipulations of the agencies. Finally driven out, the rebels establish an anti-advertising society on Venus.

The Space Merchants was strongly influenced by styles of advertising of the time. Designed to ensure product recall, commodities were represented via jingles based on a logic of memorisation and recall. These slogans were repeated over and over again (Goldman and Papson, 1994). The fear of subliminal messages and the role of marketing in creating false needs was a key theme. This critique was developed in

Frederick Pohl's (Kornbluth had long since died) somewhat belated sequel. In case readers missed its critical intent *The Merchants' War* (1984) was puffed via its social message, 'A new look at the advertising culture... The Merchants' War may not silence the snake oil merchants in our society, but it may reduce the number of people willing to swallow their potions' (excerpt from Newsday review, St. Martin's Press edition, 1984). And indeed, whilst *The Merchants' War* returns to many of the preoccupations of *The Space Merchants* it does also reflect some contemporary developments in marketing technique. In the sequel an un-materialistic Venus is contrasted with an Earth increasingly segmented according to consumer/economic category. Those few areas as yet uncolonised by the agencies are subjected to a technology of persuasion which uses light, sound and smell to create a seductive spectacle that encourages consumption.

The plot centres on Tarb and Mitzi, two Earth diplomats seconded from their advertising agencies to maintain relations with Venus but actually charged with surreptitiously undermining the Veenie cause. However the Veenies become aware of their underground activities, kidnap Mitzi and replace her with a body double. Returning to Earth and their advertising posts, Tarb quickly becomes a victim of a competing advertising agency's 'unethical' new product – *Mokie Koke*. A thinly veiled reference to *Coca-Cola*, *Mokie Koke* is instantly addictive. Tarb's addiction leads to a rapid fall from grace in the corporate world. In contrast, Mitzi's double becomes a stockholder in the agency. Conspiring with a fellow Veenie sympathiser the advertising agency's share price is inflated allowing Mitzi to sell out and establish a new advertising agency. This enables the Veenies to use the same technologies of persuasion to generate sympathy for their cause.

The Space Merchants and its sequel are excellent examples of individual novels that criticise marketing and its methods. However it was with the rise of the 'New Wave' that the estrangement between science fiction, marketing and the wider corporate world became a defining theme. The 'New Wave' consisted of a body of largely European writers who were profoundly cynical of the potential of science and technology to provide a better society. Accordingly science fiction became less preoccupied with technologically assisted prophecies. Instead it turned inwards; technology was no longer something directed towards the stars.

Initially 'New Wave' writers worked to protect reason from the perversions of materialism, to preserve the prospect of humanistic emancipation. Soon, however, they lost faith in this possibility and resigned themselves to plotting the course of its fateful assimilation. Reason, science and technology were found to be irrevocably subservient to the interests of monopoly capitalism (Jordin, 1984). 'New wave' science fiction therefore became a liberal critique of the experience of individuals within capitalist society. J.G. Ballard, a leading light of the 'New Wave', produced a number of stories portraying the consumerism of a decadent future/present. Ballard's (1973) short story *The Subliminal Man* is perhaps his most notable attack on the consequences of unfettered marketing. Anticipating the sprawling megalopolis that a decade later became synonymous with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, *The Subliminal Man* is set in a society of huge motorways linking massive commercial centres. At each intersection hotels, shopping malls and huge car parks dominate the skyline.

The story revolves around Franklin, a local doctor who is harassed by one of his psychotic patients, Hathaway. Hathaway is certain that new gigantic signs being erected on the freeway are a medium for subliminal messages. However Hathaway's predilection for conspiracy theories makes Franklin sceptical. Franklin enjoyed all of the trappings of consumerism but was beginning to reflect upon their meaning. He was forced to work during his weekends on private consultancy to help pay for the house which was heavily re-mortgaged. Credit bills for holidays and consumer gadgets were a constant drain on his income. The only time Franklin had to himself was the drive to and from work. Even here he did not escape the clutches of materialism. Obsolescence was built into the structure of society. The motorways were covered with a mesh of small rubber studs. These studs allowed smooth driving at precise speeds of 40mph, 50mph, 60mph and 70mph. When they wore out they were replaced with new studs which had been designed to only be effective with the latest tyre designs. Driving at intermediate speeds caused the chassis to shake leading to mechanical damage. Franklin had replaced his car only three months after buying it; since it was cheaper to trade in then begin to pay the maintenance costs.

One day, driving along the motorway and encountering the huge signs, Franklin remembered Hathaway's warnings. The signs were indeed enormous, though they contained no message. Their purpose was unclear - it was generally believed that they were a technology to assist the airport. Returning home, Franklin finds his wife sprawled in front of the television. Although there were four television channels the programmes were the same, only the advertisements differed. All telephone conversations were free, however the calls were interrupted by a commercial break. The

ratio of free speech to advertising was dependent on the distance of the call. Franklin's wife was watching *Spot Bargains* a programme which listed the offers in local shops. The supermarkets never closed and shoppers, like anxious stockbrokers, darted from one supermarket to another to take advantage of the ever-changing prices. Supermarkets further reinforced consumption by listing the highest spenders in the local area. They were socially rewarded because their spending increased the rate of discount for everyone. In contrast, the lowest spenders became social outcasts.

Franklin finally decides to investigate one of the huge concrete signs. He notices a powerful humming emanating from the structure. Through a reflection in a shop window, he sees that the sign carries two messages, one '*Keep away*' the second '*Buy cigarettes*'. His curiosity aroused, Franklin returns to the sign the next day during rush hour. There he finds Hathaway, who, having scaled the construction is surrounded by armed police. Hathaway had succeeded in blowing the sign's fuse enabling the text to be 'seen' by the spectators below,

BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY
NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW
YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES

(Ballard 1973: 74)

Although Franklin is unable to prevent the police opening fire on the triumphant Hathaway he remains strangely unperturbed. Accepting the situation he goes out and buys a new car.

The critique of marketing and its methods contained in these stories is fairly clear¹. There are also some remarkably prescient predictions. It is interesting to note how nearly all of the commentaries contained in these stories on product obsolescence, selling methods, privacy, materialism and environmental impacts have found their way into Kotler et al (1999) as contemporary ethical issues. Ballard's *The Subliminal Man* and the seductive technology in *The Merchants' War* are literary equivalents of Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* (1961) and its successors. Indeed the fear that the assumed rationality of the individual is being subverted via surreptitious methods is still played out today. A recent article in *The Guardian* (Cleverly 1999) warns of a new form of marketing, 'stealth advertising' which conjures up images of cloaked media preying on unenlightened consumers. It is soon apparent that our obsession with subliminal advertising goes beyond the famed James Vicary experiment to seduce consumers to buy popcorn and *Coca-Cola* in 1950's American cinema houses. Ambient promotions, the use of non visual or aural advertising, can be experienced in almost every supermarket and remains a popular focal point for Internet discussion on conspiracy theories². It is also notable that at the end of *The Merchants' War* the consumption brainwashing technology is used to support the Veenie cause. An anticipation of social marketing? Contemporary social causes are no longer squeamish about using the hard-nosed methods of the corporate world (Kotler and Levy, 1969; Bruce, 1994).

These stories are less than flattering in their representation of the marketer. Usually they are given egotistical motivational drives but minimally developed moral scruples. It is only when Courtenay in *The Space Merchants* and Tarb in the *The Merchants' War* are

released from their top ranking positions as marketing executives that they realise the consequences of their former trade. The portrayal of humanity is equally bleak. The tales outline how economic forces have produced a world infatuated with consumption. Consumers are represented as blindly duped, addicted either to the 'product' or browbeaten by constant advertising³. Those individuals who withdraw from consumption are often portrayed as deranged victims or societal outsiders. Implicit in all of the stories is that marketing's role in the maintenance of the economic system has created a lack of regard for humanity and the environment. Thus in *The Space Merchants* and *The Merchants' War* the majority of the world's population is dependent upon genetically modified, synthetic food. In *The Subliminal Man* the desire to constantly expand GNP means that products are rapidly abandoned. The land alongside the motorway becomes a dumping ground for goods in perfect working order.

MARKETING SCIENCE FICTION

But there is something dreadfully deadening about these *reflectionist* readings. Their pessimistic asceticism tends entirely to ignore our entirely self-conscious engagement with the consumption opportunities presented by marketing. We will return to this point in due course. More immediately however we have to recognise how the *production* of the science fiction genre is, in particular, tied up with marketing activities.

In most accounts science fiction appears either as a beguiled propagator of jet-propelled futures, a mental laboratory for earnest social speculations or as in our previous discussion, a moralistic commentator upon late capitalism. But if science fiction's engagement with marketing has frequently fallen into the latter category, its wringing

hands are not entirely unsoiled. It is revealing how many 'serious' histories of science fiction stress the importance of commerce. This is not merely a recognition of its trashy origins, a disreputable heritage subsequently left behind. Instead the viability of the genre is seen to move hand in hand with the development of commercial opportunity. Such histories (eg. Amis, 1960; Asimov, 1971; Aldiss, 1973) usually begin with a whistle-stop tour of proto-science fictions. Plato's Atlantis story from the dialogue *Critias*, More's *Utopia*, Rabelais' *Gargantua* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* are oft cited. Appropriate respect is paid to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But it is the founding of the magazine *Amazing Stories* by Hugo Gernsback in 1926 that marks science fiction's emergence from its primitive era. This is because authors now had a consistent commercial outlet for their work, as Isaac Asimov (1971: 270) acknowledges, 'although the concept of science fiction had been born, the economic basis for the support of science fiction did not exist.' This was the era of pulp fiction, inexpensive mass-produced literature aimed at an increasingly literate citizenship. The target audience was the archetypal teenage male who was provided with an endless stream of formulaic tales of mad scientists, their recalcitrant creatures, heroes and heroines.

The edging of science fiction towards respectability, the beginning of its so-called 'Golden Age', is similarly associated with the development of commercial outlets. At the same time the atomic bomb played an important role in rescuing SF from far-fetched futures in that its extravagant predictions were being seen to be realised. A wider audience began to take notice; John W. Campbell's editorship of *Astounding Futures* directed science fiction away from tales of adventure towards issues of politics and morality. These 'serious' concerns attracted 'respectable' publishing houses; *Doubleday*

and *Simon and Schuster* became particularly identified with the genre. Hence the importance of corporate support is heavily stressed. The Golden Age is associated with a transformation from pulp hobbyists to professional authors, ‘suddenly writers found they were in the writing *business*’ (del Ray, 1980: 222).

And what about those austere, non-materialistic members of the ‘New Wave’? Surely they finally disentangled science fiction from vulgar commerciality? Of course the fact that business was now its biggest target meant that it remained a central preoccupation. However Klein’s (1977) account of an antagonistic middle class authorship offers a less charitable reading. Whilst we may prefer to see them as principled defenders of lost values, their background is that of frustrated ambition. Once expecting to become the secular priesthood of modernity, their hopes became frustrated. The middle classes no longer felt themselves to be in control; instead they too had been assimilated by the forces of capital. The privileges that had been anticipated, indeed that had been promised, failed to arrive. Big business and big science were not a simple point of opposition but an estranged and deceitful partner. Under this interpretation the ‘New Wave’ appear as spurned collaborators, lashing out at those who had used them. Their real regret was not that the corporate world is destructive and exploitative, but that it had failed to deliver upon its promises. The instrumental benefits expected by the dominant class had somehow slipped elsewhere.

The revival of a more optimistic form of science fiction in the mid to late 1970’s was also stimulated by commercial success. Many of these examples were mainstream Hollywood feature films that, by nature, are strongly market driven. For many the

success of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) reinvigorated the whole genre. Of course both were resolutely old-fashioned films. One is a tale of princesses, Evil Empires and valiant knights⁴; the other shows how ‘humanity’ is also extraterrestrial. But more than anything, the restored viability of this somewhat reactionary science fiction was measured by the films sheer profitability. For these so-called blockbusters, massive investment is protected by similarly massive marketing budgets. And whilst science fiction is not the only form of mass entertainment that is heavily marketed, the relationship, particularly on film, is increasingly intertwined. The *Star Wars* phenomenon is of course the clearest example. The initial three *Star Wars* films netted over £2.4 billion in merchandising alone (Wilde, 1999). The announcement two years ago of the production of the prequel trilogy started another round of licensing and sponsorship deals. *PepsiCo* reportedly paid £600 million for merchandising rights, whilst *Lego* committed £200 million to market toy figures.

Increasingly these deals are not merely product tie-ins. Marketing has become complicit in the production of films through the sale to corporations of product placements. Whilst this is conventionally achieved through the clear branding of the film’s artefacts, this has recently gone a step further with the virtual reality thriller *The Matrix* (1999). Although the film itself might be read as a critique of capitalist society, humanity’s (literal) labour power is exploited whilst it is pacified via a (literal) false consciousness, the script’s reliance on mobile phones presented an opportunity for joint advertising. Thus newspaper and television campaigns simultaneously sell the film and phones, *Nokia* communications becomes ‘*The link between reality and the dream*’. It has been suggested that this relationship is often inverted. Instead of marketers taking advantage

of the opportunities offered in the script, the script is shaped to offer marketing opportunities. George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* films, has been heavily criticised for the insertion of characters that can be turned easily into cute toys. Hence the Ewoks in the *Return of the Jedi* (1983) are effectively walking, squeaking teddy bears. The computer generated Jar Jar Binks in *The Phantom Menace* transforms easily into a space age version of *Disney's* bendy *Goofy*.

Marketing and the science fiction film has therefore moved from the merchandising of secondary products, to the insertion of brands into filming, to finally driving the creative process. Here we are close to science fiction's trashy origins, a genre driven solely by commercial gain. Films like *Independence Day* (1996) and *Godzilla* (1998) mine the choicest science fiction motifs and rebrand them for a new generation. Marketing for such films occurs simultaneously with production. Teaser trailers are produced long before the film has been completed. Usually these trailers feature extravagant special effects. *Independence Day's* nefarious alien invaders gleefully detonate the White House, whilst *Godzilla's* huge foot crushes terrified commuters. Size, we were told, *is* important. Indeed these films's heavy use of special effects is frequently used to dismiss them as abstract light shows, a grotesque spectacular devoid of serious comment. Thus this science fiction fetishises technology, in the same way that advertising fetishises commodities. The name of George Lucas' massively profitable special effects company, *Industrial Light and Magic*, is highly revealing - a clearer statement of technological disenchantment is hard to imagine. In fact many science fiction films are 'sold' on the basis of their special effects by either publicising the number of effects shots, for instance *Lost in Space* (1998), or by stressing the size of the budget. *Total Recall's*

(1990) actual budget was substantially less than was used in publicity material. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) was reviewed in the business section of the New York Times a week before it opened on general release (Hoberman, 1991: 23).

TRUST NO ONE

Nevertheless this analysis fails to capture the power of much contemporary science fiction. This has a more comprehensive ability to disturb. In this way it also serves to undercut the strategies that have produced the preceding critiques. Thus whether reading a science fiction text as a piece of social criticism, or alternatively subjecting its production to similar critique, we inevitably demarcate various actors, most obviously the author(s), the textual reading, contemporary marketing reality, the mainstream audience, the audience as consumer and so on. Indeed all social criticism depends on these strategies of division. As Kellner (1998) shows, this process of boundary drawing is central to critical theory. It first notes how capitalism is a form of reification, a process of abstraction by which the privileges of certain categories are justified. The response of the critical theorist is to draw their own boundaries and make use of abstractions to illuminate social processes. Hence they criticise positivistic approaches that simply mirror existing social realities. Instead they call for social theory to abstract itself from current society in order to produce critical perspectives and alternatives, 'this abstractness, this radical withdrawal from the given, at least clears a path along which the individual in bourgeois society can seek the truth and adhere to what is known' (Marcuse, 1968: 150-1). These abstractions are the means by which we can uncover the 'actual' social processes that take place behind the back of the individual. For instance, Ritzer's (1997) McDonaldization thesis in showing how the processes of production and

consumption have slipped into the ordering of the non-commercial separate the normal from the abnormal. The assumption is that there is something 'authentic' which has been distorted. We will have a few more words to say about McDonaldization in due course.

In fact, much contemporary science fiction is powerful because it threatens the assumption that things can be known. This science fiction serves to transgress, twist and unsettle the sites from which critique can be launched. McHale (1991) in a wider review of postmodernist fiction sees science fiction as the archetypal postmodern genre. Its 'dominant' or focusing component is ontological, invoking such questions as 'Which world is this?' 'What kinds of world are there and how are they constituted?' 'Which of my selves is to engage in this world?' David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982) is a good example of such science fiction. On the surface it has many of the elements expected in a critique of the pervasive powers of the mass media. A pirate TV station transmits programmes of sexual depravity that are found to induce brain tumours. This tumour, 'a new organ... a new outgrowth of the human brain' makes the brain hallucinate. Once detached from reality the body becomes a literal (the body acquire slots to receive tapes) receptacle for re-programming. But hallucination is laid upon hallucination. Through this endlessly replicating hallucinatory virus, *Videodrome* does not simply criticise the effects of representation but moves everything into representation (Bukatman, 1993). Its transmission does not create a pseudo-reality but destroys any sense of something that is separate from representation, any sense of authenticity. 'Professor' Brian O'Blivion, the film's media guru caricature of Marshall McLuhan, informs us that 'Television is

reality, and reality is less than television.’ Our subjectivity is entirely constituted through the act of viewing.

Traditional science fiction and attempts to be critical about science fiction have a similar problem in that both seem to require commitment to the existence of something separate, unaffected and untainted. *Videodrome*’s ultimate revelation is of a global conspiracy headed by a company called ‘*Spectacular Optical*’ (mission statement- ‘We make inexpensive glasses for the Third World and missile guidance systems for NATO’). However the nefarious activities of *Spectacular Optical* may or may not be just another hallucination. But it is ultimately irrelevant, in *Videodrome* the death of the subject and the death of representation is mutual, complicit and final. In this environment, no longer is it possible to conceptualise images as representations of reality and judge them for their veracity and reliability. No longer can we identify distortions and dissimulations. Instead the simulations and the real are so intertwined that we cannot distinguish one from another.

MARKETING AND ALIEN-ATION

Although this Pomo hyper-reality has a certain vertiginous attraction, we remain somewhat uncomfortable with the message that it sends about our relationship with marketing. We want to explore the complex nature of this process of engagement by returning to and reinterpreting the notion of the ‘alien’. Of course the alien plays a central role within science fiction. However this role is played out in different ways. Here we identify three versions: the alien as destructive ‘other’; the alien as symbolic of

lost or threatened values; and finally, the alien as representative of a pervasive process of 'otherness' (Sobchack, 1987).

In its first version, whether deriving from unknown origins, artificially constructed or a perverted version of what is held to be natural, the alien is obviously demarcated as monstrous. It is something that is clearly 'Other' and something that must be stopped before it threatens what is held to be valuable. This is the archetypal 'monster from outer space' found in such works as *The War of the Worlds* (1953), *The Thing* (1951, 1982) and the *Alien* (1979, 1986, 1991, 1997) films. An alternative formulation sees the alien itself as representative of conservative values. In this science fiction the alien is held apart from the human, but only in order to display a nostalgic message about lost humanity. For instance, in films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *ET* (1982) *Starman* (1984), and of course in the various *Star Trek* incarnations, aliens often demarcate the border with the human by being better than us, more human than human. Instead of destroying, they embody and protect humanist values that are felt to be increasingly under threat.

Finally, in what might be called postmodern science fiction, it is questioned whether there is any original model of humanness from which the alien can be distanced (or alternatively seen to represent). In a world where traditional signifiers have been lost, we are all aliens whether human or extraterrestrial (Sobchack, 1987). Distinctions drawn from such binaries as alien/human are increasingly troubled. Hence this science fiction breaks down divisions such as male/female, real/imaginary, human/other, literal/metaphorical, factual/fictional, plausible/incredible. The meaning of alienation is

eroded if, as in certain science fiction, colonisation is no longer the result of invasion by an identifiable Other. Science fiction 'no longer symbolically figure the alien-ation generated by a whole new economic world system, but rather our *incorporation* of that new system and our *absorption* by it' (Sobchack 1987: 252- italics in original). *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Solaris* (1961), *Blade Runner* (1982) and the previously discussed *Videodrome* (1982) all produce this ontological confusion.

When we allow these characterisations to resonate with approaches to marketing, we find different, but somewhat familiar messages produced. The postmodern view, as discussed earlier with reference to *Videodrome*, presents the division between the marketing and the non-marketing world as no longer sustainable. Marketing is seen to have conducted its own programme of colonisation. Through this process the language, practice and ordering processes of marketing have become irretrievably taken for granted in the creation of our-selves. Like 'postmodern' science fiction, marketing is preoccupied with the ontological. It fragments, builds and re-builds worlds. Some elements of marketing likes to think that it can build better worlds. But we cannot step outside. There is no outside world separate from marketing. The movement of marketing techniques into the 'normal environment' is now complete (Cleverly, 1999).

If this is a broadly Baudrillardian perspective, then the other versions use the alien to implicitly draw upon critical theory. Hence they follow a similar rationale but switch their symbolism. Thus the alien either threatens 'authentic' values or represents and protects them. It is a similar type of engagement that we have seen applied by science fiction to marketing, but also to science fiction because of its strong commercial

instincts. Both positions are constructed from a position of certain superiority, a position that allows condemnation and revulsion. Thus much science fiction⁵ dismisses marketing as force that stimulates unfettered consumption whilst numbing us to the destructive effects of its materialism. In turn the contemporary SF blockbuster is subjected to the same critiques that science fiction has directed at the world of marketing. Thus Hartwell (1984) argues that science fiction was a televisual narcotic directed at the adolescent population of the United States. These cultural dopes are the archetypal science fiction ‘anoraks’, ‘pimple faced nerds in rubber Vulcan ears or wrapped in multifaceted scarves, overweight women clutching collectibles and dolls’ (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: vii). Personified in this pitiful spectacle is all that critical theorists despise- blind consumerism, an obsession with trivia, a fixation with gadgetry, a loss of dignity and respect and either a retreat from the pressing issues of the real world or, worse, a total inability to decipher fact from fiction (See Alvesson, 1994).

But those who offer these criticisms cannot preserve their detachment. For instance Adorno’s (1991) treatment of the capitalist culture industry distinguishes it from art because of its commercial vulgarity. Yet of course this analysis proceeds on the basis of deep knowledge. The products of the culture industry have been thoroughly sampled before they are rejected. For Umberto Eco (1994) this exposes an ill-concealed desire, ‘the barely disguised manifestation of a frustrated passion, a love betrayed, or rather, the neurotic display of a repressed sensuality, similar to that of the moralist who, in the very act of denouncing the obscenity of an image, pauses at such length and with such voluptuousness to contemplate the loathsome object of his contempt that his true nature-

that of carnal, lustful animal- is betrayed' (Eco, 1994: 25-6). The critic has to face the implications of involvement with the object of her criticism.

In her essay *The Imagination of Disaster*, Susan Sontag (1971) discusses the nature of our engagement with alien inhabitants of science fiction. This engagement is, she argues, the,

Undeniable pleasure we derive from looking at freaks, beings excluded from the category of the human. The sense of superiority over the freak conjoined in varying proportions with the titillation of fear and aversion makes it possible for moral scruples to be lifted for cruelty to be enjoyed. The same thing happens in science fiction films. In the figure of the monster from outer space, the freakish, the ugly, the predatory, all converge- and provide a fantasy target or righteous bellicosity to discharge itself, and for the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering and disaster

(Sontag, 1971: 316).

Yet this account gives no attention to the implicate nature of the alien gaze. Sontag speaks of the monstrous 'Other', something that is so obviously apart that it receives only our scorn. But the aliens in science fiction are often neither obviously apart, nor completely absorbed. One of the most successful examples of contemporary science fiction is the *X-Files*, a television series notable for its menagerie of alien types, alien/human hybrids and freaks of nature⁶. Indeed the episode '*Humbug*' (1995) takes place in a community of freaks in which a series of murders have taken place. Mulder

and Scully are sent to investigate. Rapidly the hierarchical distinction between the 'normal' FBI investigators and the freak is brought into question. In a key scene, one morning Scully is awoken by Lenny, a freak with an incipient conjoined twin. Scully still dazed from sleep is unable to resist searching for signs of Lenny's physical abnormality, the attachment of his brother to his waist. At the same time Lenny is drawn to Scully's partially exposed breasts. Realising what they have been doing, both restore normality by covering themselves. Soon it is the physical normality of the FBI agents, which sets them apart. Mulder's bland dress sense and his catalogue model good looks begin to cause revulsion⁷. The story soon becomes a battle with the assumptions of (ab)normality. The rational Scully is faced with a troubling paradox. She has to convince the local Sheriff, formerly 'Jim, the Dog Faced Boy', that just because he regards his community as 'normal folk' does not mean that they cannot be killers. Most serial killers, she explains, are regarded as mundane by those who know them. No longer then, can we be certain of the limits of normality.

These limits are never entirely lost. But, neither are they secure. We are continually troubled by the trace of their presence. The alien as freak then cuts a liminal figure, but one that causes us to reflect upon ourselves. We, to paraphrase Eco, contemplate the loathsome object but are forced to consider our own nature, and pause to wonder whether it is, in fact, natural.

CONCLUSIONS

Science fiction is more than a reflexive resource through which to gaze upon marketing. Reading it as just another site of criticism misses firstly the complicity of its relationship

with commerce, but more importantly, that science fiction ultimately ends up problematising the stability of these sites. The drawing of boundaries between ourselves and the Other, alien and human, the subject and critic is often uncertain. This is not to say that they entirely disappear, but the boundaries themselves become matters of debate.

This tensile movement is wonderfully illuminated by a tale of Sunday afternoon lunch. It is an encounter with the golden arches of *McDonald's* that Morris Holbrook (1999) relates in the *Journal of Macromarketing*. The story revolves around Morris and his wife's Sunday afternoon drives. On route to nowhere in particular, they stop at *McDonald's*. *McDonald's* offers an Arch Deluxe for \$2.99 and an Arch Deluxe with Bacon for \$3.29. Morris' wife orders an Arch Deluxe without bacon and also without cheese. This request causes great consternation for the waitress, who trained in the art of standardised meal order inputs, is unable to find an appropriate key on her till for the order. She ultimately resorts to inputting an Arch Deluxe with Bacon, whilst shouting to the kitchen to void the cheese and the bacon. Despite such efforts the burger naturally comes in its pre-ordained form, with cheese and bacon. Whilst this story is unusual only in its mundanity, most of us having probably enjoyed a similar experience, what is of interest is the way in which Holbrook takes great pleasure and pride in recounting this tale; the knowing relish of being able to see the opponent's hand, the (smug) satisfaction of being at the receiving end of Ritzer's (1997) 'irrationality of rationality'. Indeed George Ritzer himself, in a presentation at a recent conference⁸, showed the slipperiness of our corporate encounters when he spoke of (another) *McDonald's* purchase. Wishing to make an argument about the 'invisibility' of the visible kitchen

areas, he began to sense that the audience were beginning to wonder why he continues to frequent such awful places. Rizter explained that he was 'really thirsty' and that there was really nowhere else to go in the busy international airport terminal. Catching himself, he then wondered out loud why he always felt obliged to indulge in such shaky self-justifications.

Despite our desire to perceive *Ronald McDonald* as the new threat from outer space⁹, many of us remain customers, viewers, followers and critics. And what is more delicious than being able to perform all of these roles? Would *McDonald's* be half the fun without the half-hearted, manufactured smiles, the product placements, the bucket seats and garish décor, the slow fast-food and being able to complain about standardised milk shakes 'tasting different'. And those burgers are so damn tasty. A new type of total customer experience- dissatisfaction and satisfaction rolled into one ecstatic bundle; an opportunity to bemoan the failings of service delivery whilst enjoying the pleasures of flesh.

This form of alien-nation forces us to question a somewhat superior, motivated no doubt by some notional sense of authenticity, critical distancing from marketing's vulgar horrors. But this does not mean that we must fall victim to the vertiginous pull of the corporate abyss. The passive, programmable, bewilderment of the *Videodrome* is similarly simplistic. Both positions have something in common. They rest ultimately in static states. Either the security of knowing something to be true. Or the security of knowing everything is false. But both of these stabilisations give us little purchase on our engagement with marketing. Clearly we are neither entirely critical nor entirely

beguiled. We participate, withdraw, display wonder, show disgust, believe, are sceptical, test, play, enthuse, and detach. Science fiction exposes the fluidity of these positions. Asseverations are diluted. Like tears in rain.

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ENDNOTES

¹ C.C. MacApp's (1968) short story *And All the World a Grave* is another excellent critique of marketing's construction of desire. An accountancy error provides a coffin manufacturer with a massive advertising budget. Soon death becomes the latest status symbol.

² See for example <http://www.parascope.com/articles/0397/sublim.htm> 'Subliminal threat : The Subliminal Scares'.

³ It is no coincidence that in Ray Bradbury's (1953) *Fahrenheit 451* drugs and television are similarly addictive.

⁴ Some would be tempted to debate whether Star Wars, given its reliance on fantasy archetypes, is science fiction. We find such questions remarkably tedious and prefer to admire Darth Maul's light sabre.

⁵ Of course we must be suspicious of distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' science fiction given that many 'classics' were originally dismissed as trash.

⁶ Recently the series has increasingly parodied itself- in a recent episode a weary Fox Mulder investigating the tale of an alien (extraterrestrial) baseball player asks, "So I assume that you're speaking metaphorically?" His subject, the brother of the originator of the X-Files replies "Speaking metaphorically is for young men like you agent McGuyver, I don't have time for that. I only have time for speaking the truth." Mulder comes to the point, "Is X a man who is metaphorically an alien, or an alien who is

metaphorically a man, or a something in between who is literally an alien-human hybrid?"

⁷ Dr. Blockhead sneers at society's entirely abnormal desire for conformity, "I've seen the future, and the future looks just like him."

⁸ Critical Interventions: Obscene Powers: Corruptions, Coercion and Violence, 11-12 December, 1999, University of Southampton.

⁹ See <http://absurdgallery.com/arch.shtml>