

VOLUME TWO

**The** EDITED BY  
L. Timmel Duchamp & Eileen Gunn  
**WisCon  
Chronicles**

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**Provocative essays  
on feminism, race,  
revolution,  
and the future**



# **The WisCon Chronicles**

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# Science fiction in the Year Zero

CHRIS NAKASHIMA-BROWN

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery. It cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence...

MAO ZEDONG, 1927<sup>1</sup>

## I. ¿NO HAY MAS?

Riding in my dead grandmother's 1974 Chevy Nova, after Paul Harvey completes the day's AM radio recitations of whole milk Midwestern haikus, Peggy Lee serenades me with an unexpectedly existential 1969 ballad, half-spoken word. "Is that all there is?" she asks, the disillusionment of young Thomas Mann channeled through AM radio by Lieber and Stoller. Echoing a universal modern sense of alienation across the long century. Do you know the feeling?

You might argue I have it made. I am a middle-class white boy, living in one of the most materially affluent societies in the world. I live the life of a twenty-first century knowledge worker, with a reasonably rewarding day job and enough leisure time to chase other pursuits — writing, yoga, the wild outdoors — and thereby break the monotonous curse of the division of labor. I revel daily in the beauty of the world around me, even the ugly bits. The only "weapon" I really believe in is love. But despite all this, I can't stop dreaming of revolution. Scarlet, man-the-barricades revolution.

This is because I can't quench the yearning for a better world. Utopia, or at least some aspirational mirror of it. Utopia may not be achievable in the real world, but its Platonic ideal is an important counterbalance to conservative pragmatism, the dipole of social progress. Mine is probably an American vanilla variation — the culturally implanted drive toward social and personal reinvention in pursuit of imagined perfection. In a society where mainstream political participation rarely yields the satisfaction of meaningful results, and we are

mostly estranged from the products of our own creation, that drive commonly produces frustration and alienation. Revolutionary urges articulate the fantasy of instant Utopia.

The affluence and comfort of life under contemporary capitalism counter-intuitively fans these feelings. To be so objectively comfortable, all appetites fed to engorgement, and yet feel so empty. The challenge of finding, in this pampered realm, an existential satisfaction that lasts longer than the aftertaste of a Quarter-Pounder with Cheese.

I don't think I am alone in daydreaming of revolutionaries ready to break the mental haze. Cathode-ray Lenins lurk in the pop cultural environment of music and movies. From Robert DeNiro's plumber in *Brazil* to the *Matrix*-busting Neo; from the dystopian Guy Fawkes of *V for Vendetta* to *Fight Club's* Project Mayhem. These figures tap our secret desire for imminent liberating social change, our fantasies of becoming clandestine allies of the vanguard of a new underground. Interestingly, though, it is hard to find such archetypes lurking in the pages of established literary science fiction. Why?

Science fiction plays a critical role in seeding the mind of society for revolutionary change, imagining better (and worse) futures and counterfactual presents, providing a narrative laboratory in which the human subjects needn't consent because their blood is made of nothing but pulp and imagination. That science fictional imagination is the best toolbox to navigate the media-drenched, technologically mediated mindscape of contemporary life. But few practitioners of professional literary science fiction put their tools to work hacking reality in a way that really cracks open the now. There was Burroughs, there was Ballard in his prime, and the other explorers of the New Wave; there's our elongated Obi-Wan William Gibson with his emotionally remote explorations of the weird semiotic landscape of the cyberpunk present that he helped create. But mostly the genre reflects on itself, vaunting its own isolation from relevance, while the half-life of its forums dissipates at an accelerating rate. Utopian dreams have vanished from the mental landscape of the West, and the only "real-world" revolutions are fundamentalist anachronisms.

So every time I go to the mall, I make a point of imagining it as a post-apocalyptic ruin.

## II. PARADISUM VOLUPTATIS

Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form: yet just as the literary value of the form is subject to permanent doubt, so also its political status is structurally ambiguous. The fluctuations of its historical context do nothing to resolve this variability...

— FREDRIC JAMESON, 2005<sup>2</sup>

In the imperial heart of old Madrid, if you walk down the right corridor, you can visit heaven on earth. Beautiful naked people of all races cavort on a verdant green meadow, swim with mermaids in translucent lagoons under magical fountains, nibble on strawberries the size of Volkswagens, dance with giant songbirds who bring them cherries, gallop through a bareback unicorn rodeo in the round. Hieronymus Bosch's master triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (~1504), ensconced in its home at the Prado, lifts open the grey veil of the world to reveal a dream realm situated between innocent Eden and the shock and awe of life after the Fall. The painter's vision is of the "paradise of lust" described at Genesis 2:8 in the Vulgate,<sup>3</sup> which somehow got lost in translation by the time I was given my *Leave it to Beaver* Presbyterian Concordance in the 1970s. Bosch grabbed a Biblical cryptogram and ran with it, in a bit of precocious painterly science fiction: filling up the narrative negative space with a Utopian dreamscape. The undiscovered paradise implicit within Genesis, a kind of alternate Biblical history — the dream of a world in which humankind never discovered sin.<sup>4</sup>

Bosch's vision has its kin in the rosy green dreams of 1969, dreams of revolution and Utopia in the contemporary West that were breathing their last gasps when I was being programmed with Sunday school stories of our secret history. Patty Hearst's remaking as Tania may have been the official expiration date, as irony usurped idealism and consumerism co-opted the rock and roll spirit.<sup>5</sup> Between the proto-fabulist of sixteenth century Hertogenbosch and the self-parodic but still scary Symbionese Liberation Army stood a long line of theorists postulating alternate presents and imminent futures in which the real world could be remade free of everything that is bad about the human race. Thinkers who bought Rousseau's fundamental premise that man

is basically good but corrupted by a society that could be reconfigured to exterminate the baser natures. Social philosophers like Marx who emulated the scientific method in an effort to discern natural laws that would enable a polity to be restructured in a manner that worked us all free of the consequences of the Fall. A grand hubris, perhaps, but also a creative counterweight to pragmatic conservatism that is an essential engine of progress, and one profoundly absent after the death with the Soviet Union of state Socialism and the Utopian ideas that anchored it.

Who does not yearn, in this age of War and Prozac, for the end of the alienation that characterizes life in the industrialized West? And who does not feel essentially helpless to enact any change, a prisoner of their own physical and aesthetic comforts?

Bosch and Marx, in their conjuring of imagined futures and alternate presents, were practitioners of science fiction, and models for how diligent wondering about better worlds can successfully inform and redirect the present in a more hopeful direction. What would minds like theirs do with the material of the world today? What would *their* kind of science fictional imaginings produce in the context of the twenty-first century?

## III. THE NORTH TEXAS COMMUNIST REUNION

Revolutions are never waged singing 'We Shall Overcome.'

Revolutions are based upon bloodshed.

MALCOLM X, 1964<sup>6</sup>

In 1855, a group of French colonists founded a socialist Utopia in suburban Dallas. "La Réunion." It did not last long.

Victor Considerant and his 200 or so fellow settlers set out to establish a community based on the ideas of the proto-communist Charles Fourier, a traveling salesman turned *petit philosophe*, who had the radical idea that work should be joyous rather than laborious and that society should be based on cooperation rather than competition. Communities would be organized in optimally sized and structured *phalanstères* (a communitarian variation on the Greek military phalanx) to enable essential work tasks to be assigned to those most likely to enjoy them, ideally to attach each person to the labors most synchro-

nous with their greatest creative passions. Hence, the job of trash collection would go to young boys.<sup>7,8</sup>

A contemporary of Sade and Blake, Fourier wallpapered his more pragmatic prescriptions with fantastic visions of the fabulist paradise toward which a world organized according to his master plan would inevitably converge. The oceans would turn to lemonade! Androgynous plants would copulate. Six moons would orbit the Earth. Wild animals would happily perform most of humanity's labors. The North Pole would be milder than the Mediterranean. The world would contain 37 million poets equal to Homer, 37 million mathematicians equal to Newton, and 37 million dramatists equal to Molière (although "these are approximate estimates"). And every woman would have four male companions (lovers or husbands) simultaneously.<sup>9</sup>

Grandly absurd, but a beautifully expressive evocation of the dream of liberation from "work." A relay for Bosch's sense of wonder that still echoes in Marx's lemonade-free version. In *The German Ideology*, Marx describes a fully realized communist society (with all the social scientific certainty of Fourier) as one in which the division of labor has been obliterated and replaced with total freedom as to how one expends the productive energies of adult life. In this paradise where all passions are expressed with vocational worth, "it is possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic."<sup>10</sup> A dream that today's pampered proletariat of hyper-specialized knowledge workers chases in the form of Fidelity-funded and Viagra-assisted healthy, wealthy retirement.

The ubiquitous ads showing happy and free silver-haired couples walking at leisure are ample evidence. Our society already is based on the dream of the liberation from work, as anyone who has worked for stock options or bought a Power Ball ticket can attest. But one in which that freedom is a rarely dispensed reward for those who win the game through competition and chance, providing a baiting mirage for the toiling grey-collar masses who aren't so lucky. And, of course, the freedom to golf, or to enjoy the golden years at leisure, is not as existentially promising as the freedom to be productively engaged in socially beneficial self-expression throughout adulthood — to live a life that has broader meaning and worth than its quantified contribution to capi-

tal. Though wizened grown-ups may accept the Churchillian aphorism that our system is the worst one except for the known alternatives, why shouldn't we keep striving towards undiscovered improvements in the collective happiness? Perhaps not so much radical political change, as a regime change of our collective consciousness? When you learn that your mind dedicates an individual neuron to the recognition of each celebrity, you can't help but want to wipe some of it clean.

For a time in the boom-boom '90s, when it seemed our middle-class corner of the world was morphing into a cyberpunk paradise devoid of discomfort, I thought I might soon be living in J. G. Ballard's Vermilion Sands, a postmodern Sun City that appeared "during the Recess, that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years." Then came 9/11,<sup>11</sup> and the lurching toward apocalypse, and the starker illumination of the Planet of Slums that surrounds us. Yet even with all of that manifest strife, we seem to exist within a sensory cocoon, one which allows the self-referential beauties of slipstream and next-generation space opera to flower while the world burns. You can feel the latent urge for revolution, and then go back to your cathode-ray anesthetics. Where is the sf that confronts the world that is and postulates the world that should be?

#### IV. THE BLOOD OF TYRANTS

The attempt to produce heaven on earth invariably produces hell.

KARL POPPER<sup>12</sup>

The North American continent is littered with the ruins of a hundred failed micro-Utopias of the nineteenth century like La Réunion, as well as a few that survive in some diluted form — from Iowa's Amana colonies to the entire state of Utah. None of these were founded on revolution, unless you count the American Revolution and its consequent religious and spatial freedoms, before settlement of the continent was fully completed.

American society is founded on the myth of revolution and on the expectation that we could have another one. The right of revolt divined by the Founders from natural law, articulated in the Declaration of



Independence, persists despite its notable omission from the federal Constitution. As Jefferson wrote in 1787, "God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion...what country can preserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time, that this people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms...[t]he tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure..."<sup>13</sup> The second highest us appellate court, considering a challenge to District of Columbia handgun controls, recently held that the Second Amendment assures each citizen the right to keep in his home, assembled and ready for use, small arms of the type that would be used in contemporary military engagements — citing the right of popular revolt implicit in the Constitution.<sup>14</sup> Underlying it all is the dying dream of the nation as putative Utopia, the City on a Hill.

Marx and company applied Hegelian logic to conjure a kind of social science fiction: predicting the inevitable future evolution of society that would result from the operation of observable historical forces. The bourgeoisie had overthrown the aristocracy to produce a better, freer society; surely another new society was germinating within today and progress was inevitable. But Marx's ideas inspired others who didn't want to wait for evolution, and the twentieth century experienced multiple revolutions seeking to tear down old regimes (interestingly, most commonly in peasant societies rather than industrialized ones) and immediately replace them with the beginnings of socialist Utopias. Lenin, Mao, Fidel, Kim, Ho Chi Minh, the Sandinistas, the Khmer Rouge, all hustled to hasten the future.

Revolutions that wish to realize instant transformations into the germ of Utopia have a fundamental problem. They wish to reinvent human nature — to not just upend the power structure with force if necessary, but to alter the consciousness of the citizenry. What they inevitably find is that restructuring social context rarely suffices to change the fundamental character of those already socialized into the old society. (And, history suggests, there is a lot in our natures that is particularly resistant to modification through social systems: Sex times violence equals the future?) From 1789 to 1979, the solution for many new revolutionary governments was apparently simple and astonishingly brutal. The problem of people who could not be reformed by the immediate enactments of revolution was most easily solved through

extermination. Not the social guillotine of spilling merely the blood of tyrants, but the rough societal cancer surgery of excising huge chunks of the population deemed irrevocably counter-revolutionary in their thinking.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this approach was that of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot: declare the Year Zero, and set out through systematic relocation and mass murder to remove the educated urbanized classes from the society in a misguided effort to start from a clean slate. Like Mao's Cultural Revolution on steroids. The results of the effort, including the death of a quarter of the population and the prompt failure of the revolutionary project, are self-evident. Some science fictions kill.

#### V. REVOLUTION IN A SMALL TOWN

Revolutions in aesthetic sensibility may be the only way in which radical change can be brought about in the future... It may be only from aesthetic changes of one sort or another that one can expect a radical shift in the people's consciousness.

J. G. BALLARD, 1984<sup>15</sup>

In his introduction to Eileen Gunn's collection *Stable Strategies and Others*, William Gibson recalls his youthful dream of sf as a literary Bohemia — beatniks with a sense of wonder — and his initial disappointment at finding, instead, an eccentric small town. I think many of us can relate to that feeling.

WisCon is the closest thing I have found to an antidote. A science-fiction convention, with all its filking oddities, that also feels like an incubator of stylistic, literary, and intellectual innovation. A gathering of artists who are trying to break new ground and blaze their own fresh trails, and a celebration of community among the diverse denizens of a cultural Island of Misfit Toys. And one that works harder than others to be politically engaged.

Despite all that energy, there is little that one finds at WisCon or the new work in its overlay that is really revolutionary. Being science fiction, it can't escape the self-referential and coddling insularity of the genre — isolation that is worn as a badge of honor. A literary cul-

ture that has huge amounts of intellectual horsepower but thrives on a staple food of inside jokes and reworked old tropes and the endless ping-pong of additional backstory to otherwise worn-out worlds. That rarely cross-pollinates with the rest of the world around it. It's a matter of subjective personal taste, but I struggle to find contemporary work that challenges with the same revolutionary verve as the best product of the New Wave, or even of cyberpunk.

The Singularity already happened, during the commercial break. Our minds occupy a narrative plane of swirling narratives mediated by technology and spectacular capital. The line between "reality" and "content" has been obliterated. We already live in the Matrix, a mental world more virtual than the cyberpunks could have imagined. And the content we consume is propelled by accelerating commodification. The average New Yorker experiences 14,000 brand images a day, a non-stop mental assault designed to infiltrate her mind and make her view herself through the prism of the billboard. Would real American revolutionaries be bisexual Abercrombie narcissists with white teeth, clean pores, and credit cards, dedicated to blowing up all the ugly shit?

The real explosions need to go off in our heads. On the "Making War on War" panel, we achieved a consensus that the hacker ideal provides better tools for changing our world than the metaphor of war. I think the prankster ethos also leads the way for new revolutionaries — projects like the Yes Men and *Adbusters*, where the creative prostitution of advertising minds is hacked and repurposed as social critique — exploding IEDs on the mental landscape instead of the side of real roads. I believe science fiction gives us the tools to hack the master narrative on a much wider scale.

To do that, we need to break out of our genre's parochial comfort zone. We need to push each other and ourselves, with intellectual rigor, love that doesn't coddle weakness in the line of duty, and egos checked at the door. Science fiction, as embodied in WisCon, could be the intellectual pirate utopia of popular culture, a laboratory of new ideas as vibrant as Madison must have been at the dawn of the con. Marrying stylistic and narrative innovation with deep engagement, shaping the politics of the future by changing the mental landscape of the present. Nurturing a confederation of individuals that cultivates community and experimentation without feeding mobs.

Back to Gibson. The latest novel, *Spook Country*, is carried by an

intensely charismatic but mostly useless character named Milgrim, a veteran of the shadow world. Milgrim spends the book as a prisoner — of a corrupted soldier-spy, of his own addictions, and of his own apathy — while the world explodes around him. He sustains himself with anesthetics — the drug that sedates his flesh, and the secret Baroque paperback nonfiction of lost worlds he hides in his coat. Milgrim reads to me as a stand-in for both author and reader — the holder of latent power, yearning for rebellion, but doped into inaction by the comfort of the now. Just like me, dreaming of change while drinking a soy latte and reading the new William Gibson novel. Even imaginary revolutions are better than none, and there are fewer dead bodies along the way.

The best thing about science fiction conventions is, there's always next year.

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Chris Nakashima-Brown came screaming out of Austin a few years back to careen headlong through the streets of science fiction. His fiction can be found on *Strange Horizons*, *Revolution SF*, and the *Infinite Matrix* websites, and in various magazines and anthologies. He blogs at [nofearofthefuture.blogspot.com](http://nofearofthefuture.blogspot.com).