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# Trumppunk Resists Presidential Bunk Or, Updating Obscuring Mirrorshades with Revelatory Magnifying Glasses Enhances Seeing the Forces of Normalcy

**Marleen S. Barr**

A year into Trump's presidency, we've thoroughly established what a liar he is. . . . The man dwells in the loopy land of his own invention. The [Electoral College] landslide was a fiction.

The millions [of illegal ballots] were a mirage. . . . It's not merely that this emperor has no clothes. This emperor has no camouflage, at least none that's consistent and effective. Syllable by syllable, he traffics in fantasy. —Frank Bruni, "Donald Trump's Radical Honesty," *New York Times*, January 21, 2018, 3

Now, on with the show. —Bruce Sterling, 1986, "Preface," *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, New York: Ace Books, 1988, ix-xvi



Fig. 1: Trump caught red handed grabbing a pussy

I have defined feminist fabulation as feminist metafiction, fiction about patriarchal fictions which reveal patriarchal imperatives.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, I propose Trumppunk as a political metafiction, speculative fiction that resists normalizing Trump-authored fictions involving alternative truths—or, more directly stated, lies. Bruce Sterling explains that mirrorshades symbolize cyberpunk: “Mirrored sunglasses have been a Movement totem since the early days of ’82. . . . By hiding the eyes, mirrorshades prevent the forces of normalcy from realizing that one is crazed and possibly dangerous. They are the symbol of the sun-staring visionary” (xi). Trumppunk requires a newly relevant totem to signify the need clearly to see that the crazed and dangerous President Trump stands outside the forces of normalcy

My purpose is to explain that Trumppunk’s hyperbolic response is resistance literature which assuages becoming desensitized to the American President’s deviance. When Trump goes low, Trumppunk goes satirical in a fantastic vein. Or, for example, when Trump says “lock her up” in reference to Hillary Clinton, Trumppunk’s response is to relegate him to Phantom Zone incarceration.

Trump is an orange outrage reckless to the extent that he did not use protective sunglasses while directly staring at a solar eclipse. Trumppunk also eschews sunglasses. Trumppunk replaces mirrorshades with magnifying glasses which underscore that resistance to Trump necessitates vigilant awareness that the daily Trump show barrage is aberrant and abnormal, not routine and mundane. This new symbol, which denotes enlargement, stands for more clearly seeing the mandated reader response interpretation Frank Bruni calls “pretend”: “We’re supposed to pretend that he [Trump] gives a fig about decorum. Above all, we’re supposed to pretend that what he says today has any bearing on what he’ll say tomorrow, when what he said yesterday contradicted it. Our president lives in a world of sand and wind and make-believe . . . [a] shifting, swirling fantastical context. . . . I’m not that good at pretend” (Bruni A25). We can’t normalize Trump by complacently viewing him as a garden variety President. It is more appropriate to equate him with Stanislaw Lem’s ever changing *Star Diaries* protagonist Ijon Tichy. Trump’s smoke-and-mirror reality television show, a shifting sand and wind phantasmagoria, is akin to Vonda McIntyre’s speculative fiction novelette title *Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand*. Trumppunk resists becoming good at pretend.

Charles M. Blow seems to point to magnifying glasses becoming mirrorshades’ successor, a new signifier of textual resistance: “Trump sees it [the world] as if in a house of mirrors—everything reflecting some distorted version of him. His reality always seems to return to a kind of delusional narcissism” (Blow A27). Distorting magnifying glasses supersede mirrorshades in that they enlarge the reflected astigmatism Trump projects. Magnifying glasses effectively symbolize enlarging Trump’s distorted narcissistic reflections to facilitate seeing through their delusions. Magnifying glasses function as a preventative to becoming lost in the funhouse (John Barth’s term) of Trump’s enlarged house-of-mirrors self-obsessions.

Trump punk, then, turns Trump's distortions into even more magnified and exaggerated distortions, speculative fictions which encourage seeing his delusions more clearly as delusions. In this vein, Stephen Colbert's take on Trump's fantasy response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting epitomizes Trump punk. Trump ludicrously presents himself as a death defying hero: "But I think I really believe I'd run in there [the school] even if I didn't have a weapon" (CBSN), he proclaimed. Colbert magnifies Trump's delusional distortion by recasting him as a speculative fiction protagonist to exaggerate it further. The comedian begins with the mundane, the regular temporality of the rising sun: "At this point I go to bed every night believing there's nothing he [Trump] could say or do that could possibly surprise me. Then the sun comes up. And it happened again today" (Colbert). Then Colbert abruptly deviates from sunrise sunset predictability to go in for the speculative fiction transformation kill: "As long as you're living in a fantasy world at least make it interesting. . . . I would have run in and hit the shooter with my laser beam eyes then use my mind like Neo in *The Matrix* and fly away to space. Mar-a-Lago. Space-a-Lago" (Colbert). Colbert's monologue recasts Trump in terms of speculative fiction to shed light on his delusional narcissism. Refusing to play pretend along with Trump, Colbert uses speculative fiction to make the inanity of the President's hero story nonsense more visible—huger.

In contrast to Trump's business as usual cowardice, New Jersey Senator Cory Booker ran into a fire to save people. A potential future President Booker could conceivably manifest the heroism Trump falsely ascribes to himself. Booker would not, however, use laser beams or become Neo. By exaggerating and magnifying Trump's distortion, Colbert resists it and, hence, relegates it to abnormal Neverland. Or, in Colbert's words, "That's [Trump's hero fantasy] really stupid. But he said it and you can't say that he didn't say it. Can you? . . . So Trump's got all kinds of fantasies about what he'd say in that school" (Colbert). It is necessary to portray Trump as a Trump punk speculative fiction character because, in the age of alternative facts and fake news, it becomes possible to say that he didn't say it. Colbert's description of the sun is not science fictional, something that is fantastically "off" such as the scenario Isaac Asimov describes in "Nightfall." According to Colbert, the threat radiates from Trump, not from the comfortingly predictable sun. His use of Trump punk lets the sun shine in to illuminate fact—that is truth, justice, and the American way.

Trump punk replaces becoming desensitized with clearly seeing that Trump is transforming America into Absurdistan. This speculative fiction subgenre proclaims that those who oppose Trump are mad as hell and we are not going to take it anymore. Millions of mad as hell women responded to Trump's pussy grabbing by marching in Pussy Hats, turning themselves into literal pussy galore. Their ambulatory knitted pink wave magnified Trump's toxic misogyny for all to see. Sterling describes a similar creative and enhanced view: "With this intensity of vision comes strong imaginative concentration" (Sterling xiv). Or, in other words, magnification of Trump's absurdity is Trump punk. Mad as hell writers who won't take it anymore use strong imaginative concentration to create Trump punk's magnified visions.

Howard Jacobson, for example, turned his strong imaginative concentration into the first novel about Trump, a satirical fairy tale called, *Pussy: A Novel*. J.F. Garrard and Jen Frankel include alternative historical scenarios in *Trump: Utopia or Dystopia*. Trump punk is not flooding bookstores, however. Literary agent Jonny Geller explains that the "commercial view among publishers seems to be that people are living it [Trumpism] and haven't got the head space for

reading it. . . . It is a lack of courage and imagination” (Bilefsy C4). B Cubed Press shows no such lack of courage and imagination. B Cubed Press is the nexus of Trumppunk. Founder Bob Brown states that “B Cubed Press was founded in the throes of desperation, as, like so many Americans in 2016, I searched for an outlet for the anger and frustration that came from seeing the America I grew up with torn from my heart” (Brown). In *After the Orange* and the *Alternatives* series (which consists of *Alternative Truths*, *More Alternative Truths: Stories From the Resistance*, and several forthcoming titles),<sup>2</sup> Brown gathers a cadre of speculative fiction writers who are as angered and frustrated—that is to say mad as hell—as he is.

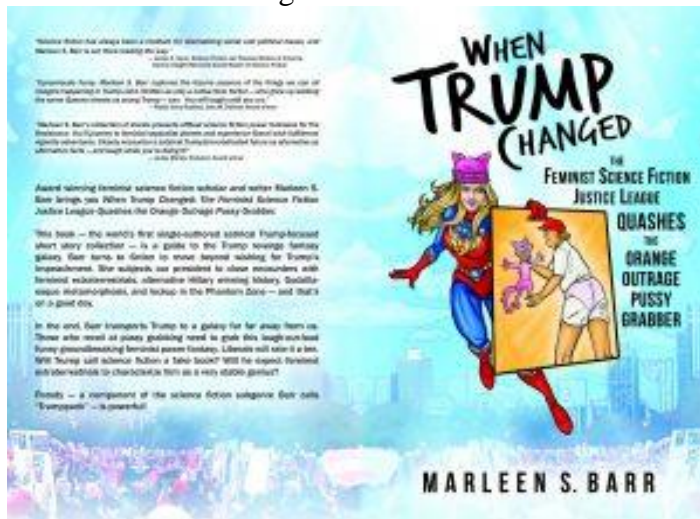


Fig. 2: Marleen S. Barr’s *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber* epitomizes Trumppunk

I am grateful that Brown has the courage to go against the grain of the publishing consensus Geller describes. B Cubed is the publisher of my own *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*, the first single-authored Trump story anthology. My Trumppunk stories serve as an outlet for the anger and frustration I felt after seeing my place of origin—Forest Hills, Queens, located a stone’s throw away from Trump’s childhood home in Jamaica Estates—torn from my heart. I am ashamed that our misogynistic abomination President comes from Queens. In response, I have authored a satirical guide to the Trump revenge fantasy galaxy. I subject Trump to close encounters with feminist extraterrestrials, alternative Hillary-winning history, Godzilla-esque male metamorphosis, lock up in the Phantom Zone—and that’s on a good day.

In the end, I transport Trump to a galaxy far away from us. Wearing my well-worn speculative fiction scholar hat, I can state with authority that I and my fellow B Cubed authors are creating Trumppunk. How might Trump respond to this new genre? Will he call speculative fiction a fake genre? Will he expect feminist extraterrestrials to characterize him as a very stable genius? Trumppunk is powerful!

Sterling notes that cyberpunk “favors ‘crammed’ purpose: rapid dizzying bursts of novel information, sensory overload that submerges the reader in the literary equivalent of the hard-rock ‘wall of sound’” (Sterling xiv-xv). The media daily blasts a barrage of news crammed with

Trumpian absurdity, a dizzying sensory overload about ever more sex, lies, and tweets. Trumppunk responds to the cyberpunk-like chaos Trump engenders. Speculative fiction writers know the difference between the literature they create and the reality they inhabit. Trump is often not clear about this distinction. Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Martin point out that he has a “lifelong habit of attempting to create and sell his own version of reality. Advisers say he continues to privately harbor a handful of conspiracy theories that have no grounding in fact. . . . He has claimed . . . Trump Tower . . . was several stories taller than it actually is” (Haberman and Martin A1). When Trump is rational, he substitutes lying for brain fog. Although Trump clearly knows the real height of his tower, he cheerfully prevaricates.

Trumpunk—metafictional fictions about Trump’s fictions—responds to Trump’s incessant lying and his inability sometimes to distinguish between the alternative reality he inhabits and the real world. Anderson Cooper and David Gergen have discussed Trump’s relation to alternative reality:

Gergen: The degree to which he [Trump] may be occasionally living in an alternative reality is very disturbing. . . . And if he’s not quite sure of what’s real and what’s not that has serious implications for the safety and security of the country.

Cooper: You think it’s possible he’s not sure what’s real and what’s not? . . .

Gergen: I think he may persuade himself of things that are true . . . even though it’s an *alternative* [italics mine] set of facts that people don’t share (Cooper).

Bob Brown’s *Alternatives* series echoes Gergen’s “alternative.” There presently is no alternative to living with the consequences of Trump’s lack of demarcation between fiction and fact. In response, Trumppunk writers hold a magnifying glass up to Trump’s routine delusional narcissistic funhouse mirror distorted reality. Their efforts guard against normalizing a behavior context positioned far far away from the real political business as usual we knew. The need for using magnifying glasses to safeguard against going through the looking glass is dire. Recognizing this need, journalists are creating texts which act in tandem with those of speculative fiction writers and comedians such as Colbert. Michelle Goldberg, for example, imagines a near future dystopian America: “If you think 2017 was bad, imagine an America without allies fighting another two-front war, this one involving nuclear weapons, under the leadership of the most hated president in modern history, while a torture apologist runs the CIA” (Goldberg 9). Bruni morphs Jared Kushner into Superman: “Why don’t we just stitch him [Kushner] in a red cape, put him in spandex, affix a stylized ‘S’ to his chest and be done with it? Super Jared has taken flight” (Bruni “Jared” A23). Blow equates the Republican Party with the Zombie apocalypse: “The pre-Trump Republican Party is dead; The zombie Trump party now lives in its stead, devoid of principle, feasting on fear and rage, foreign to moral framing” (Blow “Rise” A27). Trumppunk fiction writers, journalists, and comedians use speculative fiction to express their anger in relation to Trump.

The writers who contribute to the *Alternatives* series exemplify the nascent Trumppunk speculative fiction subgenre. K.G. Anderson, in “Patti 209,” for example, creates a near future society describing the implications of what happens when Trump’s desire to terminate Social Security and Medicare come to fruition. Janka Hobbs, in “Letters from the Heartland,” portrays

Trump's divisiveness and environmental disregard resulting in travel bans between different regions in the United States and people breeding deformed large animals. Susan Murrie Macdonald, in "As Prophesied of Old," positions an Excalibur wielding King Arthur as the only person who can defend a multi-ethnic gender-inclusive Great Britain from Trump's impending visit. Trumppunk speculative fiction practitioners create texts which use exaggeration to magnify Trump's absurdity and to proclaim that the force of normalcy is still with us. Their fiction facilitates clearly seeing the difference between truth and alternative truths. Trumppunk is Trump's Achilles heel, orange Kryptonite which makes him vulnerable to ridicule. Ridicule is a potent weapon. The force of Trumppunk resistance is not futile.

Now, on with the Trumppunk show.

**Bio: Marleen S. Barr** is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction and teaches English at the City University of New York. She has won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr is the author of *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*, and *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*. Barr has edited many anthologies and co-edited the science fiction issue of *PMLA*. She has published the novels *Oy Pioneer!* and *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir*. Her *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber* is the first single-authored Trump short story collection.

## Notes

1. See Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1992.
2. The forthcoming volumes in the B Cubed Press *Alternatives Series* include *Alternative Amendments*, *Alternative Theologies: Parables for a Modern World*, *Alternative Theologies II: What Are You People Thinking?* and *Alternative Truths: Endgame*.

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