Postmodern Doom and *Transmetropolitan* Redemption

Daniel FERRERAS SAVOYE
Department of Foreign Languages
West Virginia University
dferrera@wvu.edu

Abstract
The analysis of the semiotic relationship between the city and the science fiction mode in Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* allows first of all for a critical introduction that challenges certain canonical certainties regarding the science fiction mode as well as the medium of comic books, and lead us to refine our terminology to better distinguish literary genres from narrative modes. *Transmetropolitan* can be considered as paradigmatic when it comes to the treatment of the city in the science fiction mode for it offers a variety of interpretive layers, which, when studied from the particular to the general—from micro to macro-structures—enable us to establish a vast array of connotative levels that work complementarily in order to generate a highly coherent narrative semiosphere. Ultimately, the study of the narrative function of the city as theme and background in the *Transmetropolitan* saga reveals its political and ethical intentionality, which transcends the ideological limitations of post-structuralist cultural constructionism and puts forth a hopeful, albeit lucid and godless positivism.
Keywords: *Transmetropolitan,* Warren Ellis, science fiction, Darick Robertson, prospective.

Título: Condena postmoderna y redención *Transmetropolitana*
Resumen
El análisis de las relaciones semióticas entre la ciudad y el modo de la ciencia ficción en la obra de Warren Ellis y Darick Roberston, *Transmetropolitan,* permite ante todo una introducción crítica que cuestiona ciertas certidumbres canónicas tanto respecto al modo de la ciencia ficción como acerca del medio de los cómics, y nos lleva a una redefinición terminológica para mejor distinguir los géneros literarios de los modos narrativos. *Transmetropolitan* se ha de considerar como una obra paradigmática en cuanto al tratamiento de la ciudad en el modo de la ciencia ficción, y ofrece una variedad de dimensiones interpretativas que, estudiadas desde lo particular hacia lo general –desde las micro hacia las macro-estructuras–, nos permiten establecer una serie de niveles connotativos que se complementan entre sí para generar una semiosfera narrativa altamente coherente. En última instancia, el estudio de la saga de *Transmetropolitan* revela su intencionalidad tanto política como ética, que transciende las limitaciones ideológicas del construccionismo cultural pos-estructuralista para promocionar un positivismo esperanzado, aunque lúcido y sin dios.

Palabras clave: *Transmetropolitan,* Warren Ellis, ciencia ficción, prospectiva, Darick Robertson.

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1. Critical Tensions

The choice of Warren Ellis' and Darick Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* as corpus of study to establish fundamental semiotic correlations between the genre of science fiction and its representation of the urban narrative theme and motifs within a postmodern consciousness situates this essay within a wider canonical, hence critical debate: *Transmetropolitan* is after all a science fiction comic book, and thus unworthy of academic consideration by traditional definition. Concerning the genre of science fiction, the issue is of course far from new, however we seem today further than ever from any possible resolution: science fiction—just as detective narrations or fantastic stories[1] —is currently in a sort of critical limbo, for, if we have on the one hand accepted the necessity to devote scholarly attention to popular culture artifacts and consequently to challenge well-established and commonly accepted canonical notions, we have not on the other articulated any theoretical apparatus which would allows us to transcend (*dépasser*) our current conception of the canon, nor have we really tried: between Harold Bloom's relentless efforts to salvage and consolidate a vision of the Occidental canon that may seem to many as slightly fossilized[2] for it enthusiastically ignores

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[1] The definition of the fantastic genre has become vaguer yet than it was two decades ago, as generic distinctions—an activity that would seem to belong to the field of literary studies—has given way to more meta-theoretical than truly literary inquiries. If, following Todorov's well-known *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* some efforts where made in post-structuralist times to define gender barriers (Ferreras Savoye 1995), such endeavor has been all but abandoned as the empire of theory and meta-theory set in, which has caused the discipline of literary studies to start aping neighboring fields, such as psychoanalysis and philosophy, borrowing often badly digested conceptual apparatuses that dissolve our endeavor into over-conceptualized rhetorics.

[2] See Bloom's description of the Western literary canon, which prompts very serious questions in terms of artistic and cultural evaluation; to discard for instance Emilia Pardo Bazán from the Spanish 19th century canon is highly questionable, as are the inclusion of Pascal's *Pensées* or that of Bossuet's *Oraisons funèbres* and the

most twenty centuries popular works and authors on the one hand, and the radical relativism of postmodern thought that rejects instinctively any type of hierarchy—artistic or otherwise—as a pernicious cultural construction bearing the unmistakable sign of hegemonic abuse on the other, there is indeed little room to maneuver. Postmodern thought has once and for all discarded any notion of objective evaluation in terms of aesthetic evaluation[3] and the growing amount of critical inquiries of the postmodern persuasion that tackle the vast and diverse corpus of popular culture have the tendency to extrapolate highly generalized conclusions from a synecdochical apprehension of the corpus, which is naturally only considered significant insofar as it suits the intended theoretical purpose. The priority given to the theoretical demonstration over the analysis of the corpus' possible artistic merit—a notion that would appear in itself suspiciously objective—has paradoxically denied some important works from the attention they deserve while conferring to others what may seem to many as an exaggerated interest. If there is no doubt that the artistic qualities of Raymond Chandler' and Philip K. Dick's works deserve critical recognition[4], perhaps some other artifacts might be considerably less interesting form the point of view of their artistic signification, regardless of their widely popular reception[5].

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exclusion of Donaltien Alphonse de Sade and that of important surrealist precursor Lautréamont, author of the *Chants de Maldoror*, from the French canon: the very belonging of both *Pensées* or *Funerary Oraisons* to literature is already more than suspicious for their respective intentions are more of a theological than of an artistic nature. When it comes to popular literature, Bloom's classification is fundamentally unusable and could be seen as a direct binary opposition to any attempt to structure a more modern view of the canon, for it openly disregards authors and works which might be considered by many as quite influential in spite of their "popular" aura, such a Alexandre Dumas, Conan Doyle or H.P. Lovecraft; as to the genre of science fiction, besides a few canonically accepted exceptions, i.e., Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Thomas Pynchon's *V*, it is mostly absent from Bloom's vision—we are indeed left then wondering if science fiction could be literature at all.

[3] *Cfr.* Eagleton (2003), chapter 1: "The Politics of Amnesia".

[4] The place of Raymond Chandler within the literary canon is not yet a given, and even a Marxian critic such as Eagleton still has his doubts concerning the godfather of the hard-boiled detective story (Culler 1997: "Introduction: What Is Literature?").

[5] At this point, the difference between what deserves to be studied as an artistic referent and what should be analyzed as a social or cultural phenomenon is paramount: whether or not Meyer's *Twilight* or David Cameron's *Avatar* deserve their share of sociological attention is beyond questioning; what is less clear, however, is the evaluation of their intrinsic artistic qualities. This is of course hardly the place to examine the artistic qualities—or absence thereof—of either the *Twilight* novels series or of Cameron's latest universal globalized blockbuster, however, and to remain on the fringes of the debate, let's just say that if originality can be considered as a more or less unmistakable trait of true works of art, both

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1.1. Canonical uncertainties

If the positivism of any canonical position appears irremediably associated to the past and is represented by scholars such as Harold Bloom who do not really incarnates a cutting-edge view of the literary phenomenon, the radical relativism of postmodern critical theory implies a constant suspicion of any canonization attempt and quickly transcends the literary dimension to articulate a meta-theoretical discourse, often based upon the promotion of very determined ideological positions. Literature becomes a battlefield, waiting to be territorialized by any given critical theory[6], and the notion of the all-encompassing Great Text, dear to post-structuralism, logically does not allow to draw concrete differences between its different manifestations, canonical or otherwise. Since all is in the Text, any text is in actuality a pre-text to push forward a theoretical agendas that precedes the actual deciphering or interpretation of any given cultural artifact.

As the attention shifted from the texts themselves to theoretical speculations regarding major issues of human condition, the "science of literature" dreamed by the early formalists and structuralists is indeed regarded as a chimera of the past, which furthermore participated in the general hegemonic order that postmodern thought sought to denounce from the very start. But radical cultural constructionism comes at a price, and ironically, it is precisely that which motivated our endeavor in the first place, namely literature itself[7]. The general suspicion towards any type of objective disposition, the substitution of literary texts by theoretical and meta-theoretical inquiries and the triumph of not always well-digested

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Twilight and *Avatar* fall far from the mark: the borrowing of paradigms from other genres—the fantastic in the case of *Twilight*, and space-opera, would-be science fiction in that of *Avatar*—cannot hide the fact that *Twilight* is a predictable teenage romance novel and *Avatar* a no less predictable epic/marvelous narration; in both cases, the adaptation of paradigms from other popular genres does not alter the composition of the narrative syntagm, which remains quite characteristic of the original narrative structures, whether it be that of romance novels or that of traditional marvelous narrations.

[6] The process of erasure that is increasingly affecting both the definition and the corpus of literary studies can be exposed in the words of a most vocal supporters of postmodern critical theory in general and of French theory in particular, Jonathan Culler, who often defines "literary theory" in the following terms: "Theory in this sense is not a set of methods for literary study but an unbounded corpus of writing about everything under the sun […]" (Culler 1992: 203 and *Introduction*).

[7] According to Paul de Man's affirmations, which have become axiomatic in today's theory infused criticism, "any difference between literature and criticism is *delusive* (my emphasis)" (1973); this naturally prompts the question of the very nature of our occupation: if indeed any theoretical discourse is literature, then we simply have no theory—unless it is the other way around, but then again in the circular epistemology of postmodern thought, such distinction becomes superfluous.

conceptual apparatuses borrowed from neighboring fields, such as psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology or, of course, philosophy, have diverted us from any attempt to define both our field and our corpus of study. Consequently, the important mediatic changes that have affected the manners in which we perceive narrative semiospheres have not been approached from the point of view of their possible artistic merits, but rather have becomes bases for socio-philosophico-literary inquiries that, notwithstanding their political importance—and even their urgency[8]—have not contributed to a better understanding and acceptance of narrative modes and media usually associated with popular culture, such as science fiction and comic books.

By its very corpus of study, this essay is thus to be considered as an implicit attempt to relocate the medium of comic books—as well as the genre of science fiction—within a new, more realistic and perhaps more convincing narrative canon[9]. As the definition of our corpus of study is quickly disappearing behind either canonical intransigence or ideological priorities, it appears indeed urgent to rescue some a truly significant narrative work such as *Transmetropolitan*, by selecting it as privileged corpus of study for the analysis of the vast array of semiotic correlations that are to be found between the science function mode and the city.

2. Genres and modes

Terminologically speaking, the notion of literary genre has become obsolete, for it excludes the distinction between genre and mode: a literary genre can correspond to a formal specificity, such poetry versus prose narration, including as well its subdivisions—such as fables versus elegies, novel versus novella or fairy tale versus short story—however, it can also refer to a conception of the artistic endeavor itself, and so, we usually speak as well of the romantic or realistic genres, which can indeed be expressed in a variety of

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[8] Current debates around major issues such as gender or racial hegemonies are indeed most needed to progress towards a better comprehension of the world and the Other and could be considered as a humanist counterpart to economic globalization.

[9] The current diversification of narrative supports renders the notion of "literary" increasingly vague and somewhat outdated, revealing the unspoken generic flaws of its very inception: indeed, as exposed elsewhere (Ferreras Savoye 2011), if Shakespeare's plays are commonly accepted as the most representative elements of the Occidental literary canon, we must then deduce that the literary canon is in actuality based upon the appreciation of another medium, namely theatre. It must pointed out, however, that recent scholarly efforts in popular literature studies, such as in particular Fernando Moreno's important *Teoría de la literatura de ciencia ficción*, seem to demonstrate a necessity to return towards generic definitions in order to better apprehend the limits of our corpus without either theoretical nor canonical prejudices.

manners also called "genres". The concept of *mode* allows to establish the difference between a formal characteristic and an artistic intent; and so, we will refer to the mode rather than to the genre of science fiction, for it has always implied at least two literary genres, the novel and the short story.

Besides distinguishing between genre and mode, we must as well introduce the mediatic dimension, which corresponds to the support of the message itself; the science fiction mode has materialized in a variety of media without loosing its essential components, and to address its fundamental definition implies acknowledging what are traditionally considered as "non-literary" manifestations: it would indeed be naïve to pretend to analyze the science fiction phenomenon in a comprehensive manner without keeping in mind its formidable multi-mediatic success, if nothing else as an obvious point of reference for today's receptor. Mediatic distinctions have never really entered the great canonical debate, which explains why a playwright, Shakespeare, is considered as the most viable literary canonic value, even though his medium of predilection happened to be theatre and not literature[10]. The same could be said regarding Teresa de Ávila in regard to the Spanish literary canon or of Pascal vis-à-vis the French one: it could be argued that in both cases, the medium of the sermon is a determining influence in their writings, hence the oral conception of the message precedes its textual materialization[11]. We naturally associate canonical status to media as well as modes, and in a lesser measure, to genres themselves: in spite of having been immortalized by the likes of Poe and Maupassant, the short story genre for instance might not command the same authority as the novel, at least in our current perception of the literary canon. When we oppose

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[10] For all their importance and aesthetic qualities, Shakespeare's poems remain far behind his plays in terms of diffusion; logically, the formal semiotic violence which defines poetry is not as universally exportable as performed dramatic situations and conflicts, and here lies perhaps one of the most obvious differences between both media; notwithstanding the crucial importance of language in theatre, and especially in Shakespeare, we must not forget the semiotic weight of the performance, which participates fully in the overall message and supposes a fragmentation of the sending entity.

[11] Regardless of their aesthetic value, the evaluation of which is naturally opened for debate for it implies a high degree of subjectivity, the intentionality of both Ávila' and Pascal's texts is not artistic but theological, therefore to include them into the Spanish and French literary canons is to make abstraction of the very conditions for their inception in the first place; in spite of their remarkable differences, *Les Pensées* and *Las Moradas* are very similar in their fundamental intent, that of edifying the sinner as well as the believer—or only the believer if we are to believe sociologist Lucien Goldmann (*Le Dieu Caché*)—and thus, their medium of choice in terms of conception is closer to the oral sermon than to the written narration.

"popular" modes and media, such as detective stories or comic books to "true literary works" by "true" novelists—whichever and whoever these might be[12]—the status determination and its implicit influence upon the reception becomes blatantly apparent: the canonical reflex is to take for granted that neither popular genres nor media are susceptible to produce truly artistic works. As we will see now, a close analysis of the semiotic characteristics of *Transmetropolitan* will help us challenge these canonical certainties by revealing its polysemic and referential qualities, which entitle us to consider it a true work of art, as well as an ideal corpus to explore the intricate relationship between science fiction and urban spaces, for the city is at the core of *Transmetropolitan,* both formally and referentially, and constitutes the background of the narration as well as the reason for its existence: the significance of *Transmetropolitan,* which relies on a constant negotiation between doom and redemption in a postmodern universe, cannot be dissociated from that of The City.

2.1. Urban Microstructures

From the very start—before we begin to read—*Transmetropolitan* inscribes itself onomastically within the urban space at two different levels, by the etymological origin of its title—*metropolis*—as well as by the implications of the prefix *trans*–, which denotes a place of exchange, communication and transformation, that is The City. It also intertextually situates the narration within the genre of comic books by connoting the name of Superman's adopted city, Metropolis, which, just as Gotham is the setting for most of Batman's feats, functions as the main background for the adventures of the Man of steel. Before it was fused with the genre of super-heroes[13], and as far back as the venerable Yellow Kid comic strips, the comic book medium has been associated to urban space and experience, if nothing else because of its initial conditions of production and distribution, hence *Transmetropolitan* can be seen as a natural evolution of both mediatic and generic tendencies that all but reinforce the thematic relationship between the city and this

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[12] One could argue that the originality of "serious" literature lies in its capacity to escape a predetermined narrative or semiotic structure, unlike for instance the traditional detective story which must conform to a certain pattern, i.e., must respect a more or less specific syntagmatic organization of precise paradigms; however, today's serious, canonically eligible literary production seems to be unable to shake a certain dose of social and psychological realism, a direct legacy of the great, highly canonical 19th century novel, and thus might be in the end more respectable than truly original.

[13] This common association between a narrative genre—that of super-heroes—and an entire medium—comic books—can be considered mainly as a North American phenomenon, and is intricately related to specific historical and cultural contexts (Hadju 2008; Ferreras Savoye 2011).

particular medium, rendering it a privileged corpus of study to analyze the science fictional representation of urban space. However, the Transmetropolitan city is no longer a simple copy of our urban environment as are Superman's Metropolis or Batman's Gotham—with or without the added grittiness of their latest incarnations—but a truly futuristic universe, which reunites the best as well as the worst of our social and technological projections. Whereas, from a strictly narrative point of view, Superman or Batman belong more to the traditional epic-heroic adventure mode than to science fiction, and hence present little or no ambiguity vis-à-vis the moral and social consciousness they purport, *Transmetropolitan*, on the contrary, introduces social and ethical dilemmas from the beginning, as The City has become privileged ground to evoke the future of today's postmodern concerns: Metropolis reassures for it represents an answer; the transmetropolitan City disturbs for it remains a constant question.

Throughout the entire narration, the transmetropolitan City remains nameless, and therefore acquires a quasi-ontological status, for it suggests simultaneously all possible cities and the only possible city. It is opposed to another city—Paris—in an exchange that implies the defeat of the French capital, since it is when France has just accepted to make the French language illegal in order for international sanctions to be lifted. The connotations of Paris—traditional, classical, cultural, historical—are well-represented by the drawings and naturally opposed to the chaotic, semiotically incoherent City as it is depicted from the start. The course of history, which has become implicitly that of the urban space, is set, and the Nameless, Essential City, essentially Anglo-Saxon, has defeated the culturally and historically meaningful city, Paris, the symbolic cradle of the Enlightenment century and of modern social order. In this sense, the transmetropolitan City, product of the Anglo-Saxon brand of industrial revolution, has substituted the most emblematic urban entity of European Enlightenment, as the capitalistic priorities of exploitation and financial gain have replaced the French revolutionary values of solidarity and commonwealth.

The ontological value of this nameless city is also suggested by the economy of the narration, for the narrative syntagm begins as the protagonist, Spider Jerusalem, is summoned by his editor to leave his refuge in the mountains and to come back to the city in order to fulfill his publishing contract. Spider Jerusalem is unable to write when not in the city, hence, leaving the mountains is the equivalent of coming back to existence and acquiring a true narrative consistency. The diegetic tension in *Transmetropolitan* solely depends upon Spider Jerusalem's return to The City, for it is the only space where he can acquire his function. Logically, and although the structure of *Transmetropolitan* is not exactly closed, the epilogue

shows Spider Jerusalem back in the mountains after the main conflict, that is the vector of the main level of narrative tension, is resolved: leaving the City also means leaving the narrative universe.

This relationship between urban space and narrative tension is initially micro-structurally suggested by the two books that we encounter on the floor of Spider Jerusalem's mountain refuge among broken furniture and empty bottles on the first page of the first volume (*Back on the Street*), namely John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing [in Las Vegas]*[14]. Both novels are each intrinsically related to a city, New Orleans and Las Vegas respectively, which provide the entire spectrum of urban possibilities by opposition, for, although both cities function as touristic destinations, they stand for opposite values and offer contrary characteristics: New Orleans is a historical landmark which bares the traces of both French and Spanish domination, and exhibits a very traditional type of cityscape; Las Vegas, on the contrary, is among the most recent well-known cities in the world and presents no architectural coherence whatsoever, as it renews itself constantly with no clear direction other than spectacularity. The presence of both *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and of *A Confederacy of Dunces* at the beginning of the narration semiotically underline the importance of the city—be it of the traditional type such as New Orleans or of the proto-postmodern persuasion such as Las Vegas—as privileged environment to create both narrative tension and epistemological questioning; let's not forget that Ignacius in *A Confederacy of Dunces* deplores the meaninglessness of the modern world and longs for existential significance and that Raoul Duke along with his lawyer, Dr. Gonzo, set out to find the "American Dream" in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Ignacius as well as Duke—Hunter Thompson's alter-ego—are both in search of a deeper meaning, of some sort of truth, and so is Spider Jerusalem, who could be seen both as a modern Don Quixote, a figure to which Ignacius from *A Confederacy* is often compared, and as a gonzo reporter whose outlook on life and on the art of journalism is remarkably close to that of Hunter S. Thompson. The physical appearance of Spider Jerusalem—tall, skinny and bald—, his constant search for the truth as well as his violent intolerance towards hypocrisy and stupidity remind us of both a postmodern Don Quixote and an updated version of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson; Spider Jerusalem's dear refuge in the mountains is indeed itself reminiscent of Thompson's

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[14] Although we are unable to see the entire cover, and therefore to determine if one of the books lying on the floor is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '76*, the success and importance of the first tends to overshadow the significance of the latter; it is indeed with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that Thompson coined his famous catch phrase.

Owl Farm in Colorado, where the creator of gonzo journalism spent most of his last years.

As we can see, The City is omnipresent at both narrative and semiotic levels from the very beginning of *Transmetropolitan* as the only possible environment for a convincing representation of the future. However, it paradoxically also offers a synchronic view of the past, as traditional notions of history and cultural hegemony collapse in a timeless futuristic consciousness.

2.2. The Future of the Past

The transmetropolitan City possesses historical memory for, in spite of being a display case for disorderly and radical technological advances, it also caters to the preservation of the past by harboring some of its manifestations under the form of living spectacles called The Reservations, and becomes hence also a repository of the past. The Reservations, which Spider Jerusalem visits in order to write a column (vol. 2, *Lust For Life*) are the most obvious example of a postmodern preoccupation for the past and its need to comprehend it without exercising any type of epistemic violence[15]. The Reservation are literal reconstitutions of past historical periods that go well beyond simple re-enactments, for the individuals who volunteer to be part of any given display accept to have their memory banks erased and re-programmed to comply with the selected period and place. And so, as we accompany Spider Jerusalem during his excursion to the Tikal Reservation, we see a ritual beheading, which is perceived as a natural event by the natives as well as presented by the narration as the direct reason for the forthcoming, inevitable demise of this particular Reservation: "It will kill them, just like it killed the original Mayan cities. This is the fifth Tikal Reservation. People die to teach us lessons about religion and environment. We keep history close, to make damned sure we learn from it" (131).

This particular representation of the past implies a rejection of epistemic violence for it promotes the non-intervention of the hegemonic cultural structures upon the primitive worlds it represents, and thus espouses—most likely unwillingly—one of the main conceptual staples of postcolonial theory. The Reservations and the efforts devoted to make their existence possible suggest indeed an epistemological need to identify past cultures without necessarily imposing any type of hegemonic structure, regardless of the outcome. For instance, a few Middle East Reservations still practice the "cutting of the rose", that is the excision of the clitoris, and although both Spider Jerusalem and the female director of the

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[15] See Foucault's notion of "epistemic violence", abundantly used by Spivak in particular and by postcolonial theory in general, which consists in imposing the epistemological certainties of the colonizer upon the colonized.

Cultural Reservation Systems find the notion revolting, both understand the necessity of respecting cultural traditions without attempting to force a different system of values upon them.

However, and as to underline the difficulty for The City to actually relate to a historically defined past, Spider Jerusalem implicitly deplores the lack of interest most of his contemporaries exhibit vis-à-vis the Reservations. The transmetropolitan City can re-create history and affords anyone who cares the possibility of re-visiting it; but the constant evolving present of the future does not seem to allow for any real historical consciousness, yet another very marked postmodern trait of the narration, for it emphasizes the concept of contingency in relation to our understanding of reality. The City's collective consciousness is locked into an constant contextualizing movement that prevents any deeper understanding of past history.

The inability to relate the past to the future is also expressed by the motif of the cryogenically frozen individuals who have come back to life in this undetermined but fairly distant future. Due to the facilities required by the process of bringing them back to life, The City is the only place where they can be resurrected, but, far from the usual treatment of this typical science fiction paradigm, *Transmetropolitan* denounces rather than promotes this unnatural revival by lucidly pointing out the irresolvable contradictions it entails: thrown into the midst of a future that they cannot understand by uncaring city employees, the cryogenically frozen individuals who come back to life are depicted, both visually and textually, as some type of autistic zombies—wide eyed, behaving aimlessly and totally incapable to relate to the external world. We follow the story of Mary, a photographer from the 20th Century who was cryogenically frozen by a careless corporation and brought back to life in the transmetropolitan City, and who, as a press photographer, has witnessed most of the significant moments of the 20th Century, from "John Kennedy playing grab-ass in the White House" to "a kid walking in front of a Chinese tank" (vol. 2, *Lust For Life*: 111). Mary could be therefore considered as a most valuable witness of her time, susceptible to provide us with real information about past history. However, here again, Spider Jerusalem denounces The City's apparent lack of interest for such wonders: "Mary will live for maybe another century. But her story is over. Because you wouldn't have it any other way". Just as the rest of the so-called "Revived", Mary is condemned to wander aimlessly through the future, awaiting a second death without ever having truly come back to life, for her private stock of outdated memories, regardless of their historical significance, simply does no longer interest anyone.

The transmetropolitan City is hence impervious to the lessons of the past, and embraces an endless race into the future, as shown

by the consideration the "foglets" receive by opposition to the harsh treatment reserved to the recently resurrected. The "foglets" are a futuristic representation of what has become known in postmodern theory as "post-humanity": these are individuals who have projected their consciousness into a billion nano-machines and who can reorganize at will the molecules of which they are composed as well as those surrounding them. Whereas the Revived are instinctively alienated by the collectivity, the foglets on the other hand are celebrated and often amuse the public by creating objects out of thin air; if some Revived, such as Mary, represent a path to understanding past events, the function of the foglets is, in the end, the simple pursuit of fun and, although their conceptual existence could tend to point towards a possible totally machine-oriented evolution—a natural consequence of the mechanized dehumanization put forward by the industrial and post-industrial revolutions—, they have no real bearing upon history in the making. They remain very secondary characters, barely more than elements of the background, and do not partake into the social and political conflicts that sustain the narrative tension throughout the entire narration, quite to the contrary: they have become some type of conscious objects with no subjective and even less intersubjective consistency. The very postmodern concept of "post-humanity", made somewhat fashionable by recent critical inquiries, is hence narratively represented as well demystified by being taken to its limits: detached from any human need, the only activity left for the foglets is to amuse themselves, and they are consequently irremediably separated from humanity and deprived of true active narrative function. In *Transmetropolitan*, post-humanity is simply no humanity at all.

The futuristic transmetropolitan City is therefore the repository of the past as well as the exhibition of a present in constant transformation, and both, present and past, coexist in an uneasy manner, needing Spider Jerusalem's critical view in order to recognize the importance of historical consciousness. However, the real narrative conflict at the heart of *Transmetropolitan* does not rely upon the opposition between the deliberate ignorance of past history and the blind, unconditional acceptance of the future: Spider Jerusalem's fight is in the here and now, on the political stage of a presidential election.

3. Politicized Transmetropolis

One of the main narrative themes of *Transmetropolitan* is politics, and it cannot either be dissociated from The City, for any significant political stand belongs in the city and is confined to its limits. Spider Jerusalem's main narrative function as a political journalist is that of a catalyst for the political debate that surrounds him, which opposes "The Beast" to "The Smiler", two equally corrupted and untrustworthy

politicians, vaguely reminiscent of U.S. president Richard Nixon and of U.K prime minister Tony Blair respectively. Unlike traditional journalists, and following in the footsteps of Hunter Thompson's conception of "gonzo journalism", Spider Jerusalem's methods favor true subjectivity and total involvement over an always elusive and ultimately false objectivity. Just as Hunter S. Thompson became an honorary member of the Hell's Angels in order to gather information for his eponymous book, Spider Jerusalem favors direct interaction and even personal conflict to get to the heart of things. Although Spider Jerusalem is defined from the very beginning as a political journalist, the theme of politics only acquires the dominant role starting with the third volume of the trade paperback edition. In the economy of the narration, the first two volumes, *Back on the Street* and *Lust For Life,* can be considered introductory as well as narrative, for they serve to acquaint the receptor with the particularities of The City by including a series of apparently independent stories. The link between these different narrative snapshots that allow to present different aspects of The City as well as to show the intrepid outlaw journalist at work is the overall narrative frame, that is Spider Jerusalem's weekly column in the newspaper *The Word,* which provides a structure flexible enough to cover a wide range of narrative themes and motifs without endangering diegetic coherence. However, once the modalities of the environment have been introduced, Spider Jerusalem's struggle against the soon to be elected Smiler and his no less despicable opponent, The Beast, becomes the main axis of the narration.

During the period that precedes the election of the Smiler, The City emerges as the only place where any political decision can be made or discussed, and is the only terrain of confrontation between both candidates, for, as the text itself implies in several occasions, the candidate who takes the city takes the country. In the Transmetropolitan futuristic universe, any voice outside The City is implicitly obliterated, suggesting that any space outside of the urban realm is simply non significant: the countryside can only exist as an escape, as it does in the case of Spider Jerusalem's refuge in the mountains. As noted earlier, Spider Jerusalem is incapable of writing when he is not in The City, which means that he loses the ability that makes him both unique and a privileged witness of his time and society when he is deprived of direct contact with the urban space, embodying the dichotomy between the meaningfulness of The City and the emptiness of the Outside. In this sense, *Transmetropolitan* is particularly emblematic of the initial topographic dimension of the science fiction mode at large, which always moves from the city on to a wider plane—space, different planetary systems and galaxies—but never backwards, that is towards nature and the countryside. The City in *Transmetropolitan*, as in most science fiction narrations,

remains the departing point of the narrative syntagm, and, as it often happens in dystopian science fiction by opposition to space opera, its only real setting.

However, as we will see now, Spider Jerusalem's involvement with the transmetropolitan city reveal political concerns that transcend the confines of the official political scene and re-affirm post- postmodern values: in the universe of *Transmetropolitan*, politics are everywhere whether or not they involve politicians directly, and the difference between right and wrong, although subjected to postmodern skepticism, still operates as an objective reality.

3.1. Fighting Ground

Spider Jerusalem's first adventure after he returns to The City tells of his involvement in the Transient movement riot and can be seen as an initial significant micro-structure of *Transmetropolitan*'s political and social consciousness. Upon moving in the run-down apartment that Royce, the editor of *The Word,* has put at his disposal, and as he is skimming the TV news channels in search of inspiration, Spider Jerusalem recognizes a former friend of his, Fred Christ, who has become the leader of the Transient movement and threatens the all mighty City Hall—the maximum authority in the Transmetropolitan universe—with rioting. The Transient phenomenon is in itself the result of a globalized economy gone absurd albeit without losing its inhuman logic: some races in the universe who do not have anything to sell, nor any natural resources to barter have been reduced to sell their own genetic codes, allowing the humans who decide to splice them with their own DNA to slowly become aliens. Naturally, this radical change of organism has created a series of complications—for one, the Transient can no longer digest human food—that City Hall has refused to address. As a result, the Transient community has become increasingly unmanageable and represents a threat to the integrity of the city in the eyes of City Hall. Before the Transient actually riot, City Hall sends in several squads of heavily armed policemen and the Transient are only saved thanks to the presence of Spider Jerusalem, who, able to report live from the scene, forces by his mere presence the police to retreat in order to prevent public outrage. As acknowledgment for his valiant intervention, Spider Jerusalem is severely beaten by a group of cops on his way back home; however, as he gets up, bleeding from several wounds on his face, he laughs and expresses his satisfaction: "I'm here to stay! Shoot me and I'll spit your goddamned bullets back in your face. I'm Spider Jerusalem and fuck all of you! Ha!" (vol. 1, *Back on the Street*: 70). His live report from the scene has forced City Hall to negotiate with the members of the Transient community rather than to exterminate them as it was originally intended, therefore, Spider

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Jerusalem, the fearless outlaw journalist has accomplished his first and foremost mission: telling the truth at all costs, which implies denouncing and fighting the constant injustices of City Hall.

The Transmetropolitan City is a ruthless social machine, very similar to the appliances called "makers", which have replaced both ovens and refrigerators in everyone's kitchen and consists in base block computers that can re-arrange molecules in order to create virtually anything, following the same technological concept as the aforementioned "foglets". In the City, just as if it were operated by a non-divine "maker", discrete molecular elements—human beings—are constantly re-arranged, both individually, through temporary or permanent DNA splicing, and collectively, through City Hall's arbitrary decisions.

As a privileged space of constant exchange, the nameless and ontological City generates its owns social and cultural variety beyond a simple melting pot effect: fundamental, organic differences are created by and within the city thanks to technology, representing a purely urban social stratification, the only one with true meaning and that justifies any type of political action. Segregation, both social and urban, is born from within the confines of the city, as the traditional oppositions between city and countryside, racial and national origins are no longer meaningful. The Transient conflict, for instance, clearly corresponds to a racial opposition, however, the racial difference has grown from the inside rather than from a perception of the outside.

The City hence naturally constitutes a self-generated battlefield that opposes the voice of the un-heard—baptized by the Smiler "The New Scum"—as it is represented by outlaw journalist Spider Jerusalem and his column "I Hate It Here" to that of the dominating classes, embodied by the all mighty City Hall. This solidarity with the lower strata of the City is reinforced by Spider Jerusalem's vocabulary, which, reminiscent of Hunter Thompson's style, alternates different registers of language and include sophisticated concepts as well as very offensive profanities.

The official and unofficial political struggles led by Spider Jerusalem to alter and ultimately improve the City's consciousness imply some type of certainty as to the notions of good and evil and this is where *Transmetropolitan* strays from a radically postmodern representation of reality, for it does not exclude the possibility of escaping contingency in order to reaffirm values of a absolute nature.

3.2. Beyond the Postmodern City

Often referred to as a "cyber-punk" underground classic, *Transmetropolitan* is a decidedly postmodern work, just as its selection as a corpus of study to analyze the intricate relationship between science fiction and the city can be perceived as a postmodern, anti-canonical critical move. However, far from

representing the contingent moral value system put forward by radical cultural constructionism, *Transmetropolitan* promotes very defined notions of good and evil, and does not condone the nihilistic cynicism towards objectivity that characterizes postmodern thought, regarding technology as well as ethics[16]. In *Transmetropolitan,* sciences and technology work, for better or for worse, and the protagonist benefits from the technological advances of his time as much as his most direct antagonists. It is thanks to technology, namely to high performance real time communication devices, that Spider Jerusalem is eventually able to defeat the Smiler and to unveil the truth, and such conclusion echoes that of the Transient riot episode that we found at the beginning of the narration: Spider Jerusalem is able to prevent the massacre of the Transient community and to confound the Smiler through a judicious, perfectly timed use of the information highway, hence implicitly suggesting an unshakable faith in science and technology.

Ultimately, *Transmetropolitan* purports the triumph of the Truth and therefore escapes the moral contingency put forth by postmodern radical constructionism, and this belief is expressed throughout the narration, both micro- and macro-structurally, from the treatment of specific, independent episodes to that of the main narrative conflict. Earlier in the saga, we find a violent confrontation between Spider Jerusalem and several religious representatives at what could be qualified of a "Faith Sellers" convention. The "Faith Sellers"—regardless of their church affiliation—are described as unscrupulous liars who rely on their contemporaries' weaknesses and fears in order to exploit them emotionally and, of course, financially. Spider Jerusalem intervenes directly, demonstrating the falseness of their pretentions and, as the episode concludes after he has beaten the great priest of "The Church of Release", which practices "sacred trepanation" and destroyed his stand, the outlaw journalist declares: "All I can do is tell the Truth" (vol 2, *Lust For Life*: 69). For all his skepticism and apparently contradictory positions regarding society at large, which lead him to constantly denounce its common flaws and sometimes unbearable dumbness and perversity, Spider Jerusalem still cares about the future of the human race, and it is this irremediable love for humanity that allows him to act according to an instinctive but unquestionable ethical system. Spider Jerusalem's

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[16] The doubts expressed by poststructuralist thought vis-à-vis sciences have been duly deconstructed by Alan Sokal thanks to his now famous hoax, which consisted in publishing an absurd essay entitled "Pushing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformational Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" in a leading postmodern/post-structuralist journal, namely *Social Text* from the prestigious Duke university. For a clear exposition of the excesses of over-conceptualized rhetorics: Sebreli (2007) and Ferreras Savoye (2009).

ethical certainties are apparent at all levels of the narration, justifying not only his struggle against the corrupt presidency by also some his apparently most innocuous reactions, whether they are related or not the main conflict. For instance, we see him rescuing a little girl until her mother returns and buying back the teddy bear that her mother pawned earlier in order to purchase anti-hunger traits. The same Spider Jerusalem who often declares "if you loved me, you would all kill yourselves" is hence able to identify with the pain of an innocent child and to do what is in his power to remedy it. Within the logic of the narration, the tears and the smile of a child cannot be considered as transcendental signifieds but rather as fairly static values which produce a definite meaning by opposition, along with the Saussurian conception of semiotic exchange and against the Derridian thesis of constant language displacement.

At a macro-structural perspective, the victory of Spider Jerusalem over the corrupt president, the sinister Smiler, corresponds to a similar type of clear-cut conception of good and evil, for the truth prevails thanks to the integrity and solidarity of certain mid-level players, such as Robert McX, the main correspondent of a political news service broadcast and somewhat of a TV celebrity, the chief of police, and even Royce, Spider Jerusalem's chief editor at *The Word*. From an openly postmodern perspective, *Transmetropolitan* is able to offer a functional code of ethics, and if The City indeed breeds self-indulgence and egotism by exacerbating a false subjectivity mainly composed of desires and dreams manufactured by corporate interests, it also allows for the triumph of a righteousness based upon a static notion of the Truth.

Because of its multitude of layered semiotic codes, both textual and visual, which compose an elaborate semiosphere[17], *Transmetropolitan* must be considered as an important, truly visionary work of art, which defies canonical prejudices as well as challenges the nihilistic tendencies of radical postmodern thought as expressed through cultural constructionism: contingency and contextualization will no change the fact that a little girl will be happier if she can get her teddy bear back, and that society will improve if its leaders are reminded that they are not immune to public scrutiny. In a post-postmodern world, the Transmetropolitan City demonstrates that lucidity does not exclude understanding, and that believing in a godless Truth is still not only possible, but urgent and necessary.

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[17] The semiosphere is understood as a meaning generating system composed of a variety of different semiotic codes functioning in a complementary manner (Lotman 2005).

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