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Generation X: Technology, Identity and Apocalypse in three novels by Douglas Coupland.

By Geoff Candy

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work.

It is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of a Master of Arts of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

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Geoffrey James Richard Candy

____ day of _____ 2005

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Chapter One:

Introduction: Contextual and theoretical base

> Back in 1990, North American society seemed to be living in a 1980's hangover and was unclear of its direction. People were unsure that the 1990's were even capable of generating their own mood.[1]

America in the 1990's was an enigmatic place, a place filled with contradiction and uncertainty, yet considered the only remaining superpower. The novels of Douglas Coupland capture this world and its contradictions with an ironic ferocity somewhat at odds with the affected, 'too-cool,' apathy of generation X (of which he and his characters are a part) but completely resonant with the contradictory nature of the time. Coupland's novels are important because any understanding of generation X America must include an understanding of the literature that best captures its mood – and his fiction does exactly this. This paper looks at three novels by Douglas Coupland in an attempt to examine the ways in which he expresses the zeitgeist of his generation. His novels grapple with the issues that affect and (in the case of apocalypse) frighten generation X and, in so doing, attempt to understand why this generation makes the decisions it does. Thus, it is only fitting that Coupland's novels have in their turn become parts of the popular culture and the background noise of the generation they are seeking to understand.

Before we can adequately look at Coupland's novels we need to define a number of terms. The first of these is 'popular culture'. For the purposes of this paper, I will take 'popular culture' to mean cultural texts that are mass-produced and are received by the masses. Television, music, and films are the three most prevalent of these cultural forms, but I contend that Coupland's novels have become part of the popular cultural matrix that is so important to generation X.

The second term that needs to be defined is 'generation X' itself. Generation X is not an easy term to pin down because it is the moniker of a generation that makes pigeon holing very difficult and, as such, there is a large body of conflicting data about it - where it starts and ends and what its primary features are. The origins of the term itself

[1] Coupland, D. *Polaroids From The Dead* New York: Reagan Books. 1996. p 1

are unclear, but it was Coupland who first linked the term to a specific generation of North American youth in his book *Generation X: Tales For an Accelerated Culture*. Since then the idea of a 'generation X', one slightly at odds with the prevailing social landscape of its forebears has spread throughout the world. And, although slightly different in each incarnation throughout the world, some arriving before, and some after their north American counterparts, they are all intrinisically linked to a number of things: technology, media, and popular culture both home grown and imported from other parts of the world but specifically America. For the purposes of this paper, and in light of Coupland's project, I will not be focusing on these other variants of generation X, rather I will look at generation X as it occurred in North America. At the end of the paper, I will look, however, at the ways in which Coupland's views on this north American generation X can be usefully applied to a 2005 South African audience. Chronologically, generation X has been theorised as beginning in the early 1960's and, depending on the researcher, ending anywhere between 1976 and 1983. (Beaudoin 1998) The problem with theorising about this generation, as Tom Beaudoin says, is:

> Many gen X studies are attempts to corral chronologically what is primarily cultural: a living generation. The varying estimates of the boundaries of America's thirteenth generation often seek to place artificial fences around a group of Americans who, in my view, respond to similar popular cultural events. To the extent that they shared such events, they draw upon a common well of responses and growth experiences that were formed either directly by, or in contrast to, this constellation of popular culture events.[2]

Following Beaudoin, I maintain that any definition of what constitutes generation X must necessarily be largely based on culture – a specific kind of culture made possible primarily by the leaps and bounds we have witnessed in technology and rooted firmly in the political and social events of the time.[i] The primary concerns that define the American generation X are: an overwhelming regard for, and immersion in, popular culture; an eschatological fascination with nuclear power and technology in general and their potentially devastating effects; and an affected, (shield-like) blasé disregard for the object of their fear. Generation X is also characterised by a fundamental rootlessness, resulting from a lack of any sort of metanarrative upon which to base their life. This loss of metanarrative is the necessary result of a childhood no longer forcefully based in religion and a loss of belief in many of the touchstones around which their parents built their lives. For generation X, the world they inherited was definitely not the one promised them by their parents and the result of this was the need to

[2] Beaudoin, T. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. P 28

search out new ways of thinking and believing. This search led to an increased awareness that there is not only one way to do things and that the traditional way may not always be the best.

To really get a sense of generation X and why Coupland's characters say and do the things they do, one needs to look at the social, political and economic forces that created this enigmatic generation. If we take this generation to be generally middle-class people born between 1961 and 1981, a brief look at North American sociopolitical history is necessary. Generation X has often been defined in direct contrast to the baby boomers, the generation that directly preceded them. The baby boom began in 1945 when the soldiers returned from the war and it continued throughout the 1950s: "The baby boomers were to be a new and infinitely numerous generation of an extra 50 million well-fed and well-educated and trained Americans, able to take on the world."[3]

The country the baby boomers inherited was generally economically successful and stable even though the 1970s were characterized by a period of economic uncertainty, as President Nixon said in 1971, "Twenty-five years ago, we were unchallenged in the world, militarily and economically. As far as competition was concerned, there was no one who could challenge us. But now that has changed." (Cited in Johnson, 1997. p 763) This period of uncertainty, exacerbated by the fall of President Nixon in the Watergate scandal and the unsure and largely disorganized policies of Jimmy Carter, came to an end in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Reagan believed that America's biggest problem was the government activism that had characterised American economic policy since Roosevelt's New Deal. In his inaugural address, Reagan said: "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem."[4] And, through Reaganomics as it has become known, he set about removing government influence from the economy as much as possible: he cut taxes, decreased federal spending and kept government regulation of business as low as was possible. In these policies he was influenced by supply-side economics, which maintains that lower taxes and decreased government regulation stimulate the economy. And, while there was a brief adjustment period, Reaganomics resulted in a long period of uninterrupted economic prosperity:

> Inflation tumbled from 12 percent in 1980 to less than 4 percent in 1984 and the country, after a plunge into recession in 1981-2, entered the longest peacetime period of uninterrupted economic expansion in its history. Between 1983 and

[3] Johnson, P. A History of the American People. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson. 1997 p 762

> 1990, while inflation remained under 4 percent and unemployment fell to 5.2 percent – its lowest level for fourteen years – the economy grew by a third and nineteen million new jobs were created. (Jones, 1995. p 597)

This prosperity during the 1980's had a number of consequences, the first being the reinforcement of the middle class,

> America in the 1990s was essentially a middle-class country, in which over 60 percent owned their own homes, 20 percent owned stocks and bonds (though only half more than $10 000), 77 percent completed high school, 30 percent had four years in college, and the largest single group, 44 percent were in professional, technical and administrative jobs. The true blue-collar working class was only 33 percent and shrinking fast, the remainder 23 percent being in service and farming. (Johnson, 1997. p 790)

It was a middle-class with a difference, however, one where divorce was prevalent, the nuclear family unstable and one that often needed both parents (when there were two parents) to be working full-time jobs to make their lifestyles comfortable.

The second consequence was that generation X children often had relatively large amounts of disposable income, and less and less supervision. This meant that generation Xer's were able to immerse themselves in the popular culture of the time to an unprecedented degree. Douglas Kellner describes this generation as one,

> Raised primarily on media culture. This generation was possibly conceived in the sights and sounds of media culture, weaned on it, and socialized by the glass teat of television used as pacifier, baby sitter, and educator by a generation of parents for whom media culture, especially television, was a natural background and constitutive part of everyday life.[5]

Thus, generation X's relationship with the media is neither a distant nor a hesitant one that is only accessed when and if they choose; rather it is a necessary almost umbilical relationship, the media is an essential part of generation X's life and this can be seen in the constant references to the media that populate the work of Coupland's and other Generation X cultural producers. This is another reason why

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[4] Jones, M. A. The Short Oxford History of the Modern World. The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1992 (second edition.) New York: Oxford University Press. 1995 p 597

[5] Kellner, D. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1995. p 143

Coupland's work is important. Not only is it commenting on the media and the ways in which it influences generation X but it is also a part of that media.

The third consequence was the development within the US of new industries and ever increasing technological advancements – culminating in the creation and eventual ubiquity of the personal computer. These increases in technology also provided new and 'exciting' ways to see and understand a rapidly expanding world. Technology such as TV and the Internet afforded this generation much greater access to new and different ways of thinking than any previous generation.

The other main features of the 1980's under Reagan were the massive rearmament of the US military, and a return to the aggressive postures of Truman and Kennedy toward the Soviet Union. As Jones says of Reagan,

> He characterized the Soviet Union as an, 'evil empire' and 'the focus of evil in the modern world'. He believed that the United States had fallen behind the Soviet Union in both conventional and nuclear weapons and that only from a position of military superiority could he hope for serious negotiation on the arms control treaty on which he had set his heart. Accordingly he embarked on a massive military buildup, the greatest in American history. (Jones, 1995. p 599)

This massive rearmament, combined with a number of other events during the 1980's such as the Russian shooting-down of a Korean airliner in 1983; the failed attempt to kill Libyan leader Colonel Gadaffi and end his support of terrorism by bombing Libya in 1986; and Reagan's support for the Nicaraguan contras that ended in what came to be known as the Iran–Contra affair, resulted in generation X's obsession with nuclear apocalypse, and led to the first part of the tri-partite definition of apocalyptic optimism outlined below.

Other events such as the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, most forcefully evoked in the collective psyche by images of the destruction of the Berlin Wall; Reagan's implementation of the Star Wars program - designed to send lasers into space that would be able to destroy any incoming missiles from US enemies; and the 1990 Gulf War – led to an increased fear during the period, especially among generation X, that nuclear war was inevitable and would lead to the destruction of the world, this also forms the basis for the second part of the definition of apocalyptic optimism. As Jones says,

> The shriveling of the Soviet Empire marked the attainment of what had been since 1945 the principal goal of American foreign policy. But that did not imply that the United States could now afford to give foreign affairs a lower priority. Tension and turmoil persisted in many parts of the globe, notably in Central America and the Middle East. Moreover the end of the Cold War meant that the relative stability and simplicities of a bipolar world had been replaced by confusion and unpredictability. (Jones, 1995. p 612)

When the Soviet Union collapsed, a power vacuum developed in the world because suddenly there was no one that seemed likely ever to be able to compete militarily with the US. The balance of terror suddenly disintegrated. The balance of terror was a term that helped many people to sleep at night during the cold war. It was the idea that as long as both sides had the power to destroy the other nothing would happen because an attack by one would result in the assured destruction of both. The waning of the Soviet Union's power meant that the US needed to find a new target if they were to retain their position as the only remaining superpower and their sights turned more and more toward 'terrorists', "Reagan also took effective action against international terrorism, a growing scourge of the 1970's and 1980's. On July 8, 1985 he branded five nations, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Libya as 'members of a confederation of terrorist states carrying out 'outright acts of war' against the US." (Johnson, 1997. p 774) Thus, with the Soviet threat neutralized, the possibility of war increased, because without the balance of power or the threat of retaliation by an equally powerful nation, the US was more likely to engage in acts of war, and so there was an even greater possibility of nuclear apocalypse.

The third characteristic of the 1980's and the early 1990's of which one needs to be aware is the general decline of 'moral' standards and a number of scandals. It was a period during which the Iran-Contra debacle occurred, and a large wave of corruption spread throughout government and a number of ivory towers:

> An unusually large number of presidential appointees, including cabinet members, were either indicted on criminal charges or resigned under a cloud. None was censured by the White House. On Wall Street fraud and deceit ran riot, encouraged – so critics alleged – by the ethos of greed that had developed out of the administration's emphasis on the pursuit of self-interest…Deteriorating ethical standards also invaded the world of evangelical religious broadcasting, producing a series of sexual and financial scandals. (Jones, 1995. p 606)

These factors, when linked to an increase in civil rights activism and the promotion of ideas such as affirmative action, and cultural relativism - linked in many ways to the predominance in cultural theory of notions of the postmodern (which I will explain below) – led to a loss of faith among generation Xers, in the traditional metanarratives that had been the touchstones of previous generations. These factors led to a desire to be rid of the obsession with materialism and ownership that had characterized the boomers on Wall Street. This desire is best embodied by the enormous popularity of Grunge and its main promoters the band Nirvana. This loss of faith also resulted in a disbelief in many of the tenets of traditional organized religion, spurred by the fall of the televangelists, and the often antiquated views of the Church toward important new social issues like AIDS, sex before marriage and the proliferation of divorce and single parent homes, issues that were a reality for generation X and the world in which they had been brought up.

On top of this loss of metanarratives, the early 1990's saw a decline in prosperity in the US:

> After seven booming years, the economy turned sharply downward in the summer of 1990 and remained stagnant for the rest of Bush's Presidency. Unemployment rose inexorably, reaching ten million in July 1992; corporate and personal bankruptcies multiplied; residential property values fell by almost a third, commercial property values by even more. (Jones, 1995. p 619)

Thus, there was a growing belief on the part of generation Xer's that they had been cheated; they had grown up in a world of possibility, and when they finally got to an age where they could make use of it, this world was ripped out from under them and replaced with one in which there was no longer anything to hold onto. As Andy says in *Generation X:*

> All things seem to be from Hell these days: dates, jobs, parties, weather… Could the situation be that we no longer believe in that particular place? Or maybe we were all promised heaven in our lifetimes, and what we ended up with can't help but suffer in comparison.[6]

Or, as Dag says of the generation of baby boomers that preceded him:

[6] Coupland, D. Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture. London: Abacus. 1991 p 8

> do you really think we enjoy hearing about your brand-new million-dollar home when we can barely afford to eat Kraft Dinner sandwiches in our own grimy little shoe boxes and we're pushing thirty? A home you won in a genetic lottery, I might add, sheerly by dint of your having been born at the right time in history? You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age these days. (p 26)

This belief that they have been cheated is just one of the persistent beliefs that generation X has internalized (and is one with which they have often been derogatorily associated) and is prevalent in the fiction of Douglas Coupland. It is a feeling that pervades much generation X cultural production. There is a sense that they have been ripped off and this belief is often accompanied by an expectation that they should be compensated, that they are owed something by society.

Another deep-seated belief that Coupland is trying to unpack is something I have termed apocalyptic optimism. This tripartite concept is important for a number of reasons, and comes with a slight caveat. Firstly, the caveat: Generation X has grown up in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, at the peak of the cold war. And while, in this post-cold-war world, this fear of apocalypse remains, the imminent threat perceived by generation X is not only from nuclear war – a fact evidenced by *Girlfriend in a Coma.* Generation X, while deeply perturbed, and slightly obsessed with the thought of nuclear holocaust, is just as worried about other technologies and the impact humans and their technologies are having on the planet. Thus, it is the fear of apocalypse as the direct result of humanity's meddling with the planet, either through nuclear power, or other possibly harmful technologies such as those that destroyed the ozone layer that is, I believe, the fundamental defining characteristic of generation X and is responsible for much of what they do and the ways in which they do them. The idea that the world they inherited is somehow corrupt, tainted with a humanity that is as fragile as the push of a button or the use of an aerosol can is an important motivating factor in what they do. As such the primary focus of this paper is the ways in which Coupland's novels examine this fear and the generation's attempts to cope with it – via a forced sense of optimism.

The first manner in which apocalyptic optimism, functions is as a description of the flippant apathy affected by generation X members with regard to nuclear apocalypse. They are constantly trying to talk and joke their way around their deep-seated fear of nuclear apocalypse that has been a part of the background noise of their entire life, a fear developed as a result of growing up at the height of the cold war and the ever-increasing development of new technologies to unleash this terror into the world. It acts as a defense mechanism – by pretending the threat of nuclear apocalypse is not real,

they allow themselves the peace of not constantly thinking about it. Ironically, constantly pretending that it is not going to happen just means that they are constantly thinking about it. There is, however, a flip-side to this apathy most strongly seen in *Microserfs.* It is the belief that nuclear war will not in fact occur, rather a new world will be created where we have harnessed the power of that same technology of which we were deathly afraid, and used it for the good of humanity. This will be dealt with in much more detail in the chapter concerned with *Microserfs.*

The second way in which the term works is by describing the deep-seated belief that, so long as the threat of nuclear apocalypse remains, it will never actually happen. Because the results of a nuclear war would be the end to humanity, the event could never, and will never, happen. Thus, nuclear apocalypse has become a part of the hyperreal, a simulation of the real thing, the threat of it has in fact made it null and void. Without this threat, however, nuclear apocalypse could one day become possible. As Baudrillard says:

> The unknown is precisely that variable of simulation which makes the atomic arsenal itself a hyperreal form, a simulacrum which dominates us all and reduces all 'ground level' events to mere ephemeral scenarios, transforming the only life we have left to us into survival, into a wager without takers – not into a death policy: but into a policy devalued in advance… The risk of nuclear atomisation only serves as a pretext through the sophistication of arms – but this sophistication exceeds any possible objective to such an extent that it is itself a symptom of non-existence – to the installation of a universal system of security, linkup and control whose deterrent effect does not aim for atomic clash at all… [but at a] real event, of anything which could upset the general system and upset the balance. The balance of terror is the terror of balance.[7]

Dag puts this fear of upsetting the balance much more succinctly,

> 'If people could mentally convert their houses into shopping malls,' he thought, 'then these people are just as capable of mentally equating atomic bombs with regular bombs.'
> 'He combined this with his new observation about mushroom clouds: 'And once these people saw the new smaller friendlier explosion size, the conversion process would be irreversible. All vigilance would disappear. Why, before you

[7] Baudrillard, J. *Simulations* New York: Semiotext(e), 1983 p 59

know it you'd be able to buy atomic bombs over the counter – or free with a tank of gas. (p 80)

This optimism about the impossibility of nuclear war ever really happening is built up as a way of coping with the enormous fear that nuclear war can and will happen. It is this fear that underlies a lot of what the characters in Coupland's novels say and do. The looming presence of the mushroom cloud that hangs over generation X has an enormously powerful effect on their lives and can act as either a motivator or as a reason to sink into inactivity. The belief that one day the world will end, destroyed by the awful horror that is nuclear apocalypse, is a very difficult thing to live with and usually results in one of two choices. Either one can choose to embrace what life is left until the bomb hits, or one can choose to withdraw from society completely because if everyone is going to die anyway, then what is the point of doing anything? The characters in Coupland's novels display both these attitudes at different points and often oscillate between the two positions, but there is no denying that this fear, this belief that the world will end, has a powerful affect on their lives.

The belief that should apocalypse come there will be some who will survive and will be able to start again and learn from the mistakes of the past, is the third way in which the term functions. This feeling of optimism in the didactic effect apocalypse would cause is both a way of looking on the bright side, so to speak, and attempting to get their heads around something that is completely without merit, in a sense, attempting to imbue this horrible thought with at least one redeeming feature. It is this third function of the term that is most clearly outlined in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. At the end the characters are given a chance to try and save the world, to redeem themselves from the world they have created, a world where everyone:

seems to be working too hard. Karen seems to remember leisure and free time as being important aspects of life, but these qualities seem utterly absent from the world she now sees in both real life and on TV. Work, work work work work work work…

They talk about their machines as though they possess a charmed religious quality – as if these machines are supposed to compensate for their owner's inner failings. Granted these new things are wonders – email, faxes and cordless phones – but then still…big deal.

'Hamilton , but what about you - are you new and improved and faster and better, too? I mean, as a result of your fax machine?'

'Its swim or drown, Kare. You'll get used to them.'

'Oh, will I?'

'Its not up for debate. We lost. Machines won.[8]

The third concept that needs to be defined is the notion of postmodernism, and how what I term a postmodern cultural studies can be useful in understanding what Douglas Coupland is trying to do. Postmodernism is a term the meaning and validity of which is still being debated. In fact many of the tenets of postmodern thought work against a single, final definition of the form 'postmodernism is x'. What is certain is that postmodernism attempts to subvert notions of any single truth and is constantly incorporating elements from different and diverse sources. One of the major debates within theoretical circles is whether or not postmodernism represents a break with modernity or whether it is the final stage of late modernity. (Waugh, P. 1992) I believe that it is indeed a break from the high modernism of people such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Joyce and Munch and, in keeping with the postmodern mode my own definition of postmodernism is a bricolage of a number of theories. It is primarily based, however, on the work of Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

For the purposes of this paper, I will outline a few characteristics that I believe to be central, both to my understanding of postmodernism, and to my reading of Douglas Coupland's fiction. The first of these characteristics is the belief in the fact that there are no 'master' narratives. Rather, there is an understanding that although metanaratives still exist and are used by everybody to understand the world, there is no longer one 'right' way of seeing the world. There is an understanding that all metanarratives are human constructs and need to be understood as such.

The second characteristic, is that within the arts there is an embracing of forms that were previously spurned because of their perceived status as mass cultural forms and thus not as valuable as 'high art' forms. This embracing of 'low' or mass cultural forms has been hailed as both one of the best and the worst elements of postmodernism by different theorists. I believe that the embracing of popular culture by postmodernists should be viewed not merely as a reaction to the elitism of high modernism (even though this is definitely a part of it) but also as the use of forms that are most suitable to understanding the world we live in today – a world of what Jameson calls 'late capitalism' - a world where consumerism is the dominant mode of thought. As Lyotard says,

[8] Coupland, D. *Girlfriend in a Coma*. London: Flamingo. 1998 p 141

> The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.[9]

I believe that this is the way in which one needs to view the work of Douglas Coupland: texts attempting to discover order in the fragmented postmodern world in which we now live, as a way to understand the inexorable encroachment of mass consumer culture on our lives, and in doing so attempt to fend it off to some degree. As Hutcheon says,

> The increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism seeks to challenge. Challenge but not deny. But it does seek to assert difference, not homogenous identity.[10]

The next two concepts I want to explore are the notion of, 'the presence of the past', what Jameson calls 'historicism', and the related concept pastiche. 'The presence of the past', while originally applied to architecture, can also be applied to literature and Hutcheon defines this as the idea that postmodernism

> Has been rethinking modernism's purist break with history. This is not a nostalgic return, it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary. (Hutcheon, 1988. p 4)

This concept is one that fits into most definitions of postmodernism in one way or another but, while some theorists see it as a positive feature, others see it as just another negative aspect of the postmodern project. Jameson describes this same revisiting of the past by postmodernism in negative terms as historicism, which he defines as,

> The random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebre has called the increasing primacy of the neo.[11]

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[9] Lyotard, J. F. *Answering the Question: What is Postmoderism?* From *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Waugh, P. Ed. London: Edward Arnold 1992. P 122

[10] Hutcheon, L. *A Poetics Of Postmodernism History, Theory Fiction*. London: Routledge 1988 P. 6

[11] Jamesom, F. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In New Left Review NO. 146 (1984) 53 – 93. P. 69

This idea of historicism is intimately linked to the notion of pastiche. Jameson defines pastiche as, “The imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse.” (Jameson, 1984. p 65) For Jameson, pastiche is very closely related to the notion of parody, however, while he sees parody as having depth and meaning, he believes that pastiche is nothing more than glib surface play.

For Jameson, postmodernism’s cannibalization and mimicry of the past is seen negatively as superficial and nostalgic, while Hutcheon sees it in a positive light. She maintains that pastiche and historicism are important, “Postmodernism’s ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic. It critically confronts the past with the present and vice versa.” (Hutcheon, 1988. p 39) For the purposes of this essay, I maintain that pastiche and the surface play of historicism are positive things and that, far from having replaced parody, pastiche is now used together with parody in order to critically revisit the past.

The final concept that I want to consider is the notion of postmodernism’s perceived lack of depth. Many theorists (such as Jameson) maintain that postmodernism is characterised by, “A new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity”. (Jameson, 1984. p 58.) I believe that, while there is an increasing concern for the surface, this comes not from a complete loss of depth, but rather from an understanding that a concern for depth is just another human construct. In this era of the simulacrum meaning and depth are not intrinsic to the object under study, rather they form the discourses and metanarratives that contextualise the object’s production and reception. As Umberto Eco says:

> The ‘game of irony’ is intricately involved in seriousness and purpose of theme. In fact irony may be the only way we can be serious today. There is no innocence in our world. We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualise everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact. (In Rosso 1983 p 2-5 cited in Hutcheon, 1988. p 39)

This lack of innocence in the world that Eco is remarking on is linked, for generation X, to the increase of technology that has seen the rise of both machines that help the world and could one day heal it, and the consequent rise of the technologies that produce nuclear weapons and the possibility of apocalypse. It is this dual nature of

technology as both boon and burden that generation X is attempting to come to grips with. It is the notion that even if technology is only ever used for good in the future, the planet has still been irrevocably altered and now cannot survive without our technologies. This is summed up most eloquently in *Girlfriend in Coma*, and will be dealt with in more detail in chapter four.

These characteristics: pastiche, ironic surface play, the presence of the past, an embracing of low art, a rejection of elitism and a loss of faith in the power of master narratives are, I believe, the most important elements of postmodern thought. And, while many theorists still do not agree on all of them, I believe them to be crucial to my understanding of postmodernism and to the practice of a postmodern cultural studies. They are crucial to my thinking about postmodernism because they form the basis of my understanding of what postmodernism is: a mode of thinking about life based on a fundamental disbelief in the legitimacy of any one metanarrative and an embracing of the understanding that almost everything in our world is a human construct and as such should be taken with 'a pinch of salt'. In order to do this, however, one needs a good understanding of this world and in order to understand the present one needs a multi-perspectivist understanding of the past – an understanding that takes into account the fact that, like everything else, the past is a human construct. In his book, 'Media Culture' Douglas Kellner sets forth what he terms a 'multiperspectivist cultural studies' which he defines as a type of cultural studies that, "Draws on a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticise and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny. " (Kellner, 1995 p 98) I will attempt for the rest of this paper to analyze Coupland's work through what I term a postmodern cultural studies. By this I mean a multiperspectivist cultural studies that takes as its starting point postmodernism's ironic interaction and 'critical revisiting' of the past that created it.

The final thing we need to examine before we can properly steep ourselves in Coupland's work is his nationality and the role it has on what he writes as well as his view of postmodernism. Coupland is Canadian, not American, and this is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, no matter how well he knows his subject matter and how enveloped he is by American culture, the fact remains that he will always be an outsider, this provides him with a distance that is useful in what he is attempting to do – critique and examine the ways in which generation X go through life. He has no need to be patriotic about America and so is free to speak his mind, to say what he really thinks. He has no need to sugar coat his view of America. Secondly, Coupland's writing can be read as a form of writing back to the cultural empire that has enveloped generation X, even within Canada. He has grown up within the culture, although on the

outskirts, and so can critique the culture from the inside. Of the three books to be examined, only *Girlfriend in a Coma* is set in Canada, and you get the sense that it is a novel that could just have easily been set deep in American suburbia. Coupland's main focus is, I believe, generation X, their worries, travails and exploits, and because he is not American he can make inferences and comments that only an outsider, one with considerable knowledge about his subject, could make. He is attempting to understand generation X, what makes them tick, and has the added advantage of being able to distance himself from totally identifying with this American generation because he is Canadian, while at the same time, because he lives in Canada, America's neighbour, he has been involved at least indirectly with all of the collective occurrences that have affected generation X.

For these reasons as well, Coupland's view of postmodernism is not bound by any one tradition, nor is it always completely serious. As a Canadian, he is slightly removed from the centre and so is not completely bound by its thinking. He is a member of the new world, but not of America, and so is removed from the centers of postmodern thought and thus not completely bound by their rules. If anything, he is free to mix and match ideas that suit him best. However, postmodernism's removal of many traditional boundaries such as national sovereignty - through a postmodern lens nationalism is seen as a human construct and thus not a given – provides much of the justification for generation X's reliance on culture and technology as defining characteristics rather than national or other seemingly anachronistic distinguishing traits.

Chapter 2:

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture

The first novel I want to look at in detail is *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture.* This is Coupland's first novel and tells the story of three generation Xer's: Andy, Dag and Claire, who have moved to the desert in an attempt to find out who they really are, to develop some kind of personal narrative through which they can make sense of the world. As Andy says of Claire,

> She breaks the silence by saying that it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated cool moments. 'Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them.'
> I agree. Dag agrees. We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert – to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process (p 10).

These three characters are looking for a metanarrative through which to structure their understanding of a world that has become increasingly fragmented and illusory. By attempting to make their lives worthwhile tales, they are also attempting to imbue their lives with some kind of meaning now that they no longer can believe in the metanarratives of their parents. It is interesting that they choose to go to Palm Springs, which Andy describes as having, "…no weather…just like TV" (p 12). The close link for these three characters, between media, pop culture, nature and the stories they are trying to articulate is, I believe, central to Coupland's project. They have moved their lives into a living, breathing TV studio and now enact them as made-for-TV dramas in which they play the main character. They are using the only touchstone in which they can still believe, and one that has always seemed somehow to be under their control, unlike their lives in 'reality'. Their moving to Palm Springs is a way for each of them to take control of their lives to take on not only the role of main character, but also director in the made-for-TV drama that is their life.

The chapter has been broken into three sections: apocalypse, narrative and represented because in order to fully understand what Coupland is attempting to do in this novel one needs to look at these themes individually. These three themes are continually overlapping and combining within the novel and result in a comprehensive overview of the major issues that concern generation X.

Firstly, narrative. As mentioned in the first paragraph, these characters are intent on finding a personal metanarrative that they will be able to use to understand the world in which they live. They use stories to articulate their understanding of the world because the world of stories is removed from the real world in such a way as to provide a safety net - they can live out in fantasy what they are too scared to do in reality, and they can express emotions that they otherwise wouldn't be able to articulate. As Andy maintains,

> It's simple: we come up with stories and we tell them to each other. The only rule is that we're not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA, and at the end we're not allowed to criticize. This non-critical atmosphere works for us because the three of us are so tight assed about our emotions. A clause like this was the only way we could feel secure with each other (p 16).

The stories each of these characters tell provide insights into their hopes, fears and aspirations and also into the ways in which they perceive the world. They also provide a unique way for Coupland to interact with his readers because they have been written with generation X in mind. They are filled with the ironic surface play that is characteristic of postmodernism, and are filled with references to the past, especially old media references, because media is often the only stable presence in the lives of generation X members continually bombarded with uncertainty. The stories seem simple, but this semblance of simplicity belies a wealth of deeper meaning, of allusion and implication that can only be fully accessed by readers who are familiar with the cultural references of which these stories make use. Coupland is able then not only to provide us with the story of what these characters' lives are actually like, but also to provide the reader with some understanding of the ways the characters understand their world.

The novel is also set out in an interesting manner that should be viewed, I believe, as further indication of just how well Coupland understands his audience. Firstly, it is broken up into bite-size, easily digestible pieces and, in many ways, reads like a TV broadcast. It contains the continuing drama series that concerns the lives of the three main protagonists, but is frequently broken up by unrelated stories that are interesting and serve often for comic relief, in much the same way as a sitcom would. It is also filled with aphorisms such as "Bench press your IQ" (p 102) which have been presented to look like bumper stickers; single frame cartoons that look to have come from the golden age of comics in the 1950s but comment on the fears of generation X, for example, "Hey dad – you can either have a house or a life, I'm having a life." (p

164) and lastly definitions of terms that Generation X has coined. These three features are designed to do two things. The first is to act in the same manner as the filler programmes on M-TV, something to keep the reader occupied until the next chapter begins, a little comic interlude to break up what is often a serious text. It also, serves, however, as a handbook, or a tour book for people not from generation X. If nothing else, it provides these people with an insight into the manner in which this generation perceives the world – as a 'succession of isolated cool moments' that have been woven into a story, a story that makes their lives worthwhile. After all, can a life be worthwhile without the 'cool' moments?

Because of length constraints, and the number of stories that the novel contains, I will only focus on four of the stories, the first three as examples of the ways in which Coupland uses the stories as a popular cultural shorthand to describe generation X life – the ways in which they come to grips with the world and the ways in which media references have influenced they ways they think and perceive it. The final story will be used as a bridge between the section on narrative and the one on apocalypse.

It is important to note that through the telling of these stories the characters are attempting to construct stories for themselves, coherent narratives through which they will be able to understand their world. And, while these stories are designed to create a metanarrative, a structure onto which the characters can hang their lives, they are based in and on the experiences that have shaped the lives of the characters. They are filled with popular cultural images not because they are cool, but because popular culture is an integral part of who these people are and how they relate to their world. Thus calling the astronaut Buck in the first story I will look at is not just an attempt at cleverness, rather it is a way of tapping into an entire matrix of feelings and images that is close to the heart of these characters and generation Xer's more generally. For many people, Buck Rogers was the future, the promise of amazing things to come, but associated with this is the disappointment that resulted when Buck Rogers' future failed to materialise and instead these children were given the Challenger disaster and the notion of Mutually Assured Destruction, the acronym for which is MAD, and this is exactly how the whole concept of the nuclear is perceived by generation X.

The first story is told by Claire and is set on Texlahoma, a fictional asteroid that orbits earth. As Andy attests,

> It's a sad everyplace, where citizens are always getting fired from their jobs at the 7-Eleven and where kids do drugs and practice the local dance crazes at the

> local lake, where they also fantasize about being adult and pulling welfare-check scams as they inspect each others' skin for chemical burns from the lake water. Texlahomans shoplift cheap imitation perfumes from dime stores and shoot each other over Thanksgiving dinners every year. And about the only good thing that happens there is the cold unglamorous wheat in which Texlahomans take a justifiable pride; by law, all citizens must put bumper stickers on their cars saying NO FARMERS: NO FOOD. Life is boring there but there are some thrills to be had: all the adults keep large quantities of cheaply sewn scarlet sex garments in their chest of drawers. These are panties and ticklers rocketed in from Korea – and I say rocketed in because Texlahoma is an asteroid orbiting the earth, where the year is permanently 1974, the year after the oil shock and the year starting from which real wages in the US never grew ever again (p 46).

I have quoted this description at length because I believe it can tell us some interesting things about generation X and the baggage that these characters carry around with them. Texlahoma is a strange mixture of utopia and dystopia, of old and new. It is set just before things got bad, economically, but after they were good. It is seen as a depressing alternative to the ceaseless technological progress of the 1990's, but one that has some redeeming features. The inhabitants have a purpose – they produce life-giving food. It can be read as an exchange of purpose for fun and material and technological superiority. The downturn of the U.S. economy is an event that is burned into the psyche of generation X; it is at the heart of much of their baggage. It is seen as the moment when the much-vaunted prosperity and stability they had been promised by the previous generation failed to materialise. Setting many of their stories at this point in history is both a way of dealing with these issues and of attempting to cling to a past where things could still have turned again for the better.

This can be read in the same way as Jameson reads what he terms the 'nostalgia film' which he says is the restructuring of the concept of pastiche and its projection onto the collective and social level where, "the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the 'generation'." (Jameson, 1984. p 66) While Jameson maintains that the longing symptomatic of the 'nostalgia film' is bereft of irony or any kind of critical perspective, I believe that Coupland's Texlahoma drips with irony, and a very ambiguous wish to return to a space where things might have been better. In many ways, this can be linked to Coupland's concepts of 'Now Denial', and Historical Slumming, two of the many definitions that litter the novel, which he defines respectively as, "To tell oneself that the only time worth living in is the past and that the only time that may ever be

interesting again is the future." (p 47) and "The act of visiting locations such as diners, smokestack industrial sites, rural villages – locations where time appears to have been frozen many years back – so as to experience relief when one returns to 'the present'." (p 13) these two seemingly diametrically opposed concepts, on closer examination, seem to have at their heart the same cause. A deeply ambiguous and unsatisfied relation to the present. Historical Slumming involves a constant need for validation that the present is actually better than one thinks, while 'Now Denial' is also based in the belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world in which we currently live, but is without 'Historical Slumming's' need to convince oneself that this is not true.

This unsatisfied relation to the present felt by generation X can be explained in relation to Baudrillard's view of the empty, simulated nature of the present as a result of apocalypse. A view summed up well by Teresa Heffernan in her essay, "Can the Apocalypse be Post"

> At the end of the century, at the close of the millennium, Jean Baudrillard announces 'the year 2000, in a certain way, will not take place.' For Baudrillard the proliferation and (re) producibility of the apocalypse are signals that the world has already ended. 'Everything has already occurred; become nuclear, faraway, vaporized. The explosion has already occurred ' In this Nuclear Age we have been (over) exposed, rendered transparent; in the reign of the obese, the obscene, the visible, the ecstatic 'pure and empty form' dominates, leaving no resonance, no remainder, no archive. In this 'material paradise,' this 'timeless area,' disconnected from but nostalgic for the past, we inhabit a future that has no future. We are beyond history and at the end of difference.[12]

Generation X inhabits this world where, as Baudrillard says, there is no longer an archive or remainder, at least not one to which they can subscribe, and thus are deeply confused by their world. They are dissatisfied with the present because it seems there is a lack – this lack is one of the major themes in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Thus, Texlahoma is an ambiguous space, on one hand it represents a world that is better than our own, because it is a world where things could still get better. It is a world constantly falling away from the apex, the year, "…after the oil shock and the year starting from which real wages in the US never grew ever again." It is a world in

[12] Heffernan, T. *Can the Apocalypse be Post?* From *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End*. Dellamora, R. Ed. Philadelphia: University of Penslvania Press 1995. P 171

which if one didn't know better, it was still possible to believe that things could get better, in which it was possible to imagine something could still fill the lack. It is also, however, a world where things are already bad, and people are already dying of skin cancer and other diseases that are the result of humanity's intervention in the workings of the planet. It is a world where there is a purpose, the people of Texlahoma grow wheat, their lives serve a dull but necessary purpose. The description of Texlahoma is filled with irony. It is ironic that the world such as it was in 1974 could ever seem better than the current one, especially in light of all the dreams 1974 people had for the future yet, in many ways, at least technology-wise, the present world is better. I think the most important difference between the two for generation X, however, is the fact that Texlahomans have a purpose, something that generation X, no longer has, but that it desires above everything else.

It is appropriate then that the story is about an astronaut named Buck. This is an obvious reference to Buck Rogers – the prototypical symbol of futuristic promise. He represented all of the possibilities and freedoms that technology was expected to provide to the human race. But in this story he crashes on Texlahoma because nobody thought to tell him that it existed – technology cannot provide all the answers. It can also be read as the possibility of our world's imminent crash if we attempt to ignore our past and continue to live without a purpose, whatever that might be. Buck is taken into the home of the Monroe family, where he develops a strange kind of space poisoning. The poison turns him into a monster and causes him to fall into a coma from which he only wakes up for half an hour a day. This can be read as a comment on the dangers of living in the past. During this time he is waited on by one of the three Monroe daughters in turn and falls in love with each of them. He first falls in love with Arleen who brings him lunch every day and she in turn falls in love with him. He tells her that a woman's love has the power to get his ship off the ground and once in space he will be able to cure his space poisoning, the only catch is that there is only enough oxygen for one person and that she would have to die. He reassures her, however, that he can then resurrect her later at a space station hospital. Arleen is willing to help him until the part where she would have to die, and refuses. Soon after this she gets a job and is replaced by Darleen and the pattern repeats itself identically. Finally he is waited on by Serena, who agrees to the terms he proposes, and they set off, with everything happening as Buck said it would. Once in space, however, Buck is cured and the last thing Serena sees are the stars as she dies from lack of oxygen. So, in this story, Buck Rogers the futuristic hero, is replaced by a Buck only interested in himself, and prepared to use even 'sacred' concepts like love for his own gain. Love is removed from its pedestal in this story and is shown, like all other Grand Narratives, to be

nothing more than a human construct that can be used to get one's way, rather than a sacred feeling that can save the world. The interesting thing is that at the end of the story Arleen and Darleen are left on Texlahoma and as they are watching Buck's ship leave they converse thus:

> 'You realise,' said Arleen, 'that that whole business of Buck being able to bring us back to life was total horseshit.'
> 'Oh, I knew that,' said Darleen. 'But it doesn't change the fact that I feel jealous.'
> 'No, it doesn't does it.' (p 52)

This final conversation is interesting for a number of reasons. The first is that the remaining two Monroe daughters are jealous of their sister because she was willing to risk her life for a possibly better future. They will never know for certain whether or not Buck was telling the truth, they will never know that Serena died. All three wish to leave their mundane lives on Texlahoma behind, but only Serena has the guts to actually take the chance. The fact that she dies adds an interesting element to the story because, like the Monroe daughters, members of generation X want to transcend what they perceive to be mundane lives, to make their lives into worthwhile stories. Andy, Dag and Claire have attempted to do so by moving out into the desert, however, what does it mean if, in the stories they tell, the one who takes the risks dies and the ones who don't, live? Could it mean that in order to find one's own story, one first needs to relinquish life, or is it implying that the attempt to transcend one's life is ultimately doomed to fail? Part of the reason that Serena has to die is that love, as a redeeming narrative, is no longer completely believable in the apocalyptic age, and generation X's deep suspicion of grand narratives precludes such an easy solution to Serena's plight. Taking that leap into the unknown, as Serena does, is fraught with danger but even death (or the social death of living outside of society, in the desert), it would seem, is preferable to Texlahoma. While living on Texlahoma may provide a purpose, it will never provide the transcendence necessary to make a worthwhile story of one's life, and an unfulfilling story is worse than death. This is also linked to generation X's ideas on apocalypse. Generation X is constantly haunted by the possibility of nuclear apocalypse and the desire to make a worthwhile tale of one's life is intimately linked to the notion that life is going to end soon anyway so one might as well make the most of what life one has left.

Generation X's desire to answer the big questions, to transcend their mundane lives is fueled both by its ubiquitous fear of apocalypse and by the fact that nothing is certain any more, no longer are there irrefutable truths upon which to secure an understanding

of life and the world. This is what all three characters are searching for in the desert; a story that will provide them with answers to questions such as: if the world were to end now, in the shadow of a mushroom cloud, would my life have been worthwhile, would I have achieved anything and what would happen to me after I die? This transcendence, it would seem, can only be achieved if one breaks free of the prisons created by society: materialism, worrying about what society thinks, or just socio-economic situations. This is, I believe, why the other two sisters in Claire's story are jealous. They didn't have the strength to leave their prisons and so they will always wonder: did Serena find the big answers? Did she achieve transcendence? Or, was her choice just as futile as theirs? They can never answer these questions and this is why they are unable to take the leap into the unknown. This theme also comes through very strongly in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which I examine in detail in a later chapter.

The next story I want to look at is one Andy tells, and like the rest of the stories in the book, it is actually a story about himself. It is about a lonely man named Edward who tries to cover over his loneliness and his sense of purposelessness with dignity and pride in what he does, but this proves too difficult and so he turns to drink and loses himself in his imagination and words. He withdraws completely from the world and spends ten years in a magical room he creates with words, drinking, and reading books – he has chosen to live in a world that he believes is completely under his control - one that is completely removed from reality, and heavily based, it would seem on media imagery. It is a dignified and sophisticated room, "sometimes so sophisticated that it was only allowed to exist in black and white, reminiscent of an old drawing room comedy. How's that for elegance." (p 56) It is modeled on old television shows in which the audience always knew what to expect. In reality, however, it is completely beyond his control, he depends on a maid to bring him his cocktails, which are his lifeline to this unreality - the room can only really exist in an alcoholic stupor. One day however, this unreality comes crashing down when his maid doesn't appear, she whom he thought was an old woman turns into a young beautiful woman, and his dog that had originally been a gentle spaniel turns into a vicious Rottweiler that tries to kill him. These events force him to leave his 'magical' room and re-enter the world. When he does this, however, he discovers that while he has been living alone in a world he created through words and alcohol, the rest of the world has created another world based on relationships,

> An endless New York, shaped of lipsticks, artillery shells, wedding cakes, and folded shirt cardboards; an ugly/lovely world surfaced with carbon and icicles and bougainvillea vines. Its boulevards were patternless, helter-skelter, and cuckoo.

> Everywhere there were booby traps of mousetraps, Triffids and black holes. And yet in spite of this city's transfixing madness, Edward noticed that its multitude of inhabitants moved about with ease, unconcerned that around any corner there might lurk a clown-tossed marshmallow cream pie, a Brigada Rosa kneecapping or a kiss from the lovely film star Sophia Loren (p 57).

This city is a description of the world that generation X has inherited, confusing, unpredictable and laden with popular culture icons; a world both dangerous and unexpectedly wonderful. It is also one that is intrinsically human, based as Andy says, on relationships rather than words. The people who live in this world move about with apparent ease, but this belies an innate uncertainty, they have no choice but to make the best of what happens around them. There are no maps of this city, and the inhabitants have no way of knowing what lurks behind every corner, but this does not prevent them from attempting to live and work and walk in the city. There is no indication, however, that these citizens are any less afraid than Edward, or that only new comers would buy his maps. The only certainty there is in this world is that there is no certainty. It is a world heavily influenced by popular culture, for example the things that lurk behind the corners are injury by the Irish mafia (a group that has been immortalized in numerous Hollywood movies) or a kiss from a movie star; and the booby traps are triffids, (those plant-like earth invaders of classic science fiction) and mouse traps presumably similar to the ones used in "Tom and Jerry" cartoons.

It is Edward's dream to make his way in this popular culture saturated world of relationships, eventually be successful and then to create a map of this world that he will sell from the top of his tower. This is once again a metaphor for generation X's, Andy's, and Coupland's quest for order and meaning; for a map of the world they inhabit. What is important to notice is that, for Edward, the world built on relationships is incomprehensible because he has spent his life attempting to prove that he does not need relationships, he can be alone as long as he has alcohol, words and the media. When he realizes that this type of life is no life at all and decides to re-enter the real world, however, he discovers that the world is just as difficult as he expected, that relationships are just as hard as he imagined, but that this world is infinitely superior to his make believe one, and with no other options he vows to succeed. He also vows to help others who come later, by selling a map of the city, once he understands it himself. This map or legacy is Andy's way of wanting to explain why he needs his life to be a worthwhile tale. In a world where the possibility of a kiss by Sophia Loren is just as likely as a nuclear apocalypse to be lurking around the corner of his city, life can

never be certain, but hiding from life will not make things better. Also, like Edward, Andy sees relationships as somewhat incomprehensible as he says:

> Claire and I never fell in love, even though we both tried hard. It happens… But then, as mentioned, I've never been in love, and that's a problem. I just seem to end up friends with everyone, and I tell you, I really hate it. I want to fall in love. Or at least I think I do. I'm not sure. It looks so… messy. All right, all right, I do at least recognize the fact that I don't want to go though life alone (p 53).

In many ways Andy's moving into the desert serves a dual and seemingly contradictory purpose. On the one hand, it is his way of creating his 'magic' room, by moving into the desert he is avoiding those parts of the real world that he doesn't like and cannot control. The desert is, as he says, "undoubtedly a quite sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life." (p 12) Yet, unlike Edward, Andy knows he is hiding, but at this point hiding provides the solace with which to come to grips with exactly how he is going to deal with the world of relationships that, were it not for Dag and Claire, would be completely passing him by. Despite this new found companionship, one gets the sense he needs something more, he longs to be crushed with love. Andy moves to the desert hoping to achieve transcendence, to discover himself and by so doing negate the loneliness and meaninglessness inherent in middle-class life, but in the process he largely cuts himself off from other people. He wants to enter the world of relationships, but right now is struggling to do so. He hopes that when he achieves transcendence in the desert he will be able to enter the world of relationships and succeed.

I used the word 'crush' deliberately earlier because of what happens at the end of the book. Claire and Dag have moved to Mexico to open up a hotel, and have asked Andy to join them. They don't warn him of their plans, however, because they know that if he has time to think about it he won't leave his comfort zone again. The book ends with Andy on the way to join his friends. On the road to Mexico he sees a mushroom cloud of smoke and immediately assumes the worst - that nuclear war has erupted. This is not the case – but it does serve once again to demonstrate just how obsessed all of these characters are with nuclear war. It turns out to be nothing more than farmers burning their fields and when he gets to 'ground zero', he, as well as other travelers, stop to look at the seemingly infinite blackness of the charred fields. While they are watching the field a, "Cocaine white egret" (p 206) flies into it in search of food. A group of mentally retarded teenagers form part of the audience to this spectacle and when the egret swoops over the audience grazing Andy's head, they one by one come over to Andy, eventually surrounding him:

> Then, from behind me I felt another pair of hands as one of her friends joined in. Then another pair. Suddenly I was dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than the other. They began to hug me – too hard – as though I were a doll, unaware of the strength they exerted. I was being winded – crushed – pinched and trampled. The man with the beard came over to yank them away. But how could I explain to him, this well-intentioned gentleman, that this discomfort, no this pain, I was experiencing was no problem at all, in fact, this crush of love was unlike anything I had ever known (p 207).

Coupland's choice of retarded teenagers as the bearers of this 'crush of love' is interesting because these teenagers provide a counterpoint to the other cynical, postmodern characters that inhabit the book. Unlike Andy, these 'children' are unaffected by the fears that immobilise generation X; they are simple, post-lapsarian figures (with respect to their obliviousness to the possibility of apocalypse) and as such are able to display such unambiguous love. Andy's choice to abandon the world has much to do with a belief that the only way he might ever experience such a crush with others is away from the effects of the world. Like Serena in Claire's story, he has taken a risk and just like her he might die as a result. The risk is, however, better than not knowing. As he says:

> I see the fence on the border, the chain link border fence that reminds me of certain photos of Australia - photos in which anti-rabbit fencing has cleaved the landscape in two: one side of the fence nutritious, food secreting and bursting with green; the other side lunar, granular, parched, and desperate. I think of Claire and Dag when I think of this split – and the way they chose to inhabit that lunar side of the fence – enacting their difficult destinies…I'm on the lunar side of the fence, that much I know for sure. I don't know where or how, but I definitely made that choice. And lonely and awful as that choice can sometimes be, I have no regrets. (p 201).

He claims to have no regrets but I think this is not entirely true, I think the point is that he would regret a great deal more if he had not chosen the lunar side of the fence. He, like Claire and Dag, hopes that one day he will find the transcendence he longs for, the great experience that will provide him with answers and acceptance in the world and, more importantly, in nature. This can be seen in the final two stories that Andy tells. The first is called 'The man who desperately wanted to be struck by lightning' (p 201) The title tells the whole story but what is important is that Andy says, "I sleep better at

night knowing that Young Man roams the badlands." (p 202) Part of Andy is the Young Man that roams the badlands wanting desperately to be chosen; to be struck by lightning. I believe, that if this were to happen then his choice will be justified and he will not regret it but until that day, he will still have a few regrets. The second story is rather just a wish of Andy's. He wants desperately to be chosen and accepted by nature. He wants to be lying on the rocks in Baja with nothing around him but oxygen, pure nature and then,

> A great big dopey, happy-looking pelican that will land at my side and then, with smooth leathery feet, waddle over to my face, without fear and with an elegant flourish - showing the grace of a thousand wine stewards – offer me the gift of a small silvery fish. I would sacrifice anything to be given this offering (p 202).

Andy wants this gift because it will mean that nature has forsaken neither him nor the world. One of generation X's major preoccupations is the fear that even if nuclear war doesn't happen, we are still killing the world and it will eventually succumb. This theme is much more forcefully evoked in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter four, but it is also evident in a number of the definitions that Coupland uses in *Generation X*. For example, 'Dumpster Clocking', which is defined as, "The tendency when looking at objects to guesstimate the amount of time they will take to eventually decompose: 'Ski boots are the worst. Solid plastic. They'll be around till the sun goes supernova.'" (p 188) The desire to be accepted by nature and thus pardoned for the role they have played in the earth's destruction is a very strong desire in members of generation X. If one is accepted by nature it is also probable that the transcendence one longs for will come too, and the world won't have to live in the shadow of the mushroom cloud. For, if transcendence comes, generation X believes that the answers to the questions they have will come as well. Questions such as: Is there a higher power? How can we stop ourselves from destroying the earth? Thus, transcendence and fear are linked because generation X's main fear is that they will never be able to answer such questions and will then end up destroying the world and themselves along with it.

The final story I want to focus on is one told by Dag and it is one that is completely based on obsessional fear of the apocalypse. This is the second section of the novel on which I want to focus. Dag's story is, as Andy says, an "Eschatological You-Are-There account of what it's like to be Bombed, lovingly detailed, and told in deadpan voice." (p 68) It details how 'you' and your best friend go to the supermarket and have a

fight on the way, get the things you need and while waiting in the checkout line behind an obese man, the sirens sound,

> The worst sound in the world, and the sound you've dreaded all your life. Its here the soundtrack to hell – wailing, flaring, warbling, and unreal – collapsing and confusing both time and space (p 70).

As is to be expected there are scenes of mass hysteria, but both the obese man in front of you and the cashier remain calm and decide that they will remain dignified and proceed to continue with their transaction as if there is nothing unusual happening. The story ends when Dag describes how,

> Just before the fat man is lifted off his feet, hung in suspended animation and bursts into flames while the liquefied ceiling lifts and drips upward –
> 'Just before all of this, your best friend cranes his neck, lurches over to where you lie, and kisses you on the mouth, after which he says to you, 'There. I've always wanted to do that.'
> 'And that's that. In the silent rush of hot wind, like the opening of a trillion oven doors that you have been imagining since you were six, its all over: kind of scary, kind of sexy, and tainted by regret. A lot like life, wouldn't you say? (p 71)

This story is overtly apocalyptic, but it has a strain of optimism running through it. This strain of optimism is an example of the third formulation of apocalyptic optimism as defined in chapter one. It is an understanding of apocalypse as a space where societal judgement no longer applies because apocalypse has destroyed society. Thus, it is the only space in which the one friend can kiss the other, without any worry of what the fallout will be, because the fallout has already happened. It is also interesting that the character that sticks out in the story is the obese man who, according to our fashion conscious world, is not concerned with how he looks or, as the judgmental would say, has 'let himself go', and yet he is the one who maintains his dignity throughout. It is also overtly about Dag himself; throughout the novel he is constantly obsessed by nuclear apocalypse, and then when he thinks he is going to be arrested and sent to jail for burning down a car – where his life would effectively be over - he does something that is very reminiscent of the story just outlined above, a link that Coupland himself makes obvious.

> Dag tosses his cigarette and refocuses his hearing to the sounds of the party, faint over the gully, 'Well, Andy. Wish me luck,' he says, hopping down off the

> cement pipe, then taking a few steps, stopping, turning around then saying to me, 'Here, bend over to me a second.' I comply, whereupon he kisses me, triggering films in my mind of liquefied supermarket ceilings cascading toward heaven. 'There I've always wanted to do that.' (p 195)

It is this possibility, the chance to flaunt social taboo; to do something one has always wanted to do but could not because of social convention; the ability to transcend the mundaneness and petty nature of much of our social law, even if it is just for a minute, that is the cause of the optimism that strains to be heard over the roar of apocalypse. This possibility is also explored in *Girlfriend in a Coma,* although in that novel there is a possibility that the transcendence will result in a second chance.

Images of apocalypse run throughout the novel, from the cartoon on p 152, in which a terrified man mistakes a flash of lightning for a nuclear explosion. All three characters are obsessed with, and terrified of nuclear war and the subsequent fallout and death. Dag's obsession is highlighted by the story discussed above but can also be seen when he goes to examine the nuclear test sites in the South of America, in an attempt to rid himself of 'bomb anxiety' (p 78) he is in no way reassured when he realises that the bombs were actually smaller than he imagined. Claire is also terrified of apocalypse and also of the effects of nuclear radiation, this is evident from her apoplectic reaction to the present Dag gives her on his return from his tour of what he calls "Nuclear Road" (p 78) He brings her a jar of trinitite which is sand that was melted into a new substance by the heat of the first nuclear bomb test. The jar is broken and the trinitite messes all over her apartment and Claire refuses to go back, as Andy says, "Claire may or may not have nightmares, but should she ever come back to this bungalow, she'll never be able to sleep there quite perfectly ever again." (p 87) Andy too is obsessed by apocalypse as is evident by his reaction to the smoke cloud he sees at the end of the novel, "It was not imaginary. It was the same cloud I'd been dreaming of steadily since I was five, shameless, exhausted, and gloating." (p 204) Coupland places a concern for apocalypse at the heart of the novel because it is, I believe, what generation X is most afraid of and influenced by. *Generation X* is primarily an example of the first part of the definition of apocalyptic optimism, because while all three characters seem to affect a blasé attitude toward it, they are secretly terrified of it ever occurring and so they attempt to joke and philosophise their way around their fears.

The third section I want to focus on briefly is the represented reality of the novel. The novel paints a pretty dismal picture of late twentieth century North American life. A

world of veal fattening pens: “small, cramped office workstations built of fabric-covered disassemblable wall partitions and inhabited by junior staff members. Named for the pre-slaughter cubicles used in the cattle industry” (p 24), and the constant fear of sarcomas from being out in the sun too much. A place where prices are too high and generation X is forced not only to live in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, but also in the shadow of the boomers that came before them and took all the best seats. The novel represents the characters’ lives on the periphery of society and the ways in which they strive to live through their stories and their theories, away from a world they view as the cause of their problems. A world which has wound them up too tight, that had enveloped them. As Andy says:

> Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, much better (p 14).

The novel, like the characters it contains, is filled with aphorisms and wit, and an innate desire to classify and order the world - the definitions and classificatory hairsplitting that fill the novel. It is structured in the way it is because that is how generation X has been brought up to understand and view the world, but most importantly it is in touch with the fears and obsessions that plague this generation and, while it does not seek to solve the problems – that would instantly cause generation X to lose interest because everybody’s solution will be different – it does offer one alternative to the way we live in the world.

Generation X, provided its readers with the idea that they were not alone in the world. Coupland tapped into a mindset prevalent among the youth, but until the release of the novel not really articulated. He used the language of the day to express his generation’s hopes and fears, and when there were no words to describe what they were feeling he created them. He provided generation X with a resource they could use to identify themselves with. It said, “hey if you don’t like the way the world is working or what your position in the world is, you don’t need to stay.” You can, like Dag, Andy and Claire, choose to live on the periphery, and decide to become spectators, telling stories about the ways in which the world is going wrong and attempting to narrate yourself out of these problems and into transcendence. Whether or not narrative and storytelling is a viable solution to the world’s, or even generation X’s, problems is up for debate, and

can never really be adequately answered, the more important thing is that finding one's own narrative is a sure step in the right direction. The question is whether or not a personal narrative gained out in the desert, and especially without help from anyone else, is ever really within reach.

Transcendence is not a postmodern concept, if anything it is a rather anti-postmodern concept linked to metanarratives such as religion that postmodern theory has eschewed. It is for this reason, however, that I believe generation X longs so desperately for it. Postmodern theory has removed such metanarratives from generation X's options list and has not really replaced them with anything. This doesn't mean that generation X no longer wishes for a coherent metanarrative, rather it means that they need to find one that they can believe in, even in the light of postmodernism. And, it is a transcendence resulting from narrative and technology that they believe could perform such a function, whether this is actually the case is up to the individual, but Coupland's characters are desperately attempting to reach such a level of transcendence. Interestingly none of them seems to be able to do so, not even those who have seen the end of the world.

Chapter Three:

Microserfs

Microserfs is an interesting novel for a number of reasons; the first of which is the fact that the first chapter and a number of other excerpts of the novel were published in 'Wired' magazine in 1994, before it was published as a novel in 1996. Thus, it had become a piece of popular culture even before it was published. It is also very apt for the study at hand, not only because it contains the most overt pop culture references of all of Coupland's work but also because it deals with a number of the major generation X concerns - if from the slightly left-field viewpoint of the geek.

The geek is an interesting phenomenon that developed out of generation X's intimate relationship with technology. Generation X was the first generation to use computers on a large scale; they were children, or teenagers, when the computer industry was in its infancy and the two have largely grown up side by side. Because of this, and other technology of the time, generation X is a very technologically literate generation. The geeks are those members of generation X who fell in love with this new world of technology. They got involved in the computer industry and all of them wanted to emulate Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, a man deified by the technological generation. Many generation X geeks, have, like their hero, made enormous sums of money developing technology that has literally changed the world.

Technology has impacted on the world in a number of different and drastic ways, and one area that it has had a major influence on is the development of postmodern thought. Technological development in the last four decades has seen the shrinking of the world through computers, television, the Internet, aircraft development and satellite technology. This resulted in a much wider and speedier dissemination of information and a subsequent broadening of the easily accessible knowledge base available to people, and especially generation X, which had grown up with this technology. Another key role that technology played in postmodernism's development was that it provided people all over the world with much greater access to both the best and worst parts of their own culture (to which they might not have had access) as well as those parts of other, diverse cultures that can be transmitted through televisions and computers. Indeed, the mass culture that forms one of the major facets of postmodernism, such as television and rock music, could not have been possible without the development of the relevant technologies. Thus, it is possible to say that without technology postmodernism would not have developed in remotely the same manner as it did during the 1970s.

In this maelstrom of technology and ideas, generation X and, more specifically the geeks, became the new leaders and innovators - the new frontiersmen, so to speak. *Microserfs* deals directly with this part of generation X and, while they have many of the same concerns as the rest of their generation (a sense of rootlessness and a concern for the future), they tend to see the world slightly differently to the rest of the generation. For much of generation X there seems to be a latent fear of technology. While there is an appreciation for the benefits it brings to society there is also a concern that this same technology is edging the world inexorably toward chaos and apocalypse. On the other hand, the geeks see technology as the solution to many of the problems this world is facing. They have put their faith in technology and more importantly the computer – even if this means that they sometimes lose sight of who they are, like they do at Microsoft where they are nothing more than cogs in the Microsoft machine devoid of any real individual identity. They nurture the belief that the technology they are creating will help to save the world.

Microserfs, like the other novels under study, deals with a number of issues that concern generation X: the search for identity in a world bereft of traditional touchstones; the end of the world and technology's role in that; and the role of popular culture in the world. It is with the search for identity that it is primarily concerned.

The novel is about the lives of seven geeks, Dan, Karla, Todd, Michael, Bug, Susan and Abe, who leave the safe, but stifling and all-consuming world of Microsoft to start their own company. The story is told from Dan's point of view and is written as a series of his diary entries. The beginning of the novel is set at Microsoft where the reader is introduced to the characters and to the flip side of this wonderful coin that is technology. At the beginning of the novel the reader gets a view of just how all-consuming the computer industry – and especially Microsoft – can be. Dan describes his life (or lack thereof) as a *Mircoserf:*

> I am 26 and my universe consists of home, Microsoft and Costco…Living in a group house is a little like admitting you're deficient in the having-a-life department, but at work you spend your entire life crunching code and testing for bugs, and what else are you supposed to do?[13] (p 3)

This part of the novel is intended to be the counterpoint to the lives they begin to lead when they leave Microsoft and start their own company - Interiority. Dan defines the

[13] Coupland, D. Microserfs. London: Flamingo. 1996 p 3

word interiority as, “Being inside somebody’s head” (p 115); an interesting name for their company because in many ways they have spent all their time at Microsoft avoiding issues like the need for ‘a life’ and attempting to live inside their computers rather than in their own heads. They do this in an effort to avoid actually having to come to grips with who they are and what they are doing. When they move to Silicon Valley they are forced to make some changes in their lives, and have to enter the world outside of Microsoft. In the process they discover themselves and, by the end of the novel, they are more aware of what is going on inside their heads.

At Microsoft they were nothing more than cogs in a giant machine, they decide to leave because they need to discover who they are and they cannot do it if they are lost in the stifling womb of Microsoft. This can be seen in the middle of the novel when Bug says to the rest of the group,

> ‘You know Sooz, I would have come here for nothing. I never had to get paid.’ Bug looked up. ‘Oh God, Ethan, you didn’t hear that.’ He relaxed. ‘Well you know what I mean. I just wanted to leave the old me behind and start all over again. It’s not the money. It’s never been the money. It rarely ever is. It wasn’t with any of us – was it? Ever?’ I don’t think it ever was (p 318).

What Bug is awkwardly attempting to articulate is the fact that the reason they left Microsoft was not a monetary one, rather it was because they needed to remove themselves from Microsoft or lose any chance of ever truly achieving a stand alone identity, and the concomitant chance of transcendence.

At the beginning of the novel Dan is attempting to piece together an identity for himself and the rest of his friends because they don’t really know who they are. Like the rest of their generation, they do not have the use of the foundational tenets their parents used to create identity, because they no longer believe in them. This can be seen from Karla’s comment:

> Where does your individuality end and your species-hood begin? As always, it’s a big question on my mind. You have to remember that most of us who’ve moved to Silicon Valley, we don’t have the traditional identity-donating structures like other places in the world have: religion, politics, cohesive family structure, roots, a sense of history or other prescribed belief systems that take the onus off individuals having to figure out who they are. You’re on your own here. It’s a big task, but just look at the flood of ideas that emerges from the plastic (p 236).

Probably the most interesting idea that emerges from the plastic, is the possibility of playing god, which will be dealt with later. What is important to understand from this quotation is the fact that these people do not have the traditional metanarratives that their parents had and so they are attempting to create them themselves through lines of code, they are substituting technology for now-defunct metanarrative, technology has become their metanarrative and subsequently has to produce, and it is up to them to see that it does so. That is the big idea that comes out of the plastic.

In order to do so, in order to fill the void previously filled with his parent's metanarraitves, Dan turns to the only two things that he can be sure of – popular culture and technology - in order to create his identity and his place in the world. The first one I will look at is technology.

Technology is intrinsic to the geek's conception of reality and is an integral part of their search for individual identity. As Dan says: "We design business spreadsheets, paint programs, and word processing equipment. So that tells you where we are as a species. What is the search for the next great compelling application but a search for the human identity." (p 15) For geeks, not only is technology the lens through which they see the world and the tool they use to understand their humanity, it is more than that:

> No matter how you look at it, machines really are our subconscious. I mean, people from outer space didn't come to earth and make machines for us… we made them ourselves. So machines can only be products of our being, and as such, windows into our souls…by monitoring the machines we build, and the sorts of things we put into them, we have this amazingly direct litmus as to how we are evolving (p 228).

Machines, and technology in general, play a vastly important role in the world of the geek because they have decided to put their faith in technology in lieu of any other metanarrative - they have chosen to believe in technology. This is evident early on in the novel from what Karla tells Todd when he is questioning his role in life:

> Todd: you exist not only as a member of a family or a company or a country, but as a member of a species – you are human. Our species currently has major problems and we're trying to dream our way out of these problems and we're using computers to do it. The construction of hardware and software is where the species is investing its very survival, and this construction requires zones of

> peace, children born of peace, and an absence of code-interfering distraction. We may not achieve transcendence through computation, but we will keep ourselves out of the gutter with them. What you perceive of as a vacuum is an earthy paradise – the freedom to, quite literally, line-by-line, prevent humanity from going non-linear (p 61).

While Karla is correct in saying that humanity currently has major problems her argument that geeks are the only ones who are able to save the world is not entirely convincing. Examined from her perspective it becomes clear, however, why they need to believe that they are the saviors of the planet. Their assumption of the role of savior serves a dual function; not only does it allow them to believe that they have a worthwhile place in the world, but it also provides them with a reason to continue doing what they are doing. Avoiding 'real life' and burying oneself in lines of computer code could seem like a way of attempting to escape life, but if one believes that this is necessary for the survival of the planet then it becomes a justified sacrifice. Thus, belief that technology will save the world can be a double-edged sword, it provides the geeks with a place in the world but also provides them with a license to hide from reality.

Rational as always, Karla maintains that technology may not bring them transcendence, this is, however, what they are secretly hoping will indeed happen. The geeks, like the rest of generation X, desire transcendence because it would mean that they would be able to get answers to the metaphysical questions that have plagued them in the absence of traditional meaning structures such as religion. And putting their faith into technology they have also identified technology as the source of transcendence, if it should so happen. Thus, linearity and transcendence are linked in the world of the geek – for them a non-linear world would result in apocalypse, and while technology in the hands of the wrong people (The Marvins – see below) is capable of turning the world non-linear it is up to the geeks to prevent this from happening. And, in the process develop technology that will enable transcendence and thus prove postmodernism incorrect. If transcendence were possible, postmodernism's disregard for such a metanarrative would be nullified and technology, once a curse that was slowly bringing the earth's destruction, would become the savior and the bringer of transcendence.

Throughout the novel Karla discusses her theory of the body as a diskette with Dan. She maintains that the mind is not the only part of the body that stores information, she believes that it is also stored in the muscles. Thus, the body for Karla is a giant diskette used to store information. This is the second manner in which technology functions for

the geeks. They are coming to grips with their world through the lens of technology; they define their relationship to their body in terms of technological metaphors and often attempt to solve problems with themselves by treating their bodies as machines. For example, Dan begins his diary as a way of putting his thoughts down so that he can later come back to them and debug himself. Because they understand the world through technology, it becomes an intrinsic part of the world, rather than an intrusive foreign entity that is responsible for all of the world's evils. And, while it is not then exempt from culpability for the state of the world, it is seen as having the answers to these problems.

Unlike the characters in the other novels who have largely given up on the future (choosing rather to run away), the geeks in *Microserfs* have decided to take their future in their own hands and forge it themselves the way they envisioned it as children. Forcing technology to become, "The foundry of our culture's deepest dreams" (p 3) rather than the villan of the piece, as it is in *Girlfriend in a Coma.*

Another appealing aspect of technology is that it allows them, in a way, to play God. There are three major ramifications of this. The first is the creation of a god-like figure - in this case Bill. From the beginning of the novel Bill is set up as a God. In the first paragraph Dan writes:

> Bill (Bill!!) sent Michael this totally wicked flame-mail from hell on the e-mail system – and just wailed on a chunk of code Michael had written… Exactly why Bill would choose Michael of all people to wail on is confusing. We figured it must have been some random quality check to keep the troops in line. Bill's so smart. Bill is wise. Bill is kind. Bill is benevolent. Bill, Be My Friend…Please (p 1).

While this is meant to be ironic, one can't help the feeling that this representation is not very far removed from the way these characters actually see Bill. This is further supported by the observation Dan makes:

> I thought about the e-mail and Bill and all that, and I had this weird feeling – of how the presence of Bill floats about the Campus, semi-visible at all times, kind of like the dead grandfather in the Family Circus cartoons. Bill is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that moulds. A force with thick, thick glasses (p 3).

This too is undercut with bathos but, nonetheless, demonstrates the enormous influence that Bill has over his employees and the rest of the technological world. More important is the fact that Bill is seen as having the answers.

The second ramification is closely related to the first because it is concerned with the desire to create an intelligence, to play God themselves. The end result of the world these geeks want to create is a combination of human and machine, an entity that can think but that is not human. An Entity that will provide its creators with the answers that they seek. This is evident throughout the novel but is most clearly elucidated in two places. The first is when Dan says to Michael, while they are watching the pool cleaner:

> I think nerds secretly dream of speaking to machines – of asking them, 'What do you think and feel – do you feel like me?'
> Michael asked me, 'Do you think humanoids – people – will ever design a machine that can pray? Do we pray to machines or through them? How do we use machines to achieve our deepest needs?' (p 183)

In many ways these people do both, they have put all their faith into machines, they pray through them, but as is evident from the passage below they also long for the day when they could actually almost pray to them. The second passage is slightly longer but poses an important point. Dan maintains that:

> Perhaps the Entity is what people without any visions of an afterworld secretly yearn to build – an intelligence that will supply them with specific details – supply pictures. Maybe we like to believe that Bill knows what the Entity will be. It makes us feel as though there's a moral force holding the reins of technological progress (p 35).

These two passages are important because they illustrate the deep desire that the geeks have to create something that will provide, without a shadow of a doubt, that there is something bigger than the world. The belief that this new Entity will provide the answers that they and the rest of their generation seek. Interestingly Bill is seen once again as the driving force behind this Entity. He is seen as a visionary who understands how the world works and what must be done to keep it happening. They want to build this artificial intelligence not only to improve their minds and hope to get answers, but also because if they can create life, even artificial life, then they themselves have become gods. And, if they are the ones to become gods then they will be able to know for certain that there is a moral force, because they will be it. It is also interesting

because of their deep-seated need for some ordering or moral force, some sort of code to which they can then subscribe.

The third ramification is that this feeling of power that geeks experience can result in negative things. The old duality of the mad scientist intent on discovering innovations that will help humanity but ending up doing more damage than good because he, or she, is unable to understand what the world actually needs. This occurs in a manner described by Karla as the Marvin effect: "Karla says that nerds-gone-bad are the scariest of all, because they turn into 'Marvins' and cause problems of planetary dimensions. "Marvin the Martian" was a character in a number of Bugs Bunny cartoons who wanted to blow up Earth because it obscured his view of Venus." (p 112) It is these 'nerds-gone-bad' that the characters in the other novels, and Todd's parents, are afraid of, however, the characters in *Microserfs* feel that they have the skills and the power to match up to these 'Marvins'. They dream not of world domination and power, but rather of creating a 'precision technology' that will save the world.

The other manner in which the novel attempts to come to grips with identity via technology is the subconscious file that Dan creates. This ties together the two elements of identity examined in the novel, namely, finding oneself with the help of technology and the desire to create a new technological identity, the culmination of which would be Artificial Intelligence. Dan explains why he created his subconscious file:

> So this got me thinking…What if machines do have a subconscious of their own? What if machines right now are like human babies, which have brains but no way of expressing themselves except screaming (crashing)? What would a machine's subconscious file look like? How does it feed off what we give it? If machines could talk to us what would they say…To this end I'm creating a file of random words that pop into my head, and am feeding these words into a desktop file labeled SUBCONSCIOUS (p 44).

The subconscious file entries that are dotted throughout the novel tell us much more about what Dan is thinking than what his computer is thinking and they are littered with names of products and people such as Steven Hawking, Burt Reynolds and Loni Anderson. They provide an interesting angle on the events in the novel because they are both completely unrelated and at the same time a continuation of what is happening in the novel. The best example of this an entry that Dan makes about aerospace engineers:

> The Apollo rocket designers and the NASA engineers of Houston and Sunnydale grew up in the 1930s and 1940s dreaming of Buck Rogers and the exoterrestrial meanderings of Amazing Stories [the comic book series that featured Superman]. When this generation grew old enough, they chose to make those dreams in metal (p 218).

While this has no direct bearing on what is actually happening in the story, it is in effect exactly what this new generation is trying to do, except instead of metal they are using silicon and computer code to build the dreams that they grew up on.

Like the subconscious file, the entire book is peppered with popular culture references, and this is the second way in which Dan and his friends are attempting to order and understand both their world and themselves. For example, Dan describes all of his friends by listing what their seven dream categories would be on the game show "Jeopardy". Thus, he essentialises both himself and his friends into categories on a game board. And the categories that he comes up with are things like 'trash TV of the late '70s and early '80s' (p 3), '680X0 assembly language' (p 9) and 'Frequent and empty sex' (p 11). All of these categories are very random and, on the surface, don't really tell one much about the characters. The problem is, however, that these lists tell you almost as much about these characters, at the beginning of the novel, as they know themselves. Microsoft has taken up so much of their time that their lives can indeed be broken down into categories on a game board, and they need to leave the confines of Microsoft before they will develop into fully-grown humans.

By the end of the novel the seven characters have been joined by a few others and have really begun to discover themselves, but this doesn't stop them from using popular cultural references to come to grips with who they are. This can be seen from Bug's explanation of why he had buried himself so deeply in Microsoft:

> I was so busy geeking out that I never had to examine my feelings about anything. I jumped into one of those little cartoon holes they use in old Merry Melodies, and I just came out the other side, and the other side is here. Didn't you ever wonder where the other side was? (p 318)

These characters have a treasure chest of pop culture references that they can use as a touchstone, something to which they can all relate, and this is important in a world in which many of the traditional metanarratives have been found wanting. Another good example of the way they use pop culture to help come to grips with their personalities is

the list Susan writes of what her and the rest of the 'gang's' characters and powers would be if they were characters on "Star Trek." This 'treasure chest' becomes a shorthand that they can use to communicate with each other, and a way in which they can access the world around them. The major drawback of their reliance on popular culture is the possibility that it will lead to a lack of individuality. An example of this is the 'gang's' rumination on why "the Gap" is such a successful chain:

> Susan says the Gap is smart because it cuts both ways: 'Kids in Armpit, Nebraska, go into a Gap with pictures in their heads of Manhattan, Claudia Schiffer, and the Concorde, while kids in Manhattan go into the Gap with a picture in their head of Armpit, Nebraska. So it's as though Gap clothing puts you anywhere except where you actually are'… the only problem now is that everybody shops at the Gap (or an isotope of the Gap) and so everybody looks the same these days. 'This is such a punchline because diversity is supposed to be such a hot modern issue, but to look at a sample crowd of citizens, you'd never know it.' (p 268)

In many ways popular culture acts in the same way as "the Gap;" generation X uses popular culture to fit in and can apply the same sitcom plot, rock song or "Star Trek" episode to vastly differing life circumstances. Thus, popular culture becomes a leveler, a piece of sanitized common ground with which to relate to one's peers.

Microserfs diverges from the other two novels most dramatically, however, in the way in which it deals with the issue of apocalypse. The geeks, just like the rest of their generation, grew up in the shadow of the mushroom cloud, they, however, believe that the technology they are creating could serve to prevent apocalypse, rather than speed it on its inexorable course. At the end of *Microserfs*, we see a portrayal of a future where humans have harnessed the power of technology for the benefit of humanity. At the end of the novel, Dan's mother has a stroke and is paralyzed. This seemingly apocalyptic event results in her inability to communicate with anybody. At least, not until Michael hooks her up to a computer:

> When we returned to the house, my friends were gathered around Mom, in front of a monitor, their faces lit sky blue; they had forgotten to turn on the lights in the kitchen. Mom's body was upheld by Bug and Abe inside a kitchen chair, with Michael clasping her arms. On the screen, in 36 point Helvetica on the screen of a Mac Classic were written the words: 'I am here'…I remembered a friend of Mom's once told me that when you pray, and you pray honestly, you send a

> beam of light out into the skies as clear and as powerful as a sunbeam that breaks through the clouds at the end of a rainy day; like the lights on the sidewalk outside the Academy Awards. And as Karla and I lay there, the two of us – all of us – with our flashlights and lasers, cutting the weather, extending ourselves into the sky, into the end of the universe with precision technology running so fine, I looked at Karla and said out loud, 'You know, it's true.' (p 367 –371)

I have quoted this passage at length because I believe it displays clearly the future that they are attempting to create. It is a future where, although bad things can still happen, technology can be used to solve problems, and help humanity, a universe in which 'precision technology' can be used to help those who can no longer help themselves. The image of this group of people lit only by an unearthly blue light, surrounding a helpless woman communicating via a computer, has elements of apocalyptic science fiction and, in many ways, it is where these people have always dreamed of living. This is diametrically opposed to the ending of *Girlfriend in a Coma.* In *Microserfs* humanity is, or can be, saved by technology, whereas in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, technology is one of the many factors that result in the destruction of the world. One of the major differences between the two books is the emphasis on the role of sleep. In *Girlfriend in a Coma* sleep is used as a metaphor for an attempt to escape the world, a way of becoming oblivious to a weird new future. In *Microserfs*, however, sleep imagery is replaced with imagery of dreams. Computers are often described as dreaming machines and they are seen as the tool with which humanity is going to dream its way out of the problems they face. These computers are going to enable humans to make their dreams real. Dan's mother, for example, like Karen in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, goes into a vegetative-like state, but unlike her is connected to the outside world by means of a computer. This connection between human and computer is the natural progression of the geek future. A melding of man and machine intended to help rather than hinder humanity. It is also the beginning of the realisation of one of the dreams they had as children of the melding of machines and humans and the creation of a new type of world. As Karla explains:

> 'When I was younger,' she said, ' I went through a phase where I wanted to be a machine. I think this is one of the normal phases that young people go through…I honestly didn't want to be flesh; I wanted to be 'precision technology'…I remember being young, in school, being told that our bodies would yield enough carbon for 2000 pencils and enough calcium for 30 sticks of chalk, as well as enough iron for one nail. What a weird thing to tell kids. We should be told our

bodies can transmute into diamonds and wine goblets and teacups and balloons.'
'And diskettes,' I added (p 72 – 74).

The practical middleclass tools – the pencil, chalk and nail – representative of labour and education, things upon which the baby boom generation placed the utmost emphasis, are what generation X is told it should and can produce. The options that Karla provides are much more interesting, and emphasise generation X's desire to be much more than carbon copies of their baby boom parents. They want to sparkle (diamonds), and float freely and not be tied down to the reality that their parents have forced them live with (the balloon). But most importantly, they want to develop a community (symbolised by the tea cups and wine goblets) of their peers, a community within which they have a coherent, recognizable identity. What is interesting is the object Dan suggests: the diskette - he is suggesting that along with these things generation X also wishes to become one with the technology it has put its faith in.

Despite the novel's unadulterated hope for a future in which man and machine work side by side, there is one other image I want to focus on. It is the only actual apocalyptic image in the novel and takes the form of a daydream:

Today the traffic was locked on the 101. I saw visions of the Valley and snapped out of my daydream jealous of the future. I saw germanium in the groundwater and dead careers. I saw venture capitalists with their eyes burned out in their sockets by visions of money, crashing their Nissans on the 101 – past the big blue cube of NASA's Onizuka Air Force Base, their windows spurting fluorescent orange blood (p 192).

This is interesting because the only people who seem to have suffered are those who are only in it for the money - the venture capitalists. This could either mean that those who are only in it for the money will end up doing more harm than good and will ultimately pay the price for their destructive ways, or it could be a way in which Dan lashes out at people he doesn't like, the venture capitalists on which the fate of his company hangs. The other interesting thing is that out of all three novels Dan is the only character ever to admit that he is jealous of the future. Technology, in this case represented by the Air Force Base, remains intact and unaffected. This is interesting because it can also be read as a representation of the status quo within government; it is the military that stays intact, while those people looking for money are the ones who end up dead. In this novel, I believe, one of the most important things Coupland is trying to say is that technology can be a boon so long as we as a species don't begin to

take it for granted. This is visible when Dan writes that, “Ethan has fallen prey to The Vacuum. He mistakes the reward for the goal; he does not realise that there is a deeper aim and an altruistic realm of technology’s desire. He is lost, he does not connect privilege with responsibility; wealth with morality.” (p 170)

The future does not, however, look completely perfect. These characters understand the nature of the world in which they live, they understand that there are always at least two sides to any story and that along with the promise of untold future improvements, technology has brought negative things as well. For example, as technology increases so it becomes more and more a part of our lives and as this happens, so our lives become invaded by peripheral things that come along with technology, such as marketing. As Dan remarks:

> I have noticed that on TV, all of these ‘moments’ are sponsored by corporations, as in, ‘This touchdown was brought to you by the brewers of Bud Lite’…I’m no science buff, but doesn’t this seem like a dangerous way to be messing with the structure of time – allowing the corporate realm to invade the private? (p 131)

Technology has, in many ways, isolated us from our history, even from time itself. This can be seen in two instances. The first is when Karla says: “We live in an era with no historical precedents – this is to say, history is no longer useful as a tool in helping us understand current changes.”(p 99) The problem with this is that without historical context we have no way of anchoring ourselves, we lose the collective identity that makes us human. Thus, the fact that technology has, in many ways, made historical context seem redundant means that we now have to place our hope somewhere else, and the only place we can place it is in the technology that took it away in the first place.

The second manner in which this danger manifests itself is illustrated by a comment Ethan makes to Dan about the fact that the concept of having no time to do something is a phenomenon that only began to occur when technology made it possible:

> I began noticing long ago that years are beginning to shrink – that a year no longer felt like a year, and that one life was not one life any more – that life multiplication was going to be necessary. You never heard of people ‘not having lives’ until about five years ago, just when all of the ‘80s technologies really penetrated our lives (p 164).

Time is an important aspect of humanity because it is a totally human construct – one that also plays a significant role in *Girlfriend in a Coma* – the fact that technology seems to increase the speed of the passage of time means that it is fundamentally altering the ways in which humans interact with, and experience their world. As a result technology can both create and steal time.

Thus, *Microserfs* is a novel about characters trying to come to an understanding about their world and the role they play within it. The characters are searching for a way of both maintaining their humanity and creating a new future intrinsically linked to the technology upon which they have based their faith. They know there is something bigger than themselves in the universe and they hope to discover what it is by creating something bigger than themselves They begin the novel empty, full of possibility and rationalisations as to why they were wasting it, but they end up finding something to believe in and have developed into whole humans. As Dan says in the last paragraph of the novel:

> And then I thought about us…these children who fell down life's cartoon holes…dreamless children, alive but not living – we emerged on the other side of the cartoon holes fully awake and discovered we were whole (p 371).

Generation X has a rather ambivalent relationship to technology. On the one hand, there are the geeks who see technology as the only way to save the world and are epitomised in Coupland's fiction by the characters in *Microserfs.* Dan and his friends have placed all of their faith in technology and are doing everything in their power to make it work for them. This is in sharp contrast to the characters that populate the rest of Coupland's fiction, and especially in the other two novels under study. They are deeply suspicious of the technology upon which they have come to rely and are convinced that it is responsible for much that is wrong with the world, epitomised in their minds by the nuclear bomb – a technology they could gladly live without.

Technology can thus be read as both a blessing and a curse, both the cause of and the solution to the world's problems. Generation X understands that their lives have been made better through the use of technology, but often they cannot help feeling as though they have made a deal with the devil – that somehow the technology their parents created, and that they continue to create will ultimately destroy them. In many ways this ambiguity can be read as fear, generation X does not want to admit that they are fearful in a world where they can no longer believe in anything and so they have projected much of this fear onto something tangible – if technology is to blame for all of

the world's problems then they cannot be blamed. Generation X is worried that the world will be destroyed by something they have done or have failed to do, but if technology is to blame then it is out of their hands. Coupland, I believe, understands this but leans more toward his fellow generation Xer's believing that technology, rather than generation X is to blame for many of the world's problems. It is not a black and white issue, however, and because Coupland is an astute commentator on his generation he can see why his generation fears technology while at the same time sees its redemptive qualities, which is why his novels are so ambiguous in their relationship to technology.

Chapter Four:

Girlfriend in a Coma

Of the three novels chosen for this paper, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (referred to from now on as *Girlfriend*) is the most overtly apocalyptic. It ends in a post-apocalyptic world where there are only eight survivors, however, it is also concerned with the relationship between the world and humanity, and the role that technology plays in this relationship. The review of the book by the Independent, republished on the back cover of the Flamingo copy of the text, describes *Girlfriend* as, "A richly associative novel, ranging from the dysfunctional teendom of *Twin Peaks* to the chilly metaphysics of T*he Sweet Hereafter* en route to winding up as a post-apocalyptic version of *It's a Wonderful Life*." I would say this is an apt description. The novel is indeed highly associative and filled with popular cultural nuggets that Coupland uses to create his world, and the link between the novel and the Jimmy Stewart movie, *It's a Wonderful Life,* is a piquant one that Coupland himself makes through Pam's conversation with Jared:

> This is like that Christmas movie…The one they used to play too many times each December and it kind of wore you down by the eighteenth showing. You know what the world would have been like without you….'Why you? People never asked that question of Jimmy Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*.'
> 'That's the name Pam says' (p 253).

This in an important link to make because, in many ways, this novel functions in the same way as both *It's a Wonderful Life* and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.* All three works deal with a glimpse into the future that changes a particular character – or in the case of *Girlfriend*, characters – for the better and it provides him or them with a new perspective on their world.

It also has elements, however, of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies.* The end of the novel shows us what could happen to people in a world devoid of society and its rules. It is the combination of elements from these wide-ranging sources that make it such an interesting text. The novel serves as both a warning and a type of wish fulfillment for members of generation X. It is a warning because Coupland examines just how bad things could get if we carry on the way we are. As Nicholas Lezard of The Guardian says in his review of the novel, "This is a book with a very definite purpose: he [Coupland] directly tells us to pull our socks up and look at the world afresh." (Opening page of the 1998 Flamingo edition). But, it is a type of wish fulfillment as well because it enacts a fantasy that lives deep in the unconscious of generation X, a deep-seated

desire to be given another chance in the world, to do things better, but with the security of an unshakable belief. To have all of the opportunities that their world provided them with, and have the purpose and belief their grand parents had which now seems anachronistic - that is what generation X desires. The novel also serves a third function (one that is also visible in the other two works under study) as part of both the characters, and Coupland's (and by extension generation X's) continued search for identity.

Girlfriend is definitely the most overtly didactic of the three novels under study and is, I believe, meant to serve not only as a cautionary tale but also as a guidebook - to provide generation X with a possible way of solving its, and the world's, problems. The primary problem Coupland uncovers in this novel is that everyone seems to be sleeping. They have chosen, in the face of what they perceive to be the lack of options, to become oblivious to what is going on – as a way of coping with the world they have created. The danger that Coupland is attempting to warn his readers of is that if we continue to be oblivious to what we are doing, the world will end – everyone will die. And, at the end of the novel everyone does exactly that, quite appropriately, by falling asleep. Thus, while the end of the novel takes place in a post-apocalyptic world, it does not end with a nuclear holocaust or World War Three. The reason for this has to do, I believe, both with the didactic message of the novel and with generation X's fear of technology in general. In many ways, generation X's fear of apocalypse especially nuclear apocalypse, and the havoc it would wreak, is directly linked to a latent fear of technology in general, what Coupland calls "Cryptotechnophobia" in *Generation X* which he defines as, "The secret belief that technology is more of a menace than a boon." (p 200) The word that is important in that definition is the word 'secret'. Most members of generation X are reluctant to admit that they are afraid of the technology that has given them so much, and they are so fixated on the dangers of nuclear technology that they often block out the other dangers that technology brings. Generation X longs to have something in which to believe, and in many cases technology, or 'progress' is the only thing that still seems available to believe in. They are afraid to announce their ambiguity toward it, because doing so could undermine the only meaning structure still available. If technology and progress go, then there is no reason left to exist. If there is no god and humans evolved via progress, and technology is bad then there is no point to existing at all.

Unlike the geeks in *Microserfs,* the characters in *Girlfriend* are deeply suspicious of technology and, while it may make their lives easier and more efficient, there is a suspicion that it is also constantly taking something away, that at the heart of this

technological world is a lack. This is what Karen observes when she awakens from her coma, and tells Jared that the main difference between the world of 1997 and 1979 is that in 1997 there is:

> A lack of convictions – of beliefs, of wisdom, or even of good old badness. No sorrow; no nothing. People – the people I knew – when I came back they only well, existed. It was so sad (p 213).

It is Coupland's point, I believe, to show us two things. Firstly, that there is indeed a lack – and by lack I believe Coupland means a lack of purpose and meaning and most importantly of a coherent metanarrative upon which to order one's world - and to show us the way to fill it. His solution would be, as Jared instructs the other characters at the end of the novel, to fill this lack with the right questions:

> Ask whatever challenges dead and thoughtless beliefs. Ask: When did we become human beings and stop being whatever it is we were before this? What was the specific change that made us human? …Ask how can we begin to think of the future as something enormous before us that also includes us? Ask: Having become human, what is it that we are now doing or creating that will transform us into whatever it is that we are slated to next become? (p 270)

Secondly, to show us that if we let ourselves become oblivious to the world, and the ways in which we often let technology consume us – making things easier often enables one to ignore the problems inherent in the process – then a nuclear apocalypse is the last thing that we should be worrying about because we are then far more likely to destroy ourselves with what could have been harmless technology.

Interestingly, Coupland's solution, this notion of the 'right' questions, seems particularly anti-postmodern. In fact the whole eschatological aspect of the novel (if you take eschatology to be the study of the final things in a religious sense), seems distinctly anti-postmodern. It implies that the only way to save the world is through the continual search for imminent truth, that the world needs to be overhauled and rebuilt with this continual search as its foundation, and that this search, if successful, will lead to transcendence and a glimpse of a higher power. On closer examination, however, this may not necessarily be anti-postmodern. Jared maintains that the 'gang' must "Ask whatever challenges dead and thoughtless beliefs." And, in many ways, this is what postmodernism does. It realises that many of the traditional metanarratives in our world are thoughtless and outmoded and so challenges and ultimately topples them. Thus,

the challenging of outmoded beliefs seems very postmodern, however, the focus on 'imminent truth' is harder to unpack, but is, I believe, at the heart of generation X's understanding of the world. While generation X has been influenced by postmodern thought, especially the notion of relativism and the death of metanarrative, this influence has not prevented them from desiring the discovery of a metanarrative in which they can wholly believe. They are in a catch-22 situation, on the one hand they can no longer believe in the metanarratives their parents subscribe to, but at the same time have not replaced them with anything else. As Karen observes when she wakes up from her coma:

> She remembers the innocent, pointless aims of their youth (Hawaii! Ski Bum at Whistler!) and sees that they were never acted upon. But at the same time, larger aims were never defined. Her friends have become who they've become by default. Their dreams forgotten, or were never formulated to begin with (p 135).

The reason that larger aims were never defined was because in a world in which there is nothing that one can be completely sure of, no future seems certain and so setting goals and 'larger aims' seems futile. This is also one of the reasons that the novel can be read as a type of wish fulfillment.

Coupland, like other generation Xer's, longs for answers and in this novel he is striving to discover meaning. Generation X craves the proof that will allow them to believe in something bigger than themselves, they long for a metanarrative that includes something not completely constructed by humanity, one that does not rely on faith in institutions such as the Church. On the whole, generation X is a cynical generation, they have seen so many of their dreams and visions of the future snatched away from them that they struggle to have faith in anything. Despite this, however, they long to be able to believe in something; to have a greater purpose. As was mentioned earlier, this seems quite anti-postmodern, however, while generation X longs for something transcendent in which to believe, the novel makes it plain that it will take a miracle for this to happen. There are references to heaven or the afterlife – Linus is given a glimpse of what heaven is like – but these are more closely linked to the idea that heaven is the absence of loneliness rather than a specific reference to a god. Coupland, like the rest of generation X, wishes that they could be given proof of some 'great plan', because then, and only then, could they have faith. However, isn't faith belief in the absence of proof? Thus, they dream of a world in which faith is possible but understand that it would only be possible in light of substantial proof. Thus, they realise that faith is impossible for them. It is a dream of a world in which these

postmodern members of generation X are given the proof they need in order to believe in something bigger, but is a dream that necessarily requires the world to come to an end. In other words, it would take the end of the world, the appearance of a ghost, and a couple of miracles before these cynical generation Xer's would believe in something bigger than themselves.

Coupland, and other generation Xer's, would gladly choose the life that Richard, Pam, Linus, Megan, Hamilton and Wendy have to accept at the end of the novel, if it means that they will have something in which to believe, but they can only take on that life once they are brought to the end of the world and have been shown proof of something bigger, a higher purpose. They would gladly choose a life where, as Jared tells them:

> You're to be different now. Your behaviour will be changing. Your thinking is to change. And people will watch these changes in you and they'll come to experience the world in your new manner…it's going to be as if you've died and were reincarnated but you stay in your own body. For all of you. And in your new lives you'll have to live entirely for that one sensation – that of imminent truth. And you're going to have to holler for it, steal for it, beg for it – and you're never going to stop asking questions about it twenty-four hours a day, the rest of your life (p 268).

This extreme ending is the only way that Coupland can see the world changing for the better, if people begin to ask the right questions and refuse to stop asking these questions. It is a realization on the part of Coupland that we have come so far that it will literally take a miracle to restore to humanity its sense of belief.

At first glance then, the novel seems to end on a note of triumph, with a sense of hope for the future. By the end of the novel these jaded, disillusioned people, now equipped with indisputable, if impossible to prove, truth go forth into the world, ready and willing to be branded as crazy. They no longer have to worry about the rest of the world because they no longer need the world to fill the gap, the lack they feel, because it has been filled with a purpose. You can almost see the glint in Richard's eye as he proclaims in the last paragraph of the novel:

> You'll soon be seeing us walking down the street, our backs held proud, our eyes dilated with truth and power. We might look like you, but you should know better. We'll draw our line in the sand and force the world to cross our line. Every cell in our body explodes with the truth…We'll be adults who smash the tired,

> exhausted system. We'll crawl and chew and dig our way into a radical new world. We will change minds and souls from stone and plastic into linen and gold – that's what I believe. That's what I know (p 281).

But this sense of hope and of triumph is, in many ways, a last ditch effort to put a good face on a bad situation. This is an example of the third formulation of apocalyptic optimism. The belief that when the earth comes to an end, either through nuclear apocalypse or humanity destroying the earth in some other manner, there will be some people left over who will be able to start again, or as is the case in *Girlfriend,* there will be some higher power who will intervene at the last minute and give the world, and more specifically generation X, a second chance. This belief covers over a deep seated concern that this won't actually happen, that generation X will not be able to save the world, that they will continue in the same vein as their parents and end up destroying both it and themselves. And, even when they have the proof they need and the motivation to go and attempt to change the world, they know that there is a good possibility that instead of actually effecting change they will just be branded crazy by the rest of the world and their message ignored. As Richard thinks just before the statement quoted above:

> Think about all those crazy people you can see on the streets. Maybe they aren't crazy at all. Maybe they've seen what we've seen – maybe those people are us (p 281).

Thus, even this 'dream', their wish for transcendence, has a nightmarish quality to it. Their fear that the world will be destroyed anyway is evidenced by Richard's musings when the gang is caught in a train tunnel the year after Karen falls into her coma. It is a scene pregnant with nuclear imagery and is the nightmare side of the coin, so to speak. It asks the question, what would happen if nuclear apocalypse did actually occur and there was no second chance, no higher design?

> There was no way we could run to the entrance; the five of us hit the ground and rolled into stony ditches on either side, willing ourselves to shrink. Within seconds, a Pacific Great Western train exploded above in an H-bomb roar – 108 freight cars loaded with plywood supernova'ed up above us inside the granite walls. The train radiated intermittent light from which I was able to see directly in front of my nose, pressed to the ground, an empty wine bottle, a six-year-old yellowed newspaper, a sock, and a balled-up Huggies diaper. These objects flashed briefly and vanished like fleeting shivers of shame that are soon

> forgotten…What if we were to die right there? What had our lives been? What had our ambitions been? What had we been seeking? Money? No – none of us seemed financially motivated. Happiness? We were so young that we didn't even know what unhappiness could be. Freedom? Perhaps. An overriding principle of our lives that was that infinite freedom creates a society of unique, fascinating individuals. Failure at this would mean failure of our societal duty. We were young; obviously we wanted meaning from life. I felt a craving for duty but to what? (p 58)

I have quoted this passage at length because it is, I believe, very important. It is one of the major turning points in the novel, or rather it should have been one of the novel's major turning points. Spread-eagled, face down in the dirt, a train hurtling above him, Richard asks the 'right' questions: What have our lives been? To whom or what should I be duty-bound? Had Richard and his friends continued to ask such questions, the novel would have turned out very differently, yet a question remains by the end of the novel, can six adults and two children (one unborn) really change the world for the better? What is also important to take note of is Coupland's notion of freedom. These children, members of generation X, have the world at their feet, they have everything that the world has been striving for, and they don't recognise what they have. It is this blinkered idea of their place in the world that Coupland is trying desperately to unpack. As Jared explains:

> We were all so lucky living when and where we did. There was no Vietnam. Childhood dragged on forever. Gasoline, cars and potato chips were cheap and plenty. If we wanted to hop a jet to fly anywhere on Earth, we could. We could believe in anything we wanted…And we all went to school…I remember being able to read *Life* magazine and making up my own mind about politics. I remember being in a car and thinking of a road map of North America and knowing that if I chose, I could drive anywhere. All of that time and all of that tranquility, freedom and abundance. Amazing. The sweet and effortless nodule of freedom we all shared – it was a fine idea. It was, in its own unglamorous way, the goal of all human history…People elsewhere – people who didn't have our Boy-in-the-Bubble life-style – they looked at us and our freedoms fought for by others, and these people expected us with our advantages to take mankind to the next level (p 264).

This notion of generation X's role as the innovators of a new world, is one that also comes through in *Microserfs.* It is a notion often founded on guilt – guilt because they

have squandered these opportunities in a haze of drugs, alcohol and overwork, and that they don't deserve to be the ones who have all of the privileges they have. The novel implies that if these members of the privileged generation X asked the 'right questions' then they would take the world to the next level, but the way they are going now they will just end up repeating their parents' mistakes and the world will end as a result. In this light the items Richard sees in the light of the train come to represent squandered possibilities.

These objects can also be seen, however, as a glimpse into the future: the balled up diaper representing both his own childhood and that of his daughter; the newspaper representing the passing of time and the fact that history is a human construction; the wine bottle, his own attempt at escape from the world; and finally the sock. This can be seen as an example of the litter with which we are constantly spoiling our world. These are the 'shivers of shame' of which his life and the lives of the others are made up, this is what has replaced the dreams and hopes of youth, and this is why drastic changes need to be made. Richard may have asked the right questions when he was 18, but they are soon forgotten in a haze of mundane life, drugs, alcohol and futile hopes pinned onto a girlfriend in a coma.

The next thing I would like to look at is why Coupland chooses to burden these particular people with the task of saving the world. What is so special about them? Firstly, like Coupland, they are members of generation X, he can relate to them and believes that it is up to his generation to save the world. Secondly, these characters are on the verge of finding the answers themselves, or rather they are on the verge of asking the right questions. Karen's role is probably the easiest to explain and so she is a good place to start. The hopes Richard and, to some extent, the rest of the 'gang' pin onto Karen, spring from the notion that in some way Karen,

> Provided a platform on which people could hope. She provided the idea that some frail essence from a now long-vanished era still existed, that the brutality and extremes of the modern world were not the way the world ought to be – a world of gentle Pacific rains, down-filled jackets, bitter red wine in goat skins and, naïve charms (p 74).

Rising from her coma, Karen becomes, in the novel, a fresh perspective on the world, someone who hasn't yet been corrupted by the changes that have taken place in the world, someone who can see at a glance what is actually happening and where things are going wrong.

Coupland makes Karen's purpose in the novel explicit. Firstly, when Wendy thinks, "Friends and family want to protect Karen and her innocence from the modern world, the changes that have occurred since her sleep began. Her innocence is the benchmark of their jadedness and corruption." (p 138) and then when Jared explains to her:

> You woke up from your coma because you'd be able to see the present through the eyes of the past. Without you there'd be no one to see the world as it turned out in contrast to your expectations. Your testimony was needed. Your testament (p 212).

Karen is there as a witness, a traveler from a world before generation X was completely jaded; when there was still a possibility they could achieve their potential and take the world to the next level. She has missed out on 17 years' worth of slowly becoming inured to the way things are, 17 years' worth of chopping and changing dreams and hopes, eradicating them and then never fully defining new ones, 17 years' worth of increased global uncertainty and the social and cultural events that have made generation X what it is. Karen is inundated with facts, news and gossip when she wakes up,

> Richard has been coming in with the annual volumes of the world book encyclopaedia and teaching Karen about the new years leading up to 1997. He is already up to 1989: The fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS quilt – Karen must be amazed at this. And then there's crack. Cloning. Life on Mars. Velcro. Charles and Diana. MAC cosmetics. Imagine learning so much stuff at once (p 137).

Learning these facts as history has much less of an impact than living through them. Interestingly, the only thing Karen is sad she missed is the whole Princess Diana saga, from its beginning as a fairy tale to its ending in the tabloids. It is possible that the reason Karen, in particular, is influenced by this saga is because Diana's fairy tale, happily-ever-after went so horribly wrong and this unhappily-ever-after resonates strongly with the way Karen thinks the world has turned out. In the letter she gives to Richard the night she falls into her coma she writes: "I feel like sleeping for a thousand years – that way I'll never have to be around for this weird new future." (p 28)

Sleep is the primary image in the novel. It is how Karen attempts to escape from the world; it is also the way that most people go through their lives and it should be read as

a false sense of escape. Karen doesn't sleep for a thousand years, and does have to see the 'weird new future' and Coupland is warning us to wake up before it is too late, before we sleep ourselves to death.

Like Karen, both Hamilton and Pam try to run away from the world, they try to ignore what is going on, they just choose to do it by using drugs rather than by falling into a coma. Hamilton and Pam understand what is wrong with the world, they just refuse to do anything about it; this can be seen from what Hamilton tells Richard when he confronts Hamilton about his Heroin addiction:

> Don't you understand, Richard? There's nothing at the center of what we do…No center. It doesn't exist. All of us – look at our lives: We have an acceptable level of affluence. We have entertainment. We have a relative freedom from fear. But there's nothing else…At least Pam and I accept things as they are. And I wish you'd let us do that. We get our job done. We pay our taxes. We never forget people's birthdays. So just let us be (p 94).

While both Pam and Hamilton understand the postmodern world, they are also deeply afraid of it. They see its problems clearly and recognise the lack at the center of things, but are unable to deal with this and so run away. They use drugs to attempt to escape the world, but just like Karen, fail to do so. The problem is that the more drugs they take, the more difficult it becomes to escape. That is why at the end of the novel, when Jared is giving everybody a helping hand, so to speak, he gets rid of all of their addictions. Both are overjoyed at being 'clean' again but as they sit at the end of the world, they begin to understand that while they were so busy trying to escape from the world they knew was bad, they wasted what little time was left. They begin to understand that instead of doing everything they could to block out the world they should have been asking why there was a need to do so. The conversation they have with Jared after he has freed them illustrates this realisation.

> 'Oh Hamilton look at the world'
> 'It's…'
> 'Yes…'
> The two fall silent…
> 'Well, well – here we are,' Pam says
> 'Clean,' Hamilton says. 'And I don't feel like getting high. You?'
> 'No,' replies Pam. 'I like being inside my own skin again.'
> A seagull shrieks above them and they look up. 'There's still birds,' Pam says.

‘But no people.’

‘No people. The world’s over, isn’t it, Jared…

‘Is this it forever – silence…

‘Your brains are as tender and fresh as a baby bird’s. Walk home. Enjoy your clarity. Go romp in a hot tub. You count; you were meant to exist.’ (p 240)

Another thing that this passage shows is that at the heart of much of their behaviour is a belief that maybe they shouldn’t exist, feelings of guilt about their lives and the manner in which they have squandered them, a belief that maybe humanity got out of control and this generation shouldn’t have happened as it did. Jared’s affirmation of their existence can be read as Coupland’s reaffirmation of the belief that humans are meant to exist even if they don’t always do things the right way.

Like Pam and Hamilton, Linus is unhappy with the state of the world. The difference is that he actually tries to ask the right questions. He goes off into the world on foot in search of the answers to the big question – what is the meaning of life? The problem is that he fails to come up with any answers, or rather, no one gives him these answers and so he gets discouraged and stops. As Karen observes, “Linus apparently went away for years trying to figure out the meaning of life and he never found it and so he curled up inside himself and became dusty and slightly bitter.”(p 215). Interestingly, the rest of the ‘gang’ are angry at him for not finding the answers, for not achieving transcendence. Even before Jared confronts the group at the end with plan B, Linus has realised that what he should have done is continued to ask questions. His problem is that he is too invested in this world, too caught up in its cynicism and quest for proof. Like many in generation X, he has lost his capacity for awe because he can no longer take the leap required for faith. This is seen in the conversation he has with Jared, just before Jared shows him a picture of heaven (the only picture that could restore his faith and thus his capacity for awe):

‘Did you reach any conclusions in Las Vegas?’

‘No. Not really. I thought I was going to see God or reach an epiphany or to levitate or something. But I never did. I prayed so long for that to happen. I think I didn’t surrender myself enough - that’s the term: surrender. I still wanted to keep a foot in both worlds. And then this past year I’ve still been waiting for the same big cosmic moments, and still nothing’s happened [what about the end of the world and the appearance of a ghost?] – except you’re here and instead of feeling cosmic it simply feels like we’re cutting gym class and coming up here for

a butt. Your arrival seems somehow appropriate, I wish I could feel more awe.' (p 235)

Wendy and Richard also attempt to escape from the world and while Richard was asking the right questions when he was younger, he too, as was mentioned earlier, stopped. Like Linus, Wendy immersed herself in science and became a doctor, and buried herself in her work, hoping that what she was doing, saving lives, would somehow redeem her.

Richard placed all of his hope in Karen. He believed that one day she would wake up and bring with her the lost innocence of their youth. What is interesting is that he is the only one who doesn't want or need anything when Jared is helping them in part three of the novel. Richard, unlike the others, has his faith restored when Karen wakes up. He put all his hope for the future into her and so when she woke up he knew that the future would be better somehow, less empty. He also is the first one to realise what they had been doing wrong. It is because Karen represents hope for him that he gets so angry when he hears that she must go back into her coma, because it shows just how invested in her he is. His faith was pinned to her and now it has to shift back to the world from which he was hiding.

Another interesting connection that links the characters together is the sense that they are all to a greater or lesser degree great subjects for the tabloids. First and foremost Karen, whose awakening is big news the world over, and is perfect for the type of sensationalised stories that the tabloids churn out. Richard too is media fodder, as the former alcoholic boyfriend of the newly-awakened coma patient and also in his own right as a member of the financial sector during the big crash of the early nineties, and his subsequent alcoholism. Linus, an engineer who left everything behind to travel the country on foot hoping to discover the meaning to life. Pam the supermodel who falls from the limelight because of drugs and then makes a successful return as a special effects whiz. Hamilton the drug addict, geologist boyfriend of a former supermodel who lost his blasting license because he stole explosives in order to create 'art'. And finally Wendy a trauma doctor, who lives 36 hour days. And then when they return to the world for plan B, they will become even more sensational and the tabloids would like their new story just as much.

All of these characters, then, are hiding from a world they feel has both betrayed them and been betrayed by them. They try to run away because they feel guilty about not making more of their potential and the start they were given in life. But this still does not

explain why they were chosen to be the saviours of the world. By being kept alive, they were given something very valuable, as Jared explains:

> You've all been given a great gift, but a confusing one too…you've all been allowed to see what your lives would be like in the absence of the world…This past year – if you'd tried, you'd have seen even more clearly the futility of trying to change the world without the efforts of everybody else on Earth. You saw and smelled and drank the evidence of six billion disasters that can only be mended by six billion people. (p 253)

They have seen first hand just how important it is for everybody in the world to cooperate with each other. They have seen what will happen if everyone continues only caring about themselves and at most their own country. They have been shown the absolute neccessity of people working together for the greater good, if the world is to survive. This communal effort is more necessary now than ever before because the world can no longer survive without the human race. As Jared explains:

> If human beings had suddenly vanished a thousand years ago, the planet would have healed overnight with no damage. Maybe a few lumps where the pyramids stand. One hundred years ago – or even fifty years ago – the world would have healed itself just fine in the absence of people. But not now. We crossed the line. The only thing that can keep the planet turning smoothly now is human free will forged into effort. Nothing else. That's why the world has seemed so large in the past few years, and time is so screwy. Its because Earth is now totally ours (p 265).

This passage can be read as both generation self-aggrandisement and as remarkably close to the truth. From one point of view it seems presumptuous to believe that the world can no longer survive without humans, however, such a belief resonates strongly with many of generation X's worries. Generation X longs to believe that nature will still accept it, as can be seen from the story with the pelican Andy tells in *Generation X,* but they are very worried that they have crossed a line, that they have reached a point from which there is no turning back, from which earth with eventually die as a result of human action and stupidity and greed. And this seems like a distinct possibility if one looks at the number of animal species that become extinct daily, at the way in which weather is being fundamentally changed by human waste and pollution. Thus, when Coupland asserts that we can no longer assume that if we fail the earth will right itself, I tend to agree. If we squander our potential, waste our opportunities to improve our

world, then it will eventually die and us along with it. No longer can the world be separated from the humans that live on it.

However, knowing the purpose behind saving these people – to make the rest of the world understand how forcefully humanity is nudging the world toward chaos - does not fully explain why it is these six people who are given the task. The answer to this question is not very forthcoming in the novel, even when Linus explicitly asks Jared, no real answer is given. I believe that it is left to these people to save the world for a number of reasons. The first of these is that they are cynical members of generation X. Coupland, like the rest of generation X, believes that it is up to this generation to save the world, they are just unsure as to how to go about it. The next reason why they were chosen is because of the skills they each have. As Jared commands them, "Go and clear the land for a new culture – bring your axes, scythes and guns. I know you have the necessary skills – explosives, medicine, engineering, media knowledge and the ability to camouflage yourselves." (p 271) They have all the skills necessary to make an impact on this world. They have the media savvy and celebrity status to influence people, they have prestigious technical knowledge: doctors and engineers are valued members of the society because they can contribute to the greater good. The ability to use explosives is slightly more difficult to read and is more sinister. It implies that the world only really understands the language of violence and so the ability to commit violence is necessary if one is to make an impact on this world.

It is the ability to camouflage oneself that I wish to look at in more detail now. As mentioned earlier, this novel is also concerned with a search for identity. The characters are searching for individual identities throughout the novel and continually find themselves becoming shadows and stereotypes. All of these characters are remarkably adept at fitting into their world; they have lived their lives constantly trying to fit in and they have become who they are by default. For example, everybody just assumes that Pam will become a model and she does, but she almost loses herself entirely doing so. As she tells Richard, "You know it [modeling] was fun, Richard. I grant you that. But it's over now. There's only a fraction of 'me' left. I used to think there was an infinite -supply of 'me.' Wrong-o. I have to be calm now. My small seed needs to grow and become a whole person again." (p 73) in order to become a whole person she needs to find out who she really is, but she has spent her life so desperately trying to avoid that question through parties and drugs and the modeling scene that she is now unable to.

Pam is not alone in this , in fact it is one of the things that all of these characters have in common. They are all trying their best to avoid having to ask the difficult questions, not only about the state of the world but also about the state of themselves, about who they actually are.

The final thing I would like to consider is the role that popular culture plays in the novel. Owing to space constraints, it will not be possible to examine all the popular cultural references that Coupland uses in the novel, but in order to illustrate the ways in which he uses popular culture to lend a degree of authenticity to the world he creates, I will examine three such references. The first two are very similar and are mentioned in the same sentence. Both of these references are to songs and both take place on the second page of the novel. “Yes, the world is over. It’s still here but its…over. I’m at the End of the World. Dust in the wind. *The end of the world as we know it. Just another brick in the wall.* [my italics]” (p 4*);* by using the two lines in italics the first, a line from a REM song and the second, from a Pink Floyd song, Coupland can get his readers to begin to think about a whole number of issues. Immediately readers are reminded of the rest of the REM song “It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)”. The song’s lyrics are socially and politically aware and are a comment on what Stipe sees as wrong with the world. Lyrics such as, “World serves its own needs, dummy serve your own needs” and “Six o'clock - TV hour. Don't get caught in foreign towers. Slash and burn, return, listen to yourself churn. Locking in, uniforming, book burning, blood letting,”[14] are not particularly positive. By referring to title of the song, “The end of the world as we know it,” Coupland not only gets his reader to think about the way Stipe portrays the world in his song but also gets them to think about other songs by REM, songs such as “Losing my Religion” that resonate strongly with generation X and deal with similar issues to those Coupland is attempting to unpack. For example the chorus of “Losing my Religion” contains the lines, “That’s me in the corner, / That’s me in the spotlight / losing my religion” (Out of Time REM 1991) lines which illustrate a feeling of ennui resulting from the fact that in the spotlight that is the modern world, metanarratives such as Religion, seem crass and hollow.

The second reference is to a song by Pink Floyd. The song “Another Brick in the Wall” is separated into three parts, the first dealing with the splitting of families, the second with education, with ‘thought control’ and ‘dark sarcasm,’ and the third with madness. The whole song was written for one of the band members while he was in a psychiatric hospital. The song has a dystopian and inevitable resignation to it and this is the image that Coupland is trying to evoke. Also, as with the REM song, referring to one Pink

[14] REM, The End of The World as We Know It. Document 1987 IRS: Music

Floyd song immediately taps into the reader's knowledge of other songs by the band. Two other songs by the band come to mind in association with *Girlfriend*, the first is "Mother", the first line of which is, "Mother do you think they'll drop the bomb".[15] The second is titled "Comfortably Numb" and is seemingly relevant to Coupland's warning about the world sleeping and becoming inured to what is going on. Incidentally, the name of the novel was inspired by a song by cult band The Smiths called *Girlfriend in a Coma*.

The third and final popular cultural reference I want to look at is the reference to the cult TV series *The X Files*. When Pam returns to her old neighbourhood after becoming a supermodel and then landing up in rehab, she decides to go into television make-up. A lucky coincidence sees Hamilton, Linus and Richard on the set of one of the TV pilots that Pam is working on when they are understaffed, thus begins their career in TV. Eventually Linus, Pam and Hamilton join a special effects firm but Richard stays on the set of a particular American series filmed in Vancouver. The series is never identified by name but from Richard's description it is safe to assume that it is intended to be *The X Files*:

> I wound up working on a new show in which conspiracies, be they alien, governmental, paranormal, or clerical, impacted on the lives of everyday people. These visitations would in turn be investigated by a male detective who has a belief in the paranormal and a female detective who has her doubts. It was a simple formula, but one that resonated with us (p 86).

The series resonates with them because they long to be as believing as Mulder, but are as cynical and skeptical as Scully. Richard's working specifically for *The X Files* is not a spurious detail. The choice of series is revealing because it represents some of the fundamental beliefs either that generation X long to have, or to which they have come to subscribe. As Richard explains,

> Our work continually exposed us, day in, day out, to a constant assembly line of paranoia, extreme beliefs, and spiritual simplifications. The routine nature of these ideas had begun to activate parts of me that previously remained untouched. Like most people I'd known, I was unconcerned with what happens to 'me' after I die. Implicit was a vague notion that I would somehow continue in another form and that was that. But then new doubts surfaced: would I continue on? And how? (p 90)

[15] Pink Floyd, *Mother* The Wall

It deals with big questions, if from a somewhat extreme angle, such as are we alone in the universe, is there a God and just how much power should and does government have. Referring to *The X Files* is useful for Coupland's project because not only does it indicate that the author has his finger on the pulse of the society, but the constant disjuncture between the two principle characters' belief systems provides an interesting analogy for the constant flux that exists in the generation X belief systems – generation X cannot believe any longer in metanarratives but they secretly long to do so.

This disjuncture is what I believe Coupland is attempting to unpack in *Girlfriend in a Coma,* the fact that while generation X is no longer able to place their faith in their parents' metanarratives, they long to place their faith somewhere, and in the face of the seeming unreliability of previous metanarratives the only options that seem left to them are popular culture and technology. But, both popular culture and technology are man-made, and much of their faith in humanity has been worn away by experience with the previous generation.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

America is better than any other country at exporting itself, whether economically, culturally or militarily and, because of this, American culture has been diffused throughout the rest of the world. But more than this, in the technologically advanced and globalising world in which we all live today, culture is gradually becoming more and more homogenized. The result of this is that generation X, as an entity, can be examined and understood in other parts of the world. The prime example of this is the fact that Douglas Coupland himself, one of the generation's most articulate spokesmen, is not American. As mentioned in the first chapter Coupland's Canadian heritage provides him with a unique understanding of his neighbour and the generation it has produced. It also allows him the freedom to take many things, including aspects of postmodernism, with a pinch of salt and expose them for what they really are - argued-over human constructions, just like everything else.

As mentioned earlier, in order to fully understand generation X, one needs to immerse oneself in as much of the culture and media that generation X was weaned on as possible. This is relatively easy to do considering how much American culture has been exported to the rest of the world. I would even go so far as to say that there is probably an equivalent to generation X in most of the rest of the world though, in many instances, these equivalent generations occur slightly later in chronological terms. This is the result of the time lag between America and the rest of the world in terms of American culture and more importantly, for many developing countries, the technological lag-time. A South African generation X, for instance, although influenced by American culture would also have been heavily influenced by our own uniquely turbulent history and the sheer number of different cultures that have been thrown into the mix.

There are of course things that will not translate, things that are directly the result of specific historical and cultural factors. For example, generation X's sense of being cheated owing to specific economic factors that played out in the US during the 1990s. Each incarnation of generation X has to be different, but there are a few things that will be the same for all and it is these things that, I believe, are worth studying – these are the issues with which Coupland's fiction deals. Issues such as: attempting to uncover one's place in the world, and one's individual identity; an obsession with apocalypse be it nuclear or otherwise; and, most importantly, generation X's search for metanarratives to replace the ones they inherited from their parents and which no longer pass muster.

It is for this reason that I believe Coupland's fiction should be read and studied, even in South Africa. The generation Xs of the world are the generations creating the future. They are the ones that understand technology, both its pros and cons and they are the ones who have been entrusted with guiding humanity to the next level. Douglas Coupland is, I believe, one of the cultural commentators who most clearly sees where generation X is making mistakes, and where it can improve itself, and that is a very important thing to be able to do if we are to avoid pushing the planet toward apocalypse.

His novels do not, however, in any way, provide all the answers. In fact, they often turn up more questions than answers, such as what really is the point of the constant classifying that generation X carries out? They do, however, provide readers with an insight into a number of different generation X sub cultures and the ways in which these cultures interact and the similarities that exist among them. Each of the novels deals with a different section of generation X and explores its members' travails and its attempt to come to grips with the world and the difficulties inherent in finding a self-contained individual identity - especially in light of technology that is helping to homogenize the world and often efface individuality as quickly as possible.

Coupland's view of technology is very much a mixture of two opposing views. The first is the one espoused by the characters in *Microserfs:* the belief that technology can and will be used to take humanity to the next level, that it is a boon that can be used to save the world. The second is the view of the characters that populate *Girlfriend in a Coma*: the belief that technology is more of a curse than a boon and that it is responsible for most of the problems that the world is facing. Coupland, I believe, takes a middle position, ambiguous toward the benefits that technology can bring but conscious that it has improved our lives in many ways. He takes the view that while technology can be a boon and should be used to improve humanity, it is just as possible to use technology to destroy the world, and unless we are vigilant, it is more likely to destroy than to heal.

The characters in the thee novels are all attempting to come to grips with the way they fit into the world, what exactly it is that differentiates them from the crowd, and the ways in which this increasingly technologically advanced world seems to be heading toward chaos. Generation X is a generation struggling to discover its place in the world. It is attempting to reconcile the dreams and plans it had for the future, with the way in which that future has turned out. Some, like the characters in *Microserfs*, have decided to try and save the world one line of code, or prose, at a time. They have appropriated the

identity of commentator, savior, creator of a new world. Others, on the other hand, like the characters in *Generation X* and in *Girlfriend* have decided to run away from the challenges and problems and the technologies. They have decided to protect themselves – in Coupland's case via irony and self-deprecation and fiction - and possibly develop themselves to the point where they reach transcendence, where suddenly all the answers become clear.
This is, I believe, the fundamental difference between the characters in *Microserfs* and the characters in the other two novels. The characters in *Microserfs* have decided to create the answers themselves through lines of code, while the other characters have decided to run away in the hopes of finding transcendence, in the hopes that they will reach an epiphany and suddenly be able to solve all of the problems that at present seem much too big to deal with. While all the characters are searching for a valid individual identity, some are doing so actively, while others are waiting for it to happen to them, they are waiting to be struck by lightning, rather than creating their own entity.

It is because of this seemingly mutually exclusive position, as both attempted savior and scared runaway, that Coupland seems to be able to tap into the mind of generation X so well. Coupland, like his characters, is unsure of his place. This is often both the best and worst part of his fiction. At its strongest, it is ruthless in its excavation of the fears, beliefs and desires of generation X, but at its worst it is muddled, unsure of whether it is preaching a postmodern gospel of redemptive faith or attempting to come to grips with the futility of a technologically over-ridden world bereft of meaning and in danger of giving in to entropy.

Coupland's is not, by any means, a traditional postmodernism rather, as is evidenced by his fiction, his is a postmodernism richly imbued with electronic and visual media It is a postmodernism founded upon the believe that art and literature should be for everyone, which while a postmodern belief is not very widely practiced I do not believe, that Coupland would see this as a failing, rather in his quest to understand generation X, I believe, he would see it as an essential element. It is, however, a postmodernism with a very particular, pronounced politics – designed not only to conscientise readers about generation X, but also to conscientise generation X about the problems they and the world are facing. And, while his novels examine some of the tools Coupland believes might work to solve some of these problems he never presumes to show them working. That is a step he cannot take, mainly I think, because, like the rest of generation X, he cannot bring himself to believe in the absence of proof and writing about possibilities does not count as proof. He is too influenced by postmodernism to subscribe to happy endings, but not completely convinced in the impossibility of such

an ending. The primary reason for this is, I believe, his nationality. As a Canadian, Coupland is not beholden to any one specific theoretical tradition, or rather he is more easily able to pick and choose from the masses of theory coming out of the US and Europe.

Coupland is attempting in his fiction a fine balancing act between these two differing ways of dealing with the postmodern world and the effect is sometimes brilliant, as with the accuracy of the definitions in *Generation X,* and sometimes weakened by a lack of clarity, resulting in the confusingly evangelical closing passages of G*irlfriend in a Coma.* It is, however, this same balancing act that resulted in the at times oxymoronic nature of apocalyptic optimism and it will, I believe, take a combination of both methods for humanity to avoid destroying the world, and instead take humanity to the next level. Generally speaking, however, Coupland's fiction walks the tightrope between these two very well and makes it clear to readers that, above all, generation X is confused, scared both of the technology that has given them what they have and of the lack of a coherent story with which to pull themselves together, and desperately attempting to discover its place in an increasingly complex and difficult world.

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