

PROFESSOR CAROLINE S. BROOKS

**ENC 1102 – THE GERNSBACK CONTINUUM BY
GIBSON / THE THING IN THE FOREST BY BYATT**



**THE GERNSBACK CONTINUUM
BY WILLIAM GIBSON**

**A MAN IS ASSIGNED THE DUTY OF PHOTOGRAPHING OLD
FUTURISTIC ARCHITECTURE WHERE HE DOES NOT
UNDERSTAND THE FASCINATION WITH AMERICAN POP
CULTURE.**



THE GERNSBACK CONTINUUM BY WILLIAM GIBSON

THE ASSIGNMENT IS HANDED DOWN FROM COHEN AND HE IS ACCOMPANIED BY DIALTA DOWNES (A BRITISH ART HISTORIAN) WHO IS OBSESSED WITH AMERICAN CULTURE. SHE IS DISCONNECTED WITH TRADITION.

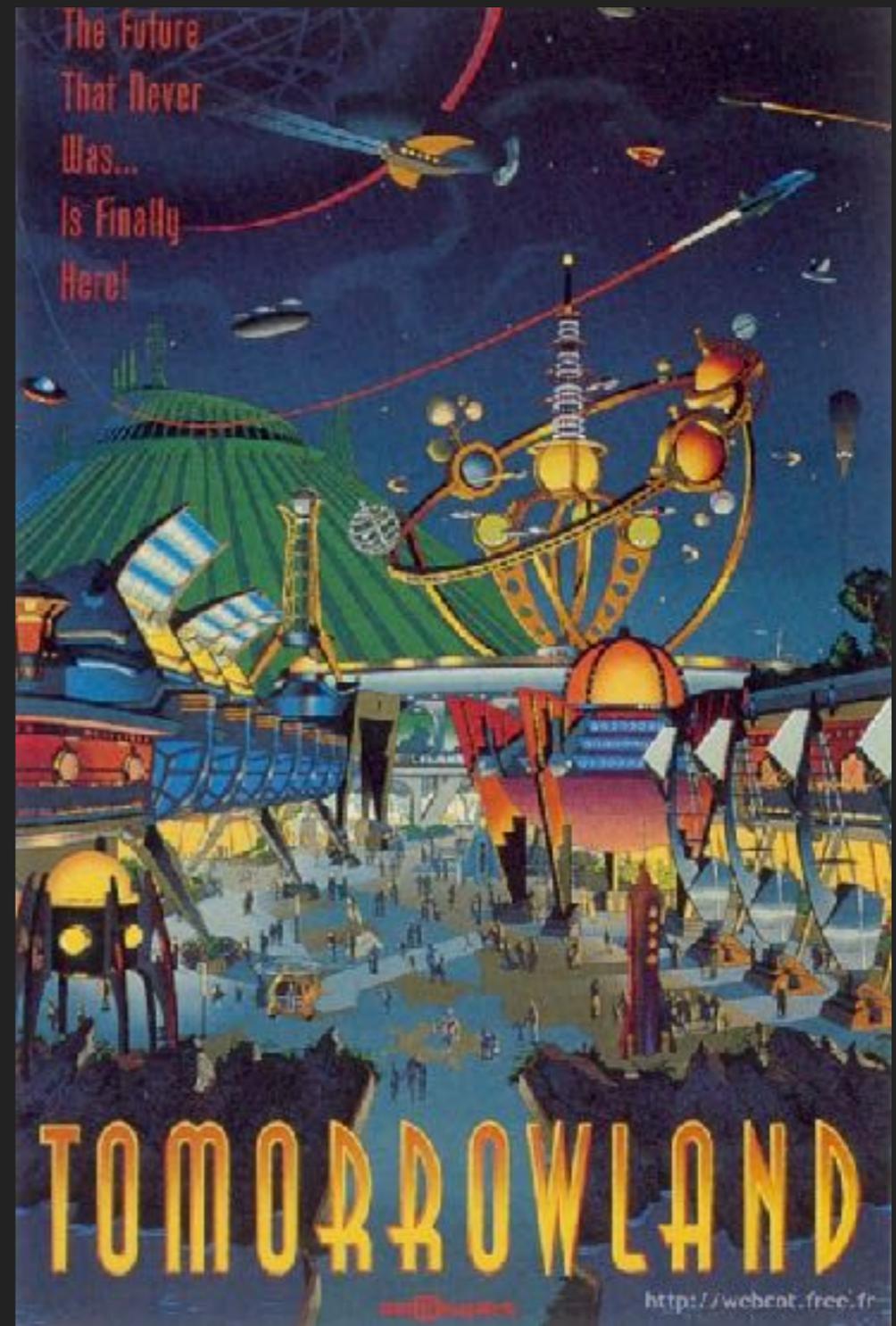
POSTMODERNISM

- ▶ Postmodern literature relies on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox and the unreliable narrator and is defined as a style or trend that emerged post WWII.
- ▶ Words that characterize Postmodernism include the following:

▶ irony	▶ intertextuality	▶ fragmentation	▶ temporal distortion
▶ magic realism	▶ Technoculture and Hyperreality	▶ Paranoia	▶ minimalism

PERCEPTION IS TRULY EVERYTHING

- ▶ He confides in a friend named Merv Kihn and explains the images he has witnessed.
- ▶ Kihn attempts to pull him from the false consciousness that he is feeding into. He explains the unreal images that people see.
- ▶ Before he loses himself in the totalitarian utopia, he snaps back to reality to view the world realistically. He finds that viewing the world's flaws is far better than losing personal authority and touch with himself.



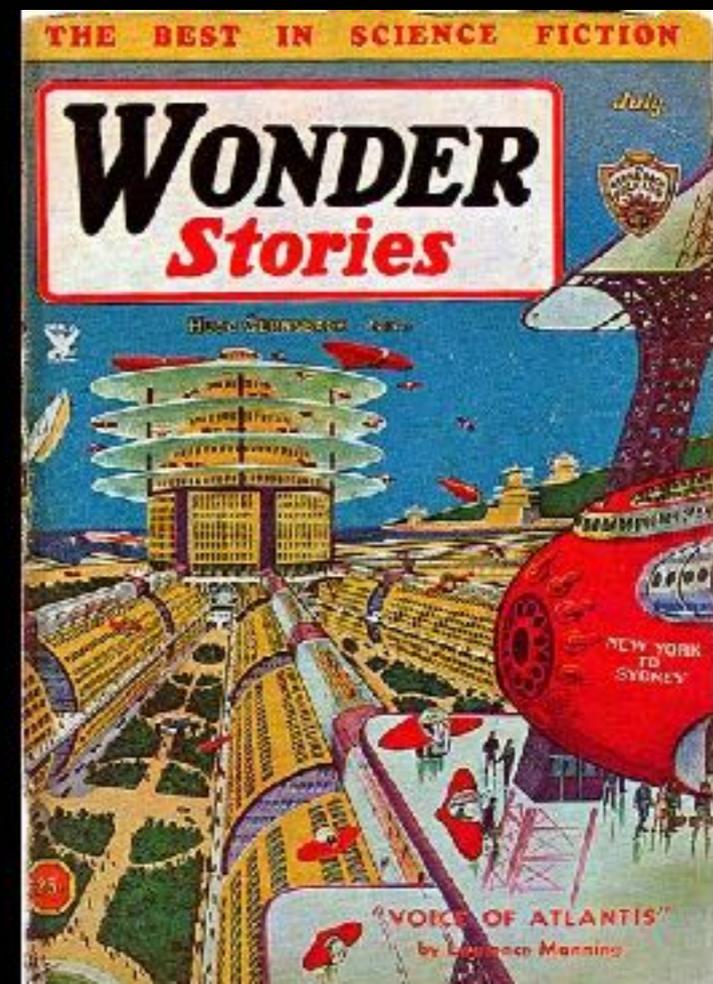
UTOPIA BELONGS TO THE FUTURE...

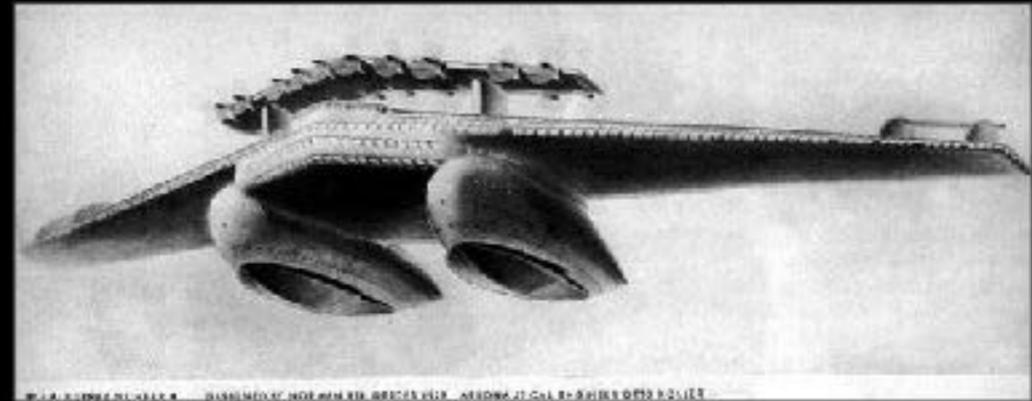
- ▶ Continuum refers to a series of extreme similarities and differences.
- ▶ He imagined the future and found that things fell short.
- ▶ Postmodernism explains these falsehoods as reality is often distorted or fabricated.
- ▶ Concerned for his sanity, the narrator contacts a friend who makes his living writing about groups who have slipped the permeable membrane of probability, between the reality of our collective public life and the madness that collects where our world intersects with alternative universes.



BOLD VISIONS OF TOMORROW...

- ▶ We learn that madness might merely be a symptom that follows our brush with **semiotic phantoms**. These phantoms are artifacts - buildings, postcards, song lyrics, comic books, speeches, pieces of wallpaper - fragments of a collective imagination of public life that has been forgotten, but not fully eliminated.

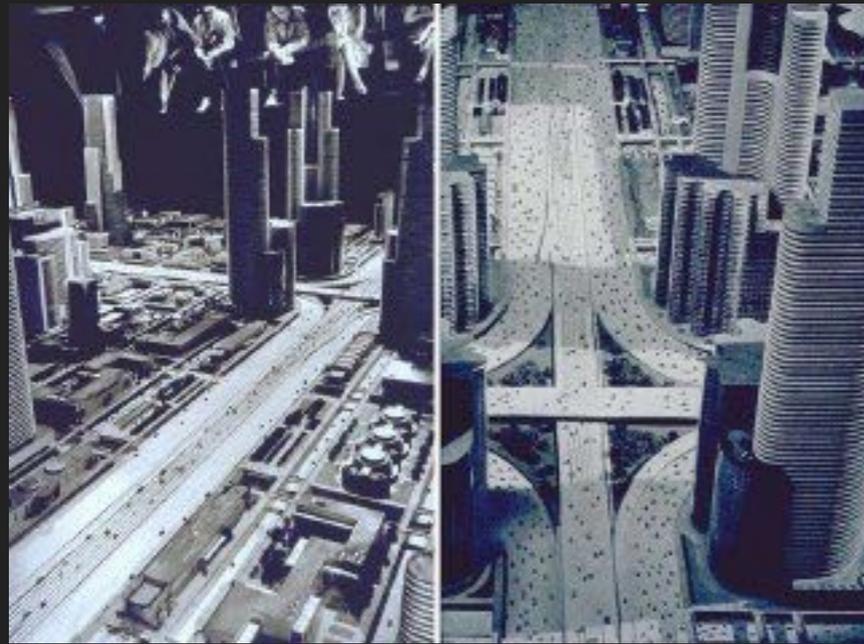




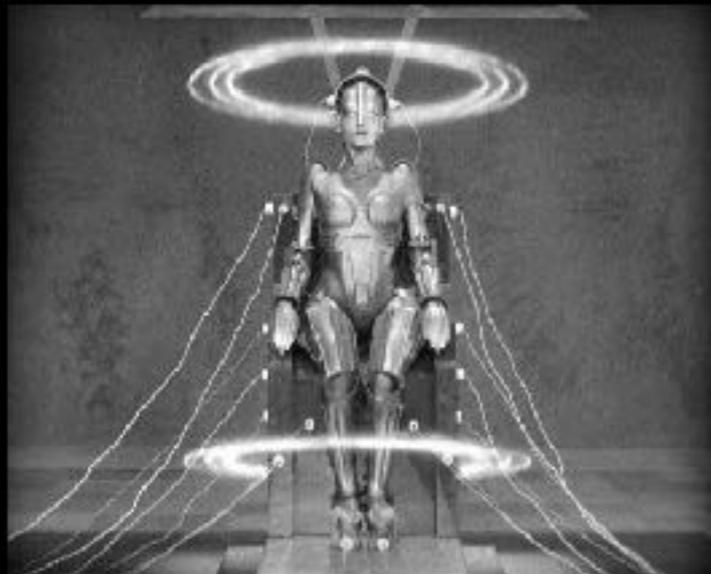
IN A DREAM STATE THE NARRATOR PASSES BEYOND HIS PUBLIC LIFE, INTO THE WORLD IMAGINED BY STREAMLINE MODERN ARCHITECTS, CITY PLANNERS, AND PULP FICTION NOVELISTS OF THE 1930'S.



HE WITNESSES AN ALTERNATIVE 1980'S IN WHICH THE BOLD VISIONS OF TOMORROW – VAST, GLEAMING, SPOTLESS CITIES – CAME TRUE, WHERE THE VIRTUES AND PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY WERE NEVER PERVERTED BY WAR AND DISILLUSIONMENT.



HE DECIDES THAT HIS REAL WORLD IS BETTER THAN A PERFECT SOCIETY THAT CAN DEPRIVE HIM OF HIS HUMANITY.



HOW MIGHT WE CRITIQUE OUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC LIFE WITHOUT STEPPING OUT OF OUR CONTINUUM OF PLACES, VALUES AND TEXTS?

A.S. BYATT

THE THING IN THE FOREST

Penny and **Primrose** are two girls who are evacuated with a group of children to a mansion in the English countryside during World War II. They are evacuated to escape the German bombing of London (i.e., the Blitz), which took place in the early 1940s. The children are described as a ragtag bunch, with scuffed shoes and scraped knees, and carrying toys and dolls as items of comfort, most likely to forestall the terror they must feel.

The war is the event that the girls are literally escaping, but they will spend the rest of their lives trying to escape it figuratively, as well, as they struggle to cope with the traumatic experience of leaving their families and encountering the Thing in the forest.

Penny is tall, thin, and pale—possibly older than Primrose, who is plump with curly blond hair. They become friends on the train during the evacuation, discussing their bewilderment over the situation, wondering “whether it was a sort of holiday or a sort of punishment.” The train is hot and dirty, and as it passes through unfamiliar countryside, the children feel the dread of not knowing where they are going or when they will return. The narrator compares them to Hansel and Gretel, two fairy tale children who were likewise led into a strange environment with no promise that they would return.

Feeling alone and scared, Penny and Primrose latch on to each other. The nascent friendship becomes a way to combat the feelings of isolation and dread they feel due to being evacuated under the threat of bombs and separated from their families. By comparing the girls to Hansel and Gretel, well-known fairy tale characters, Byatt signals that this story is a modern take on the fairy tale genre, with strong elements of fantasy and allegory.

THE THING IN THE FOREST BY A.S. BYATT

Byatt's description of the approach of the Thing creates an atmosphere of unreality and terror, both of which make it hard for Penny and Primrose to accept the existence of what they see. The incomprehensibility and horrid nature of the Thing speaks to the girls' feelings of confusion, fear, and shock at being sent from their homes due to the approach of the war.

Creeping into the forest, the girls vow not to go too far, wanting to stay in sight of the gate. The forest is thick and menacing, paradoxically "inviting and mysterious." Suddenly, they hear a "crunching, a crackling, a crushing, a heavy thumping, combining with threshing and thrashing," plus a host of other disturbing noises. They also smell a stench like that of "maggoty things at the bottom of untended dustbins, blocked drains, mixed with the smell of bad eggs, and of rotten carpets and ancient polluted bedding."

Laying eyes on the Thing intensifies the girls' fright. They can scarcely believe such a creature exists. The destructive nature of the creature as it devours things in its path parallels the destructive nature of war, subtly foreshadowing the deaths of the girls' fathers and the unravelling of their families as a consequence of the war. And yet, Byatt writes that the girls look on with a strange mixture of terror and fascination, suggesting that even the most horrible of events—such as war—can have a dark and undeniable allure in people's minds, provoking excitement and fascination despite the very real potential such events contain for violence and tragedy.

This marks the beginning of Penny and Primrose's lifelong struggle to make sense of what has happened to them, as they struggle to accept what they have seen. When they exit the forest expecting to find that the world as they know it has disappeared or transformed, it is an indication of the ways in which a traumatic experience such as wartime evacuation (or seeing a ghastly giant worm in the forest) can unground a person and alter their relationship to reality completely. Their unwillingness or inability to discuss the Thing, even with each other, deepens their feelings isolation and dread, as does their sudden departure from the country

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Penny is in a different part of the forest, trying to find the spot where she and Primrose had seen the loathly worm as children. She finds evidence of the worm, “odd sausage-shaped tubes of membrane, containing fragments of hair and bone and other inanimate stuffs.” Finding a spot to sit down, Penny reflects on her career as a psychologist, realizing that her encounter with the worm all those years ago “had led her to deal professionally in dreams.”

Primrose appreciates the powers of the imagination in a way that enables her to move on with her life without answering the question of whether the Thing was real or imagined. In this way, the imagination is an integral tool and resource in her process of healing. Byatt contrasts this imaginative approach with Penny’s need to see and hear the worm. Penny feels that if she can confirm with her senses that the worm is real rather than fantasy, this knowledge will help her to heal, but this rigid approach to processing the traumas of childhood proves self-defeating.

Seeing each other again does not make Penny and Primrose feel closer. It does not strengthen their bond. Instead, it reinforces in each of them the need to stick to her own path of recovery. For Penny, this means rationality and empiricism trump all else in the process of confronting and surmounting challenging emotional issues, while for Primrose, the imagination plays a key and liberating role.

Penny allows herself to be overtaken by her need to see and hear the worm again, which she believes is the only way she can move out from behind the “black veil” of her trauma. Whether she survives this second encounter is not stated, and the reader is left to speculate. Perhaps this second encounter is not literal but rather a symbolic description of a woman being destroyed by her grief and inability to rise above trauma.