Speculative Satire in Contemporary Literature and Film

Rant Against the Regime

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1 The Rant

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The purpose of this chapter is to outline in detail the Rant being proposed. Distinctively, the Rant blends three fictive forms—satire, science fiction, monster tale—in the pursuit of exposing, and perhaps even starting to dismantle, the dominant ideologies of our time. First, I set the specific cultural stage in which the Rant operates. Next, I discuss in turn each component genre of the Rant. Finally, I delineate the kind of social and political critique at the core of such works. As the reader will see, there are a number of moving parts in play when it comes to understanding the Rant.

Modern State, Postmodern Critique

My fundamental premise is that the Rant is a subgenre of modern satire that has come into being in the last four decades or so; moreover, it is always a form of political satire. Although the Rant has certain roots and precursors in literary satiric practices stretching back to early modern Europe as well as to the ancient Romans and Greeks, my primary focus is not in situating the Rant within a broad historical and literary category. Instead, I put forward and investigate the Rant as a satiric creation of our contemporary moment. Such a view and approach to this new form of political commentary, then, necessarily involves the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault theorizes the modern state to be a system of differentiations wherein a powerful minority, through various instrumental modes, forms of institutions, and degrees of rationalization, is able to act upon the actions of the majority of the population ("Subject" 140–141). Such disciplinary power creates a regimen of "truth"—a dominant and sanctioned worldview—that is a condition for the formation and development of capitalism ("Truth" 316–317). Foucault stresses, however, that although power relations are inevitable to society, those that are established are never everlasting or inescapable. Modern hegemony is particularly subject to alteration and renegotiation. Comments Foucault:

> I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the "agonism" between power relations and the

intransitivity of freedom is an increasingly political task—even, the political task that is inherent in all social existence.

<div align="right">("Subject" 140)</div>

Since the early modern era, much satire has come to serve, in my view, this function of challenging the "truth" formulated by power.[1] Specifically, modern satire is adept at, as Foucault characterizes the method, "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" ("Truth" 317–318). In the early 21st century, one needs only watch episodes of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, or *Last Week Tonight*, for example, to witness the strategies and techniques of satire applied toward the debunking of powerful political and corporate bunk.

Other key ideas from Foucault's theories pertain to modern satire as well. For example, from *Discipline and Punish*: how the main effect of the panopticon on the prisoner is a permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power (201–202); how the early modern transition from feudal monarchal spectacle to modern panoptic surveillance featured a new conception of power as a set of actions upon other actions (208–209); and how feudal power sought to form a single great cultural body, but modern power seeks to fabricate particular kinds of individuals that contribute to the productivity of the regulated state (216–217). All of these phenomena become distinct when comparing, say, the feudal and monarchal intimidation taking place in Dryden's political satire *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) as opposed to the carceral control enacted by the modern state in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (1985). Similarly, Foucault points out in "Truth and Power" that whereas feudal power was a repressive power that said "No," modern power is a productive power that produces goods, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and constructs discourse (307, 311). Modern power, then, can seductively mask its control over a population. Oppression is not necessarily overt. In effect, this subtlety makes modern disciplinarity a form of virtually unseen war-like domination by the hegemonic group in a society. As Foucault memorably summarizes the situation, "Peace would then be a form of war, and the State a means of waging it" (310). As we will see later in this book, a satiric analysis of a film seemingly as whimsical as Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) reveals extensive cultural combat at work. Additional concepts instrumental to investigations of modern satire occur in the relationship Foucault theorizes between the individual and the state. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault discusses the ways people resist being made subject to the modern state. These struggles generally are of three kinds: (1) against forms of domination, such as ethnic, social, and religious; (2) against forms of exploitation by the rich, which separate individuals from what they produce; (3) against that which ties the individual to forms of subjectivity and submission to authority (130). When we inspect, in a later chapter, Joon-ho Bong's film *Snowpiercer* (2013), all three types of struggle will be very much in evidence. Perhaps most important, as pointed out above, Foucault asserts that while power is an indispensable feature of society, any given manifestation of it should not be taken fatalistically. Modern hegemony is always under challenge

and thereby subject to change. For this reason, Foucault advises us not to pursue "universal philosophy," but to inspect instead the historical here and now—that is, how the current hegemonic discourse came into power and what can be done to thwart its oppressive disciplining (134). Whether defending or attacking the status quo, modern satire is a clear-cut participant in this contemporary cultural battle. For its part, the Rant is a particularly sharp weapon of satiric resistance and attack against the dominant discourse.

What is more, in its critique of the modern state, the Rant employs postmodern analytical techniques. Along with this Foucauldian reading of modern satire, I've argued elsewhere that the form itself activates undecidability.[2] For this assertion, I draw on Derrida's concept of *différance* and Colbert's term "truthiness" to make a case for the postmodernity of satire. Whether advocating for conservative or radical positions, satire deals in the truthy, that is, in social constructions. As a cultural creation, satire undermines, as Derrida states it, the "coherence in contradiction" that characterizes any social desire for a Transcendental Signified (495). Like the thinking of the Sophists, satire runs as a counter-discourse to Platonic thought in western culture. Any "truth" structured by a satirist comes with the knowledge that she is decentering someone else's "truth," and that her center, in turn, likely will be decentered. Thus, in my view, satire partakes of and contributes to Derrida's "joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world … without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation." This "Nietzschean *affirmation*" of "*the non-center*" indicates, for Derrida, the activity of interpretation as a game played "without security" (509), where language criticizes *itself* and structure is ever provisional. That is to say, as meaning-making beings, we inevitably create a center, but another center is sure to come along to destroy that old machinery (500). Satire, then, embodies that "terrifying form of monstrosity" that is Derrida's concept of deconstruction (510).[3] What I mean by satire, then, and in particular the Rant as it carries out a postmodern critique of the modern state, is this combined Foucauldian–Derridean tenor of agonistic monstrosity. Turning now to a description of the tripartite Rant, I begin with a more detailed account of satire.

Satire

Attempting to define this genre is notoriously tricky. It's a bit like trying to put toothpaste back in its tube. You'll meet with some success, but the mess makes you wonder if the effort was really worth it. While some essential ingredients of the form can be identified, too many other aspects of it inevitably escape delineation. In the English tradition, John Dryden's "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1692) marks the first comprehensive effort to explain the genre. Even at that point, more than three centuries ago, Dryden tries to summarize and concretize a satiric tradition stretching back at least to Archilochus, a Greek satirist of the 7th century BCE, and wending its way through classical Rome and then medieval and renaissance Europe. Dryden's pedantic decrees about satire (e.g., a work of satire ought mainly to

condemn a single vice and recommend its opposite virtue) carried considerable critical weight well into the 20th century. Formalist critics, when bothering at all with this shambolic brand of writing, pursued a rhetorical theory of satire up into the 1950s. When postmodern critical practices emerged in the 1960s, satire was recontextualized into its various cultural settings. Although working without definitional absolutes, scholars at that point nonetheless felt the need to establish satiric common ground. In 1968, Leonard Feinberg writes: "we have no right to demand complete conformity to a particular variety of satire, and we should be willing to accept numerous deviations from customary procedure" (31). Nonetheless, as reasonable generic similarities, Feinberg declares of satire that "it always criticizes, it always distorts, it always entertains" (36). Two decades later, Don Nilsen outlines a more elaborate rubric for recognizing satire, postulating four necessary conditions—grounding in reality, distortion, negative tone, posture of attack—and three strongly correlative ones—irony, social bonding, humor (8). Many such helpful formulations for the cardinal traits of satire have been offered. Among them, a statement by Edward Rosenheim stands out for its acumen and efficiency; satire, he maintains, is an "attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars" (31). Applying these simple guidelines for analysis allows a critic to explore, in nearly endless detail and combination, the disposition of the attack, the complexion of the fiction that is its vehicle, plus just how patent that work of imagination is. In the same vein, the critic must ask which historical particulars, precisely, are being brought into play, and exactly how visible are those local concerns. Intention, reception, rhetoric, cultural context, and the rich heritage of the genre are all subjects for scrutiny.[4]

Such operational guidelines make good sense. As discussed above, in the modern era satire has become as well an hegemonic device of discipline and subject formation within the struggle of modern power relations. By way of summarizing the key features of satire, I offer the following digest.

Satire is a polemic: a passionate argument against something and, thus, in favor of something else; key aspects of satiric discourse include:

- a combination of *laus et vituperatio* (praise and blame)
  o the negative behaviors being condemned are highlighted and predominant
  o the positive behaviors being recommended sometimes are clear, but sometimes are implied or even indistinct
- an exploration of important cultural issues of the day
  o social (e.g., religion, class, gender, race, literary matters, tastes, and fashions, etc.)
  o philosophical (e.g., ethical conduct, nature of The Good, human perception, etc.)
  o political (e.g., the best form of government, factional wrangling, Truth and Power, etc.)
  o often these types of issues are in combination
- a frequent and effective rhetorical tool of satire is distortion and exaggeration

Satiric persona is a key element: what kind of narrator is the satirist presenting to us—and why? That is, what rhetorical and polemical functions does that narrator serve? For example:

- the Horatian *vir bonus* (the good, honest man)
- the Juvenalian *vir iratus* (the irate, indignant man)
- the parodic narrator (pretending to be someone or something else)
- the self-damning narrator (a trap for the reader)
- the unreliable narrator (sometimes reasonable, sometimes ludicrous)
- any combination of the above; other types?

Satiric form needs to be evaluated: what structure or manner of communicating does the satirist construct—and why? For example:

- the *thesis-exempla satire*: basically, an essay with a main point followed by supporting argumentation and a loose series of examples
- the *situational satire*: basically, a semi-dramatic storyline presented through various scenes, characters, and voices (such as an *adversarius*)
- a mixture of both thesis-exempla and situational elements
- a fully realized longer work of fiction, whether in prose (such as a novel), in verse (such as a mock-epic poem), for the stage (such as a social comedy), or in audiovisual format (such as a feature film or a broadcast/cable/new media series)
- a thoroughgoing invasion of another genre or form—personal letter, philosophical dialog, newspaper editorial, travel narrative, scientific article, film documentary, musical, television news program, etc.

Important to keep in mind as well is that satire generates a particularly concerted transactive reader response dynamic. That is, if text + reader = meaning, then satirists are especially attuned to precipitating an exact kind of partnership with their contemporary readership. As much critical attention needs to be paid to the satiric narratee, then, as to the satiric narrator. Questions to be deliberated include: precisely who is the contemporary audience for a given satire? Exactly how is that current-day reader being manipulated into becoming the ideal reader of a piece—that is, to fall into complete agreement with the satirist? Is the reader being bullied, cajoled, having heartstrings tugged on, collective fears tapped into, empathy created, outrage fomented, shame provoked, or pride stimulated? Is the satirist preaching to a choir or making a broader appeal to the society? Has the satirist ventured into the lion's den of the oppositional camp? Who is listening has everything to do with how a satirist embeds a text with things for that reader to do. Obviously, with these readerly issues comes the all-important historical contextualization of each piece of satire we consider.

Another vital component to consider when recognizing and analyzing satiric works is that satire itself has origins as a genre of power. In the western

tradition, satire very much tends to be works created by educated urban men of means—that is, the dominant social group. Thus, satire can be seen as a patriarchal genre, one produced by those participating in the hegemonic masculinity of the day. Is satire, then, merely infighting among the elite? Satire also tends to be located in the major city of its day: Athens, Rome, Paris, London, New York, Los Angeles. While such major urban centers obviously blend together a diverse population, they are nonetheless the focal points of political, economic, and cultural power. Given this privileged backdrop for satire, some interesting questions emerge regarding the form. Where do women fit in the satiric game—aside from being its constant targets? Where do non-white, non-European peoples fit in? What about lower-class voices? Can satire be an instrument of social justice? Or is satire an instrument of social disciplining and control? Clearly, when raising these issues and asking these questions, we enter the ambit of cultural power and the theories of Foucault.

In short, satire operates within a cultural context to enact a polemic mission. To accomplish its persuasive task of blame and praise, satire invades other genres, manipulates its narrative persona, specializes in exaggeration, and establishes an intense transactive relationship with its audience. The Rants examined in this book certainly partake of all of these satiric components outlined above. For our purposes, a final factor of satire to be considered is what mode of the genre best suits a late 20th-century, early 21st-century attack against neoliberal and neoconservative supremacy. If one wants to upend a socially constructed "truth" of the neoliberal/neoconservative power elite, which satiric methods effectively accomplish that aim?

Classicist Kirk Freudenburg points out that when Quintilian famously states *satura quidem tota nostra est* (*Institutes* 10.1.93-5), the Roman rhetorician does not claim that his society *invented* the form, that "satire is *totally* ours." Rather, Quintilian's inflection reads "satire *at least* is totally ours," meaning that the form, as it was then being *practiced* by the Romans, was unique and different, at any rate, from how their Greek predecessors had put satire to use (Freudenburg 1–4). The distinction is crucial. Within a given cultural context, satire is an investigative *action*. What that activity looks like, and what might result from it, depends chiefly on the locality determining the instrument, not the other way around. Thus, Freudenburg is able to remark: "For the most part Roman satire does not matter to us. It does not have to. And we are therefore justified in thinking that our satire is exactly that: entirely ours" (21). If the formal traditions and customary practices of the genre count for less than the local needs to which they are applied, then often we put the cart before the horse when conceptualizing satire. We focus overly on the vehicle at the cost of ignoring the more vital cause for its motion. Like the current critical term queer, then, perhaps satire is better used as a verb, not as a noun. Not as a clear-cut thing, but as a wider-ranging intellectual and social action, even something of a critical method.

Recently, Ashley Marshall has asserted with regard to the golden age of early modern English satire:

> The two broadest truths about eighteenth-century satiric practice are that it is highly diverse at all times and that it changes with bewildering speed from decade to decade. Both of them stem from the fact that satire is largely generated in response to its immediate circumstances.
>
> (302)

In her study, which she calls "an exercise in 'archaeo-historicism'" (37), Marshall surveys over 3,000 works of satire produced between 1658 and 1770 in order to debunk persistent New Critical myths about a unified "Augustan mode" of satire existing during this period. Marshall demonstrates that, because of such fanciful and simplistic metanarratives,

> we are misrepresenting the culture of satire in the eighteenth century. The scope and diversity of that culture is enormous, dauntingly complex, and until now largely unknown: scholars rightly proclaim that this is the great age of satire and then overlook much of what makes it so spectacular.
>
> (xi)

Integral to what makes that early modern satire so spectacular is its "chaotic but vibrant diversity" (xiv) propelled by its intense circumstantiality. Like Freudenburg, then, Marshall finds that satire *satires* in many different ways. As a result, her newfound literary history resituates "canonical masterpieces in the full complexity of their original setting," thereby transforming "the way we conceive of satire in this period" (xiv). I look to accomplish something similar with regard to current-day satirical output. I seek to emphasize and to examine more the cultural forces driving it. What steed (or nag) pulls the ornate (or shabby) cart of our satire? And just whither might this horse roam? Certainly, motivation alone is insufficient as a way to theorize satire; formal elements of the genre, such as the ones detailed above, need analysis as well. However, the construction of grand narratives about satire that remove it from its local settings and incentives is patently silly critical business. As both Freudenburg and Marshall note, individual satires are written less to take part in a grand satiric tradition and more to participate in the controversy of a here and now. The best satire doesn't transcend the moment. The best satire *reacts* to the moment—it *is* the moment. Like Marshall, then, I explore an "explanation-strategy" (302) for how satire functions within our social moment. Which satiric moves expose best the specific enormities of our times? What is the exact complexion of that satiric action? What does it mean nowadays, not to produce "a satire," but "to satire"?

   Arguably, the best and most influential manner of satire currently at work is the fake news program. Pioneers such as Jon Stewart, using a thesis-exempla satiric format on *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert, using the situational satire of pretending to be a conservative pundit on *The Colbert Report*, firmly established the practice in the early 2000s and set the bar high for biting political commentary. Their legacy continues with John Oliver and Trevor Noah as well as with many spin-off fake news programs around the globe.[5] When it

comes to opposing the neoliberal/neoconservative hegemony, however, there is more than one way satirically to skin a cat. Since the 1980s, another means of invective likewise has registered a significant mark of social protest within our popular culture. That approach is Menippean satire. This brand of satire has a long, murky, and critically controversial past. It begins with the now lost writings of Menippus, a Greek philosopher and Cynic satirist of Gadara in Syria, who flourished about 250 BCE. His works greatly influenced the Roman scholar and satirist Marcus Terentius Varro (circa 116–27 BCE) and, subsequently, Lucian of Samosata (circa 125–180 CE), the enormously popular and influential rhetorician and satirist who wrote in ancient Greek. The writings of these men and others carried Menippean satire forward into medieval and renaissance Europe. In his "Discourse Concerning Satire," Dryden traces and theorizes satire "of the Varronian kind," offering an account of the form along with ancient and contemporary examples.[6] In the 20th century, Menippean satire is brought to the critical forefront first by Northrop Frye in his famous *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and then even more influentially by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (first translated into English in 1973 and then again in 1984). Frye characterizes the form as an unconventional, not really novelistic prose work that attacks intellectual foolishness and duplicity. Bakhtin weaves a far more intricate description of the genre, basing it in a carnivalesque, topsy-turvy prose landscape and assigning to it a great many fundamental characteristics. These include an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention, a bold use of the fantastic, a broadscale contemplation of the world and ultimate questions, violations of established norms of social behavior, dreams or journeys into unknown lands, mixed styles and tones, and an almost journalistic concern with current and topical issues. While Frye's and Bakhtin's observations and concepts are estimable and instructive, they also paint Menippean satire in such broad and, at times, implausible brushstrokes that almost any work—from, say, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to *Moby Dick*—can be seen to fit its vast boundaries.[7] In his 2005 book, *Menippean Satire Reconsidered*, Howard Weinbrot clears the critical underbrush in order to correct the many confusions within the study of this genre, thereby effectively reducing the number of works that can be categorized as Menippean satire. The scope of Weinbrot's study is an updated account of the workings of this complex literary practice from antiquity up through 18th-century France and England. I use Weinbrot's streamlined definition of Menippean satire as the starting point for my own theorizing of its complex manifestation over the last four decades.

Weinbrot remarks that, "Genre is a necessarily uncertain but certainly necessary construct" (*Menippean* 4). It is a series of codes and systems used by an author, and understood by a reader, to interpret aspects of reality. Summarizes Weinbrot:

> Genre thus includes (1) historical process and movement in which (2) form and content reflect (3) variously used but essential coded traits within a literary world that comments on and shapes the external world

as (4) perceived by a specific author's temperament and strategy and (5) responded to by an appropriately aware reader. Mingled process and stasis allow us to recognize the stable and the dynamic, the family resemblance and the new offspring.

(4)

Like Freudenburg and Marshall, Weinbrot conceptualizes satire as an active combination of custom and locale, of literary form meeting social context, wherein the polemical needs of the cultural moment determine most the character of the composition. After examining the foundational texts to establish the roots of Menippean satire, then tracing how the form changes and adapts as it moves through time and space up to the early modern period, Weinbrot is able to offer the following definition:

Menippean satire uses at least two other genres, languages, historical or cultural periods, or changes of voice to oppose a threatening false orthodoxy. In different exemplars, the satire may use either of two tones: the severe, in which the threatened angry satirist fails and becomes angrier still, or the muted, in which the threatened angry satirist offers an antidote to the poison he knows remains.

(297)

With regard to 18th-century British practice, and mainly the satires of Swift and Pope, Weinbrot finds four different kinds of Menippean satire at work: that by addition (see 115ff.), by genre (see 230ff.), by annotation (see 251ff.), and by incursion (see 275ff.). While these strategies are not unknown in current Menippean works, they are not of primary importance for the present analyzes. Likewise, Weinbrot's stipulation that Menippean satire uses at least two other genres, languages, and so forth is a guideline time-bound to his investigation of the early modern period. As will be seen, current-day Menippean satires certainly mix and blend disparate storytelling elements in highly imaginative ways to pursue their confrontational goals, but not necessarily similar to the strategies observed by Weinbrot in 18th-century letters. Three traits of Menippean satire stressed by Weinbrot that do pertain, however, to the vituperation against neoliberal/neoconservative ideology that I propose are these. First, that the Menippean mode "is perhaps as much a collection of related devices as a formal genre" (xii). Second, that Menippean satire

is a genre for serious people who see serious trouble and want to do something about it—whether to awake a somnolent nation, define the native in contrast to the foreign, protest the victory of darkness, or correct a careless reader.

(xi)

Third, that the "dark satirists think the unthinkable, write the unthinkable with compelling concepts and language, and thereby help us to read the unthinkable"

(302). Attitude and purpose are thus more fundamental to Menippean satire than readily identifiable external features and structural ingredients.

In sum, the key satiric element of the Rant, as I theorize the practice, entails a bleak forewarning. This alert involves a postmodern critique of the modern state in the throes of the false and threatening orthodoxy of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. These works take the general form of a longer narrative. Sometimes this narrative is in novelistic prose (e.g., *The MaddAddam Trilogy*), sometimes it is a feature film (e.g., *District 9*), more recently it has begun to appear as a multiple-episode series on broadcast, cable, or new media video platforms (e.g., *Westworld*).[8] These narratives feature fantastical settings, situations, and characters, often of a dystopian quality. These agonistic tales also blend into their satire pronounced components of science fiction and monster story. In fact, the Rant tends to blend seamlessly these three kinds of expression.

Science Fiction

Turning now to a consideration of science fiction (hereafter sci-fi), as a genre it has a history and disposition remarkably similar to satire. Like satire, sci-fi proves to be difficult to define. Like satire, sci-fi has various roots and histories, but its most vital developments occur from the 17th century onward. Like satire, sci-fi is regularly a deconstructionist pursuit, offering critiques of the here and now by way of imagining an altered reality. Like satire, then, sci-fi often gives voice to nonhegemonic people and points of view. I explore all of these characteristics below.

A critical commonplace in sci-fi studies is that definitional consensus about the form does not exist. Notes Carl Freedman,

> There are narrow and broad definitions, eulogistic and dyslogistic definitions, definitions that position science fiction in a variety of ways with regard to its customary generic Others (notably fantasy, on the one hand, and 'mainstream' or realistic fiction on the other) and, finally, antidefinitions that proclaim the problem of definition to be insoluble.
>
> (Critical Theory 13–14)

Like satire, sci-fi is a protean and hybrid form (genre? mode? thought-experiment? pulp fiction trash?) that reduces critics to piecemeal classifications. Some identify key elements of sci-fi: an emphasis on science and reason; rich use of the imagination; the creation of alternative worlds and societies; the relationship between the imagined world and our own. Others identify an abundance of subgenres: time-travel story, initial encounter with aliens, robot story, space opera, utopia/dystopia story, end-of-world scenario, scientist story, future-war story, and so on. Very often, as with satire, sci-fi is not regarded by literary scholars as a "legitimate" or "worthwhile" form of writing to study. It is mere popular ephemera. With the coming of structuralist and poststructuralist literary analysis, however, focus shifted from the surface attributes of the sci-fi text to its reception among readers. As Brian Baker states, such reader-oriented

approaches to sci-fi "attempt to locate the specific textual operation of the genre upon its readers, and the function it might play culturally or ideologically in relation to its time and space of production" (9). That is, what kinds of things—ideas and emotions—is the text giving contemporary readers to do, and how are readers reacting to them?[9] Among scholars who approach sci-fi in this way, something of a consensus does exist about who has formulated the most influential critical insight into the form. That critic is Darko Suvin, and his theory of sci-fi is that of the *novum*.

Suvin regards sci-fi to have much in common with realistic literature. Both are culturally specific and ideologically driven forms that treat human relations as mutable and subject to historical forces. What sci-fi can bring especially to readers, though, is the *novum*, what Suvin terms "a strange newness" (4). What he means by this term is that although sci-fi creates and depicts other possible worlds, no matter how extraordinary those other worlds seem to us, they in fact reflect our own. Explains Suvin:

> The aliens—utopias, monsters, or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror of his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible.
>
> (5)

No matter how outlandish, sci-fi participates in the social and political moment of its production; moreover, that strange newness of sci-fi enables us to see better our own here and now. According to Suvin, the *novum* works to strip away the naturalizing processes of ideology, myth, and convention. By having the familiar made unfamiliar to us, we are given the chance to recognize the constructedness—and thereby the strangeness—of our own social order. For example, ten pages into Huxley's *Brave New World* a reader is likely to be thinking: *This is the most bizarre society I've ever encountered.* Twenty or thirty pages in, though, the awful realization dawns on that same reader: *Oh my God, this is us! This is modern consumer culture gone ballistic!* Suvin uses Berthold Brecht's well-known dramatic device of *verfremdungseffekt*, "estrangement," as a basis for his theory of the *novum* (6). Brecht stages representations that estrange theater audiences from their own cultural norms, demonstrating for spectators just how unnormal and unfamiliar their conventions actually are. As a result, audiences have the opportunity to rethink "normal" and to see the world anew. Louis Althusser similarly argues that if ideology signifies the imaginary ways in which people experience the world, art has the capacity to do more than just passively reflect that experience. Certain art can manage to distance itself from ideology to the point where it permits us to "perceive" and "feel" more acutely our own ideological convictions (222). Art can supply us with an objective correlative for ideology that allows us to see and understand better the qualities of our own belief system. The work of art will not put into scientific language for us an exact analysis of our cultural mythology, but it will pack an emotional punch that begins to move us in the direction of that

fuller intellectual comprehension of the powers that shape us. Pierre Macherey pursues this idea further. He maintains that by giving ideology a determinate form, by fixing it within certain fictional conventions, art is also able to reveal to us the limits and faults of that ideology. Art can in fact contribute to our deliverance from the ideological illusion.[10] These ideas are precisely those of Suvin with regard to the functioning of sci-fi:

> Science fiction is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.
>
> (7–8; emphasis deleted)

Sci-fi gives us something strange to contemplate so that we can understand how strange we are.

Freedman points out how *all* fiction—even the most "realistic"—constructs an alternative world for us to consider in relation to our own (*Critical Theory* 21). Building on Suvin's theories, Freedman emphasizes in particular, though, how sci-fi puts into dialectic those crucial principles of *estrangement* and *cognition*. Says Freedman:

> The first term refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter. But the *critical* character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science-fictional text to account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world.
>
> (16–17)

That is to say, a dynamic tension and balance needs to exist between giving readers an alien world and giving readers a recognizable world. If the fictional world is *too* recognizable, if that tension flattens out to mere cognition, the result is merely realistic fiction that performs no estrangement. If, on the other hand, the fictional world is *too* bizarre, too disconnected from the reader's world, that tension flattens out to mere estrangement, and the result is merely fantasy fiction that performs no cognition. For Freedman, then, what he terms "cognitive estrangement" and the "cognition effect" are definitional to the genre of sci-fi. The sci-fi text must produce the indispensable outcome of readers rethinking their current reality, not simply being further immersed in it or altogether escaping it. Freedman acknowledges how such a view of sci-fi seemingly eliminates from the genre countless works in the pulp-fiction tradition, where new gadgetry, space flight, and hero saga dominate. Even the extremely popular sci-fi franchises of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, he notes, become suspect, since neither story line performs much in the way of stimulating in viewers a more profound cultural understandings of themselves. As we've seen previously

with Freudenburg, Marshall, and Weinbrot, however, Freedman advocates for a looser way to look at genre, where "a text is not filed under a generic category; instead, a generic tendency is something that happens within a text." By this measure, Freedman widens the scope of texts that can be regarded as sci-fi by not judging them on outward appearance and formulistic considerations; instead, "cognitive estrangement is the dominant generic tendency" (*Critical Theory* 20).[11] This emphasis on critical thinking and the reexamination of social order dovetails perfectly with the account of satire discussed above. A Menippean polemic mounted against the threatening false orthodoxy of neo-liberal/neoconservative hegemony triggers the selfsame cognitive estrangement of sci-fi. The estrangement comes from satire's penchant for exaggeration and the invasion of other genres—both strategies for pointedly making the familiar unfamiliar. The cognition comes from satire's transactive aim of condemning certain behaviors and recommending others in their place—thereby bringing readers to a different and broader understanding of their social moment. Like Suvin's and Freedman's concept of sci-fi, Menippean satire is recognizable more by its mindset than by a strict generic formula. Furthermore, both modes invent amazing and peculiar narratives as vehicles for their cultural exposé. So similar nowadays are certain manifestations of satire and sci-fi that it begs a few questions. Is satire invading the genre of sci-fi? Or is sci-fi, in fact, part of the genre of satire? Does differentiating really matter?

Satire and sci-fi share parallel historical developments as well. Although satire has a distinct and well-studied presence in the ancient Greek and, especially, Roman worlds, what can be taken as early sci-fi exists in those Hellenic and Roman periods as well. Some scholars see Greek myths and epics as prototypes of sci-fi. Many point to fantastic voyage narratives, such as Lucian's *A True Story* or *Icaromenippus*, as early forms of sci-fi. Such narratives are often of a Menippean satiric ilk (see Weinbrot, *Menippean* Chapters 1–3). Most critics, though, argue that modern sci-fi begins in the Renaissance through Baroque eras with works such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Journey to the Moon* (1657), and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).[12] All of these works are also satirical, fanciful adventure narratives with Menippean roots. It seems that the incredible journey functions integrally to both genres. Where satire and sci-fi clearly cross paths, however, is from the 17th century onward. Modern satire, as I characterize it above in terms of Foucauldian agonism, and sci-fi are both cultural developments of the rising modern state. As capitalism replaces feudalism, as republicanism replaces aristocracy, as science replaces magic and, to a lesser degree, religious faith, and as aggressive European colonialism begins and rapidly expands, satire and sci-fi—whether working separately or in tandem—become fictional ways to process and to inspect this shifting social reality. As H. Bruce Franklin notes when reviewing the history of sci-fi:

> During the seventeenth century, technological and social change were accelerating so rapidly that they could be experienced within a person's lifetime. Thus some people began to imagine a future qualitatively different

from the past or present. … As capitalism and modern science continued to develop each other, SF [science fiction] extrapolated from both the tremendous changes and their disturbing consequences.

(28)

Sci-fi has antecedents going back at least 2000 years, but as a distinct genre it is a phenomenon of the modern world. Before there was science, frequent and widespread technological innovations, worldwide exploration, new theories of time and space, new visions of the future and of human macrohistory, and society based in reason as opposed to superstition, sci-fi as we know it simply could not exist. Similarly, although satire was a well-established and thriving genre prior to the modern era, like all fictive expressions—and certainly as one dealing so vitally in contemporaneity—it transformed and adapted to these radically new cultural circumstances. Modern satire clearly inherits traits from earlier satiric traditions, but as a creative, intellectual, and ideological construct, modern satire carries out different polemical missions than its predecessors. Both our sci-fi and our satire, then, are genres forged in the blast furnaces of Capitalism, Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, and Empire.

For example, consider briefly two well-known early modern works, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). In 1951, Isaac Asimov famously stated that, "science fiction is that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance on human beings" (qtd. in Anders). Arguably, in both Swift's faux-travel narrative and Shelley's horror story, we see evidence that science had advanced sufficiently for western writers to contemplate its impact on society in more than merely fanciful ways. For Swift, advances in navigation had made far-flung voyaging an actuality. Swift does not so much concoct a ludicrous journey, as did Lucian, as he invades the authentic form of early modern exploration journals. In this way, due to its scientific authenticity, Swift's satire against 18th-century British society is that much more incisive and biting: its initial believability works to heighten its ultimate satiric impact. Similarly, for Shelley's novel, by the early 19th century the notion of better (or worse) living through chemistry (or any other branch of science) had become a real possibility. The element of Gothic horror in her chilling tale is not supplied by the supernatural, but by current-day scientific knowledge. Many critics, in fact, name *Frankenstein* as the starting point of modern sci-fi. What's interesting to note as well is the mixing of sci-fi and satire in these two works. *Gulliver's Travels* is ubiquitously studied as satire and only occasionally named as a possible work of sci-fi. Yet real science drives much of Swift's fiction, particularly in Book 3 where Swift attacks aspects of the new science practiced by the Royal Academy (see Lynall; Chalmers). *Frankenstein* reverses this critical judgment, being studied frequently as science fiction but rarely associated with satire. If read with the guiding principle in mind of a polemic combining blame and praise, however, Shelley's book can be seen as delivering quite the satiric punch in several areas. Discernible historical particulars attacked by this manifest (science) fiction

plausibly include the exploitation of the new industrial proletariat (in the form of the stitched-together and maltreated Creature), the navel-gazing obtuseness of the bourgeois oppressor (in the form of nabob Victor), the new science run amok (chemistry and electricity in the hands of selfish and socially irresponsible nabobs), as well as the destructive privilege of patriarchy (symbolized graphically by the She-Creature that never gets up off the laboratory table). At the moment when the European bourgeois was hard at work to secure its command over the modern state, Shelley's novel plausibly speaks counter-truth to power (see Montag).

Suvin observes how subsequent historical periods brought new traits to sci-fi. The Romantic era added Faustian overreach and political apocalypse. The Victorian era blended in late-Gothic visions of anxiety, pathology, and terror as well as stories of new technology striving for utopia but causing, instead, social and imperialistic blowback. The 20th century establishes sci-fi as the literature of cognitive estrangement.[13] For the purpose of identifying recent Menippean fictions targeting neoliberal/neoconservative authority, I focus on sci-fi of the later 20th century that looks to disrupt the status quo. Two common categories of sci-fi are "hard" and "soft." Hard sci-fi tends to emphasize impending gadgetry and pay careful attention to known actualities of the natural sciences when depicting future or alternative worlds. Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke are often named as master practitioners of this type. Soft sci-fi, on the other hand, underscores issues from the social sciences—politics, economics, sociology, psychology—and tends to focus on how well or, more usually, poorly human society might deal with technological advances. Ray Bradbury, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Philip K. Dick are often cited as masters of this kind, also sometimes known as "sociological" sci-fi. A related and maybe better term for this manner of sci-fi is "speculative fiction," a designation first coined by Robert Heinlein in the 1940s and recently refined by Margaret Atwood as a no-alien brand of sci-fi about things that might actually happen.[14] These more culturally attentive works of sci-fi blend readily with the social commentary of satire and thus pertain best to the Rant being proposed. In particular, such works dominate post-1960 sci-fi production and feature themes and issues from cultural theories such as Marxism, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonialism.

Fundamental to an understanding of sci-fi is its relationship to stories of utopia and dystopia. Suvin regards such tales of alternative history to be integral to his theory of cognitive estrangement: "Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the *sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*" (61, original emphasis). Utopia theorist Lyman Tower Sargent constructs an impressive taxonomy of utopias, which he sees coming in many forms (191). These include not only a number of what he identifies as standard sci-fi storylines (e.g., tales of the future, extraordinary voyages), but also broader categories such as "Utopian satire" and "Critical utopia" (188). These are sociopolitical tales that provoke the contemporary reader to inspect her own society in comparison to the fictional one presented. Overall, Sargent conceptualizes utopias as "social dreaming" reflecting "that essential need to dream of a better life" (189).

Fictive challenges that stimulate critical rethinking of the modern status quo necessarily entail Marxist thought. Indeed, the Marxist vein in sci-fi scholarship runs deep and rich, and it begins with critics linking utopian/dystopian visions with the genre.[15] Raymond Williams sees sci-fi as the new platform for the old impulse of imagining a better world, asserting: "it is where, within a capitalist dominance, and within the crisis of power and affluence which is also the crisis of war and waste, the utopian impulse now warily, self-questioningly, and setting its own limits, renews itself" (66). Fredric Jameson maintains that sci-fi succeeds because it inevitably fails at any utopian society it sets before us. That is, because sci-fi can never depict for us an actual future, never close its own narrative at the endpoint of an actual perfect social order, it forces readers into an ideological evaluation of their own social order. Jameson writes that such stories "serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits" (*Archaeologies* 289). While not strictly equating utopian stories with sci-fi, as does Suvin, Jameson does set them on parallel ideological paths. Both have the effect of mirroring and neutralizing our historical world. As Baker puts it:

> the conception of utopia is of a simulation, the map of which conforms in all points to that of its referent but is paradoxically entirely different: its reverse, or inverse, image. It confronts the 'real' of history by providing a negating space, one which exists (through utopic imagining) as a product of that history and an alternate to it.
>
> (110)

Another influential critic of utopia/dystopia and its intersection with sci-fi, Tom Moylan conceives of both a "critical utopia" and a "critical dystopia" that carry out the same function of questioning and upsetting the current-day state of affairs. Using Althusser's well-known cultural theories positing that ideology is an imaginary social reality into which individuals are forced via the process of interpellation (see 127–186), Moylan suggests that utopias are not blueprints but rather usefully disruptive social dreams: "There can be no *Utopia*, but there *can* be utopian expressions that constantly shatter the present achievements and compromises of society and point to that which is not yet experienced in the human project of fulfillment and creation" (*Demand* 28). In a subsequent work, Moylan argues that the "dystopian turn" in sci-fi of the 1980s eventually outgrows the fashionable nihilism of Cyberpunk (such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, 1984) to revive "the most progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative." Such dystopian texts (e.g., Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) are "emancipator, militant, open, and 'critical'" of the status quo rather than resigned to it (*Scraps* 188). These critical dystopias emphasize what's amiss *now* in our society that will lead to future disaster. Significantly for our purposes, Moylan characterizes this new wave of dystopian sci-fi as being a product of an "era of economic restructuring, political opportunism,

and cultural implosion" (*Scraps* 186). In other words, this movement comes at the outset of the neoliberal and neoconservative ascendancy post-Reagan. To return to the ideas of Suvin, he insists that noteworthy sci-fi always offers a roundabout commentary on its author's cultural context. The ostensible escape from current reality is but "an optical illusion and epistemological trick" of sci-fi that, in fact, provides the reader "a better vantage point from which to comprehend the human relations around the author." In the end, then, the actual escape provided by utopian/dystopian sci-fi is one "from constrictive old norms into a different and alternative timestream, a device for historical estrangement, and an at least initial readiness for new norms of reality, for the novum of dealienating human history" (84). As discussed above, such new seeing is the stock and trade of modern satire as well. And, not surprisingly, utopian and dystopian tales are a common and particularly powerful vehicle for satire. As a manifest fiction of distortion and exaggeration, locations such as More's remote island nation, Swift's Land of the Houyhnhnms, or Huxley's World State carry out the same manner of cognitive estrangement as sci-fi, proffering sociopolitical commentary in the form of blame and praise.

When reviewing the history of sci-fi studies, Mark Bould remarks that while there is no necessary relationship between Marxism and sci-fi, the link has always been close. In particular, "from the emergence of SF studies as an academic discipline in the 1970s, Marxism has provided a major critical-theoretical lens through with to understand the genre" (17). During the rad-icalizing period of the 1960s and 1970s, a great deal of counter-culture and popular culture studies entered academia. Among them was the study of sci-fi as an estimable form. With the establishment of the theoretically sophisticated journal, *Science Fiction Studies* in 1973 and Suvin's instrumental theory of the *novum* finding its full articulation in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* in 1979, leftist and postmodernist approaches to sci-fi became standard, with Marxism all but wedded to the genre (18–19). While of course scholars since then wrestle in various ways with "the Suvin event" (19), looking to challenge or to hone Suvin's approach (see Bould and Miéville), Marxism as a method to open up sci-fi texts for cultural analysis is patently useful and stimulating. Freedman, for example, makes a compelling case for these two pursuits being motivated by the same intellectual and critical impulses. Just as Marx didn't want merely to contemplate the world but to change it, pushing gnosis into praxis, and just as Gramsci saw the need to create a robust revolutionary cul-ture, sci-fi likewise participates in radical social change. Asserts Freedman of utopian sci-fi works in particular: "they do call, as clearly and eloquently as Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*, for the world to be not only interpreted but also changed; and changed with a far-reaching radicalism in many ways com-parable to Marx's own" ("Marxism" 122). Dystopian sci-fi as well is mainly Marxist in its warnings against evil social systems. Freedman points out that such warnings

are generally launched not out of any satisfied embrace of the status quo but, on the contrary, out of a sense that the tendencies represented as

having reached a logically and terrifyingly extreme culmination in fiction are already present in actuality to an alarming degree.

(123)

This "transformative, anti-conservative thrust" forms "the most basic affinity between Marxism and SF" in Freedman's view (124). More than sharing an ardent desire for social change, however, Marxism and sci-fi possess "a deeply formal—almost, in some ways, a *generic*—affinity" (125). The structural resemblance manifests in at least two distinct ways, according to Freedman.

First, both Marxism and sci-fi, as discursive forms, are predominantly *materialist* in character. Marx accepts Hegel's understanding of the world as a dialectical and historical construction, but rejects Hegel's essentialist and spiritualist conception of *Geist* (a kind of world spirit or spirit/mind inhabiting all humans) as the driving force of history. Instead, for Marx, material production determines human affairs. In a similar way, materialism defines sci-fi as a genre. Unlike fantasy, sci-fi takes us to other worlds but explains, in at least some degree of detail, what that world is and how we got there. Not magic, but rationalist, scientific, technological—that is to say, material—explanations and concepts account for the strange new world of the narrative. For Freedman, "this materialist rationality is … closely allied to that practical transformative spirit integral to SF and generally much weaker or altogether nonexistent in fantasy" ("Marxism" 126). Second, *historicism* is a strong structural affinity between Marxism and sci-fi. The Marxist concept of historical materialism considers "material reality not as a passive unchanging essence but as an active historical unfolding that is never quite the same in one particular time and place as in any other" (128). In this way, the make-believe of human "universals" is set aside. The always-changing material world determines our consciousness, and we are perpetually in the process of constructing our social order. Sci-fi implements this perspective of history. Just as the historical novel "deals with the dynamic continuity of present and past," sci-fi "deals with the dynamic continuity of present and future" (128). That is, no matter where the sci-fi text imaginatively may take us, its starting point is in the historical here and now of its cultural moment of production. Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* tells us far more about America in 1950 than it does about any future colonization on Mars. Sci-fi, then, whether extrapolating a history-to-come or imagining an alternative history, exercises an understanding that history is *not* caused by supernatural beings or forces exerting their will on society. Instead, culture is a human-made construct and, thus, history—even a "future history" as Heinlein termed sci-fi—is a chronicle of struggle between different social classes rooted in the underlying economic base. As Bould notes: "SF world-building is typically distinguished from other fictional world-building, whether fantastic or not, by the manner in which it offers, however unintentionally, a snapshot of the structures of capital" (4). Being a cultural product of the modern world, sci-fi cannot help but use capitalism as the launch pad of its fiction. In the judgment of many critics of the genre, the best and highest-flying sci-fi rocket ships are those looking to land the reader in a destination where

the primitive and exploitative oppression of capitalism is exposed, challenged, and, with hope, eventually transformed.

Finally with regard to the connection sci-fi has with Marxism, Freedman points out that indispensable to Marxism is a destructive critique of capitalistic practice. At the same time, however, that critique is incomplete if a constructive alternative to the status quo is not offered as well. In this way, Marxism has its utopian side in that "the social relations peculiar to capitalism would be replaced by relations more humane and just" ("Marxism" 130). While Marx and Engels were always scornful of the term "utopia" used in ways that were merely wishful thinking, the transformative project of their socioeconomic criticism certainly aimed for a better day. Freedman contends that among literary genres "the utopian imagination crucial to Marxism is the special province of SF." In fact, not only is sci-fi today "the privileged but almost the exclusive genre for the utopian literary imagination." The Marxist dialectical tension between critique and utopia, then, is embodied seamlessly in the combination of Marxism and sci-fi. Marxist analysis tends to emphasize the critical and sci-fi storytelling the utopic in a "dialectical complementarity" that indicates, according to Freedman, that the "two modes not only *can* be paired … They must be" (131). Such a combination of blame and praise is, likewise, the indispensable component of satire. Like Marxist sci-fi, modern satire routinely targets the functioning of the capitalistic state. When separating "Truth" from modern power, satire carries out the same mission of rebuke-and-replace, the same gnosis–praxis project of exposing for our consideration the oppressive socioeconomic practices of capitalism and recommending instead a pathway toward increased social justice. In effect, then, sci-fi and modern satire can conjoin in their radical excoriation of modern discipline and subject formation.

With its Marxist underpinnings, sci-fi struggles against forms of exploitation by the rich that separate individuals from what they produce. Similarly, post-1960 works of sci-fi often participate in the two other ways, according to Foucault, that people resist being made subject to the modern state: against forms of subjectivity that submit individuals to authority; against forms of ethnic, social, and religious domination ("Subject" 130). With regard to resisting imposed subject status, patriarchy became a particular target of sci-fi as new works by women overlapped with second-wave feminism. In the 1960s, the French feminist critiques of Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray became influential among American activists and academics. During the 1970s, a new wave of women writers—Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Sally Miller Gearheart, Ursula K. Le Guin—began to use sci-fi as a way to interrogate and challenge constructions of gender, in particular "femininity" (Baker 120). Many of these works involve the creation of a feminist utopia that stands in obvious criticism of the author's current-day patriarchal society. Le Guin, for example, saw traditional male sci-fi as sexist and racist "Techno-Heroic" stories that were regressive in their politics and featured masculinist principles of domination and repression. In contrast, she viewed the "female principle" as being "basically anarchic. It values order, without restraint, rule by custom not force" ("Is Gender" 163). Looking to transform the genre of

sci-fi, Le Guin called for the addition of "a little human idealism, and some serious consideration of such deeply radical, futuristic concepts as Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity"—to include, of course, "Sisterhood" ("American" 99). In the same vein, Russ declared sci-fi to be a problem-solving genre for women writers in that it could break them out of the two storylines traditionally available to women: the marriage plot or the madness plot. Within the imaginative freedom of sci-fi, narratives can be created that are not "about men *qua* Man and women *qua* Woman; they are myths of human intelligence and adaptability." These stories "ignore gender roles" and "are not culture-bound" (18). Since the 1970s, numerous works of fiction and films inspired by such precepts have enriched and expanded the genre of sci-fi. Thus, along with Marxism, feminist approaches to sci-fi are instrumental to the genre and its study. A leading critic in this area is Marleen Barr with her theory of "feminist fabulation."

Barr asserts that where most "male SF writers imagine men controlling a universe once dominated by nature; most female SF writers imagine women controlling a world once dominated by men" (*Feminist* 4). In this way, feminist sci-fi disrupts the hegemonic discourse of capitalistic patriarchy by creating "literature whose alien ingredients are concocted by the female imagination" (31). Barr characterizes fabulation as an exercise in acute social critique that operates via Suvin's principle of cognitive estrangement. Profoundly different alternative worlds and futures are deployed as a way to displace and disrupt the contemporary familiar. Writes Barr: "Feminist fabulation is feminist fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal world we know" (10). Such speculative fictions estrange readers from conventional reality so that they may question the dominant worldview. Via a range of postmodern demolitions of the patriarchal "normal," this kind of feminist sci-fi depicts women characters doing the presently impossible, in various ways frees women from reproductive slavery, and overall subverts traditional conceptions of gendered behavior by demonstrating how the very notion of gender is a social construct. Novels such as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Russ' *The Female Man* (1975) are exemplary to this manner of fabulation. Of course, not all works conveying feminist perspectives create women-run worlds. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) performs quite the opposite as a means to deliver her anti-patriarchal message, and Denis Villeneuve's recent film *Arrival* (2016) gives us a woman protagonist who steadily works to undermine the dominant masculine bluster with her intelligence and empathy.[16]

In due course, gender theory as an expansion of feminist theory came into play in the writing and analysis of sci-fi. The male/female gender binary can be blurred and problematized in any number of ways by sci-fi works involving weird or horrific scientific experimentation, space or time travel, aliens, cyborgs, A.I., or any other alternative or otherworldly scenario that can be imagined. In her well-known essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), Donna Haraway calls for reconstructed gender roles by way of women modeling themselves on cyborgs—monstrous hybrid machine–humans. Such a disturbance of the normal man/woman and human/machine binaries would bring

about a "postgender world" (67), where identities could be constructed for pleasurable and utopian purposes. Humans, then, would possess "permanently partial identities" (72) that disobey the oppressive gender positions currently assigned and enforced by the ideologies of capitalism and patriarchy. For Haraway, sci-fi is the realm where such stories of possibility best occur, that is, tales featuring gender deconstruction and radical defiance to modern subject formation. Haraway's declaration anticipated the influential gender theories of Judith Butler, in particular Butler's notion of gender performativity as outlined in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Queer theory, as it formulated and escalated from the theories of Butler and others, proved a readily applicable tool for sci-fi studies. Butler's foremost contention that gender and subjectivity is not a natural essence manifesting from within but a social varnish ideologically applied from without matches entirely with a genre dedicated to upending the familiar here and now. Baker remarks how Butler's concept of performativity "deeply informed the critiques of subjectivity and gender that have been central to the discourses that surround SF, and to the development of a strand of SF criticism that has 'queered' the genre" (127).[17] Feminist, gender, and queer theories alike figure prominently in the disruption and resistance sci-fi can mount against the techniques of modern discipline.

   With regard to struggles against forms of ethnic, social, and religious domination, increasingly issues of race and colonialism are patent in works of sci-fi. In his opinion piece "Black to the Future," novelist Walter Mosley points out that only "within the last thirty years have positive images of blackness begun appearing in even the slightest way in the media, in history books, and in America's sense of the globe" (203). Even this small acknowledgment, though, has produced an outpouring of accomplishments for African-Americans in any number of professional fields. Notes Mosley:

> The last hurdle is science fiction. The power of science fiction is that it can tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised, or simply by asking, What if? This bold logic is not easy to attain. The destroyer-creator must first be able to imagine a world beyond his mental prison.
>
> (203–204)

Mosley predicts a coming explosion of sci-fi from the black community, new works "created out of the desire to scrap five hundred years of intellectual imperialism" (204). Signs of this innovation are found, for example, in the novels of Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor. In a talk at the TEDGlobal 2017 conference, she describes her *Binti* trilogy (2015–2018) as a work of Afrofuturism, a fresh strain of sci-fi that functions differently from traditional western sci-fi. Okorafor describes the narrative arc of her three novels as: "African girl leaves home. African girl comes home. African girl becomes home. … This idea of leaving but bringing and then becoming more is at one of the hearts of Afrofuturism." Her approach to the genre, then, is altogether not through a European perspective. Explains Okorafor: "Growing

up, I didn't read much science fiction. I couldn't relate to these stories preoccupied with xenophobia, colonization and seeing aliens as others. And I saw no reflection of anyone who looked like me in those narratives." Instead, Okorafor writes her *Binti* novella trilogy not

> following a line of classic space opera narratives, but because of blood that runs deep, family, cultural conflict and the need to see an African girl leave the planet on her own terms. My science fiction had different ancestors, African ones.

Like Mosley, Okorafor sees this new bloodline of sci-fi as a way to break out of white supremacist and Eurocentric chains:

> African science fiction's blood runs deep and it's old, and it's ready to come forth, and when it does, imagine the new technologies, ideas and sociopolitical changes it'll inspire. For Africans, homegrown science fiction can be a will to power.

In the 21st century, sci-fi is expanding as a form of nonwestern counterhegemonic discourse. The genre has become an emerging world literature and expression that challenges British and American literary and, far more important, cultural–economic domination.[18] Unsurprisingly, themes of colonization are frequently pertinent, if not central, to the production and the study of sci-fi these days.

As Matthew Candelaria points out, "science and industrialism are themselves thickly intertwined with the successive waves of colonialism/imperialism emanating from the powers of Europe" (133). Since western sci-fi sees its very development as a way to respond to the emerging modern world, it makes good sense "to read and analyze SF texts in terms of their explicit or implicit commentary on historical episodes in European imperialism" (134). Needless to say, some works of sci-fi support the imperialistic project (consciously or not), while other works question, problematize, or outright challenge the aggressive spread of modern power. In *The War of the Worlds* (1897), H. G. Wells famously turns the tables on British imperialism, imagining England invaded by a rapacious and militarily superior civilization. Steven Spielberg's 2005 remake, *War of the Worlds*, similarly asks American audiences fictively to experience the terror and powerlessness of being subjugated by an overwhelming and callous foreign force—that is to say, to feel what it might be like to be invaded by the American military-economic machine. In *District 9*, Neill Blomkamp explores issues of South African apartheid with a unique, strangely inverted alien-invasion plotline. To date, a top-grossing film worldwide remains James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), a sci-fi blockbuster premised in the brutality of colonial expansion.[19] Of course, one could say that all of these works are themselves imperialistic acts, given that they enjoy the support and clout of the western publishing and filmmaking industries. As Cyberpunk novelist Bruce Sterling once remarked, "Trying to conquer the American publishing industry would be the same as trying to conquer the US

Air Force" (qtd. in Sousa Causo 153). From any number of angles, sci-fi is rife with the concepts of postcolonial theory. Candelaria, for example, emphasizes ideas such as civilized metropolitan center/savage wilderness periphery, imperial Self/colonized Other, and a "progress discourse" advocated by the colonizer but, in fact, denied to the colonized (135–138).[20]

I have reviewed carefully not just sci-fi but how that genre parallels the history and function of satire. In particular, post-1960 sociological sci-fi and Foucauldian–Derridean modern satire pair remarkably well. So well, in fact, that at this point I am ready to coin a literary term: *speculative satire*. At the core of the Rant against the Regime is the anti-establishment speculative fiction of sci-fi blended with the warning against false orthodoxy distinctive of the Menippean cautionary tale. While satire and sci-fi form the baseline of this Rant, a third ingredient of monsters, or at the very least issues of monstrosity, is powerfully at work as well in speculative satire.

Monster Tale

The word "monster" comes from the Latin *monstrum*, "a portent"; its root word is *monere*, "to warn." Right from the start, then, the very concept of a monster has something to do with upsetting the applecart of the social norm. A belief in monsters of all kinds is a global, historical phenomenon of culture. Studying their variety or theorizing about the psychology behind them are interesting ways to approach the bestiary of human imagination. My purpose here, though, is to consider monsters as symbols, as constructs of specific societies, as terrifying signifiers linked, usually, with even more disturbing signifieds.[21] A leading critic in this approach to monsters is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who proposes Monster Theory as "a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (3). Asserts Cohen: "The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read. … Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself; it is always a displacement" (4). In particular, Cohen regards monsters as cultural signifiers that subvert the current normal. Monsters act, in effect, as binary busters, as disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic cultural structuration. Calling such creatures "the Harbinger of Category Crisis," Cohen sees the monster as "a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions." Monsters are therefore dangerous because "by refusing an easy compartmentalization of their monstrous contents, they demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality" (6). In the epic of *Beowulf*, for example, the monster Grendel seems but a brute beast gathering up, killing, and eating Danish thanes. Yet, at the same time, Grendel pursues a political agenda as he targets and disrupts, for 12 winters, King Hrothgar's seat of power, the great mead-hall, Heorot. Is Grendel, then, just a mindless and bloodthirsty creature? Or is he a thinking being, a rebel in fact (or terrorist, depending on one's point of view) with a sophisticated take on the world? Answers are murky. In this

way, monsters expose the provisionality of the present; they act as agents of deconstruction. Cohen calls them "the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida has famously labeled the 'supplement' (*ce dangereux supplément*)" because, like supplementarity, monsters erase the either/or logic of binary opposition (7). Grendel upsets such neat pairings as human/animal, culture/nature, hero/enemy. Part of its terror, then, is the monster's ability to decenter our carefully constructed and much desired totalization of existence, thereby dragging us, kicking and screaming, into Nietzschean freeplay. Monsters are inexplicable yet, suddenly, there they are, forcing us to rethink what we formerly thought of as reality.

What is more, the monster often embodies the social Other, dwelling at what Cohen terms "the Gates of Difference." A monster is constructed to appear aberrant and from beyond the cultural normality, yet actually it originates from *within* the culture as a representation of those who are excluded by the dominant discourse, that is to say, as those who must be exiled or destroyed. King Hrothgar, after all, oversees an invading and colonizing force, one that took possession of Grendel's native lands. No wonder Grendel becomes—in the Danish telling of the story—an evildoer that must be obliterated. Monsterization, then, can be an act of social power, a means of segregation and marginalization. Remarks Cohen: "Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (7). Clearly, Grendel can be read as a political opponent of the Danes expediently reduced to slathering horror. Similar acts of monstrous exclusion in western culture include those against strong women (e.g., Grendel's nameless mother), against racial difference (e.g., King Kong), against ethnic-religious difference (e.g., Xerxes and the Persians in the graphic novel and film *300*), against sexual deviation (e.g., Lilith). In Cohen's view, monsterized Others serve as scapegoats for the problems of a society. Creating then blaming victims (e.g., Jews, Muslims, immigrants, the poor) seems a special proclivity of modern discipline. At the same time, however, Cohen points out how the "political-cultural monster, the embodiment of radical difference, paradoxically threatens to *erase* difference in the world of its creators" (11). If pondered thoughtfully, monsters have the potential to reveal the contrived workings of the society. Once Grendel can *also* be seen as a freedom fighter challenging colonial domination, Hrothgar can *also* be seen as an old, drunken, feeble chieftain who must hire a glory-seeking thug, Beowulf, to reestablish oppression. Suddenly vanished is the national feel-good of epic grandeur and heroism. As René Girard notes about the scapegoat:

> Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality. … persecutors are never obsessed with difference but rather by its unutterable contrary, the lack of difference.

> (qtd. in Cohen 12)

Monsters imperil not just individual members of a society, then, but, as Cohen remarks, "the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed" (12). Monsters derail the mechanisms of modern subject-formation.

A further paradox of the monster theorized by Cohen is its ability simultaneously to enforce social borders and to invite their dissolution. The monster both "Polices the Borders of the Possible" (12) and our "Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire" (16). As extreme examples of what *not* to be, monsters administer modern panoptic discipline. These strange creatures warn us:

> that one is better off safely contained within one's own domestic sphere than abroad, away from the watchful eyes of the state. The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself.
>
> (12)

More specifically, monsters act as herdsmen to control the traffic in women and to establish male homosocial bonds "that keep patriarchal society functional" (13). As constructs of the dominant discourse, monsters are created to keep us in our social place. As discussed above, however, such controls can backfire. Cohen affirms that, under scrutiny, "The monster's destructiveness is really a deconstructiveness: it threatens to reveal that difference originates in process, rather than in fact (and that 'fact' is subject to constant reconstruction and change)" (14–15). What can trigger this insight into the mutability of culture is our uncanny attraction to the monster. As transgressors and lawbreakers, these "same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint" (16–17). Perhaps this is why Mary Shelley tells us, in the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, that her ghost story will "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror" (23). Monsters may be embodiments of the culturally abject, of that which the general society wants to shun, but unlike us, who are so carefully disciplined in our behaviors and attitudes, monsters enjoy a terrible freedom as border-walkers. Their despair as outsiders can be enticingly sublime. In his novel *Grendel* (1971), John Gardner takes us inside the thinking, emotions, and backstory of the monster, very much humanizing that beast. In her novel, Shelley allows us to feel the confusion, loneliness, and betrayal experienced by Frankenstein's creature, arguably making it a far more sympathetic character than Victor. The moment we empathize in any way with the monster is the moment we realize that we have created it through careful exclusion and as an act of power. Concludes Cohen:

> These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate

our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression.

(20)

Monsters can be unnerving and penetrating symbols that demystify the "reality" formulated by a society.

Cohen's notions of monstrosity augment and blend well with the disruptive genres of satire and sci-fi. As a component of an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars, the device of a monster can serve the satiric polemic admirably. In its attack on knavery and folly, satire ever has been in the business of monsterizing its victims. Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and Rabelais in *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* (five volumes c. 1532–1564), for example, give us all manner of giants, little people, sea monsters, rational horses, winged pigs, giant wasps and monkeys and eagles, magicians, ghosts, immortals, deformed and savage humanoids, and so on. All such creatures are used to make satiric points, none better, perhaps, than Swift's Yahoos as a caustic portrait of rapacious, vainglorious, and brutish Europeans. Nor does monsterization necessarily entail the representation of strange creatures. The behaviors, attributes, and attitudes of specific individuals or groups of people often are exaggerated and vilified in satire to the point of monstrosity. Political adversaries routinely come in for this kind of rough treatment, and the satiric tradition is rife with the monsterization of women.[22] Of course, satire can be cunning in its use of monsters as well. Looks, after all, can be deceiving, and satire is adept at setting traps for the unwary reader. With Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729), we seem to be reading the treatise of a highly educated and well-intended social engineer tackling the problem of poverty in Ireland—until that narrator recommends, by way of solution, that poor Irish start selling their babies for food to wealthy gentlemen and ladies.

> A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout.
>
> (Swift 490)

This monstrous political economist then sets out a detailed and rational scheme for treating human beings as commodities. In a satiric flash, Swift reverses our understanding of social order: poor Irish are not the problem; rich British are. A similar occurrence of monster-inverting satire comes with the so-called "Prawns" in *District 9*. These aliens, as monsterized racial Others excluded and oppressed by the hegemonic social order, function poignantly as stand-ins for victims of actual South African apartheid. These marooned, insect-like beings have been ghettoized into shanty towns by hysterical public opinion and draconian governmental policy; meanwhile, an avaricious and underhanded multinational corporation hopes to exploit their advanced weapons technology. By way of this unexpected scenario, the film mounts a pointed

argument against the neoliberal state, highlighting for blame the bigoted, corrupt, and violent collusion between political and corporate institutions ruthlessly pursuing abusive objectives. Held up for praise, on the other hand, is the longsuffering communitarianism of these erstwhile monsters. While as viewers we are given no details at all about these space aliens, and while when provoked these aliens can act unpredictably and sometimes violently themselves, we nonetheless witness how they possess more "humanity" than do the humans in the film. This application of monstrosity, then, like Swift's, explores important social, economic, political, and philosophical issues of the day via two frequent and effective rhetorical tools of satire: distortion and exaggeration. *District 9* readily can be read as a monster-driven Menippean warning against a threatening false orthodoxy.

If my suggestion of monsters functioning as a strategy of satire is somewhat surprising, the idea of monsters being a commonplace and integral feature of sci-fi certainly is not. Monsters, aliens, and strange beings of all sorts have populated fantastic voyage, utopia/dystopia, and sci-fi stories from their earliest iterations. As confounding triggers of what Cohen terms "category crisis" (6), monsters operate perfectly within the strange newness of Suvin's *novum*. In fact, the necessary and sufficient conditions for sci-fi specified by Suvin—that is, "the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition" (7–8)—match exactly the impact of monsters as theorized by Cohen. Both the alternative reality of sci-fi and the horror of the monster first estrange the reader from her empirical environment and conventional social order. Second, sci-fi and monster then spark in the reader, by way of that estrangement, a recognition that her *own* reality is not a "natural" one but likewise artificial and the product of cultural construction. Sci-fi and monsters (and, yes, satire) hold up a strange mirror to our own world that works to undermine and denaturalize current ideologies and customs. By way of another quick example, consider the Na'vi in the film *Avatar*. At first, they seem to be a combination of exotic space alien and colonized savage, both bizarre and inferior to the humans establishing an industrialized foothold on the planet Pandora. During the course of the film, however, it becomes clear that the real monsters in this story are not the eccentric indigenous beings of Pandora, but the invaders from Earth. Specifically, corporate greed and military machoism—as we will see in the next chapter, trademarks of neoliberalism and neoconservatism—emerge as the rampaging beasts of the narrative. As viewers, then, we come to recognize our own cultural practices as being violently acquisitive and intolerant. Startlingly, a further bit of cognitive estrangement we undergo is realizing our *technological* inferiority to the Na'vi as well. Not only is their communal society superior to our individualistic one, but their biotechnology is far advanced to our crude mechanized technology. The Na'vi mesh and thrive alongside the environment of Pandora, while we primitive and exploitative humans have devastated and exhausted our own planet. These sci-fi Others thus begin the film as monsters but end the film as ideals.

Post-Marxism versus The Man

Now that the cultural stage has been set and the component parts of the Rant have been explained, I end this chapter by characterizing the type of social critique driving these works. While the issues of Marxism certainly animate much modern sci-fi, the best way to understand all the kinds of resistance to modern power available in speculative satire—against social domination, against subject-formation, against economic exploitation—is through the lens of post-Marxist theory. As argued above, at the core of the Rant is a postmodern dissection of the modern nation-state as it is currently being controlled by neoliberal and neoconservative doctrines. By putting into operation the fundamentals of post-Marxist theory, Rants are able to tackle the full range of abuses suffered at the hands of the present-day hegemon.

Post-Marxist theory came into existence contemporaneously with the rise of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, when Keynesian embedded liberalism began to sputter in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, responses to that economic crisis polarized between neoliberalists looking to detach business and the market from state regulation and social democrats looking to extend central planning and state regulation of the economy. In the advanced capitalist world, labor unions and urban social movements began to converge to form a realistic socialist alternative to economic liberalism. As a response to this social democratic threat to the ruling elite, the forces of neoliberalism began their gradual march to power (Harvey 15). In the academic activist world, the socialist resistance to these neoliberal forces became theorized as post-Marxism. The term itself means *beyond* Marxism, that is, taking Marxist theories as a basic starting point, but adding to them and moving forward with their social implications. Basically, what has been added to Marx's 19th-century struggle for economic fairness (e.g., labor unionism) is a range of 20th- and 21st-century struggles for social justice (e.g., feminism and racial equality). As a theory, post-Marxist stems from the works of Louis Althusser (1918–1990) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Althusser laid the groundwork for post-Marxist theory by successfully undermining the Hegelian universalism of traditional Marxism, thereby opening up a variety of social critiques beyond economic determinism. Foucault augmented these developments by demonstrating how discourse and the episteme are hegemonic constructs always under the stress and possibility of change; that is, the creation of a dominant discourse is not the sole purview of the owner class (as implied by Marx's concept of ideology) nor does it always serve the interests of the elite (as implied by Althusser's concept of interpellation).[23] Emerging from the influence of these two thinkers is a great variety of social enquiry pursued by many critics looking into philosophical, economic, historical, feminist, racial, literary, and cultural matters in ways that broaden traditional Marxism. Asserts Philip Goldstein of this new approach:

> The work of all these scholars suggests … that, unlike traditional Marxism, which defends the priority of class struggle and the common humanity of oppressed groups, post-Marxism reveals the sexual, racial, class, and ethnic divisions of social life and promotes its progressive transformation.
> (21)

No longer is a Marxist analysis concerned only with a generic oppressed "worker" (meaning, really, a toiling white man being exploited by a wealthy white man). Subject to scrutiny now are a variety of identity positions as they are formed and regimented by various and competing power discourses within the modern state.

A key early text in this social and intellectual movement is *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, first published in 1985 by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In their call for a new socialist strategy, Laclau and Mouffe dismiss the notion from traditional Marxism of the worker being a transcendental ideal, a homogeneous group that someday will set right all the wrongs of capitalism. They argue that the "ontological centrality of the working class" must be set aside because the "plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary" (2). The manifold social struggles of the day necessitating this theoretical reconsideration of Marxism include:

> the rise of the new feminism, the protest movements of ethnic, national and sexual minorities, the anti-institutional ecology struggles waged by marginalized layers of the population, the anti-nuclear movement, the atypical forms of social struggle in countries on the capitalist periphery.

Social conflict, then, extends far beyond the clash of capital and labor. Hegemonic contest exists in a wide range of areas, the exploration of which "creates the potential … for an advance towards more free, democratic and egalitarian societies" (1). Needing to be tackled are both issues of "redistribution" (meaning wealth inequity) and issues of "recognition" (meaning social identity). In this way, "struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defence of the environment" can be "articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project" (xviii).[24] Central to Laclau and Mouffe's new leftist politics is Gramsci's concept of hegemony—but rethought and radicalized by postmodernism. That is to say, as a political articulation, hegemony is no longer considered to possess a stable, "universal" meaning as it might within the rationalism and essentialism of classical Marxism. Instead, applying the poststructural theories of Derrida and Lacan, Laclau and Mouffe regard hegemonic discourse as a time- and location-bound, evershifting articulation of modern power. They declare:

> At this point we should state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain. It is no longer possible to maintain the conception

of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development, nor, of course, the conception of communism as a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared.

(4)

Given the rise of a globalized, information-based form of capitalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the radically altered intellectual landscape of postmodern thought, Laclau and Mouffe assert the need to reject 19th-century Marxist essentialist thinking as well as Leninist and Stalinist communist dogma that grew out of the cultural specificity of 20th-century Russia. Older forms of Marxism simply were not relevant to the new political and economic circumstances of the day. Marxist theory needed reinvention.

At the core of this reinvention are Derrida's deconstructive principle of "undecidability" as well as Lacan's notion of a "nodal point" in the formation of the subject. From these ideas, Laclau and Mouffe formulate two key concepts: hegemonic subjectivity and social antagonism (xi–xiv). By hegemonic subjectivity, they mean that social structure and one's position within it are not matters determined by "nature" or any kind of universal "truth," but instead are cultural constructs determined by the actions and articulations of powerful groups. Here of course, the strong influence of Foucault's cultural theory of "truth and power" is evident in their thinking. Like Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe propose that "the privileged discursive points" of the powerful act as "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain," thereby creating a social order that masquerades as fixed, stable, natural, and timeless. At the level of the individual psyche, these "partial fixations" are what Lacan calls *points de capiton*, that is, a means by which we can make sense of the world by imposing an order upon it. At the political level, these *nodal points*, to use Laclau and Mouffe's term for this concept, structure a social center, a political–economic transcendental signified, along with a dominant discourse to support it (112). However, because of linguistic undecidability, any given social construct and center cannot hold. Derrida's idea of freeplay maintains that every signifier is a floating signifier, never becoming fixed forever to a single, unchangeable signified. Laclau and Mouffe apply this precept politically, remarking that "this floating character" of all signifiers "finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) identity" to render it a contingent and impermanent state of affairs. They elaborate:

It is not the poverty of signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. ... *The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.*

(113, emphasis original)

Any given social moment, then, is just that: a moment. Culture is no more everlasting than language. There can certainly seem to be stability and longevity to both, but, as Derrida posits, that is fond wish, not existential circumstance.

   Because linguistic freeplay ceaselessly creates then undermines nodal points of partially fixed meaning, Laclau and Mouffe put forward their second key concept: social antagonism. This idea is the central argument of their book and asserts the inevitable clash of contending forces and groups in society, *not* as part of a cultural superstructure but as the *base* of social organization itself. They state:

> Our thesis is that antagonisms are not *objective* relations, but relations which reveal the limits of all objectivity. Society is constituted around these limits, and they are antagonistic limits. … This is why we conceive of the political not as a superstructure but as having the status of an *ontology of the social*.
>
> (xiii–xiv)

Society is rivalries, with competing factions ever vying to fashion and impose a nodal point of cultural "reality" upon the population. To turn to specifics, the cultural moment and nodal point troubling Laclau and Mouffe in the mid-1980s and thereafter is that of the left wing not adequately revitalizing itself in order to combat the takeover of right-wing neoliberalism. In the 2000 preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, they write:

> Instead of a recasting of the socialist project, what we have witnessed in the last decade has been the triumph of neo-liberalism, whose hegemony has become so pervasive that it has had a profound effect on the very identity of the Left. It can even be argued that the left-wing project is in an even deeper crisis today than at the time in which we were writing, at the beginning of the 1980s.

That crisis, for Laclau and Mouffe, is the development of the so-called "centre-left" and a "third-way" politics premised on the misconception that "with the demise of communism and the socio-economic transformations linked to the advent of the information society and the process of globalization, antagonisms have disappeared" (xiv). While they are certainly not calling for a return to Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the table at the 1960 United Nations General Assembly, Laclau and Mouffe are concerned that, during the 1990s, social–democratic parties abandoned their leftist identities (think of Clinton in the U.S. and Blair in the U.K.) to capitulate to neoliberal pressures. They are pleased that the Left has acknowledged "the importance of pluralism and of liberal-democratic institutions," but they are concerned that, in doing so, the Left mistakenly has abandoned any attempt to transform the current neoliberal hegemonic order. They comment:

> In our view, the problem with "actually existing" liberal democracies is not with their constitutive values crystallized in the principles of liberty and equality for all, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of those values.
>
> (xv)

In other words, Laclau and Mouffe favor liberal democracy so much that they want to *extend* its benefits to all—not limit its benefits, as does the neoliberal hegemony, to the privileged few. They conclude:

> This is why our project of "radical and plural democracy" was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the "democratic revolution", as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations.
>
> (xv)

To pretend that social antagonism no longer exists, that humanity has somehow magically arrived at an endpoint to the political, is nothing more than a neoliberal nodal point, an act of power to partially fix meaning at a place beneficial to the neoliberal elite. Laclau and Mouffe expose and debunk this political maneuver of the bourgeoisie.

A specific strategy of liberal discourse is to fix a new definition of reality to replace the feudal, aristocratic world order it overthrew.[25] For Laclau and Mouffe, such beliefs are not only delusions but carefully crafted lies propagated by the plutocratic elite in order to secure and cement a social arrangement advantageous to themselves. Capitalists, then, are forever in the process of contriving and disseminating "hegemonic articulations" (187)—that is, *their* ideology; *their* interpretation of the world—informed by liberal ideology and masquerading as universal truths and timeless values.[26] As will be discussed in the following chapter, neoliberal ideology in particular pushes the idea of the individual needing liberation from the state. Laclau and Mouffe note, for example, how: "the new conservatism has succeeded in presenting its programme of dismantling the Welfare State as a defence of individual liberty against the oppressor state." Yet the very idea is self-contradictory. If the state is seeing to the well-being of the citizen, how is that despotic? Conservatives and Libertarians argue that social welfare programs create a debilitating dependence in people as well as welfare-cheaters, for example, the mythical figure of the "welfare queen" so heavily promulgated by Republicans in the 1990s. In fact, dismantling welfare programs only serves to create the legions of cheap, desperate laborers neoliberalism preys upon (see Chang, Thing 21). Bulldozing welfare, then, is an act of hegemonic articulation, not sound social–economic policy. Laclau and Mouffe point out how neoliberal articulations above all else work to establish a dominant discourse of "possessive individualism," which "constructs the rights of individuals as existing before society, and often in opposition to it." However, it is inevitable that as more and more people come

to demand this formulation as a right of the democratic revolution, "the matrix of possessive individualism would be broken, as the rights of some came into collision with the rights of others" (175). That is, possessive individualism is a self-defeating doctrine in that it forces a choice between liberal capitalism *or* democracy. This stark choice Laclau and Mouffe term a "crisis of democratic liberalism": at some (nodal) point, the partnership of capitalism and democracy (a bond that ousted aristocratic rule) must be dissolved in order to preserve and protect the wealth and power of the new capitalistic elites (creating, in effect, a new bourgeois aristocracy). Such a discursive project is the entire focus and purpose of neoliberalism: to obstruct democracy from spreading any further than itself. Note Laclau and Mouffe:

> This is why the liberals increasingly resort to a set of themes from conservative philosophy, in which they find the necessary ingredients to justify inequality. We are thus witnessing the emergence of a new hegemonic project, that of liberal-conservative discourse, which seeks to articulate the neo-liberal defence of the free market economy with the profoundly anti-egalitarian cultural and social traditionalism of conservatism.
>
> (175)

This "liberal-conservative discourse" is what I have named the Regime of hegemonic neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Its enemies—the enemies of the free market and of western primacy—are, not strangely, all the old enemies of European aristocracy: the worker, the poor, women, non-white people, non-Christian people, non-native-born people, non-heterosexual people, non-able-bodied people, and so on. Like feudalism, liberal/neoliberal capitalism does not function without people to exclude and a great many people to exploit.

Traditional Marxism and Soviet Communism propagate their own nodal point of an inexorable and marvelous Workers Revolution that, in Laclau and Mouffe's view, is every bit as fictitious as the possessive individualism of neoliberalism. Both are the articulations of powerful groups attempting to fix a hegemonic subjectivity and, as a result, put a stop to the process of social antagonism. Post-Marxism looks instead to embrace the freeplay of social antagonism and to continue the modern political–economic innovation of capitalism joined with democracy. Proclaim Laclau and Mouffe: "*The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy*" (emphasis original); moreover, their "extension of the field of democratic struggles" covers "the whole of civil society and the state" (176). All peoples, not just wealthy white men, deserve the benefits of modern democracy. As political deconstructionists, similar to Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe see incessant hegemonic struggle as the guarantor of democracy itself:

> The central role that the notion of antagonism plays in our work forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus,

of a fully inclusive "we". … Indeed, we maintain that without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible.

(xvii)

What this means is that democracy never reaches an endpoint; it is never wholly complete; circumstances always will demand adjustment; politics is a perpetual conversation—if not shouting match. Writing in 2000, Laclau and Mouffe see democracy in serious danger. Around the globe, disaffection with the democratic process "is reaching worrying proportions, and cynicism about the political class is so widespread that it is undermining citizens' basic trust in the parliamentary system." In some countries, this situation "is being cleverly exploited by right-wing populist demagogues, and the success of people like Haider and Berlusconi is there to testify that such rhetorics can attract a very significant following" (xix). Given the subsequent right-wing populism of Putin, Trump, neo-Nazi groups in Europe and the U.S., and emerging hardline conservative leaders around the world such as Bolsonaro in Brazil and Johnson in the U.K., this analysis by Laclau and Mouffe is nothing short of chilling. They warn that as long as the left wing fails to engage in hegemonic struggle, as long as it chooses to languish in "the centre ground," there is little hope of combating such right-wing demagoguery. They say:

> To be sure, we have begun to see the emergence of a series of resistances to the transnational corporations' attempt to impose their power over the entire planet. But without a vision about what could be a different way of organizing social relations, one which restores the centrality of politics over the tyranny of market forces, those movements will remain of a defensive nature.

(xix)

What the left wing needs to do is both "define an adversary" and "know for what one is fighting, what kind of society one wants to establish." That undertaking will require from "the Left an adequate grasp of the nature of power relations, and the dynamics of politics. What is at stake is the building of a new hegemony" (xix). The Rant is part of this left-wing pushback prescribed by Laclau and Mouffe. The Rant is capable of defining the current hegemonic adversary, of indicating the better kind of society for which it fights, of putting to use the freeplay of political power, and of working to construct a new hegemony to replace that of the oppressive neoliberal–neoconservative Regime.

To Sum Up

Satire, sci-fi, and monsters all stimulate perplexity then critical thinking then reexamination of social order. When blended into a single tale, they form the potent cocktail of an outlandish world or an incredible journey that shocks our understanding. Post/Human theorist Elaine Graham, working from Foucault's archeological/genealogical method of disinterring social and intellectual

lineages as a way to queer what is currently taken as "normal," "natural," and "universal," contends that the "realization of alternatives for the future can only be made possible by apprehending the strangeness of what we now take for granted, thereby subverting its inevitability." Cultural activities that open up this kind of "critical space within which social critique and political action might emerge" include, for Graham, journalists, satirists, and political radicals using devices such as "fantastic, speculative and utopian literature" (55). Such works emphasize "the provisionality of the present, and the indeterminacy of likely futures, the better to disrupt the stability of a monolithic interpretation of reality" (56). In particular, Graham situates sociological science fiction and monster stories squarely within this kind of production.

> Science fiction, too, shares these preoccupations, creating alternative worlds primarily in order to refract our own back to us. By invoking the paradigm shift of estrangement, the suspension of reality, or the creation of incongruous speculations, science fiction as 'fabulation' is designed to break the hold of the *status quo*. Science fiction is also the genre, arguably, in which contemporary equivalents of teratology flourish.
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> (59)

By stirring in satire with this sci-fi/monster mix, I've theorized speculative satire as a subgenre of modern political satire. At the turn of the 20th/21st century, a creative/critical/societal perfect storm has amalgamated three renegade genres in opposition to the enormities of the neoliberal/neoconservative hegemon. In the next chapter, I examine that dominant political–economic formation.

Notes

1 In my own attempts to theorize satire, I've argued that, emerging at the cusp of modernity, 17th- and 18th-century British satire became factionalized within the politics of the developing modern state. What we can recognize as modern political satire emerges around the English Civil War first in the vitriol of Parliamentarian versus Royalist, then after the Restoration in the paper scuffles of Whig versus Tory. See Combe, "The New Voice of Political Dissent"; *A Martyr for Sin*; "Making Monkeys of Important Men." See also Lord.

2 In "Stephen Colbert: Great Satirist, or Greatest Satirist Ever?" I make the case that satire problematizes notions of certainty, stable reality, and absolute truth. A satirist does not traffic in certitude but rather is a polemicist making an interim case for better versus worse in the here and now. Thus, even satiric claims of Truth are based in cultural relativism. My article points out as well how many current media critics misapprehend this postmodern satiric project to operate instead with a modernist view of the genre. Such an approach to satire is inadequate and fails to notice the significance of the form. See Combe, "Stephen Colbert."

3 These views on satire obviously run counter to Fredric Jameson's pronouncement about our postmodern condition, namely, that critique is now impossible because there is no "outside" position from which to criticize the viewpoints of another. Remarks Jameson on the unattainable prospect of "moralising judgments" within

the postmodernist space: "the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable" (*Postmodernism* 46). One hardly requires, however, the chimera of an essentialist, timeless, a priori reality existing independent of human perception—but somehow "objectively" assessable by humans—in order to disagree with someone else about the best version of polity, economics, society at large, or anything else for that matter. Postmodernity does not negate debate; it renders debate inexorable. Thus, postmodernity does not invalidate satire; it makes satire all the more keenly robust. For an example of a critic following Jameson's edict about the incompatibility of satire and postmodernism, see Neeper 295. For a close reading and critical appraisal of Jameson's position, see Robert Samuels' "After Frederic Jameson: A Practical Critique of Pure Theory and Postmodernity" (Samuels 51–68). There, Samuels argues for a critical and progressive mode of postmodern political action that runs contrary to Jameson's regressive cultural order.

4 For accounts of the various ways that satire has been theorized, see Griffin Chapter 1; Connery and Combe; Marshall 1–8.

5 See Amarasingam; Geoffrey Baym; Borden and Tew; Gray, Jones, and Thompson; Jones; Jones and Baym.

6 See Combe, "Shadwell as Lord of Misrule."

7 For a succinct summary of the Menippean theories of Frye and Bakhtin, see Weinbrot, *Menippean* 11–16. For an excellent overview of Menippean satire, see Weinbrot's introduction, "Clearing the Ground: The Genre That Ate the World."

8 Originally, I assumed that certain graphic novels and manga would fit easily into the manner of Rant I'm proposing. For example, Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*, Shirow Masamune's cyberpunk *The Ghost in the Shell*, or Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette's *Le Transperceneige* ostensibly seem a perfect match as highly imaginative protests against modern power. All of these graphic novels have been turned into feature films as well. Two of them, James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* and Joon-ho Bong's *Snowpiercer*, I see as excellent specimens of contemporary Menippean satire. However, I find that many graphic novels and manga, perhaps due to their being targeted mainly at young-adult readers, offer as a worldview a simplistic binary of white/black, good/evil and, as a result of that unsophisticated conception of the world, partake too heavily either in adolescent libertarianism or schmaltzy sentimentality. That is, these works do not bring with them the intellectual complexity and seriousness required for meaningful satiric exposé.

9 For the debate on how to define sci-fi, see in particular Baker 1–24 and Freedman 13–23; see also Anders; Rabkin. For an intriguing essay arguing that sci-fi is *always* in the process of being defined by its local conditions, see Vint and Bould.

10 See in particular Macherey's Chapter 10, "Illusion and Fiction."

11 For Freedman's fuller discussion, see *Critical Theory* 19–22. For critics voicing opposition to Suvin's and Freedman's dismissal of Fantasy and other imaginative works that are somehow deficient for, supposedly, not possessing enough "cognitive estrangement," see Milner; Miéville.

12 For informative overviews of the history of sci-fi, see Baker, Chapter 2; Franklin.

13 In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin dedicates four chapters to a review of "Older SF History" and four chapters to a review of "Newer SF History." For an overview of Suvin's theory of historical "clusters" of sci-fi development, see Baker 26–28.

14 See Atwood's "Introduction" to *In Other Worlds*.

15 See Baker's Chapter 6, "Utopias and Dystopias"; see also Freedman, *Critical Theory* 62–86. For a consideration of Utopia as a literary genre, a study acknowledged by both Fredric Jameson and Ursula LeGuin as an influence, see Elliott.

16 For excellent overviews of feminist issues in sci-fi, see Donawerth; Baker, Chapter 7.

17 For examples of queer criticism of sci-fi, see Piercy; Braidotti; and particularly Pearson.

18 For a good introduction to sci-fi as a modern international genre, see Sousa Causo; see also Baker's Conclusion, "Science Fiction as a World Literature." For a collection of essays examining the practice of sci-fi in countries around the world, see Hoagland.

19 For a reading of Spielberg's film as anti-colonial, see Combe, "Spielberg's Tale"; for readings of *District 9* and *Avatar* as counter-hegemonic films, see Combe and Boyle, Chapter 5.

20 For the commercial domination of Anglo-American sci-fi, see Gwyneth Jones. For examples of scholarly studies of colonial issues in sci-fi, see Kerslake; Rieder.

21 For an historical account of monsters, see Asma. For a Freudian reading of monsters, see Gilmore. For readings of monsters as representational of social issues, see Cohen; Combe and Boyle; Graham; Levina and Bui. For a study of the figure of the monster in Latin-American literature and popular culture, see Moraña.

22 Dryden attacking the Earl of Shaftesbury in *Absalom and Achitophel* or Pope and Swift attacking Sir Robert Walpole in any number of their satires are good examples of political figures being depicted as beyond the pale. A more recent example of this kind of attack is Alec Baldwin's impersonation of Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live* where the president is rendered as a monster of narcissism and ignorance. For women satirically depicted as illogical, frivolous, deceitful, hypersexual, or otherwise "unnatural" beasts, see Juvenal's infamous *Satire VI* (late first, early second century CE), often translated or imitated through the centuries as "Against Women." For scholarly studies of the abundant early modern British satire against women, see, for example, Gubar or Nussbaum.

23 For detailed analyses of Althusser's and Foucault's influences on post-Marxist theory, see respectively Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of Philip Goldstein's *Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction*. See that book in general for an overview of this cultural theory.

24 As Goldstein points out: "What exposes the fissures within hegemonic ideological practices is not, then, the conflict of classes but the antagonisms of women, minorities, gays, and others. The conflicts and struggles of these social movements undermine hegemonic literal meanings and conservative identities and justify those movements' assertion of democratic ideals" (55).

25 As Claude Lefort points out, a key difference between the theological–political logic of aristocratic society and the rule of law of democratic society is that while the former is founded on the transcendental signified of God, which imposes a hierarchical and unconditional order, the latter has as its power site an empty space subject to constant negotiation. No law is final and not subject to contest; no classification of citizenry is ever wholly closed and indisputable (173). However, this situation does not mean that within democratic society there are no totalitarian efforts to reimpose the kind of imaginary unity and hierarchy that democracy shatters.

26 Examples of these grand-sounding falsehoods include Manifest Destiny, the American Dream, Pulling Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps, Capitalism = Democracy, The Free Market, A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats (i.e., wealth trickles down), and, most recently, Make America Great Again.