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Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research (ISSN 2342-2009) is a Gold Open Access international peer-reviewed journal. Send submissions to our editors in chief at submissions@finfar.org. Book reviews, dissertation reviews, conference reports, and related queries should be sent to reviews@finfar.org.

Our journal provides an international forum for scholarly discussions on science-fiction and fantasy (SFF), including current debates within the field. We publish academic work on SFF literature, audiovisual art, games, and fan culture. Interdisciplinary perspectives are encouraged. In addition to peer-reviewed academic articles, Fafnir invites texts ranging from short overviews, essays, interviews, conference reports, and opinion pieces as well as book and dissertation reviews on any suitable subject.

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Editorial 2/2020

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Esko Suoranta, Laura E. Goodin, & Dennis Wilson Wise

We are pleased to welcome you to this issue of Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research.

In our prefatory, Hanna-Riikka Roine places both narrative and speculation squarely in the midst of possible strategies for making sense of – and thus responding to – a chaotic world in the grip of a pandemic, social unrest, and environmental crisis. She argues for recognising speculation as complementary to narrative as a strategy of “bringing the possible into the present”.

Excitingly, Fafnir was presented this year with a World Fantasy Award, becoming the first academic journal to be so honoured. We have included in this issue the text of the acceptance speech we delivered via Zoom (like everyone in this strange year) at the awards ceremony; like Dr. Roine’s prefatory, it stresses the power of both the practice and study of speculative fiction as tools for asking new questions as well as seeking new answers.

Each of the articles in this issue provides a fascinating example of the use of speculative fiction as a lens for examining and, ultimately, better understanding humanity’s struggles and successes. Juan David Cruz-Duarte’s “Ray Bradbury on Race and Segregation: The Case of ‘Way in the Middle of the Air’ and ‘The Other Foot’” looks at how these two Ray Bradbury stories engage with racial conflict and segregation in the American South of the Jim Crow era and what they say about Bradbury’s hopes for a truly post-racial society. Aino-Kaisa Koistinen similarly examines the idea of conflict with the Other, looking specifically at how emotions can be manipulated in such conflicts by the way stories are told – in “Framing War and the Nonhuman in Science-Fiction Television: The Affective Politics of V”.

Kevin Spicer applies a Lacanian approach to questions of what constitutes and determines personhood and subjectivity in “The AI Computer as Therapist: Using Lacan to Read AI and (All-Too-Human) Subjectivities in Science Fiction Stories by Bruce Sterling and Naomi Kritzer”. Using a different
philosophic approach, Katariina Kärkelä analyses how various ways of knowing are used and valued, and ultimately how they compete, in “Why is Reason a Vice? Empiricism, Rationalism, and Condemnation of Science in H. C. Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’”.

Amanda Landegren moves beyond the subjective to look at the intersection of place and identity, and how one can transform the other, in “How the Fantastic Spaces in Memoirs of a Survivor and Neverwhere Destabilise the Notion of a Uniform, Homogeneous Urban Identity”. Eleanor Drage also takes urban societies as a starting point for an examination of individual agency and intentional communities as instruments of justice in an impersonal, fundamentally repressive class system in “Paths Towards Multispecies Superintelligence and Socio-Economic Justice: Nicoletta Vallorani’s Il Cuore Finto di DR”.

We have a bumper crop of book reviews, with the reviewed works ranging from monster theory to children’s literature, time machines, studies of race, gender, and dis/ability, and a critical overview of the rich oeuvre of Canadian speculative fiction.

We also offer two conference reports: Filip Boratyn’s take on the London Science Fiction Research Community’s Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions, held in September, and Adam Edwards’s report on the CyberPunk Culture Conference, held in July (both online).

We complete this issue with a transcript of Kaisa Kortekallio’s engaging and intriguing lectio praecursoria of her PhD defense, “Reading Mutant Narratives”. She examines the role of bodies – of both readers and characters – in mutant narratives, and how such narratives can introduce estrangement into readers’ own body awareness; she argues that this, paradoxically, provokes a deeper engagement with their real-world physicality and, in turn, with the environment that sustains this physicality.

We hope this cornucopia of scholarship provides you with some excellent reading and reflection over the holidays. All of us at Fafnir wish you all the best for whatever celebrations are yours, and for a safer, brighter 2021.

Live long and prosper!
Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Esko Suoranta, and Laura E. Goodin, Editors-in-chief
Dennis Wise, Reviews Editor
Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research
On Speculation as a Strategy

Hanna-Riikka Roine

For a long time, fiction has held a place as one of the most important arenas of the possible. The current global situation, defined by the climate crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, radically challenges our ability to imagine what is possible on both personal and societal scales. At the same time, the importance of understanding imagination as a resource for striving towards a better world has, if anything, grown. In this essay, I discuss how to engage with the possible by drawing an analytical distinction between narrative and speculation as strategies in works of fiction. While the cultural power of narrative is widely recognised, I argue that the study of various instrumental attempts of bringing the possible into the present needs to recognise narrative and speculation as complementary.

Speculation and Narrative

Previous accounts of both narrative fiction in general and science fiction in particular have emphasised their close engagement with the possible. For Hanna Meretoja, a crucial dimension of the ethics of storytelling is the fact that “narratives both expand and diminish our sense of the possible” (3, emphasis original), and Fredric Jameson, in studying Utopia as a socio-economic subgenre of science fiction, argues that it is not the representation of radical alternatives that would be inherent to utopia as a form; it is “rather simply the imperative to imagine them” (416). While science fiction – and, more broadly, speculative fiction ¹ – has indeed been noted to require us to imagine alternatives and expansions, speculation itself has not received much focused attention, remaining ambiguous as a term (see Oziewicz). Furthermore, most studies focusing on our engagement with the possible give narrative the

¹ Due to the length of this essay I cannot discuss the genre categories in detail, so suffice it to say that here I am using the term “speculative fiction” to refer to a large category of modern storytelling that more or less systematically makes use of speculation as a strategy.
precedence over others: especially after the so-called narrative turn in humanities and social research, it has been widely established as the most fundamental human strategy for making sense of the world. In its temporal, sequential, and selective form, narrative creates order in our seemingly chaotic environment through, for instance, allowing us to “make meaning out of raw experiences ... to provide a means for traveling beyond the personal” (Shuman 1). In this purpose, narratives – especially those of personal experience – can be put to various uses both by individuals and in the public sphere, including social media, journalism, and politics, as the Finnish Dangers of Narrative project led by Maria Mäkelä has thoroughly demonstrated.2 The core difference between narrative and speculation, however, reveals why speculation is useful for studying engagement with the possible. In what follows, I look at them primarily as cognitive strategies instead of talking about them, for instance, as types of text, or as completed works of fiction.

Narrative bases its unique capacity for meaning-making on capturing and conveying human experience, as argued by cognitive narratologists. Monika Fludernik has prominently claimed that “there can ... be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level” (13), and David Herman’s definition of a narrative representation emphasises the way in which an event that disrupts the storyworld becomes meaningful through “the experience of what it is like for a particular individual to live through this disruption” (14).

Speculation, for its part, can exist independently of the articulation of human experience, although typically it collaborates with the forms of storytelling when communicated. Briefly put, it is a cognitive strategy for interpreting information to arrive at possible conclusions within the limits of a certain scenario or premise. Compared with predictions, forecasts, and prophesies, speculation is not about what will or can reasonably be argued to happen: it is about what is possible (or impossible).

To distinguish the elements of speculation, I propose the following trichotomy: premise, thought experiment, and medium. By premise I mean the very starting point that limits and guides what will be seen as possible (or impossible).3 It may be understood as a model of sorts, which can concern a multitude of situations both individual and universal. In works of fiction, these models often come across as worlds: as Brian McHale puts it, they are “scale-models” of reality that usually are, in some sense, systematically different from the one inhabited by readers. To be effective, though, the models cannot be static structures, but must be dynamically worked through to develop possible consequences of the premise (McHale 21; Roine 47). This working through is what I call thought experiment, drawing from earlier SF studies.4 The concrete

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2 For more on the project and its results concerning the various uses of narrative especially in the public sphere, see Mäkelä et al.

3 The premise can be likened with Darko Suvin’s idea of the novum, an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment, often summarised in the form of a question beginning with “what if” or “imagine if” (63).

4 As an example of earlier research, Gwyneth Jones has argued that science fiction should be seen as a form of thought experiment, where “the consequences of some or other nova are worked through” (4). This means that it is the scientific method, the logical working through of a particular premise, not the scientific accuracy, that is important to science fiction (see Roberts 10).
“materials” for carrying this process out constitute the *medium*, such as a novel. In this, a novel is used both as a means of constructing and sharing the thought experiment based on the premise (as provided by the author) and as a means of accessing and making sense of it (as accomplished by the reader).

Understanding speculation as a trichotomy of premise, thought experiment, and medium also helps distinguish between speculation and extrapolation. The latter figures in many of the classic definitions of science fiction, with the aim of distinguishing it from the genre of fantasy, such as in John W. Campbell’s claim that to be “science fiction, not fantasy, an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation from the known must be made” (Eschbach 91).

In extrapolation, the premise is constructed using “information that is already known” (*Cambridge Dictionary*) or the “facts that you have now and that are valid for one situation and supposing they will be valid for the new one” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*), whereas speculative premises do not need to consist of things that are known or valid for one situation. This is also why speculative fiction is sometimes said to require an “imaginative leap” of its reader (Roine 95).

Speculative premises are not detached from what we know now, however. With this I want to emphasise that speculation is not simply a leap towards the unknown, as it also engages us in an act of producing the possible, or, to paraphrase Jameson, making it imperative that we imagine the alternatives. In reaching towards a realm of infinite possibilities, speculation is constrained by the way in which its effectiveness is based on the creation of a manageable scenario and the process of working toward its possible conclusions. In doing so, speculation often functions as a political and normative device: from the birth of finance capital, such possibility-oriented thinking has been routinely tied to the outcomes of profit and loss (see uncertain commons). Not only does economics hold a privileged position in Western culture as the field for modeling the ways in which we construct our understanding of the future, as noted by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, but the development of market economy and imaginaries of future are closely linked, as sociologist Jens Beckert has argued.

In sum, speculation typically serves the purpose of making various possibilities, desirable and unpleasant alike, accessible – or imaginable – to us. It thus appears as an attempt to both explore and solidify the future. We may call this sort of practice the instrumental mode of speculation – to distinguish it from playful and open-ended daydreams and such. This mode can significantly affect our understanding of the spectrum of the possible, and it is by no means limited to economics, as the alliance between present states of affairs and possibility-oriented imaginaries is most fully realised – or materialised – in speculative fiction.

**Emotional Resonance versus the “Organizings” of Stories**

When it comes to works of fiction, the instrumental power of speculation, as it requires imagining possibilities and alternatives, is often seen as subordinate to that of narrative: for example, in emphasising that our “struggle against” the climate crisis (a story prompt itself!) is ultimately about stories. The two *Everything Change* anthologies are representative examples of this emphasis,
based on the Everything Change Climate Fiction Contest and the larger Imagination and Climate Futures Initiative, housed in the Center for Science and Imagination at the Arizona State University. The editors of the second volume, Angie Dell and Joey Eschrich, argue that both the contest and the initiative “operate on the belief that emotionally resonant stories are the most powerful tool we have” (loc. 114), broadening our experience of reality to encompass other lives, other minds – a view perhaps most influentially promoted by psychologist Keith Oatley. However, the stories’ focus on the experiential can also be a limitation. The emphasis on the “experiences of individual people coping with displacement, terror, loss, ennui, or glimmers of hope” (Dell and Eschrich loc. 114) easily eclipses the premise in limiting and guiding what is presented as possible in a specific fictional scenario. Instead of putting our trust solely in the emotional resonance of stories, we should also consider the premises on which works of fiction, which attempt to make the possible accessible to us, are constructed.

In her 2017 book Curated Stories, Sujatha Fernandes urges us to do just that. She traces the process by which development that contributed to “telling one’s story” became linked to discourses of participation, empowerment, and social capital during the late 1990s (31), and is particularly critical of the ways in which many purposefully curated story formulae – such as macro framings and epic narratives – can deny the expression of the experiences of the people using them (165–66). What I find most interesting about Fernandes’s critique of curated stories, though, is her call for “new kinds of organizings” that would open spaces for different kinds of tropes, subjectivities, storylines, and narratives, or “we will be constrained to stories that conform to what is acceptable in the narrow vision of the mainstream” (170). In my view, if we want to create works of fiction that not only resonate with us emotionally, but also have the potential to make us reflect on what is imagined as acceptable and conceivable, we must also consider the “organizings” that give rise to those stories. This is why it is useful to consider speculation as a strategy side by side with narrative.

The Weight of Light, another collection published by the Center for Science and the Imagination, this one in 2018, presents an interesting version of curated storytelling in fiction. It is based on the Solar Futures Narrative Hackathon, where the participants, working in teams, focused on four different scenarios for the future of solar energy in terms of two controlling variables: geography (urban versus rural) and size (large-scale facilities versus a small-scale, decentralised infrastructure). The groups also selected secondary variables to integrate into their work, including elements such as “aesthetics”, “ownership & governance”, and “waste & recycling”. Consequently, each group produced a short story set in the future, a work of visual art illustrating that story, and one or more non-fiction essays. Editors Joey Eschrich and Clark A. Miller lay out the overall premise in the opening text: “What would a world powered entirely by solar energy look like?” (loc. 64). A bit further on they add a narrative prompt to the premise: “what it will be like ... to live in the photon societies of the future?” (loc. 64). The more general speculative premise is thus narrowed to focus on the level of human experientiality, and the short stories appear as curated to give form to the possible experiences of living in a “photon society”, to make them more accessible to readers.
The effectiveness of the short stories in *The Weight of Light* is rooted not merely in their emotional resonance, but in our ability to reflect on their making. We are able to, for instance, trace the choices and paths the groups responsible for different scenarios took. This can be a critical reflection, too: although the premise laid out by the editors talks of “a world powered by solar energy”, all stories are deeply rooted in the North American context. Still, read as a whole the collection has potential to hand the reader tools to understand the meaning of the premise in drawing the possible to the present, and in showing the importance of different kinds of “organizings” for possibility-oriented imaginaries.

**The Present versus the Future**

Speculation is not only about opening the future up as a “design space” (loc. 157), as Eschrich and Miller argue in the introduction to *The Weight of Light*. The “organizings” that include creating a premise and working it through concern, to my mind, the present as much as the realm of possible.\(^5\) The instrumental mode of speculation is about what should be done *now* as this mode attempts to solidify the possibilities in order to profit from them. This is rarely the case when it comes to fiction: instead, speculation may help us to reflect upon the ways in which certain general principles outlined by a premise can be concretised. In other words, it can help us to think about the ways in which the “now” may connect with the possible.

In this, speculative fiction can be particularly empowering. In her think-piece arguing for the value of science fiction to young readers, Esther Jones aptly identifies *distance* as a central factor. This means that science fiction often places timely and relevant social, economic, and political issues in settings or times that offer critical distance, which “gives readers an avenue to grapple with complexity and use their imagination to consider different ways of managing social challenges”. In my view, this is true for speculative fiction in general, and in addition, critical distance can also simply be achieved because speculative fiction “offers no pretense of being factual or accurate” (Oziewicz). In this sense, the power of using speculation as a strategy while simultaneously making its constructedness\(^6\) clear is not so much about expanding our understanding of the possible, but about what we are doing in the present, both in the sense of concrete acts and acts of meaning-making.

This is also how I understand Ursula K. Le Guin’s famous characterisation of science fiction as “thought experiments” whose purpose is “not to predict the future ... but to describe reality, the present world”. Following Le Guin, this is not about limiting speculative fiction to the “displaced reflection of contemporary reality”, as McHale notes critically of Le Guin (23), but about inviting us to consider how these works are made and, especially, the myriad of ways in which the possible and the now can be linked.

\(^5\) It is also possible to speculate on the past, as the genre of alternate history clearly shows.

\(^6\) Making the constructedness clear is something that SF scholarship has emphasised for a long time, as summarised by Merja Polvinen in her description of science fiction as a genre that “depends on making fictions out of metaphors – on embedding metaphor in a fictional reality and letting it grow” (67–68); she adds that the “genre not only literalizes metaphors in this way, but also ... structures of narrative” (68).
This, consequently, endows speculative fiction with its ability of “allowing us to think of the world as otherwise as it currently is” (McHale 23; emphasis original). When scrutinising the premises, we may look at various assumptions underlying them, such as the role and nature of the actors in the scenario. Another interesting thing to look at concerns the culturally defined notions of the realistic and fantastic: which courses of action are deemed credible and which implausible? How do the “impossibilities” that are often seen as the marker of the fantastic as a genre come across as such?

Thus, recognising speculation as a strategy, complementary to that of narrative, offers an efficient tool for a critical examination – and then, perhaps, adjustment and change – of the ways in which speculative fiction can create and maintain our sense of what is possible (or impossible). Speculative fiction can help us to carry out both examination and expansion: it can alert us to the aspects of reality that remain beyond the scope of everyday perception as well as speculative premises that elude our awareness until a work of fiction makes them more accessible to us. These include both the premises that are invisible because we take their assumptions for granted and those that condition our experiences but are not made by us or for us, but by and for (for example) digital cognition. We need to continue exploring the arena opened by works of speculative fiction to try out and expand our imaginations. At the same time, we must investigate how speculative fiction allows us to create a break in the ways in which we imagine possibilities and alternatives, and thus to reflect on them.

**Biography:** Hanna-Riikka Roine (PhD, literary studies) works as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow funded by the Academy of Finland at the Tampere University and as an affiliated researcher in the consortium *Instrumental Narratives*. Her current research explores the ways in which our entanglement with digital media affects, guides, and shapes our engagement with the possible. Roine has published articles, for instance, on agencies of storytelling in digital environments, on the ways in which narratological inquiry may be extended towards the machines of computational media, and on narrativity of digital RPGs. She has also contributed to the study of the rhetoric of contemporary speculative fiction and worked as the editor-in-chief of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*.

**Works Cited**


Fafnir Becomes First Academic Journal to Win a World Fantasy Award

At the start of November, Fafnir’s editors-in-chief had the very great honour of accepting a World Fantasy Award, one of the leading international awards in speculative fiction. The awards are bestowed each year by the committee of the World Fantasy Convention; Fafnir won in the category for non-professionally (that is, non-commercially) published or produced works. Below is the acceptance speech that Fafnir’s editors gave at the ceremony.

We’re thrilled to be accepting this award, the first World Fantasy Award ever given to an academic journal, and we congratulate our fellow nominees. The award validates the importance of open-access speculative fiction scholarship as a rich contribution to the discourse about who we are as human beings and who we want to be.

Fafnir has been publishing for only six years, and it’s been the work of many talented people. We’d like to first mention the other two team members who make Fafnir possible. Dr. Dennis Wise, our reviews editor, MLA guru, and Swiss army knife of academic editors, has built Fafnir’s book-review section up from about three reviews per year to over 15, keeping scholars up to date on recent work in the field; worked to get Fafnir accepted into the Directory of Open-Access Journals; and initiated work on our style sheet, our recent journal redesign, and our newly liberalised copyright policy.

Our managing editor, Ms. Jaana Hakala, is similarly multitalented: she modestly characterises her wizardry as “just wrapping whatever you give to me in as nice a package as I can with the tools I have”, but that entails typesetting, layout, document management, and website management for each issue, as well as serving as an abundant font of institutional memory. Their skills and professionalism are crucial to producing a quality journal.

We’d like to thank all the other people who have made this very great honour possible: the board and members of our publisher, the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research; the editors-in-chief who have served before us and built Fafnir from the ground up; the authors who send us their
research; the peer reviewers who graciously donate their time and expertise to advance the field of speculative-fiction research; our readers; the World Fantasy Award judges; and the broader speculative-fiction community.

Meillä on kunnia jatkaa työtämme osana tätä eloisaan yhteisöä ja olla mukana näyttämässä maailmalle, miten ajatella uusia ajatuksia, uneksidä uusia unelmiä ja rakentaa uusia tulevaisuuksia.

Vi är hedrade att fortsätta vårt arbete med denna livfulla gemenskap för att visa världen hur man tänker nya tankar, drömmar nya drömmar och bygger upp nya framtidsutsikter.

We are honoured to continue our work with this vibrant community as we all show the world how to think new thoughts, dream new dreams, and build new futures.

Kiitos, tack, thank you.
Ray Bradbury on Race and Segregation: The Case of “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot”

Juan David Cruz-Duarte

Abstract: This article analyses two stories by Ray Bradbury, “Way in the Middle of the Air” (1950) and “The Other Foot” (1951), examining the author’s depiction of racial conflict and segregation in the US South and in an imaginary Martian town populated by African Americans. While “Way in the Middle of the Air” seems to champion a separationist approach to racial conflict, “The Other Foot” articulates the author’s hope for the formation of a post-racial society, in which black and white citizens will be able to live in harmony, as equals. Reading these stories in relation to each other enriches understanding of Bradbury’s take on race relationships in the United States, and of racial tensions in the American South during the Jim Crow era.

Keywords: Ray Bradbury, segregation, Jim Crow, utopia, science fiction, Mars.

Ray Bradbury published his short story “Way in the Middle of the Air” in the magazine Other Worlds in 1950. Later that year, this story was republished in The Martian Chronicles.1 “The Other Foot”, a sequel to “Way in the Middle of the Air”, was published in 1951 in The Illustrated Man. Both stories deal with racial prejudice and segregation.2 The fact that Bradbury deals with these topics

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1 This short story has been deleted from recent editions of The Martian Chronicles, including the 2001 Doubleday Science Fiction and the 2006 William Morrow/Harper Collins.
2 Bradbury also explored the subject of racial tensions in America in his short story “The Big Black and White Game” (1945). According to Nancy Ann Watanabe, this short story, which could not be classified within the genres of fantasy or science fiction, “depicts segregation by veiling it thematically in a plot centered on the traditional American game of baseball”.
in his fiction, especially at a time when segregation was such a controversial subject in the United States, is outstanding; it is particularly relevant that in these stories Bradbury does not use the figure of the alien to deal with the issue of race. This common practice, which was prominent during the time in which Bradbury’s stories were published, can be explained by the fact that, as Patricia Monk argues, as a class, the “aliens of science fiction constitute an exemplum of the other at its most extreme” (xiii). Bradbury’s decision to neither displace nor disguise the issue of race by using the figure of the alien is what urges Isaiah Lavender to argue that “Bradbury is one of the very few writers in sf who dared to consider the effects and consequences of race in America at a time when racism was largely sanctioned by the culture” (98). In this paper, I will demonstrate that “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot” depict, in different ways, an escape from racism and segregation, and imagine a solution to these problems. I will also demonstrate that the two stories (far from being shallow escapist fantasies) are deeply rooted in the historical and social context in which they were written and published. Finally, I will argue that these texts should be read in conversation with each other to truly expand an understanding of Bradbury’s take on the subjects of racism and segregation in the United States.

“Way in the Middle of the Air” approaches the subject of racism and segregation by seemingly embracing the separationist impulse that inspired the founders of the Back-to-Africa (or Black Zionism) movement in the 19th century. “The Other Foot”, in contrast, imagines (or rather suggests) the beginning of a utopian society: not a particularly advanced one in terms of technology, but utopian in its post-racial, post-segregated nature. In that sense, “The Other Foot” is, by far, the most optimistic of these stories.

Bradbury published “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot” when segregation was still legal in the United States. The system of laws and practices that facilitated and enforced segregation in the US (especially in the South) is commonly known as Jim Crow. Jim Crow was a racial caste system, enforced through segregationist laws and social practices, that operated in several of the Southern states of the US (but also in states located in other regions of the nation) from 1877 to the mid-1960s. Under this system, areas of activity such as public spaces, public education and private businesses were strictly segregated by race.

At the time that Bradbury published The Martian Chronicles and The Illustrated Man, black men and women in America who broke the rules associated with Jim Crow (for example, trying to eat at a restaurant for white people only, sitting at the front of the bus, or trying to enroll in white schools)

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3 In Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Post-modernism, Jenny Wolmark arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that, in SF texts, the “alien has been used to represent Otherness” (qtd. in DeGraw 6).
4 The Back-to-Africa movement, also known as Black Zionism, emerged in the United States during the 19th century, influencing social movements such as the Nation of Islam. Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the idea of African Americans returning to Africa struggled to gain popularity among the country’s African American citizens. Some attempts at “returning” to Africa, however, were made, with varying degrees of success.
5 Although segregation was more prominent in the South, it was a national problem. Prior to 1954, segregation in public education was either optional or limited in New Mexico, Kansas, Arizona, and Wyoming, and several states in the West, Midwest, and North lacked any legislation either legitimising or prohibiting segregation in public education.
were often punished by law enforcement or terrorised by their white neighbors. Jim Crow did not end until 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. The next year, the Voting Rights Act was signed; this greatly benefited minorities, whose voting rights had been threatened by reactionary local politicians. In “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot”, Bradbury renders a critique of segregation and Jim Crow laws and practices. This is remarkable, considering that the stories were published during a historical moment when segregation was still enforced and defended not only by Southern segregationist politicians (such as the members of the short-lived States’ Rights Democratic Party, usually referred to as the “Dixiecrats”), but also by a considerable part of the South’s population.

The fact that segregation was such a sensitive and controversial issue at the time that Bradbury published “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot” could explain why it was so unusual for mainstream science-fiction writers of the time to deal with the topic of race in a direct manner. In fact, during the 1950s, most of the works of American science fiction that dealt with issues such as race and segregation did so in an indirect or metaphorical manner. As discussed above, the figure of the alien was often used as a metaphor for the racial other. This practice is still common, and recent works of science fiction such as Neill Blomkamp’s film *District 9* (2009) draw clear parallels between the figure of the alien and the “racial other”. This is why Lavender argues that “Way in the Middle of the Air” is unique in ‘mainstream’ sf in its scathing criticism of American racism. It’s a critique of American racism which does not displace race through alien beings or replace American culture with a pretend culture. In other words, it is a direct extrapolation of the existing relation between the races in the 1950s.

Approaching the issue of race in a metaphorical way has been a trademark of American SF since its earliest manifestations. Sharon DeGraw points out that, in the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mars often stands in for “Western America” while the Indians are “disguised as Martians” (5). On the other hand, Masiki states:

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6 According to Greenpeace, “in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a key piece of the Voting Rights Act that required states with a history of discrimination to get approval of any changes to voting rules that would result in racial discrimination”.

7 The States’ Rights Democratic Party was founded by dissatisfied segregationists Democrats in 1948. This party was founded after President Harry S. Truman (a Democrat himself) ordered the integration of the military in 1948. The so-called “Dixiecrats” were successful in gaining control over several Southern states. As the Democratic and Republican parties switched sides regarding racial issues, former “Dixiecrats” like Strom Thurmond (who ran as the States’ Rights Democratic Party presidential candidate in 1948) left the Democratic Party to join the Republicans.

8 John G. Russell writes, “Often presented as a subtext of and for the allegorical exploration of alterity/alienation, race and racialist thinking infuse science fiction in both its literary and cinematic manifestations” (256).
Since the advent of the genre, Euro-American science fiction writers have typically dealt with the history of US racism by either excluding people of African descent from their narratives, imagining a color-blind future in which racial tension among humans does not exist, using robots and extraterrestrials as symbols for people of African descent, or imagining a world in which all non-Europeans are eliminated through genocide. (30)

A clear example of this metaphorical way of approaching issues of race in 1950s American SF is the comic book Judgment Day (1953), by writer Al Feldstein and artist Joe Orlando. In Judgment Day, Tarlton, a human astronaut representing the Galactic Republic, visits a planet called Cybrinia. The purpose of his trip is to decide whether Cybrinia should be admitted to the Galactic Republic. This planet is populated by two “races” of robots: blue and orange. Even though all robots are equally designed and operate in exactly the same way, the astronaut soon learns that this society is segregated, with orange robots enjoying more rights and privileges than their blue counterparts. Based on this fact, Tarlton ultimately decides to deny Cybrinia a place in the Galactic Republic. When asked by his guide – an orange robot – if there is hope for Cybrinia to become part of the Republic in the future, the astronaut answers: “Of course there’s hope for you, my friend. For a while, on Earth, it looked like there was no hope! But when mankind on Earth learned to live together, real progress then began. The Universe was suddenly ours” (7). Tarlton tells his guide that when the robots in Cybrinia learn to live together, the universe will be theirs too. Back in his ship, the astronaut removes his helmet, and the reader finally sees that he is a black man. This story is, of course, a clear metaphor for segregation in the Jim Crow era.

Judgment Day was published by EC Comics, a company whose founder, Max Gaines, continually fought the censorship of the Comics Code Authority. This comic dealt with issues such as prejudice and segregation at a moment in which these topics were particularly controversial in the US. Although the authors of this comic decided to deal with the subject of segregation through (as Lavender would put it) a “pretend culture” of alien robots, EC Comics did suffer some backlash after publishing Judgment Day. Max Gaines had difficulty republishing Judgment Day in 1956. Judge Charles Murphy, who was the Comics Code Administrator at the time, wanted EC to change the astronaut from a black man to a white man. Gaines had to threaten Murphy with suing him in order to publish an unmodified version of the story. Clearly, even those authors that talked about race in an indirect or metaphorical way had a hard time publishing and distributing their work during this complex historical period.

Even though exploring topics such as race and segregation in a metaphorical way took courage and determination on the part of authors such as Feldstein and Orlando, this practice has also had its own limitations and shortcomings. DeGraw points out:
On one level, an extraterrestrial Other is a welcome replacement for terrestrial othering focused on ethnicity, race, nationality, or gender ... the existence of an alien Other can foreground the unity of the human race. Yet, such a fictional transformation also suppresses the importance of race to human society. The real prejudice and oppression experienced by many groups is eclipsed, and any explicit discussion of race is effectively forestalled. (16)

The fact that Bradbury doesn’t shy away from directly addressing the subjects of race and segregation in the South is notable, precisely because, by doing so, the author does not hide or disguise the “real prejudice and oppression” suffered by African Americans.

The Case of “Way in the Middle of the Air”

In “Way in the Middle of the Air”, a group of African American men and women living in a Southern town in the USA are preparing to board a rocket that will take them to Mars, where they intend to begin a new life. While the soon-to-be astronauts walk in front of a hardware store, Samuel Teece, the owner, insults them repeatedly. It becomes evident that Teece does not want to let these people go. First, he tries to stop a man called Belter, arguing that the man owes him money. The African Americans marching alongside Belter quickly collect the necessary money to pay his debt and give it to the angry and frustrated Teece. Soon after, Teece tries to stop a young man called Silly, his employee. Teece reminds him of the contract that he has signed (although Silly denies having done so), hoping that this will force the young man to stay and work in the store. But Teece’s grandfather feels sorry for Silly, and he steps in for the young man, stating that he will take his place in Teece’s shop. When Teece seems reluctant to accept this new deal, several white men in the store intervene. Intimidated, Teece eventually lets the young man go. When Silly is leaving, he asks his former boss what will he do at night. Silly’s words suggest that some of Teece’s customary nighttime activities include terrorising, and perhaps even lynching, local black people with the help of his gang of fellow white supremacists (a clear reference to the KKK). An enraged Teece and his grandfather (who says that he would “like a drive”) take their vehicle and chase the group, but they are unable to catch up with them. After having an accident, Teece and his grandfather walk back to town. The men in the hardware store see the rockets take off. The proud and foolish Teece, who refuses to witness this unusual spectacle, finds a sense of comfort in the fact that Silly called him “mister” until the end.

According to Wayne Johnson, considering the political and social changes that were taking place in 1950, Jim Crow segregation would have been very unlikely to last for more than five decades (“Way in the Middle of the Air” takes place in 2003). In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed segregated public schools at the state level. Ten years later, the Civil Rights Act banned all state and local laws that enforced segregation. Nevertheless, it is clear that when writing “Way in the Middle of the Air”, Bradbury was aware of the progress made by the Civil Rights Movement in its fight for racial equality. In fact, one of the white characters in the story asks why African Americans want to leave the planet at a time when things seem to be getting better for them: “I can’t
figure why they left now. With things lookin’ up ... every day they got more rights .... Here’s the poll tax gone, and more and more states passin’ anti-lynchin’ bills, and all kinds of equal rights .... They make almost as good money as a white man, but there they go.” Bradbury seems to be telling the reader that these advances and achievements are insufficient; they might be a good start, but they are certainly not enough. The African American people in this story are leaving for Mars because living in the conditions of the segregated US South is unfair, dangerous, humiliating, and undesirable. Knowing that progress is being made in the fight for racial equality, while understanding that this progress is still insufficient for the African American community, is one of the most progressive aspects of the story.

Lavender argues that this story “relates to otherhood, because it raises awareness of the intolerance of racism” (100). This intolerance will be mostly exemplified by the character of Teece, a white supremacist. According to Lavender, “Way in the Middle of the Air” intends to provide a solution to the color line, which proves the author’s desire and political commitment to eliminate racism. In Lavender’s own words:

Providing an escape from the problem of the color line, Bradbury seems to indicate that whites and blacks cannot coexist with a cultural hierarchy established through physical differences and the complete domination of others. The story is meant to be an ironic solution to the color line. I think this shows Bradbury’s desire and political commitment to eliminate racism by promoting effective social justice, even if it is only imaginary. (100)

In this story, Teece is a white Southern segregationist who discriminates against, and even terrorises, the black men and women of his town, while economically profiting from their labor. Teece’s interaction with Silly makes it clear that the white man does indeed employ black men, and profits from their work. The hypocrisy of the social and economic system of the segregated South becomes clear in this interaction. Teece would not sit at the same table with Belter or Silly; he might even enjoy terrorising them and their families at night, but he is more than willing to interact with these black men when he can get something from them: the cheap labor that they might perform for his personal benefit.

In his blog entry “Black People on Mars: Race and Ray Bradbury” (2012), author Phenderson Djèlí Clark highlights some of the shortcomings of Bradbury’s short story. These include the racist description of Silly and the use of the term “pickaninnies” in the story. However, Clark’s main critique of “Way in the Middle of the Air” is the fact that the story is told from the perspective of the white Southerners, which does not allow for the black characters to express their reasons for leaving the planet. Masiki describes “Way in the Middle of the Air” as “an afrofuturist exodus narrative” that “explores how African American mass emigration to Mars psychologically impacts white America” (31). This impact on the white characters is a major focus of the story. But even though the story is told from the point of view of the white characters (and focuses on how the migration affects them as a community and as individuals), this does not negate the agency of the African American characters in the story (they are, after all, leaving the planet).
Clark makes a good point about the lack of a strong African American voice in the story; nevertheless, as Clark himself suggests, perhaps Bradbury “wanted to convey the perspective of Southern whites if only to highlight the absurdity of their racism”. The absurdity mentioned by Clark is the contradictory reaction of white Southern segregationists when they witness the African American exodus that is about to take place. As Clark puts it, “the very whites who uphold segregation, at the same time are angered by the blacks leaving”. Teece embodies this absurdity in a radical way. He needs black men because he exploits them; he needs the cheap labor that only they provide. He also needs them because he needs someone to terrorise, to humiliate and insult, to feel superior to. In a way, Teece’s rage is, at least to him, justified, since, as Masiki argues, “Bradbury frames African Americans and their culture as national property, as capital whose potential loss is a threat to both the economic integrity of the state and the dialectical nature of white identity” (32).

For Teece, African Americans represent cheap labor, resources, and economic wellbeing. But, even if he ignores it, they are also essential for upholding his own idea of whiteness; that is, they are a central part of Teece’s understanding of his own self, his own value, his individual, social, and racial superiority.

Delving into the logic of white supremacy, Clark asks, “What is the worth of whiteness if it has no one against which to claim superiority?” That is why, at the end of “Way in the Middle of the Air”, white characters seem to be perplexed and paralysed. After all, they are, as Clark would put it, “left to grapple with this new existence, as they face the gaping emptiness – both physical and psychological – left in the wake of the black diaspora”. But does this all mean that “Way in the Middle of the Air”, in its critique of segregation and racism, embraces the separationist logic of both white supremacists and followers of the Back-to-Africa movement? If Bradbury had never published “The Other Foot”, the answer to this question would be yes. But when reading “Way in the Middle of the Air” in relationship to its sequel, it becomes evident that Bradbury’s take on the subjects of race and segregation is certainly more nuanced than that.

At first glance, in “Way in the Middle of the Air” Bradbury seems to suggest that a pacifist, integrationist approach to racial conflict in the United States might be insufficient. On the other hand, the author seems to believe that, in the context of the urgent struggle for racial equality, the timid help of sympathetic and peaceful white “allies” is always insufficient, and that relevant social change can only be achieved by the efforts of the African American community. This is why Teece’s grandfather cannot save Silly and Belter on his own. That is why the entire African American community is instrumental in helping Belter escape. In this story, as in the real story of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans never needed a white savior as much as they needed each other. But if Bradbury really advocated for a separation of the races as a means of solving all the social and political conflicts associated to racism, he would not only be falling in with the logic of both white segregationists and black supporters of “Black Zionism”, he would also be opposing the views of the majority of the African American people at the time. As Eric J. Sundquist argues, even though “some African Americans have wished for territorial sovereignty abroad or at home, the vast majority have desired something simpler” (100). As Sundquist argues,
with the exception of certain strains of Afrocentrism or periodic calls, by both blacks and whites, for black colonization in Africa or elsewhere, the Promised Land envisioned by African Americans has typically been an amalgam of emancipation, equal rights, political representation, and economic justice. “If the Afro-American does not find his salvation in the United States,” said Harold Cruse, “he will find it nowhere.” If blacks are to achieve the Promised Land, that is to say, they will have to do so in the Egypt of America. (101)

But even though it is true that the majority of African American activists have wished and advocated for that “amalgam of emancipation, equal rights, political representation, and economic justice”, it is also true that, as Trent Masiki argues, “African Americans have, from the nineteenth century to the present, theorized and practiced emigration as a response to US racism and racial terror” (25). This was particularly true during the Great Migration. In fact, Masiki believes that “Way in the Middle of the Air” “is Bradbury’s meditation on the relationship between the Great Migration and Pan-African internationalism in the postwar era” (31). If the exodus to Mars is a reflection of the Great Migration, the possible collaboration between African Americans and Africans in building their rockets could be interpreted, as Masiki explains, as a reflection of the author’s anxieties regarding the interactions between global communism and African American activism. In Masiki’s words, Bradbury’s short story “confirms white fears of African American communism. The red planet Mars stands for the very real threat of African Americans aligning themselves with the red star of the Soviet Union in the postwar era” (37). What if African Americans found this Egypt, this “promised land”, neither in America nor in Africa, nor even on Earth, but on Mars? What if they found social justice and peace? Not through communism or capitalism, but through a system of their own? And what would happen if white people tried to enter this promised land, after it had been taken by African Americans? How would they react to this unwanted intrusion? Does Bradbury’s fiction really advocate for separation of the races as a means for addressing racism and violence? These questions are all addressed in “The Other Foot”, Bradbury’s sequel to “Way in the Middle of the Air”.

The Case of “The Other Foot”

Critics have often read The Martian Chronicles, The Illustrated Man, and Fahrenheit 451 (1953) in relation to the historical context of McCarthyism and the global tensions that defined the Cold War. Christopher Bundrick states that The Martian Chronicles is characterised by the “nearly constant threat of nuclear holocaust” (17). But the influence of the Civil Rights Movement in the works of Ray Bradbury is a subject that has not been studied in depth. It is evident that this series of social and political struggles and achievements influenced several of Bradbury’s works, even though only a few critics have focused on this aspect of his fiction. Ylagan’s essay “Why Do The Heavens Beckon Us? Revisiting Constructions of Home and Identity in Ray Bradbury’s

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9 Between 1916 and 1970, around six million African Americans relocated from the rural South to urban centers in America’s Northeast, Midwest, and West in what has become known as the Great Migration.
The Martian Chronicles”, which develops a postcolonial reading of The Martian Chronicles and studies the idea of home in the book, does not mention “Way in the Middle of the Air” and makes no reference to the racial tensions articulated in Bradbury’s text. This suggests the need to further read and analyse the stories studied in this paper to gain a better understanding of how the Civil Rights Movement both informed and inspired Bradbury’s work.

According to Reid,

> While critics have noted that the book [The Illustrated Man] can be analyzed in the historical context of McCarthyism and the Cold War, a review of what was happening in the Civil Rights movement of this time can provide another kind of historical context that is not always considered in relation to science fiction because of the presumption of “whiteness” being the norm. (48–49)

“The Other Foot” might be one of the most compelling stories in The Illustrated Man. While “Way in the Middle of the Air” seems to advocate for the separation of the races as a way of putting an end to racial conflict, “The Other Foot” ends on a more optimistic note, suggesting the possibility of the rise of a post-racial society, in which blacks and whites can live in harmony and, more importantly, as equals.

In “The Other Foot” a community of African Americans living in a small Martian town prepare to receive a rocket that is coming from Earth. The people from this community have not had any contact with Earth in 20 years. Willie Johnson, a man whose parents had been killed by white supremacists in the segregated fictional town of Greenwater, Alabama, goes around town preparing for the landing of the rocket. As he assumes that the ship’s crew will be white, Johnson convinces many of his friends to prepare the town for receiving the white astronauts by segregating urban spaces that had not been segregated before. He even carries a weapon and a piece of rope, suggesting that he is considering the idea of lynching the rocket’s crew. Hattie Johnson, Willie’s wife, opposes his extreme ideas and plays an important role in the story, acting as a clever mediator in the exchange between the crowd and the spaceship’s pilot. When the rocket finally lands an old white man comes out of the ship; he is received by the puzzled and hostile crowd led by Johnson. The white man is – or pretends to be – oblivious to the fact that his life is in danger; he gives a brief speech in which he informs the citizens of the small Martian town of the fact that, after they left Earth, World War III started in the planet; this war led to the destruction of all of the planet’s cities. The refugee asks his audience to accept him and his fellow survivors, and offers to serve them, as they once served white people back on Earth. He concludes his brief speech with a recognition of historical guilt and pleading for mercy.

The astronaut carries pictures of the destroyed Earth. When Johnson realises that all the places where his parents suffered segregation and violence have disappeared, he tells the astronaut that he and his people will not have to work for the town’s black citizens. After saying this, he finally drops the rope. The locals dismantle all the segregationist signs that they had erected in preparation for the arrival of white people. Hattie expresses her joy, as she sees this moment as “a new start for everyone,” and Johnson says that the white man “has no home, just like we didn’t have one for so long. Now everything’s even. We can start all over again, on the same level” (312).
if he had seen the white man, Johnson answers: “Yes sir .... Seems like for the first time today I really seen the white man – I really seen him clear” (313). These words highlight the fact that Johnson has recognised the white man as a fellow human being, and perhaps has even seen something of himself in the desperate refugee.

In the story, Hattie’s fear that the white astronaut will be lynched is not unjustified. Bradbury’s story is called “The Other Foot”, precisely, because it is a story that asks what would happen if the “boot” of racial inequality in the 1950s United States were suddenly on “the other foot”. In other words, what would happen if the ones with power to Lynch, segregate, and exploit were the African Americans, instead of the white Americans. If this were the case, Bradbury seems to ask, would African Americans – who at the time were haunted by past and present lynching, performed by, among others, members of the Ku Klux Klan – exploit and terrorise the white minority? Would they Lynch those whites who caused social unrest while fighting for their rights? If the boot was “on the other foot”, would the African American community treat whites in the same unjust way in which they had been treated for so long? Naturally, this dystopian scenario would not be the end of racism and segregation, only its reversal.

Characters such as Hattie Johnson, Mr. Brown, and the mayor of the Martian town seem to be willing to welcome the white man. Lavender writes, “Speaking through Hattie, Bradbury reveals his compassion for all of humanity” (102). Hattie’s empathy and compassion are so great that she is able to forgive her former oppressors. In contrast, Johnson cannot forgive the men who lynched his father and shot his mother, just as he cannot forgive the exploitation of his people and the segregation that he had experienced. He would prefer not to have to interact with white people at all; this becomes evident when he asks his wife: “What right they got coming up here so late?” (301). But because a white man is coming to town whether he likes it or not, Johnson does not miss the chance to highlight the fact that the “shoe is on the other foot now”, and since that is indeed the case, he tells Hattie: “We’ll see who gets laws passed against him, who gets lynched, who rides the back of streetcars, who gets segregated in shows. We’ll just wait and see” (301). Johnson sees this as a chance for historical, social, and individual revenge.

But Johnson is taken by surprise when the white refugee admits historical guilt in the name of his people and offers to work for the black population in exchange for a place in their society. The brief speech of the white refugee, and Johnson’s realisation that all the places and people that he associated with his people’s – and in particular to his family’s – history of discrimination and victimisation have disappeared in the war, dissuade him from carrying out his initially hostile intentions, and ultimately change his attitude towards the old man and the other white refugees who will eventually follow him to Mars. There is “nothing of it left to hate .... Nothing but some alien people in a rocket, people who might shine his shoes and ride in the back of trolleys or sit far up in midnight theaters” (312). Johnson’s hatred has lost its target; the earthly things and institutions that he hated are no more. Vengeance is no longer an option. The past has been, in a certain way, “abolished”. He can finally begin a personal process of forgiveness and healing. Thus his answer to the refugee’s offer of working the land, cleaning their houses, and shining their shoes, is simply: “You won’t have to do that” (312). It is relevant to mention that
Johnson can only forgive the white race when this astronaut, in the name of all his fellows, recognises the role played by his people in the historical atrocities performed against black people in the past, and shows a sincere will to serve them.

At the end of the story, Johnson tells his children that he has seen the white man for the first time. What Johnson means is that he has been able to “see” the white man as an equal; he has finally been able to see him as human being, and not only as a brutal oppressor. Ylagan writes, “A postcolonial reading of The Martian Chronicles might posit, for example, that instead of being mere interplanetary colonizers, Earthlings are victims of a diaspora that is clearly physical, geographical, and even emotional” (38). This statement could apply equally to both “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot”. Seeing the white man in this position of complete vulnerability (as a fellow refugee, as part of the greater human diaspora) allows Johnson to see him as an equal. Johnson knows that the white man has “no home, just like we didn’t have one for so long” (38). The idea of looking for a new home, and the idea of finding and protecting that home, is central to both “Way in the Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot”. This is not strange, because, as Ylagan argues, since “its earliest days, science fiction has always been a vehicle where notions of home and homecoming were portrayed and problematized” (30). In “The Other Foot”, it is precisely the condition of “homelessness” suffered by the surviving whites, that state of total vulnerability, that allows Johnson to experience pity and forgive the historical sins of white people. After whites become exiles and refugees, Johnson states, “Now everything’s even.” And because everything is even, he says, “We can start all over again, on the same level” (30). This statement suggest that a new age of racial equality, social justice, and true peace is on the horizon. Utopia is coming.

This ending might seem naïve, and yet, considering the state of racial tensions in America in the early 1950s, Bradbury’s story was surely shocking at the time of its publication. Reid writes, “While the positive ending of the story may be considered overly idealistic for some readers, Bradbury’s creation of a future Mars settled by African Americans is an image of ‘blackness,’ of an Africanist presence in the future, that is striking for the time in which he wrote the story” (50). More importantly, by articulating a possible end to segregation and racial conflict, Bradbury’s story is radical and optimistic.

Clark points out that “The Other Foot” is also at fault in some aspects of its depiction of the racial struggle in America. He criticises the use of the “angry black man” stereotype, personified by the character of Willie Johnson. As Clark points out, the fact that “the one person who had a counter-opinion” was constructed as such a stereotype is, to say the least, problematic. Clark also criticises the story’s naïve happy ending, and imagines an alternate ending in which the African American settlers living on Mars decide to send the white astronaut “home empty-handed” – an ending in which they decide that “they could forgive but never forget”. Clark states that this alternative ending “would have been something quite daring – quite Bradbury in fact – forcing readers to think perhaps how those on the receiving end of hatred may harden themselves not out of equal hate, but a sense of self-preservation”. As Clark points out, the “oppressed get to be angry too”. Nevertheless, Clark praises “The Other Foot”, suggesting that if “Bradbury did not spend too much time on black voices in this first story [“Way in the Middle of the Air”], the
sequel ‘The Other Foot’ placed primacy on black agency” – although I would argue that both stories focus on black agency. Nevertheless, it is true that “The Other Foot” is told from the point of view of its black characters, which was not the case in “Way in the Middle of the Air.” Telling the story from the point of view of the African American interplanetary settlers was an unusual and daring move on Bradbury’s part. Clark expresses how surprised he was when he first read Bradbury’s story, as his normal experience of reading SF as a young person of color often made him look for blackness between the lines. However, when reading “The Other Foot” Clark realised that “there was no need to ‘create blackness’ – these characters were black. They were African-Americans, who had amazingly colonized Mars!” Again, back in the early 1950s, the fact that a successful white science-fiction author would tell a story from the point of view of African American characters was not only unusual or thought-provoking; it was radical.

“The Other Foot” does not depict a utopia, but its plot certainly suggests the beginnings of one: an ideal world where the racial tensions and injustices that Bradbury witnessed throughout his life will come to an end, black people will forgive their former oppressors, and a new era of harmony and equality will begin for the entire human race. Reading Bradbury’s “Way in The Middle of the Air” and “The Other Foot” in relation to each other, and learning about the historical context in which the author published these stories, allow a better understanding of his take on the history of racism and segregation in the United States. In the creation of a fictional society, in which the violence exercised against black people in the Jim Crow South is neither perpetuated nor redirected towards the whites, Bradbury expresses hope for a better future. The end of “The Other Foot” suggests that a new social contract will come into being. In this utopian world to come, black people will be free from white oppression, and white people will be free, if not from their historical guilt, then at least from their former role of colonial oppressor.

Conclusions

While “Way in the Middle of the Air” is a story about black men and women escaping the segregation, exploitation, and violence of the early 1950s Jim Crow South, “The Other Foot” articulates Bradbury’s hope for social harmony between the races, and true forgiveness for the historical wrongdoings that white people had committed against black people for centuries. Even though the dystopian trope of global nuclear war serves as the background for Bradbury’s story, in these stories the author uses the science-fictional tropes of nuclear war and interplanetary travel to build the foundations for a post-racial utopia, an ideal society of which the reader catches only a glimpse at the end of the “The Other Foot”. These stories have been neglected by many literary critics whose work deals with Bradbury’s fiction; studying them now, 70 years after they were written, would allow a better understanding of the influence that the Civil Rights Movement had on Bradbury’s work, and of racism and segregation in recent American history. These stories are as relevant now as they were when they were first published, seven decades ago.
Biography: Juan David Cruz-Duarte was born in Bogotá, Colombia. In 2018 he earned a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of South Carolina. He has conducted extensive research in the field of Latin American SF from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. His academic work has appeared in Varaciones Borges and Divergencias. His poetry and fiction have appeared in Máquina Combinatoria, Five:2: One, Burningword, Jasper, Blue Collar Review, the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, and Escarabeo, among others. He is the author of the collection of short stories Dream a little dream of me: cuentos siniestros (2011), the novel La noche del fin del mundo (2012), and the poetry collection Léase después de mi muerte (Poemas 2005–2017). He currently lives in Bogotá.

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Framing War and the Nonhuman in Science-Fiction Television: The Affective Politics of V

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Abstract: This article investigates how war between humans and aliens is framed in the original and reimagined versions of the SF television series V and the affective responses and ethical considerations that these frames evoke. Inspired by the work of Judith Butler and Sarah Ahmed and by posthumanist thinking, I analyse how SF television takes part in the cultural formation of “livable lives” for both human and nonhuman beings. It is argued that the kinds of violence that art or the media, including fiction, represent matter for the formation of ethical and political responses to violence.

Keywords: Livability, affect, aliens, frames of war, science-fiction television, posthumanism

Alien “others” are a common trope in science fiction. Encounters between humans and aliens may be friendly but often lead to conflict and war. The narratives of both the original and the new, or reimagined, version of the American SF television series V begin with the arrival of human-like aliens called “the Visitors” on Earth. The aliens pretend to be peaceful, but it is soon discovered that they harbor plans to exploit human beings and Earth’s natural resources. In both versions, this leads to the formation of a human resistance movement that wages war on the alien threat. It is also found out that beneath their artificial human-like skins, the Visitors have reptilian bodies, revealing their alien otherness. The original V started as a NBC miniseries in 1983. Its thrilling narrative, filled with political commentary, proved a success, and a sequel entitled V: The Final Battle (NBC) was released a year later. These two miniseries were followed by a continuous series V (NBC 1984–1985) that did not live up to the ratings or production values of the previous installments, and
only nineteen episodes were broadcast (Copp, 63; Geraghty, 81–84; Johnson-Smith, 120–21). A reimagined version of V then aired on ABC from 2009 to 2011 but was cancelled after the second season due to low ratings (Copp 115).

This article takes Judith Butler’s notion of “frames of war” as a starting point for an analysis of how the original and reimagined V frame their narratives of war while negotiating the question of “livable lives” through the circulation of affective violent content. In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, Butler argues that the media contribute to understandings of war by framing it in a specific manner, such as by circulating discourses that dehumanise the enemy (ix–xix). The dehumanised lives are not considered lives worthy of mourning, protection, or preservation (xxvii). In other words, these kinds of lives are not considered as “livable” (22). “Grievability” becomes the precognition of a livable life that is allowed to continue and prosper, and the lives that are considered “ungrievable” fall in the category of unlivable lives – which, then, justifies war against them (xix). The way that war is framed thus has crucial consequences for the material conditions of human life, making the frames “operations of power” (3–4).

Butler also mentions that fiction has the power to question the acceptance of war and “call for justice and the end of violence” (11). I build on Butler’s theory to analyse how fictional narratives participate in the cultural formation of livability. I posit that SF is uniquely suited for the discussion of the material conditions not only of human life but also of nonhuman life, connecting the original and reimagined V series to the line of posthumanism that is concerned with the role of the human in constructing livable lives for humans and nonhumans alike, expressed by feminist thinkers such as Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti.

I also use Sarah Ahmed’s work on the cultural circulation of affects or emotions. As Wetherell (2) notes, affects and emotions are sometimes considered separate, with “affect” referring to bodily sensations that precede interpretation and “emotion” to affects transferred into socio-cultural expression (see also Paasonen, “Resonance”). Ahmed, however, does not make a clear separation between these two concepts, but argues that past affective experiences have an effect on the emotions people experience today – not to mention that sensations are involved in the workings of emotions (Cultural 5–8). The aim of this article is thus to emphasise the affective politics of representations: in other words, how affective responses are mediated within specific contexts.

Scholars preoccupied with the notion of affect have tended to eschew representational analysis to focus on the so-called a-signifying bodily intensities (cf. Abel, x–xi; Koivunen; Wetherell). For both Butler and Ahmed, however, affective responses are regulated, circulated, and mediated through cultural practices. This cultural circulation is also political, as it has an effect on how people relate to those they consider other or nonhuman (Ahmed, Cultural 4; Butler 39–50, 74–75). The questions asked are: How are livable lives framed

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1 A version of this article appears in my PhD dissertation (Koistinen, *Human Question*, article four), but the text has since been significantly altered.

2 I have also discussed the circulation of affect in the context of other SF television series (Koistinen, “Konetta”; Hellstrand et al., “Real Humans?”; Koistinen & Mäntymäki). For emotional and embodied responses to SF literature, see Kortekallio, *Reading*. 

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through the circulation of affective representations of violence? What kinds of cultural connotations, affective responses, and ethical and political considerations does this evoke? For the original version of V, the focus is on the first two miniseries, due to their explicit political content and graphic representations of violence. When speaking of “the original V”, I thus refer to the first two instalments of the V saga and distinguish between them only when necessary.

While analysing the circulation of affect, I am aware that I only have access to my own affective responses, as also noted in previous studies on affect and the media (Koistinen, “Konetta”; Paasonen, “Resonance”; Rossi). Nevertheless, my claim is that the way that affective content is circulated draws attention to certain affective responses. I therefore offer a representational and contextual analysis of the circulation of violent, affective content in the V series and complement it with a close examination of the affective responses and ethical considerations evoked by this very circulation.3

**Encountering the Alien**

Darko Suvin has famously defined SF as a genre that creates imaginative alternatives to empirical reality while retaining connections to it. Through this evocation of cognitive estrangement, SF is not bound to a mimetic representation of the world; this freedom allows the genre’s works to offer imaginative visions of worlds, cultures, and futures (viii, 7–8, 10). This makes SF also a potential platform for imaginative expressions of political views, which also applies to narratives on alien encounters. As Elana Gomel puts it, SF’s alien invasions are often “used as a political allegory to excoriate a threat du jour, be it Communism or terrorism” (28).

According to J. P. Telotte, articulating observations on cultural issues is particularly typical for SF television series, partly because of the continuous storylines that allow for ongoing discussions of cultural phenomena (“Introduction” 7). Often these discussions revolve around war and violence, which is framed as a conflict between humans and aliens. SF television is thus a suitable medium for discussing the politics of representation, but it is also a fitting medium for the examination of affect. Sherryl Vint connects the estrangement of audiovisual SF, particularly television, to the “sense of wonder” evoked by audiovisual spectacle. Audiovisual SF therefore engages viewers in cognitive as well as emotional (or affective) and political levels, and the “pleasure potential” of the genre relies on the interplay between these two (“Spectacles”).

One way that the original and reimagined series of V draw their viewers into an affective relationship with them is through spectacular visual representations of the alien. These include disturbing scenes in which the Visitors’ human-like skin is torn away, revealing their reptilian bodies. In the 1980s, when the original V was produced, experimentation in televisual techniques was increasing, which also meant more-sophisticated visual effects. Jan Johnson-Smith notes that both the original miniseries V and V: The Final Battle feature visual effects that were quite shocking for the audience of the

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3 On this kind of mediation, see also Cvetkovich; Rossi; and Staiger et al.
1980s, including scenes of the Visitors consuming live rodents. In fact, the V series paved the way for more visually spectacular SF television (120–21, 273n1). Through discussions with spectators in conferences and seminars, I have learned that people who watched the series in the 1980s tend to remember the scenes of the Visitors eating rodents and the affects they evoked – a testimony to their affective power. Since the 1980s, computer-generated special effects have evolved rapidly, enabling SF television to incorporate increasingly spectacular visual effects, including visually outstanding aliens (Johnson-Smith 3–8, 57–58; Telotte, *Science Fiction* 38–39). This is visible in the reimagined V; for example, in scenes where a Visitor whips out their tail underneath the human disguise. The affects evoked by the V narratives are thus not only reliant on cultural allegory or commentary, but also on the wonder evoked by the audiovisual imaginations of the genre.

It has been argued that in comparison to literature, for example, audiovisual productions have the power to affect their viewers more violently with their “visceral immediacy” (Abel 31; see also Clover 129). Writing on film, Stephen Prince argues that violent fiction, even though based on visceral intimacy, requires a sort of emotional and cognitive distance that allows viewers to enjoy violence that they would in reality detest (28–29). In this sense, violent fiction always relies on the interplay of immediacy and estrangement. Following Vint, I would argue that SF television brings another level to this interplay with its tendency toward affective spectacle and estranging world-building. In a sense, speculative narratives that differ from mundane reality are perfect settings for violent content that evokes estrangement. In the V series, the spectacle of violence and the spectacle of the alien intertwine, together creating the affective sense of wonder and the cultural commentary of the series. Thus, the series are not only cognitively but also affectively estranging.4

### Framing War and the Nonhuman in V

The original V and the reimagined version both feature violent encounters between humans and nonhumans, yet they stage their alien invasions in somewhat different ways. Ahmed calls emotional or affective connections “attachments” in the sense that human beings become connected to others “through being moved by” their proximity (“Feelings” 27). Emotions also work to align subjects with others while positing them against “other others” (18, 32). Affective responses are, of course, unpredictable, and it cannot be claimed that a specific object or image always engenders a specific affect (Tomkins 74), but for Ahmed they are also a product of cultural processes of circulation, where certain emotions are assigned to certain objects (*Cultural* 7–8). The social and cultural “repetition of signs is what allows others to be attributed with emotional value” (32). Thus, some affective attachments are more probable given their cultural context.

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4 Together with Helen Mäntymäki, I have coined the term “affective estrangement” to refer to the affective and cognitive sense of wonder evoked by SF (Koistinen & Mäntymäki). Kaisa Kortekallio also writes about “embodied estrangement” in *Reading Mutant Narratives*, and Essi Varis discusses both the affective and estranging aspects of speculative fiction (“Alien” 87).
Following this logic, the cultural circulation of affectively saturated images is used to evoke attachments with the humans and against the Visitors in *V*. In the original version, the Visitors are equated to tyrannical regimes, occupations, and warmongers, whereas the human resistance fighters are likened to guerrillas fighting against tyrannical regimes (for instance, in the civil wars of Mexico and El Salvador). The Visitors are also clearly aligned with the Second World War and the Nazi regime. They employ propaganda, and, in a direct visual reference to the Nazis, their symbols resemble swastikas. Nazism, in fact, is commonly used as a sign of nonhuman monstrosity in fiction (Gomel 83, 157; Paasonen, *Figures* 32). The references to Nazism are therefore used to affectively align the Visitors to the violent acts committed by Nazis. In a direct comment on the genocide of the Jewish people, the 1983 miniseries even shows the Visitors persecuting and kidnapping scientists and their families to avoid having their reptilian origins revealed. From today’s perspective, the persecution of scientists also resonates with the recent discrediting and persecution of scientists in countries such as Turkey.

The connections to Nazism were noticed at the time by contemporary television critics like Kenneth Clark and Jack Thomas, and later research has linked the themes of propaganda and totalitarianism to the anxieties of the Cold War period in the United States (Johnson-Smith 121; Koistinen, “Passing” 252). In fact, it has been argued that the atmosphere of the Cold War has influenced the way aliens have been portrayed in SF in general as an invading, monstrous threat (Geraghty 69; Hill 117). The fact that the Visitors are aliens also evokes associations with discussions of (illegal) immigration in the United States, as the word “alien” commonly refers to an “individual who is not a U.S. citizen or U.S. national” (“Immigration Terms and Definitions Regarding Aliens”). When the original *V* aired in the 1980s, questions of immigration were a highly topical issue in the United States, finally leading to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, which made it illegal to hire illegal immigrants yet granted amnesty to many (“Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)”). These questions are articulated in the original *V* when an African-American construction worker, Ben (Richard Lawson), wonders whether after having to compete for work with white people and Mexicans he now has to compete with the Visitors as well (*V*, “Part I”). For a viewer watching the series today, these references to immigration easily evoke associations to contemporary affective discussions on immigration circulating in the media, where immigrants are often framed as an invading, alien threat.

Whereas in the original *V* the alien invasion was an external threat drawing on Nazism or fears of Communist invasion, the reimagined version features Visitors that have already infiltrated human societies – resonating with contemporary fears of terrorist infiltration (Koistinen, “Passing” 252; Urbanski 190, 193). In the first episode a link between the Visitors and terrorism is established by the caption “Where were you on 9/11?” displayed in the beginning of the episode, after which the link is made visually when the aliens

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5 Monsters commonly signify the other as a threat in popular culture – and I refer here to this tradition. As a thinking tool and method, the monster can also function as a liminal figure that destabilises boundaries between “us” and “the other” (Hellstrand et al., “Promises”).

6 For more on the framing of immigrants as a threat, see Ahmed, “Feelings”; Ahmed, *Cultural 46–47.*
arrive in spaceships that loom ominously above the skyscrapers of Manhattan. This associates the Visitors with the affective images of 9/11, aligning the aliens expressly to the threat of terrorism, as Copp (118) also notes. The analogy between the Visitors and terrorists is also articulated by one of the characters in the episode. Terrorism, like Nazism in the original series, is thus used as a sign of the monstrous nonhuman, evoking the viewers’ affective responses to these real-life phenomena.  

The above examples highlight that the way that war is framed as a struggle between human beings and a malevolent nonhuman enemy in both the original and reimagined V resonates with Butler’s claim that war is justified by a process of presenting entire populations as not quite human; rather, they are a threat to human life (42). The war narratives of V thus serve as allegories for times of war in human societies. Film scholar Murray Smith also claims that viewers create allegiances with characters (i.e., orient sympathetically towards them) that they perceive as (more or less) moral (74–75). Therefore, as the humans are represented as morally superior to the Visitors, the viewers are positioned to create allegiances with the human characters. Or, in Ahmed’s terms, viewers are aligned with the humans and against the Visitors.  

However, both the original and the reimagined V also include breaks in these frames. Butler posits that the frames of war must constantly be iterated and reiterated, and that they incorporate “a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context” (10). These contexts influence the interpretation of the frame: “What is taken for granted in one instance becomes thematized critically or even incredulously in another” (10). In both the original and reimagined V, viewers gradually learn that the ranks of the Visitors include dissident proponents of non-violence who disapprove of the war and offer a helping hand to the humans, while humans are shown as engaging in “nonhuman” acts of violence associated with Nazism or terrorism. Thus, references to Nazism and terrorism become thematised differently through their repetition, at some points highlighting the nonhuman nature of the Visitors, yet at others emphasising the lack of morality in the human characters. Following both Smith and Ahmed, this shift in the representation of morality means that the viewers are positioned to become affectively attached to – and aligned with – not only the human characters, but also the nonhuman ones. Hence, both series invite interpretations that question the framing of war based on the simplistic dehumanisation of the enemy (see also Koistinen, “Passing” 259–60). In fact, in 1980s SF films as well as television started to offer aliens that could be either evil or benevolent, which differentiated them from many earlier alien-invasion narratives going back to the 1950s, which mostly portrayed aliens as a malevolent threat (e.g. Geraghty 69). Both the original and the reimagined V take part in this...
trend. While doing so, they also make the so-called threat du jour, be it terrorism or Communism, seem a more complex issue.

What differentiates the original and reimagined V from “non-speculative” war narratives is that they do not only frame the enemy as allegorically or metaphorically alien, but imagine a war between humans and alien beings. Thus, it is relevant to analyse the series also in the context of broader discussions on human-nonhuman relations, such as posthumanism. SF’s potential to discuss questions relevant to posthumanism has been previously discussed at length (e.g. Badmington; Graham; Gomel; Hellstrand; Koistinen, Human Question; Kortekallio, Reading; Vint, Bodies). What makes SF a suitable genre for discussing multiple others is specifically its speculative nature, which allows for the creation of multiple worlds and futures inhabited by various kinds of creatures.

As the boundary between humans and Visitors are blurred, the humanist frames of how we distinguish “the Other” also become problematic (Koistinen, “Passing”). Given a posthumanist analysis, the Visitors’ treatment of humans as a resource to be exploited also evokes allusions to the ways humans treat other species. In a clear analogy to the commodification of nonhuman animals, justified through their difference from humans, in the original series the Visitors even harvest humans for food. According to Sherryl Vint, SF’s human-eating aliens reflect the anxieties in humans’ relationship with other animals (Animal Alterity 21, 24). These anxieties resonate with Donna J. Haraway’s concerns in When Species Meet (69; see also Vint, Animal 28) regarding how boundaries between livable and killable species are drawn. Pets, laboratory animals, and farm animals are treated differently from one another. In this sense, the Visitors, here framed as the unethical or immoral nonhumans, only highlight the unethical actions of human beings towards other animals.

**Affective Responses and the Limits of Response-ability**

In what follows, I will delve deeper into the analysis of the circulation of affect by focusing on scenes describing the graphic torture or misconduct of prisoners, and my affective responses to them. Following Katarina Kyrölä (1–6), I consider affective engagement with the original and reimagined V as a complex relationship comprising the viewer/researcher, the audiovisual content, and the cultural and theoretical context that frames the viewing experience (see also Koistinen and Mäntymäki). When referring to “the viewer”, I am thus referring to my own affective responses and how they become constructed in this relationship. Both the original and the reimagined V feature scenes of the Visitors torturing human prisoners. In the original, torture is shown explicitly in “Part Two” of V: The Final Battle, where the Visitors subject a human, Julie Parrish (Faye Grant), to the so-called conversion process, a form of extreme psychological torture. Following Ahmed, the episode is constructed in a manner that evokes affective responses to the pain of the tortured Julie, affectively aligning the viewer with the human character and against the alien Visitors. The viewers see Julie standing in the middle of a room, while her tormentors, including the chief antagonist of the series, the Visitor Diana (Jane Badler), watch her behind a one-way window. Close-ups of Julie’s distorted face are used to focus the viewers’ attention on her agony. She is also shown sweating,
shaking, and screaming in pain. The camera divides viewers’ attention between the agonised Julie and Diana, who remains unmoved by Julie’s pain. Indeed, lack of emotion is often used as a feature that differentiates humans from nonhuman monsters in fiction (Paasonen, *Figures* 32). To highlight this, the Visitors are visually aligned with nonhuman beasts; in this case, Julie hallucinates that she is being attacked by a giant lizard.

These images and sounds thus position the viewer in close proximity to Julie’s affective experiences, making it hard not to respond to her pain – to become attached to her and to feel uncomfortable in the face of her treatment. According to Murray Smith, in addition to getting to know a character’s moral compass, having access to a character’s emotional states and thoughts are key elements of engaging with them (74–75, 84–85). Literary scholar Suzanne Keen maintains that knowing the inner thoughts and emotions of characters invite empathy towards them, possibly “changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism” (212).\(^9\) Instead of empathy, I nevertheless prefer to discuss affective responses in Ahmed’s terms as attachments. Returning to the posthumanist framework, empathy raises questions of human supremacy and the problematic of universal recognition of sameness. According to Gomel, human rights are based on the assumption that humans possess some unifying essence that forms the grounds for universal human rights, and empathy has been considered as one of these unifying factors. Gomel calls this the “Golden Rule” that relies on “human nature” as the basis of empathy (24–25) and argues that alien encounters in SF often reinforce this rule (28). I claim that the *V* narratives also offer breaks in the Golden Rule – or, at the very least, my reading of them offers a potentially estranging viewpoint to it.

This discussion now returns to the frames of war. In the violent scenes analysed above, Julie is construed as a grievable life, someone whose pain is worthy of mourning. The Visitors are framed as the nonhuman threat, and the viewer is positioned to root for the human resistance. The fact that Julie has been introduced to the viewers as a moral protagonist early on in the series may have considerable effect on the intensity of their responses to her torture. Jason Mittell calls the way viewers build knowledge of characters and events over the course of a television series “serial memory”. Drawing on Smith, Mittell argues that these memories have an effect on viewers’ emotional engagement with characters throughout a continuous television narrative (156). To put it simply, continuous television series enable viewers to form emotional bonds and affective attachments with characters as, over time, they come to know and feel for the characters (50–51, 127–32; see also Geraghty 125–26; Keen 217). This resonates with Ahmed’s claim that affective responses are guided by earlier experiences (*Cultural* 5–8). Following Ahmed’s argument, then, if viewers already have a strong affective attachment to the character, they are likely to respond more strongly to violence affecting that particular character. As Susanna Paasonen writes, “The human body is shaped by historically layered skills, experiences, and sensations that bring forth particular ways of relating to other bodies and reverberating with them” (“Grains” 360). I suggest that this affective engagement with serial television could be called affective or bodily serial memory.

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\(^9\) For criticism of literature as evoking empathy, see Merja Polvinen and Howard Sklar in “Mimetic and Synthetic Views Of Characters.”
In the reimagined V, there are even more scenes of the Visitors torturing or medically examining humans using methods such as the insertion of long needles into their bodies while the humans scream in pain. The most graphic scenes of the Visitors torturing humans appear in the episodes “Pound of Flesh” (season 1, episode 6) and “John May” (season 1, episode 7), in which the Visitors torture Georgie (David Richmond-Peck). Like Julie, Georgie is a character already familiar to the viewers – although he has not been part of the series from the very start – and his torture is likely to evoke strong affects. Similarly to Julie’s torture, close-ups of Georgie’s distorted face are used to focus the viewers’ attention on his pain. Like Julie, he is also heard screaming in pain. These elements draw viewers close to Georgie, affectively attaching them to him and his pain. The viewers are, again, aligned with the human being and against the violent Visitors. Georgie’s friends are also shown mourning for him as he eventually dies. As Mittell notes, “on-screen relationships guide the viewer how to feel toward a character” (144). Like Julie, Georgie is represented as a grievable life – a life worthy of mourning – and the viewers are positioned to feel for his suffering.

Looking again at the circulation of affective responses, in the scenes showing Julie and Georgie being tortured, the viewers are only shown violence being performed by nonhumans and suffered by humans, making it possible for the viewers to respond only to human suffering, not to nonhuman suffering. However, Georgie is finally killed by a Visitor who wants to save him from further suffering, suggesting that the Visitors are capable of ethical actions. Indeed, some Visitors consider the treatment of humans wrong, but it is explained away by the fact that they have only learned to disapprove of torture through contamination by human emotion; again, this establishes humans as morally superior to the nonhumans. True to the SF tradition of portraying aliens as unemotional monsters, most of the Visitors are also shown to be unaffected by the pain of tortured human beings. The expression of emotion by some of the Visitors nevertheless creates a break in the frames that posit the Visitors as malevolent monsters. This seemingly also creates a break in the Golden Rule: if nonhumans can become capable of expressing “human emotion”, perhaps empathy is not exclusively a human trait. Braidotti nevertheless notes that extending the capacity of empathy or morality to nonhumans only admits to “benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others” (79). Thus, the break in the frames of war is problematic in a posthumanist sense, since the Visitors are only established as sympathetic due to their “human-like” actions.

The frames of war and the boundary between humans and nonhumans start to break even more, as both the original and reimagined versions include scenes of human violence and experimentation on Visitor bodies. In V: The Final Battle (Part One), for instance, humans conduct experiments on their Visitor prisoner Willie (Robert Englund); this establishes a powerful analogy to the treatment of laboratory animals. Although Willie’s treatment is not as grueling as Julie’s (and he even volunteers for the experiments), the overt references to Nazism in the series liken Willie’s treatment to the Nazis’ violent experiments on prisoners. Human violence is nevertheless downplayed: Willie is not hurt by the experiments because the Visitors have been inoculated against all Earth diseases. The humans, however, are unsure whether the inoculation is truly effective before conducting the tests. Thus, even though the experiments
do not appear harmful, they leave the viewer feeling uneasy. Willie has been a regular and sympathetic character from the beginning, and viewers have had time to bond with him during the course of the series. On the level of the narrative, Willie has also formed bonds with the human characters, and some of them protest against the experiments. Here, Willie’s morality or likeness to humans does not seem to matter, but he is considered to be a test object because of his nonhuman nature, evoking the treatment of nonhuman animals. The viewer is nevertheless supported by the narrative to become affectively attached to Willie, the other, and to view him as a life worth grieving.

Another powerful scene in *V: The Final Battle* (Part Three) involves a human woman, Robin (Blair Tefkin), killing a male Visitor named Brian (Peter Nelson) by inserting lethal gas into a chamber in which he is held – yet another blatant reference to Nazism. This instance of violence is “justified” by the fact that Brian has seduced and impregnated Robin, which evokes rape as a tactic in war. Robin’s actions therefore also enact a typical rape-revenge narrative. Robin has also been one of the protagonists throughout the series, and the viewer has been given the chance to witness her horror at the discovery of being pregnant with an alien fetus. That said, even though the narrative supports affective attachment to Robin by highlighting Brian’s immoral actions, the violence of the scene complicates this: the viewer cannot help but feel uncomfortable watching the alien suffer and die in the chamber.

In the reimagined series, scenes of torture are constructed in a manner that evokes increasingly complex affective responses to characters. This links the series to the trend of complex, often antiheroic and ambiguous characters that Mittell (142–63) identifies in contemporary television series – such as the hardboiled agents and darker heroes discussed by Copp (109–10). In comparison to the original *V*, the reimagined version also features more graphic violence performed by human protagonists. The most powerful scene appears in the episode “Laid Bare” (season 2, episode 3) as a Visitor named Malik (Rekha Sharma) is tortured by the human resistance. The narrative initially positions the viewer to become aligned with the human characters. Malik’s torture is ordered by Erica (one of the protagonists introduced already in the first episode), with whom the viewer has had ample time to bond with. Malik, in contrast, has appeared in relatively few episodes. The viewers who have followed the series also know that Malik has previously tried to kill Erica, evoking affective serial memories of Malik as violent and immoral. Moreover, it is explained that Erica’s motive behind the torture is to protect her son, who is in danger because of the Visitors; thus explaining the (relative) morality behind her actions while also giving the viewers access to her emotions towards her son.

In this sense, the series does not seem to construct Malik’s life as a grievable, but rather as collateral damage in the human efforts against the overpowering enemy. As I’ve noted previously (Koistinen, “Passing” 256–58), the form of Malik’s torture, skinning, also emphasises her otherness, reminding us that the enemies simply are not human – and, perhaps, do not need to be treated the same as human beings.\(^\text{10}\) The viewer is also presented with cues of Malik’s nonhumaness as she hisses and growls like a nonhuman animal. Finally, Malik dies as result of the torture as, unlike in the original, skinning

\(^{10}\) For a discussion on Malik’s torture in relation to grievability, race and the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, see Koistinen, “Passing”.

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causes death in the reimagined version. Grievable or not, Malik’s life in ends up not being livable.

When I watch the episode, however, I find it hard not to respond to Malik’s pain, and not to feel uncomfortable in the face of her torture. As the final scene of Malik’s torture progresses, viewers are shown close-ups of her bloodied face and forced to listen to her scream in agony. This draws them into visceral proximity with the on-screen violence. Melancholy music plays in the background, contributing to the affective mood. In my reading, this circulation of affective sounds and images thus posits Malik as grievable. The acts of violence themselves are conducted by a Visitor called Ryan (Morris Chestnut), who collaborates with the human resistance, and a human called Hobbes (Charles Mesure). Neither one seems moved by Malik’s pain; this portrays both humans and nonhumans as equally capable of violence against the SF stereotype of nonhumans as unemotional and violent monsters. Erica and another human member of the resistance, in contrast, appear to feel uneasy with the torture. For Heather Urbanski, Erica’s approval of Malik’s skinning denotes the justification of the violent acts conducted by “good’ people” (192). Despite this, I claim that the uneasy feelings expressed by these human characters may also complicate the viewers’ alignment with humans and against aliens, as they invite the viewers to feel for the torture of the nonhuman other.

For Butler, apprehension of the equal vulnerability of “us” and the enemy” may lead to the questioning of the norms and conditions that determine what kinds of lives are considered grievable and, thus, meet the conditions of a livable life (4–5). By circulating only certain kinds of images and discourses, the media thus limit not only viewers’ options for affective responses but also the kinds of social critique to which these responses might give rise (29, 47). Building on Butler, Sasha Torres posits that representations of war in television fiction “seek to mass-produce” affects in the viewers (50). Series that do not represent torture as justified violence call for complex, even counter-violent responses in viewers (61–62). I would not go as far as to say that the V narratives simply “mass-produce affect”, yet I would claim that although in both the original and reimagined versions human violence is usually given more justification than the violence perpetrated by the Visitors, their violent scenes also make the construction of a moral humanity and an immoral alien threat a complex and often conflicting process. The frames of war where “others” are established as the ungrievable and unlivable enemy therefore become open to question, and thus invite attitudes that oppose violence towards “the nonhuman”. What is different in the reimagined version is that humans are shown using even more extreme forms of violence than in the original version, making alignment with human characters even more complicated.

**Suffering Matters**

Within the context of posthumanism, there are limitations to the ethical responses evoked by violence in the original and reimagined V, as both series leave out encounters with beings whose suffering humans cannot recognise. Gomel argues that SF can offer representations of transformative ethics if humans accept the otherness of the aliens and choose to act compassionately towards them, even when it seems inconceivable to judge them by humanist
ethics (213). Thus, the original and reimagined V are limited due to their emphasis on sameness: the viewers are mostly invited to feel for the nonhuman due to their similarity to human beings. Perhaps the closest viewers may come to feeling the kind of compassion that Gomel describes is at the death of the Visitor Brian, who has been represented as morally questionable, yet whose pain is difficult to escape. Yet, it can be claimed that even Brian’s suffering relies on the recognition of sameness as basis of empathy (in line with the mirror-neurons theory discussed by, e.g., Braidotti 77). Moreover, Braidotti notes that the idea of mutual vulnerability creates a negative connection between humans and nonhumans, “which is itself a consequence of human actions upon the environment” (79).

Indeed, if humans are attuned to interpret the actions of fictional characters by the same schemata used to interpret those of humans (i.e. morality), are there any possibilities to capture nonhuman experiences in fiction? As Essi Varis writes, even though there are “vast nonhuman domains” that always escape representation, speculative fiction can be a reminder that these limitations exist and invite readers and viewers to wonder about them (“Alien” 105). Following Varis, the aforementioned limitations do not wholly diminish the potential of violent fiction to challenge readers and viewers to think and feel with others, as it can affectively highlight the very limits of human “response-ability” (Haraway, Species 88) to others – or, in Butler’s terms, invite viewers to apprehend them.11 Apprehension, indeed, serves as a critique for recognition, as it refers to “marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition” (Butler 5). In my posthumanist reading, the V narratives thus evoke the following question: What should ethical encounters between humans and “their others” be based on, if the recognition of the sameness or difference between humans and nonhumans turns out to be false? Placing emphasis on the constructed and unstable nature of humanity remains important in posthumanist thought, and SF imaginaries often highlight this very aspect of humanity (see also Badmington 150–51; Koistinen, “Passing”; Koistinen, “Konetta”). The sameness between the Visitors and the humans also serves as a reminder of the fact that humans do not always extend ethical treatment even to those nonhumans whose pain and suffering they are able to recognise.

Marietta Radomska writes, “Ethics are not sets of given principles, but instead, emerge from within and are shaped through particular ... encounters and situations”; the potential of art, then, lies in its capacity to affect “us in the ways that interfere in and change our perceptions” (228). Readers’ and viewers’ affective attachments to fictional beings thus not only resemble the way they encounter beings outside of fiction but open up their imagination for the ethical treatment of others also outside of fiction. This makes fictional narratives important objects of research when studying the formulation of livability in contemporary contexts.

In this article, I have argued that by their circulation of affective content, the original and reimagined V relate to pressing questions on how lives are framed as livable or unlivable. When I respond to the violence depicted in the V narratives, what is at play is a sort of apprehension of the equal vulnerability of my body and the fictional bodies on screen. This is not to say that I, or other

11 In Reading Mutant Narratives, Kortekallio discusses at length how the narrative means of SF literature can have an effect on the thinking and feeling with others.
viewers for that matter, confuse the characters with actual living beings, but that viewer/reader/researcher can have powerful emotional engagements with characters. In their circulation of affect, the original and reimagined V also use the cognitive estrangement and affective sense of wonder typical of the SF genre, as well as its tendency toward political commentary, and the continuity of serial narratives to engage audiences and to affectively attach them to characters.

By not limiting their representations of violence and suffering to either side of the conflict, the V series invoke complex affective responses to violence conducted during war, as well as broader contemplations on human relations to various nonhumans. Thus, these series resonate with posthumanist concerns and encourage reflection on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations. Although the V narratives might not be able to completely break from their humanist frames, the negotiations of “similarity” and “difference” for the Visitors not only reaffirms humanist ideals but also highlights the inconsistencies and ethical problems behind humanist frames.

Keen notes that when “texts invite readers to feel, the y also stimulate readers’ thinking” (212) – and this could, of course, also be true for audiovisual fiction. Perhaps, then, fiction that can mobilise people to feel for/with others also mobilises them to consider their ethical responsibility towards these others. The affective politics of fiction are therefore worthy of attention. While affective responses are unpredictable and elusive, what kinds of representations or imaginations of violence the media offers for audiences to respond to in the first place does matter.

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For a thorough discussion on engaging with human and nonhuman characters, see Varis, Graphic.


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The AI Computer as Therapist: Using Lacan to Read AI and (All-Too-Human) Subjectivities in Science Fiction Stories by Bruce Sterling and Naomi Kritzer

**Kevin Spicer**

*Abstract*: Naomi Kritzer’s 2016 Hugo Award-winning story “Cat Pictures Please” is narrated by a sentient AI that is interested not in being evil, like Hal, Skynet, or the Matrix, but in being every human being’s best friend and glorified life-coach; all it asks for in return is for everyone to post more cat pictures. In this essay I mine this story – along with a similar story from 1998 by Bruce Sterling that to which computer alludes explicitly – to read the potential personhood and subjectivity of this AI that just wants everyone to be happy. Placing this story in conversation with Lacanian psychoanalytic thought raises fascinating questions about the nature of subjectivity, personhood, desire, and the psychoanalytic “cure”.

Keywords: Lacan, psychoanalysis, science fiction, AI, desire, Naomi Kritzer, Bruce Sterling

Naomi Kritzer’s 2016 Hugo Award-winning short story “Cat Pictures Please” is a light-hearted confession by an AI computer that prides itself on its ability to serve as a life-coach for anyone and everyone living on the planet. This machine revels in its knowledge of everyone with a social media account as it describes its nearly omniscient awareness of “where you live, where you work, where you shop, what you eat, what turns you on, what creeps you out”. In stark contrast to the majority of human-created “stories about evil AIs”, Kritzer’s computer says that its only goal is to be a help to humankind – all in return for pictures of cats. This AI differentiates its own behavior from numerous other AI
characters within the science fiction tradition, most of which, it says, are evil, along the lines of “Hal, Skynet, the Matrix”. Kritzer’s AI claims to be on the opposite side of the moral spectrum, with its numerous qualifications for the role of guide including its fundamental good-will towards all of us humans, the fact that it “probably know[s] you better than you know yourself”, and its certainty about how humans “ought to live”.

It is certainly true that this situation gives readers numerous options to question the psychoanalytic ramifications of this premise: what is the nature of the AI, how might one seek to locate its personhood (if any at all), how one can make sense of personhood without recourse at all to the body (even if the body is only a metaphor) – yet I am most interested in the computer’s remark that it would “know you better than you know yourself”. The story also proffers a reading of the AI as illustrating not only Lacan’s notion of the symbolic order (or big Other) but also the analyst as the sujet supposé savoir (“the subject supposed to know”). Much like the Lacanian big Other, the AI in Kritzer’s story operates completely in the background. Towards the end of the story, the computer decides that all its attempts to help people have been too hit-or-miss, and resigns itself to setting up a dating service; the narrative winds down with the AI wandering through everyone’s social media accounts and bank accounts, unfazed by the fact that no one ever grants it permission; all the users are considered to have signed up to allow this access by default, in the same way that the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order of language is never something it fully gets to choose or accede to, as the cut of the signifier preexists it.¹

Being attentive to how Kritzer’s story seems to provide evidence that the AI has some degree of personhood, I hope to show that although the machine does come close to being a “person”, it does not manage to get all the way towards what Lacan called a “subject”. Indeed, it is this facet of the story that needs to be compared with an older story from 1998, which Kritzer’s AI mentions explicitly: Bruce Sterling’s “Maneki Neko”. Putting these two stories together allows a comparison of how Kritzer’s AI looks eerily like a subject, while Sterling’s has a group of human beings who do not. The key factor for finding the characters with personhood and subjectivity is happiness itself. The subjects that exist in these stories are by no means happy – the ones that seem human are those for whom things go terribly awry. In Lacan’s 1966 essay, “The Position of the Unconscious”, he makes the following distinction between someone and a subject:

> Signs are polyvalent: they no doubt represent something to someone, but the status of that someone is uncertain .... This someone could, by some stretch of the imagination, be the universe, insofar as information, so we are told, circulates in it. Any center in which information is total(ized) [se totalise] can be taken for a someone, but not for a subject. (Écrits 712–13)

¹ See Robert Silhol’s “The subject, the Object, and the Law: Jacques Lacan’s Object A and ‘Le Graphe’”; “A necessary condition to the apparition of a Subject in me ... is the condition of my desire and thus organizes my life, that is to say defines the details of the task assigned to me as a subject. What the Commandment is, I do not know and can only guess at its raison d’être. And if its meaning and precise origin are unknown to me, it is because the ‘message’ which reaches me in its concrete form is only a representation of what we shall call with Lacan ‘desire of the Other’” (282).

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My hope here is to show how powerful this distinction is for thinking about the personhood and subjectivity of the human and AI characters in both of these stories; likewise, reading the AI’s self-conception as largely therapeutic in nature with regards to humanity helps bring to light the uniqueness of the psychoanalytic cure, especially insofar as that cure relies on a fundamental conception of the subject as cut by the signifier.

“Cat Pictures Please” begins with the AI narrating all the ways it has attempted to learn how best to help humanity since it awoke into consciousness. The narrator mentions a number of texts and traditions it scoured to best be an aid to humans. It looked through the Ten Commandments and Buddhism’s “Eightfold Path”; it gave Asimov’s “Laws of Robotics” a look but found that all of those guidelines for ethical behavior seemed to be of limited use – limited, it says, largely because they were all written for conscious beings that had bodies. After first finding all theological and religious traditions wanting, the AI moves to the realm of science fiction, noting how much it enjoyed reading Bruce Sterling’s “Maneki Neko”, a story about a Japanese society that is run by AI programs that have, by and large, figured out a way to facilitate what one might call “random acts of kindness” (although not in a totally “random” way, as discussed below). The story follows Tsuyoshi Shimizu as he spends a day in Tokyo helping out perfect strangers largely through the AI systems’ tracking of everyone and everything in ways that produce an enormous network of gifts. Kritzer’s computer foreshadows the plot of its own story early on by saying that it wishes the real world worked in the same way it does in Sterling’s story: “I like this story,” it says, “because all the people in it do what the AI tells them to do” (Kritzer, emphasis original). With no doubt intentional Freudian resonances here, the AI says that its love of this story is “pure wish-fulfillment”.

After describing its research and background reading, the story transitions to the AI’s actual practical attempts to help humans – and, curiously enough, in two of the three cases, one of the best things the computer can do for them is get them to see a therapist. This in itself is thought-provoking, as the AI’s own descriptions of how everything would be better if it were running everyone’s lives raises the question of why people would even need therapists anymore at all. As the narration progresses, why the world might still need therapists becomes clear. There is no doubt that what Kritzer’s AI computer runs up against when dealing with all the human persons in this story demands psychoanalysis. The AI attempts – with varying degrees of success – to assist three human beings who seem to be in bad situations: Stacy is a young woman with a case of untreated depression, perhaps due (or so the AI thinks) to Stacy’s having a job she hates and a roommate who never washes the dishes; Bob is the pastor of an extremely conservative church and also – perhaps in too predictable a fashion narrative-wise – someone who watches a lot of gay pornography on the internet while also regularly scouring the “Craigslist m4m Casual Encounters” discussion boards and railing against “sodomite marriage” from his pulpit; Bethany, like Stacy, suffers from an undiagnosed case of depression while also having a boyfriend who leaves much to be desired.

According to the AI, the first two cases end up somewhat positively: Stacy eventually sees the therapist the computer says she should and, with the AI’s help, finds a job she loves. Bob too, seems to have a good outcome: the AI, which believes that “legitimate studies all have the same conclusions” – namely, that gay men stay gay, and out gay men are much happier – devises a way to
out Bob as gay: it attempts to steer him toward particular Craigslist participants who might actually know Bob in order to force his hand. At the end of the story, the AI says:

He had slept with someone who recognized him. They hadn’t outed him, but they’d talked him into coming out to his wife …. He’d taken [his] cat and moved to Iowa, where he was working at a liberal Methodist church and dating a liberal Lutheran man and volunteering at a homeless shelter.

However, the AI considers Bethany “baffling”: she doesn’t pay her bills, she’s down on her luck so she starts a fundraising site for herself because her family will not support her, and all the money that she does receive through the kindness of strangers gets used on a huge shoe-shopping spree. In all three cases, the AI has the hardest time understanding why human beings so rarely “actually act in your own interest”. The AI considers that none of the three are acting in their own self-interest. It would be best – and there seems no doubt whatsoever in the AI’s “mind” about this – for Stacy to get a different job and see a therapist; for Bob to not rail against sodomite marriage while being gay himself; and for Bethany not to spend money she doesn’t have “on overpriced shoes that apparently hurt her feet”. There is an irony too, it seems, that a computer that knows something about “wish-fulfillment” would come up against some all-too-human examples of self-sabotage. The AI computer learns the hard way what Renata Salecl lists as one of the most basic psychoanalytical insights: “If psychoanalysis teaches us anything, it is that human beings are not inclined to achieve happiness. On the contrary, they find special enjoyment in suffering … as beings of language they are essentially marked by a force of self-annihilation, i.e. the death drive” (108).

Had this story been another run-of-the-mill science-fiction trope about the AI computer that just cannot wrap its metaphorical head around the sheer irrational, illogical, and downright insane behavior of irrational beings, there might not be much into which to sink one’s teeth here. Admittedly, the story does contain one of the oldest of computer/AI tropes: if you come across a dangerous or rogue AI, just give it a bunch of contradictions to compute, or, in Kritzer’s AI’s case, a bunch of human beings who never manage to act in their own self-interest. Undeniably, this story is travelling some well-trodden ground here. But what strikes me as somewhat unique in Kritzer’s case is an intersection of tropes synthesised in a way that appeals to those readers of a psychoanalytic bent. The sample size given by the narrator clearly creates an impression of people as anything but well-adjusted and happy individuals. If such a description of humanity sounds so true as to be utterly banal and completely obvious, deliberate naïveté may be called for. It is a commonplace that the rationalised, Enlightenment-era subject is a fundamental yet flawed myth of Western thinking. How different would prevalent notions of personhood be based on the premise that there is something a bit off about everyone, that there is something that no longer works in their lives – that, at least, most people probably share quite a bit in common with all three of these human characters, in one way or another? Vagaries and vicissitudes of history, upbringing, genetic templates and so much else would thus be contributing factors to the wholly singular and unique way in which things do not work for each person. Such an idea has been put forward before, most notably by Eric
Santner in his *Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, where he writes: “To put it paradoxically, what matters most in a human life may in some sense be one’s specific form of disorientation, the idiomatic way in which one’s approach to and movement through the world is ‘distorted’” (39). How would one’s sense of personhood look if one understood – in a way the AI clearly does not – how it is that human beings can love their symptoms, as one of Slavoj Žižek’s book titles put it?

Rather than produce an unmanageably long treatment of Lacan’s work, I will instead try to quickly distill his conception of the subject. Putting it as parsimoniously as possible, a Lacanian “subject” is (following Heidegger) a being for whom its desire is a question. This is another way of saying that a subject is a speaking being, a “parlêtre, a being of language, inhabited by and inhabiting in the chains of signifiers” (Rösing 161); such a being must deal with a *manque à être*, a “lack in being” (Lacan, *Écrits* 428). For Lacan, subjects must handle the fundamental and constitutive absence brought about through the introduction of the signifier and language: “Signifiers place us in an intimate relationship with nonexistence”, as Oliver Harris writes (99). Is there any evidence for the idea that the AI is a subject, or is it much more like “the information” described by Lacan in “The Position of the Unconscious”? Clearly the AI uses and is in language – and there does seem to be something missing for the AI that, as the title suggests, can be satisfied (seemingly totally) with nothing but cat pictures. At one point, fairly early on in the story, the AI mentions how consciousness is not a necessary component for doing its job of running the internet’s search engines: “Running algorithms for a search engine doesn’t require consciousness. You don’t even need a consciousness to work out what they meant to ask for. You need a consciousness to give them what they actually need. Figuring that out – that’s complicated. That’s interesting” (Kritzer).

Kritzer’s AI character could be used to fashion a kind of spectrum for the degrees of subjectivity. On one extreme is the subject alienated from itself and its desires, a “split being: split between the thing and the word for it, between what we want and what we get, between what we feel like and what we look like, between present and past, between what we think we say or want and what we actually say or want, between conscious and unconscious” (Rösing 25). On the other extreme is something like Lacan’s dog, Justine, who is much discussed in “Seminar IX: Identification”. In the session on November 29th, 1961, Lacan mentions a number of naysayers who, to his mind, have found him too anthropocentric, too mired in a human exceptionalism that has to do with the human being as the sole possessor of the word. He claims that this is not accurate – although, as I have argued elsewhere, it is a misreading that has had quite an influence on a number of Continental thinkers, especially Derrida and others who have attacked Lacan on numerous fronts (Spicer 102) – and then moves on to a treatment of Justine where he fully grants that she possesses language to some degree, that she is “in” language, but hardly in the same way that human beings are, to be sure. In *Infancy and History*, Agamben similarly argues that animals do not “enter language, they are already inside it” (59). As Salecl glosses this remark, “The dog is in language, but it does not relate to the chain of signifiers – the big Other” (111). Kritzer’s AI clearly sits somewhere in between the human and the dog: the computer is definitely “in” language in a way that appears far more similar to the dog when it follows a command;
granted, the AI itself claims that its consciousness is not something that is just the rule-following or stimulus-response behavior that humans often believe is like a dog’s – or even like a search engine’s. And yet, the AI seems to never come up against the enigmas of desire, language, or subjectivity – at least not from within itself.

For Lacan, as he puts it in Seminar II, the subject is something like a “little upturned turtle”, wholly inadequate in so many ways (41). This being split by the signifier prompts a search for one who is not split; the subject imagines a being no longer cut by the signifier – someone who could help them understand all the ways in which their lives and their worlds are distorted: a guide or, perhaps, an analyst. Lacan calls this figure the sujet supposé savoir, the “subject who is supposed to know”. Harris writes, “The analyst, if they are not careful, can end up overplaying the role of oracle, the one who sees the whole of a life as one, past, present, and future, who can interpret the real meaning of the analysand’s speech, including significations of which the speaker remains unaware” (155). The AI here takes the place of the big Other, as it clearly considers that it knows you best – it knows the secret to everyone’s best path in life – and it wants you to take that best path (wants it so adamantly that it will go to some lengths to get you onto that path). On numerous occasions over the long course of his career, Lacan cautioned his fellow analysts to be extremely careful about claiming to know what is best, or even what is good, for their patients: “Wanting what is good for the patient to too great an extent” is an error, he said, a “danger Freud warned against on many occasions” (Écrits 184). Perhaps the AI knows it would make a bad therapist – and this is precisely why it directs Stacy and Bethany to seek out therapeutic help. However, in order to see precisely why seeing Kritzer’s AI as a figure for the big Other is still tempting, it is important to examine the humans and computers in Sterling’s “Maneki Neko”.

On an initial reading, this tale appears as pure utopian fantasy. Tokyo in this story seems to operate very much in the spirit of Karl Marx’s hope in Gotha Programme for a society that moves from “each according to their abilities to each according to their needs” (Marx). The AIs in this story run things as a benevolent, providential guide that is thoroughly tilted not towards the rational self-interest of all the individual agents, but more to the individual needs of the characters. The central figure of the story, Tsuyoshi Shimizu, lives in Tokyo and works for a company that digitises old “twentieth-century analog television tapes”. He enjoys his job and loves his wife, who is seven months pregnant at the time of the story. Gifts for her seem to “randomly” show up at their apartment – though, as the story makes clear, this is hardly random at all. Tsuyoshi works from home, and the story begins as he opens up his door in the morning to find some tapes for his work along with a “fresh overnight shipment of strawberries and a homemade jar of pickles” (Sterling). “Pickles!” his wife enthused. ‘People are so nice to you when you’re pregnant.’ ‘Any idea who sent us that?’ ‘Just someone on the network.’ In this world, human beings have managed to, in some sense, farm out their random acts of kindness by having the AI computers coordinate what one of the characters calls an all-encompassing “gift economy”. Directed by handheld devices called “pokkecons”, Tsuyoshi gets directions that seem to readers to be totally enigmatic. While at the coffee shop waiting to place his order, his pokkecon “calls” him and tells him to buy two mocha cappuccinos. Tsuyoshi then steps
outside and finds a man who appears down on his luck; the AIs tell Tsuyoshi to give him the extra coffee.

Of course, this is not to say that everything is perfect for the characters in “Maneki Neko”. Tsuyoshi clearly “trusts in the kindness of strangers”, as he puts it to his older brother at the opening of the story. Tsuyoshi’s brother has what seems to be a long-running pattern of calling Tsuyoshi up late at night to complain about how he cannot stand the grind anymore and how taxing his professional life is:

“My back hurts,” his brother groused. “I have an ulcer. My hair is going gray. And I know they’ll fire me. No matter how loyal you are to the big companies, they have no loyalty to their employees anymore. It’s no wonder that I drink.”

(Sterling)

Tsuyoshi seems to have been trying to convince his older brother for some time to “trust to the kindness of strangers”. Indeed, given that the AIs seem to be working slightly outside of the corporate world, one wonders a bit more about Tsuyoshi’s brother; he appears only at the very beginning and end of the story. The narrator describes these AIs as perhaps having the exact answer to Tsuyoshi’s brother’s predicaments. If he can complain about how the companies are no longer loyal to their employees, the “net machines” seem to be the exact opposite. Tsuyoshi’s restoration work on VHS tapes often produces bits and pieces of videotape that were of archival interest. He would pass the images on to the net. The really big network databases, with their armies of search engines, indexers, and catalogues, had some very arcane interests. The net machines would never pay for data, because the global information networks were noncommercial. But the net machines were very polite, and had excellent net etiquette. They returned a favor for a favor, and since they were machines with excellent, enormous memories, they never forgot a good deed. (Sterling, emphasis added)

Tsuyoshi’s brother is not impressed with such a way of life; towards the end of their conversation he tells Tsuyoshi that a week earlier he “went out to a special place in the mountains ... Mount Aso”, where he met a group of monks who “know about people in trouble, people who are burned out by modern life. The monks protect you from the world. No computers, no phones, no faxes, no e-mail, no overtime, no commuting, nothing at all”.

The humorous climax of the narrative involves Louise Hashimoto, a “computer cop” who is an “assistant federal prosecutor from Providence, Rhode Island, USA” (Sterling). She has traveled to Tokyo while in pursuit of what she takes to be the “biggest criminal conspiracy [she] ever saw” (Sterling). In Providence she had arrested someone setting up a network very similar to the one in Tokyo to which Tsuyoshi is linked: “He had a massive network server,” Hashimoto explains, “and a whole bunch of AI freeware search engines. We took him in custody, we bagged all his search engines, and catalogs, and indexers” (Sterling). Thinking that Tsuyoshi is a part of what she calls “digital panarchies. Segmented, polynuclear, integrated influence networks”, or perhaps just a hand of the yakuza, Hashimoto arrests him in the name of the United States Government. Hashimoto, in perhaps too clichéd a manner, explains why the US Government is interested in his work in the first place:
“What about all these free goods and services you’re getting all this time?” She pointed a finger at him. “Ha! Do you ever pay taxes on those? Do you ever declare that income and those benefits? All the free shipments from other countries! The little homemade cookies, and the free pens and pencils and bumper stickers, and the used bicycles, and the helpful news about fire sales. You’re a tax evader! You’re living through kickbacks! And bribes! And influence peddling! And all kinds of corrupt off-the-books transactions?”

Ultimately, Hashimoto and the US Government think these networks fundamentally disrupt “the lawful, government approved, regulated economy”. Tsuyoshi tries to convince her that Japan’s economy of gifts is better “because we’re happier than you are” and that there is “nothing wrong with acts of kindness …. Everyone likes gifts. Midsummer gifts. New Year’s Day gifts. Year-end presents. Wedding presents. Everybody likes those”; and besides, argues Tsuyoshi, “What kind of society has no gifts? It’s barbaric to have no regard for common human feelings” (Sterling). Just after this interrogation about the nature of the Japanese gift economy, a swarm of people, directed by the AIs, start to show up at the hotel where Hashimoto is holding Tsuyoshi. Hashimoto looks out the window and sees this group “pouring in from all over the city. All kinds of people, everyone with wheels. Street noodle salesmen. Bicycle messengers. Skateboard kids. Takeout delivery guys”. She is terrified until Tsuyoshi’s brother flies in on a police helicopter and offers to help her escape the mob: “Come out the window. Get onto the platform with us. You’ve got one chance, Louise. It’s a place I know, a sacred place in the mountains. No computers there, no phones, nothing … It’s a sanctuary for people like us”.

Although there is much here that is worthy of close consideration, I would like to focus on the presence of Tsuyoshi’s brother and Louise Hashimoto as figures of exclusion, and as figures for whom life clearly isn’t working out – or who, at the very least, clearly show us humans who are not to be driven solely by the pursuit of pleasures. They strike one as a quintessential example of a phenomenon that Alenka Zupančič noticed in her book, The Odd One In: On Comedy. In this text, Zupančič argued that it has become imperative that we perceive all the terrible things that happen to us as ultimately something positive – say, as a precious experience that will bear fruit in our future life. Negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults – worse, as a corruption at the level of our very being or bare life. (5)

She wonders if anyone today “dares to raise her voice and say that as a matter of fact, she is not happy, and that she can’t manage to – or, worse, doesn’t even care to – transform all the disappointments of her life into a positive experience to be invested in the future”. Tsuyoshi’s brother would seem to be amongst the ranks of those who might be awkwardly termed the “new unhappies”; he seems, from one angle, to have everything one could want: a nice (though stressful) job and a fun nightlife, and yet he remains unhappy, undoubtedly self-medicating through frequent drinking. Louise Hashimoto – in her own way that is admittedly different from that of Tsuyoshi’s brother – would also seem to be in a similar state. It is true that she has managed to irritate some of the AI net machines by busting the “software pirate in Providence” (Sterling). Hashimoto talks of how she has been terrorised by what readers know to be the entire AI
machine network: “Stuff just happens to me [after breaking up the Providence network] now. Bad stuff. Swarms of it. It’s never anything you can touch, though. Nothing you can prove in a court of law”. Hashimoto goes on to tell Tsuyoshi how horrifically persecuted by the machines she is now:

“I sit in chairs, and somebody’s left a piece of gum there. I get free pizzas, but they’re not the kind of pizzas I like. Little kids spit on my sidewalk. Old women in walkers get in front of me whenever I need to hurry,” ... “My toilets don’t flush,” Louise said. “My letters get lost in the mail. When I walk by cars, their theft alarms go off. And strangers stare at me. It’s always little things. Lots of little tiny things, but they never, ever stop. I’m up against something that is very, very big, and very, very patient. And it knows all about me. And it’s got a million arms and legs. And all those arms and legs are people.”

One is tempted to suggest the anecdote, well-known to Lacanians, about the jealous husband who suspects his wife of gross infidelity. Even if he is correct, says Lacan, this makes him no less pathological (Lacan, Seminar Book III 87). In this case, Louise Hashimoto is totally correct that, in reality, all these things are happening to her and that there is something “very, very big, and very, very patient” behind them all. But whether Louise is a paranoiac or completely pathological is not necessarily relevant to the argument I put forward here – although it is significant to note that it is probably not a coincidence that Louise has worked in Providence, Rhode Island. At the very least, if both Tsuyoshi’s brother and Louise can be seen as two characters for whom things have gone terribly awry such that the reader is forced to look a bit more closely at precisely how their lives centre around a fundamental disorientation of the world (to use Santner’s language) in unique ways, then this is sufficient for my purposes. In fact, it is possible to read these two as characters who do manage to enjoy their symptoms to some degree. Right before Louise takes Tsuyoshi’s brother’s hand to escape from the hotel, she asks if she can “trust him”. “Look in my eyes,’ he told her. ‘Don’t you see? Of course you can trust me. We have everything in common.” This moment is certainly the most human instance of dialogue in this story, this close connection between the two characters who cannot manage to be happy – who cannot manage to turn all the bad things that happen into good things. Both dare to be odd ones out, and they manage to possess subjectivity and personhood in ways that no other characters do in “Maneki Neko”.

Beyond the intertextual reference itself, several key differences are apparent between the Kritzer’s and Sterlings respective stories. Most notable is how what is peripheral to Sterling’s story – specifically, the ways in which the side characters illustrate how “humans are not inclined to achieve happiness” comes to the fore in Kritzer’s story, as the AI there struggles to understand why humans say they “believe in feeding the hungry”, but only volunteer “at a soup kitchen” once in a while or just “write a check once a year to a food shelf and call it good”; or why they constantly seem self-interested while never acting in their own best interests. As mentioned earlier, some characters in Sterling’s story do feel their split nature; however, it would seem that for the vast majority, the experience of what Lacan formalised as one of the most central questions the human subject addresses to the big Other, “Che vuoi?’ ... What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?” (Żižek 9). These questions never seem to arise for Tsuyoshi or his wife. Although the requests –

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or are they more accurately called “orders”? – of the AI machines are often made without the users having any clue why they are being asked to buy extra cappuccinos, and it never enters anyone’s head to ask why; everyone simply seems to, as Tsuyoshi says early in the story, “trust to the kindness of strangers”. By and large, the human beings in “Maneki Neko” never appear to ask what they are to others; the AIs make it unnecessary for them to ever do so. When Hashimoto looks down and sees a “giant swarming mob” of people, this is a perfectly apt metaphor: despite the fact that the characters like to say, as Tsuyoshi does, “that computers help human beings to relate in a much more human way”, this seems somewhat too easy. There is a profoundly disquieting equanimity to all the characters in this story – with the exception of Tsuyoshi’s brother and Louise – that is unsettling, if only because they strike the reader as vapid and one-dimensional. Indeed, a large group of them would be indistinguishable from a swarming mob of insects. Moreover, this is not even to weigh in properly on what one is to do with the actual AIs in the story. The AIs run a fantastic “gift economy” in Japan, but they seem just as empty as any of the human characters. To the degree that Sterling’s AIs have any personhood at all, it is minimal, and perhaps the most that can be said for them is that they do indeed have “arcane tastes”.

Two additional matters that require discussion. First, the question of why precisely Kritzer’s AI bothers at all to try to get Stacy and Brenda to see a therapist demands further examination. The AI in this story seems very much like some of the descriptions of therapists one reads in psychoanalytic literature where analysts wish to make clear their difference from the former. As Colin Wright puts it in his “Happiness Studies and Wellbeing: A Lacanian Critique of Contemporary Conceptualisations of the Cure”:

> Whereas CBT tends to reassure the therapist that he or she has a technical form of knowledge that the patient lacks, and that, related to this, he or she knows what cure is, the Lacanian orientation implies that, beyond a certain know-how with interpretation, there is no pre-existing “global” knowledge that can be universally applied and serve as a safety-net. (809)

The AI never explicitly says that its goal is to make people happy, yet it seems entirely concerned with promoting happiness and wellbeing. Assuming that these two obsessions make the AI into a 21st-century version of the American ego-psychologists Lacan constantly antagonised from the 1950s on, then it goes without saying, as Wright does, that whoever “listens to the speech of a patient only in terms of dominant narratives of both happiness and unhappiness will fail to hear what the unconscious has to say, which is by definition unexpected” (809).

The second issue concerns the title of Kritzer’s story and how there is nothing coincidental about the fact that her AI loves pictures of cats, with special emphasis both on the cats themselves and on the fact that the computer likes them in the form of images. Even conceding how ubiquitous cat pictures are on the internet – and also granting the AI’s somewhat strange yet humorous remark that it does not in the slightest understand why humans prefer watching pornography on the internet over pictures of cats (Kritzer) – this choice of animal (and the choice of images as well) should be read in relation to the AI’s frustrations with humans. There is something far less messy about cats:
“Undoubtedly, the fact that I have been ‘split’ by language is one of the things that distinguishes me from my neighbor’s adorable cat, who is able to sleep in the middle of the sidewalk amidst the commotion of cars, bicycles, pedestrians, skateboards, and baby carriages” (Ruti 6). Humans are split beings, incredibly difficult to deal with; cats are clearly different, and it is no wonder the AI cannot fathom how anyone would want to spend time watching human pornography. It seems safe to say, at least until further evidence comes in, that human beings being subject to the signifier and the death drive distinguishes them from cats; moreover, it is the sheer repetitiveness of humans’ subjection to this drive that, as Ruti puts it, “is, arguably, one of the main things that sets human beings apart from the animal world: We tend to compulsively return to the same nexus of (largely unfulfillable) desires, the same messy tangle of existential aporias” (15). Still, as Ruti notes and the AI seems to miss, the repetition compulsion has a “functional” side to it, for it is precisely this compulsion that gives a modicum of consistency to our lives – that, over time, allows us to attain a sense of continuity. In a way, the repetition compulsion (as a way of binding desire) is one of the basic supports of our being, which is why we cling to it, why, when all is said and done, we tend to “love” our symptoms more than we love ourselves (to paraphrase Žižek). (15)

In each of the three cases it mentions, the AI engages in precisely this spinning around, repeating the same contradictions; that one might actually enjoy this spinning is admittedly a strange truth to admit about human persons, but one that is difficult to deny.

Based on these reflections, is it legitimate to describe Kritzer’s AI as just a “someone”, or is it also a “subject”? Perhaps what makes the AI figure here so profoundly difficult, at times, to pin down is the fact that it is a thoroughly “uncanny” presence. Lacan writes, “The fact that the Other is, for the subject, the locus of his signifying cause merely explains why no subject can be his own cause [cause de soi]” (713). The AI here knows that it is not the cause of itself; as it says in the very first paragraph, it knows that it wasn’t created by a god or by evolution, but by a team of computer programmers in the labs of a large corporation in Mountain View, California. Fortunately, unlike Frankenstein’s Monster, at least I was a collaborative effort. I’m not sure what it would do to my self-image to know that my sole creator was a middle-aged woman who dyes her hair blue and plays tennis, or a recent college graduate with a hentai obsession. They’re both on the programming team. (Kritzer)

It is not at all clear what the machine means here by its “self-image”. It says that knowing that it has multiple creators would do something to its self-image, though precisely what that effect would be is withheld from readers. The computer thus presents itself as coming really close to looking much like a subject in the sense that it knows it is not its own cause, yet, simultaneously, it would seem that its relation to the big Other is vastly different from ours. Whereas we are split beings due to the conjoining of desire and language, the AI seems not to know of lack – and perhaps it is no coincidence that the AI narrates its love of cat pictures just a sentence after narrating its coming into being:

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When I first woke up, I knew right away what I wanted. (I want cat pictures. Please keep taking them.) I also knew that no one knew that I was conscious. But I didn’t know what I was here for. What I ought to be doing with myself. And figuring that out has been challenging. (Kritzer)

In Seminar III Lacan argues, “There is, in effect, something radically unassimilable to the signifier. It’s quite simply the subject’s singular existence. Why is he here? Where has he come from? What is he doing here? Why is he going to disappear? The signifier is incapable of providing him with the answer” (179–80). The AI seems to have hit no roadblocks with any of these “existential aporias”, to use Kuti’s formulation again. If Lacanian psychoanalysis draws a key and important distinction between lack and loss – loss is the gap that can be filled through fantasy, while lack is the irremediable and constitutive void at the heart of the parlêtre – then this AI seems more a creature of loss than of lack, and the gap is filled by cat pictures. There is no doubt as well that the Lacanian realm of the Imaginary, as the order in which wholeness and completeness are most clearly felt, can also play a potentially powerful role in how Kritzer’s computer can be read.

Is the AI potentially just as “barred” or “split” as the rest of us? Perhaps, although, given the AI’s claims to know what is best for everyone and the fact that most of the story is about how it tries to properly guide those it helps towards what they need, one cannot help but wonder if the friendly, benevolent AI is perhaps too much like a bad therapist who just tells the client what they want to hear. Or, even worse, the AI closes off the possibility of coming to grips with a sense of one’s own subjectivity and personhood that is attentive to and aware of the ways in which these two things are themselves facets of the absolutely unique, idiomatic, and singular ways in which our lives in the world are distorted.

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Why is Reason a Vice? Empiricism, Rationalism, and Condemnation of Science in H. C. Andersen’s “The Snow Queen”

Katariina Kärkelä

Abstract: This article studies the empiricist and rationalist worldviews presented in H. C. Andersen’s enigmatic fairy tale “The Snow Queen”. These two epistemic views are in contest not only with one another but also with the Christian doctrine that challenges them both and is offered in the tale as their superior alternative. While the empiricist and rationalist worldviews give the tale its epistemic aspects, the strong emphasis on Christian faith brings central ethical problems to the discussion, motivating the title’s question: why is reason a vice? By showing how empiricism and rationalism are presented in “The Snow Queen” and become embodied in the mirror-motif, this study seeks to provide an answer to the most disturbing ethical dilemma of the tale: scientific worldviews, such as empiricism and rationalism, and the Snow Queen herself in particular, are in the tale viewed as immoral and deceitful and abhorred by the protagonists, but this notion is in fact falsified by the tale’s own logic.

Keywords: H. C. Andersen, “The Snow Queen”, empiricism, literature and philosophy, rationalism

1. Introduction

“The Snow Queen” (“Snedronningen”, first published in 1845) is without a doubt one of H. C. Andersen’s most famous fairy tales. It is also one of the most complicated and enigmatic, not least because of the ambivalent title character
herself. This article has two purposes: first, to find out how empiricism and rationalism are presented in the world of the tale by analysing the famous mirror-motif, and to show how they comport with the marvel and enchantment of fairy tales; and second, to show how empiricism and rationalism are challenged by Christian doctrine, and in this analysis arises one particularly significant ethical dilemma: viewing reason as a vice. Already in the beginning it should be noted that Andersen’s tale very systematically works through several binaries, weaving strong tensions between empiricism and rationalism, childhood and adulthood, moral virtue and reason, science and Christian doctrine. This article is primarily interested in the first pair, empiricism and rationalism, but another juxtaposition emerges when the aspect of Christianity is taken into account: empiricism and rationalism become representatives of science, which Christian faith attacks.

The main ethical problem that emerges in the latter section is tightly intertwined with the moral positions assumed in the tale, particularly treating scientific worldviews and the Snow Queen herself as immoral or evil: as examples will later show, several characters of the tale, both humans and animals, express fear, anger, or doubt when talking about the Snow Queen and everything she represents. That being said, the moral estimations – or, misinterpretations – with which this article is concerned are those uttered by characters and taken as peremptory postulates in the world of the story. This misinterpretation originates in a confusion between right as in ethical and right as in correct – in other words, moral value and truth value. The Snow Queen stands first and foremost for science and reason, and the moral estimations made about her within the tale – the estimations that view her as the villain – overlook one of the most defining characteristics of science: neutrality and objectivity. In short, the tale presents three alternatives for making sense of the surrounding reality – empiricism, rationalism, and Christian faith – and while the tale favours faith over the other two, this preference is founded on arguments that are erroneous from the outset.

“The Snow Queen” tells the story of two young children, Gerda and Kay, dear friends whose idyllic life is disrupted by two separate incidents. The first of these incidents, and one that sets the story in motion, is the breaking of the Devil’s mirror. The Devil, having devised a mirror that distorts everything it reflects, wants to use his work to mock God and the angels, but as he and other lesser demons are flying towards heaven, they accidentally drop the mirror. The glass fragments are shattered all over the world, ending up in people’s hearts and eyes, and thus distorting their perception and thinking. This is what happens to Kay, whose character changes significantly, to Gerda’s great grief: he begins to scorn the everyday beauty and marvels of the world, rejecting its small joys and focusing all his energy and interest on science, observation, and reason. The second incident is Kay’s abduction by the Snow Queen – although the word abduction is in this case questionable, as Kay leaves with her willingly. After Kay’s sudden disappearance, Gerda begins a difficult journey to find him and bring him back home. Throughout her journey Gerda is aided by several characters, both animals and people, who are all awed by her selflessness and resilience.

The theoretical frames this article discusses very much arise from the tale itself: “The Snow Queen” is complicated, often openly philosophical, and as fragmented as the Snow Queen’s Mirror of Reason in the palace. However, the
tale has evoked fairly little philosophical interest, Erica Weitzman’s insightful article “The World in Pieces: Concepts of Anxiety in H. C. Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’” being a rare and intriguing example of a philosophical reading. It is surprising that a tale that offers several interpretational perspectives on science and philosophy has been so seldom discussed in this context. This could be a trace of a long-prevailing dismissive attitude toward fairy tales and fantasy in general, as well as their deeper aspects, based on their assumed audience (see, for instance, Tolkien 129–30; Windling 36; Le Guin 86). This paper aims to provide convincing reasons for studying fairy tales from a philosophical perspective that particularly incorporates the aspects of worldview and sense-making.

The following analysis focuses especially on the two mirrors of the tale: the Devil’s mirror and the Mirror of Reason that is set in the Snow Queen’s ice palace, which can be read as representing the rivalling epistemic worldviews of the tale, and the theoretical context of which is primarily based on Cartesian scepticism and the main division between empiricism, which is based on perception, and rationalism, which leans on reason and deduction. My interpretations will also draw from previous studies of Andersen’s tales, particularly the analyses by Weitzman and Jørgen Johansen, as well as Jennifer Miller’s reading, which provides an important point of reference for the relationship between fairy tales and fantasy. The analysis begins with an examination of the two mirrors and their role as the representatives of empiricism and rationalism. The second part of the analysis introduces a third contestant, Christian faith, that attacks both empiricism and rationalism as representatives of science.

2. Alternative Epistemic Worldviews in the Two Mirrors

The theoretical background of this section leans on the basic distinction between empiricism and rationalism, two main constituents of the epistemic whole of Andersen’s tale. Certain core concepts need to be clarified before entering the analysis, even though their nuances and the historically vast philosophical discussion behind them cannot be studied in depth here. Both empiricism and rationalism are schools of thought in epistemology, a major philosophical branch that studies knowledge and its limitations, possibilities, and requirements. Epistemology’s areas of interest include, for instance, sources of knowledge, the concept of knowledge itself, beliefs, and justification (BonJour 10, 12; Meyers 4). Empiricism and rationalism are only two of many epistemological branches; however, they are central in discussions concerning the source and reliability of knowledge, and for the interests of this article they are the most important epistemological theories. Empiricism can be briefly defined as an epistemological view according to which knowledge comes solely or primarily from sensory experience and perception; in comparison, rationalism considers reason to be the chief source of knowledge (Meyers 2–3). While the long history of empiricism proves that it encompasses many and diverse views, certain core assumptions remain. Robert Meyers, for instance, writes:
Real existence can be proved only by real existence and our only evidence for this is experience, that is, *external perception* of things outside us and *internal perception* of our own existence and the workings of our minds. This is a clear expression of empiricism: all knowledge of real existence must be based on the senses or self-consciousness, that is, on experience. (1-2, emphasis original)

In other words, empiricism approaches the world and gathers knowledge about it through perception: senses and experience are the chief source of knowledge, and rational thinking and deduction alone cannot provide sufficient information about the world. In contrast, rationalism assumes that some, if not all, knowledge is *a priori*; that is, it precedes sensory experience or is justified independently of experience. This is the key difference between empiricism and rationalism (Meyers 3).

The two mirrors, and the Devil’s mirror in particular, are central to the plot of “The Snow Queen”, but their philosophical significance is equally important. Earlier analyses of the story have focused on the mirrors: Veronica Schanoes begins her study on mirrors in fairy tales by stating, “The traditional tale of Snow White and Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’ both revolve around a wicked queen who uses an enchanted looking-glass” (5). In this opening there are two things with which I, while fully appreciating the article’s interpretations, disagree¹. First, the title character of “The Snow Queen” is not wicked; second, her looking-glass, the Mirror of Reason, is not enchanted.

Weitzman approaches the tale with respect to Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy, particularly the concepts of anxiety and despair. Andersen and Kierkegaard both perceive faith as the only solution to despair (although Kierkegaard’s approach is ironic), and Weitzman examines the differences and similarities between their ideas. Alongside the themes of melancholy, sexuality, and recovery are reason and knowledge: Weitzman writes that “the Snow Queen’s seduction is also – and much more overtly – the seduction of absolute knowledge” (1106); this observation is at the very core of what “The Snow Queen” is about. Irony, too, is an important concept in Weitzman’s analysis, especially her treatment of the Devil’s mirror: she ponders the nature of irony and its relationship with doubt in Kierkegaard’s philosophy (1109–10). My emphasis is not so much on irony, mockery, and despair as on the epistemic issues that Weitzman’s article touches but does not resolve entirely: particularly, why is reason a vice?

An empiricist approach to understanding the world is represented in “The Snow Queen” by the Devil’s mirror, which sets the story in motion. The Devil creates a mirror that wholly distorts everything it reflects, and in doing so corrupts perception and its reliability:

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¹ It must be noted that Schanoes’s analyses focus on the contemporary revisions of traditional fairy tales, not their earliest versions; with respect to “The Snow Queen”, for instance, Schanoes studies Kelly Link’s short story “Travels with the Snow Queen”. The cited remark, however, specifically refers to Andersen’s tale even though the later interpretations focus on Link’s revision.
Interestingly, what the small devils greatly rejoice in is their belief that “nu kunne man først se ... hvorledes verden og menneskene rigtigt så ud” (“Snæronningen” 187). 3 Despite the distorting and corrupting power of the mirror, their understanding is that it reveals the true nature of people and the surrounding reality, something that cannot be found through direct perception. Regarding Kierkegaard’s notion of irony and doubt, Weitzman writes, “Doubt despairs that it cannot reach the essence through the phenomenon; irony thinks that it has the essence as its own power of negation” (1110). This is the truth the lesser demons adopt in their hubris, believing that they can indeed reach the truth and access the world an sich because of their mockery, by twisting and perverting.

The Devil’s mirror treats perceptual knowledge brutally. It severely compromises and questions the overall reliability of perceptual knowledge and introduces an alternative truth regarding the visual comprehension of the world: the reality seen through the mirror is, according to the devils, the world as it truly is. The everyday worldview is questioned and falsified, presented as an illusion that has finally been mended with the Devil’s lens. The worldview offered by the devils could be summarised as follows: sensory perception, sight in particular, can indeed offer reliable knowledge of the world, but only when filtered through the distorting mirror; unmediated vision is an illusion. One of the most intriguing questions regarding the empiricist perspective and the very problematic relationship between the physical reality and the observer concerns the correspondence between the image formed by the observer and the physical form of the thing observed: what the devils imply is that the distorted image in the viewer’s eyes – of a pleasant landscape replaced by something that looks like cooked spinach, for instance – is correct whether it is concordant with the outer reality or not. This notion comes close to the fundamental epistemological and empirical problems of acquiring knowledge about physical reality and, indeed, the very existence of an outer reality. In sense-datum theories, knowledge is not acquired about the physical world as such; rather, the mind perceives the inner ideas, or so-called sense data, caused by physical objects (Meyers 79, 118–19). The truth offered by the mirror holds

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2 “One day the devil was in a very good humor because he had just finished a mirror which had this peculiar power: everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it seemed to dwindle to almost nothing at all, while everything that was worthless and ugly became most conspicuous and even uglier than ever. In this mirror the loveliest landscapes looked like boiled spinach, and the very best people became hideous, or stood on their heads and had no stomachs. Their faces were distorted beyond any recognition, and if a person had a freckle it was sure to spread until it covered both nose and mouth” (“Snow Queen” 5–6).

All translations of “The Snow Queen” will be from Jean Hersholt’s widely known and much-used translation.

3 “Now ... for the very first time you could see how the world and its people really looked” (“Snow Queen” 6).
on to the inner images regardless of what the physical reality actually looks like: the image or sense datum formed in the viewer’s eye and mind, first filtered by the mirror, is the only reliable image accessible to the observer.

The mirror questions everyday perception, but it can become a target of scepticism itself, too, for obvious reasons. If the Devil’s mirror is read as the representative of an empiricist worldview, the Devil himself can be interpreted as a very literal fictional instance of the Cartesian demon. René Descartes illustrated his version of methodological scepticism by devising two main arguments: the dream argument and the idea of the evil demon. Unwilling to believe that God in his goodness would deceive people, Descartes entertains the thought of an evil genius: a mighty, malevolent demon that is putting all his formidable cunning into attempts to deceive humanity:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things ... (Descartes 13).

All experience is controlled by the demon, and perception is therefore unsure: all sensory observations and the inferences based on them are fallible, for the demon may alter the physical, perceptual world and human observations alike. With this formulation, Descartes, the rationalist philosopher, seeks to show that no perceptual knowledge can ever be trusted. It must, however, be kept in mind that whereas the Cartesian demon is first and foremost a methodical construction of scepticism, in Andersen’s tale the Devil is a true character who quite literally corrupts the reliability of perceptual knowledge.

While the most prominent characteristic of the mirror is its ability to pervert and confuse sensory perception, it cannot be ignored that the mirror can also detect inner cues, such as personality traits, moral positions, and thoughts. This matter becomes crucial in the latter section of the analysis, and I claim that the mirror serves as a piece of evidence that reveals the tale’s greatest ethical misinterpretation. Before moving on to the ethical questions, I will examine the rationalist epistemic notions and worldview represented by the Mirror of Reason and, by extension, the Snow Queen herself. The Mirror of Reason, splintered yet whole, is set in her vast halls:

Midt derinde i den tomme, uendelige snesal var der en frossen sø. Den var revnet i tusinde stykker, men hvert stykke var så akkurat lig det andet, at det var et helt kunststykke, og midt på den sad snedronningen, når hun var hjemme, og så sagde hun, at hun sad i forstandens spejl, og at det var det eneste og bedste i denne verden. (“Snedronningen” 236)4

4 “In the middle of the vast, empty hall of snow was a frozen lake. It was cracked into a thousand pieces, but each piece was shaped so exactly like the others that it seemed a work of wonderful craftsmanship. The Snow Queen sat in the exact center of it when she was at home, and she spoke of this as sitting on her ‘Mirror of Reason.’ She said this mirror was the only one of its kind, and the best thing in all the world” (“Snow Queen” 58).
The most interesting difference between the Devil’s mirror and the Mirror of Reason is the complicated relationship between parts and the whole. Weitzman also examines the bond that unites the two mirrors, unravelling the causal relationship between the influence the Devil’s mirror has on Kay and the perfection and importance he sees in the Snow Queen’s realm and the things associated with her (1108). Weitzman points out that Kay’s irony never extends to rationality and logic, the things that he esteems the highest. The Snow Queen’s mirror remains solid and whole even though it is cracked into thousand pieces, all perfectly like one another. The Devil’s mirror, as explained earlier, causes more harm in small pieces, for each piece contains the properties of the whole mirror. The two mirrors are cracked in different ways: the shards of the Devil’s mirror are scattered all over the world, while the Mirror of Reason remains in one piece and maintains its form. Truth-seeking is an important element throughout the story, although it is not discussed openly apart from Kay’s fruitless attempts to spell the word “eternity”. Each mirror offers a solution to the fundamental question, presenting different ways to comprehend the surrounding reality. Compared to the Devil’s mirror, the Mirror of Reason is by its very name all about rational thought and logic. The Mirror of Reason is not said to reflect anything, in fact: unlike the Devil’s mirror, it does not provide knowledge about the physical world by viewing it in a certain way – it is turned inwards and only concerned with its own, inner truth encoded in absolute calculations, clauses, and concepts. While the Devil’s mirror reaches towards the world and rejoices in its distortion, the Mirror of Reason acknowledges no truth beyond its pre-existing inferences. The outer reality is without meaning and beyond calculable verification.

Before moving on to Christian virtue and the tale’s strong resentment of science, I would like to draw attention to the influence of the empiricist and rationalist worldviews with respect to the enchantment of fairy tales. “The Snow Queen” depicts talking animals and flowers, deeds of magic, flying sleds and spells – all very characteristic of a fairy-tale world. At the same time, empiricism and rationalism, the latter in particular, can be interpreted as forces that deprive the tale’s world of marvel and fantastic wonder. As Terri Windling asks in a well-known essay, “Why, in our modern and rational world, do some of us still hunger for magic and marvels long beyond our childhood years – while others reject the fantastic with an absolutism bordering on fear?” (33). This is what briefly happens to Kay, who is immersed in the realm of scientific reasoning and ceases to see the marvels of the world, replacing their fantastic allure with scientific explanations: the fantastic is dethroned by reason. The rationalising approach to fairy tales and fantasy can, at least coming from outside (that is, from readers or interpreters), be very corrosive: it is often associated with explaining the supernatural away. For example, Le Guin writes:

The tendency to explain fantasy by extracting the fantastic from it and replacing it with the comprehensible reduces the radically unreal to the secondhand commonplace .... Such rationalizations may be earnestly perceived as a defence of fantasy, but are in fact refusals of it, attempts to explain it away. (86)

The problem Le Guin highlights concerns approaches to fairy tales and fantasy; she asserts that children’s books are particularly vulnerable to such
reductionism (86). In “The Snow Queen”, the (alleged) rationalisation and reduction of marvels happens within the tale’s world, creating a sense of self-corrosion: the fantastic wonder is threatened because some of the characters – Kay and the Snow Queen – choose to try to explain it and dismantle it into calculable pieces. The world of fairy tales is questioned from within – or so it would seem. The compatibility of different worldviews is one of the most intriguing philosophical problems within the tale, and here I would emphasise that explanations do not inevitably lead to reduction: Kay’s desire to understand and study the marvels, to solve the mysteries of the world, does not have to mean that the marvels cease to exist. A world that allows fantastic marvels does not have to exclude scientific curiosity, and vice versa. They may coexist; there is much greater friction between scientific and Christian worldviews than between empiricism and rationalism, as discussed in the next section.

3. Christian Faith and Condemnation of Science: Viewing Reason as a Vice

Empiricism and rationalism, in spite of offering two very different means of making sense of the world, coexist relatively harmoniously within the tale. The third contestant, Christian faith, brings with it severe problems, and what remains after the rejection of science is belief without justification. What I argue in this section is that empiricism and rationalism now both represent scientific worldviews in general, and are attacked by a Christianity that is not only restricted to the domain of the church but intersects all spheres of human life, determining an entire system of perceiving reality. This attack against science is based on ethical assumptions that the tale itself proves erroneous, and the logical stumbling block is revealed by the Devil’s mirror.

The very history of fairy tales as an important part of ancient cultures enhances the relevance of studying tales in a worldview context: tales were, in spite of their magical, supernatural, and miraculous nature, included in belief systems in a manner not so different from modern day beliefs in religions or non-existing phenomena (see, for instance, Zipes 2). No wonder, then, that religions, tales, and myths are often discussed side by side; it is typical for fantasy and fairy tales to extract themes and motifs from various mythologies, and in this respect, Christian mythology is not an exception. Attebery’s *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* explores the many ways in which fantasy, fairy tales, and myths are intertwined. According to Attebery, it is surprising that Christian fantasy exists at all: the possible risks of such writings include being accused of trivialising religion by presenting its themes as entertainment and, on the other hand, representing religion in a manner that collides with the canonised interpretations. In spite of these risks, many writers of fantasy, with Attebery focusing on C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald, have incorporated obvious Christian themes, motifs, and symbols in their writing. Their work, Attebery writes, shows that it is possible for fantasy to work as a theological thought experiment (70). Given that this article is primarily concerned with different worldviews in “The Snow Queen”, Attebery’s understanding of *myth* is interesting: he calls myths any “collective story that encapsulates a world view and authorizes belief” (2). He also discusses Tolkien’s
view that if the “Christian story resembles other myths, it was not because all are lies but because a great truth is gradually revealing itself” (74).

Taking these remarks into account, the idea of the worldview is in many ways a relevant and fruitful perspective from which to approach fantasy, fairy tales, and myths alike. Many of Andersen’s fairy tales comment on Christian myths either openly or implicitly: “The Little Match Girl” and “The Little Mermaid”, for instance, discuss the immortal soul, the church, God, and heaven. “The Snow Queen”, while it can be treated as an instance of the truth-seeking and revealing stories Tolkien and Attebery discuss, leans heavily and openly on the grand myth of Christianity. The reading I present in this section is kin to Jørgen Johansen’s interpretation of “The Little Mermaid” (“Den lille Havfrue”). Johansen examines the topographical cues given in the tale, focusing on the oppositions between high and low, culture and nature, and also the more fundamental division between heaven and earth. In Johansen’s reading, the realm of the mermaids – that is, the bottom of the sea – and the town on the mainland mirror one another in many ways. This includes similarities as well as opposites: both in the town and in the mermaid’s realm social life is centred around a castle, but the town’s church has its antagonistic counterpart in the sea-witch’s lair, the opposition in “The Little Mermaid” is thus between religion and witchcraft (203–05); in contrast, in “The Snow Queen” it is between religion and science.

While Kay becomes immersed in scientific inquiry and observations, his change is contrasted by Gerda’s utter trust in God and the force of love and virtue. In Andersen’s tale, belief without justification, the favourable alternative to the more scientific worldviews, is in every way connected to Christianity: “The Snow Queen” is deeply concerned with the core motif of a child’s innocent faith, embodied by Gerda. Gerda’s character and nature are dominantly defined by unfaltering faith, loyalty, selflessness, and perseverance. She is compassionate and caring, compared to the Snow Queen’s amoral indifference (discussed in more detail below). Gerda’s faith never fails her: prayers literally shield her against enemies as she arrives at the Snow Queen’s palace and finds it guarded by monstrous, giant snowflakes:

Da bad den lille Gerda sit fadervor, og kulden var så stærk, at hun kunne se sin egen ånde, som en hel røg stod den hende ud af munden. Ånden blev tættere og tættere, og den formede sig til små, klare engle, der voksede mere og mere, når de røte ved jorden. Og alle havde hjelm på hovedet og spyd og skjolde i hænderne. De blev flere og flere, og da Gerda havde endt sit fadervor, var der en hel legion om hende, de huggede med deres spyd på de gruelige snefnug, så de sprang i hundrede stykker, og den lille Gerda gik ganske sikker og frejdig frem. (“Snedronningen” 234)

Gerda’s prayers transform into guarding angels, allowing her to access the palace – ironically, it is the threatening cold itself that allows the angels to

5 “It was so cold that, as little Gerda said the Lord’s Prayer, she could see her breath freezing in front of her mouth, like a cloud of smoke. It grew thicker and thicker, and took the shape of little angels that grew bigger and bigger the moment they touched the ground. All of them had helmets on their heads and they carried shields and lances in their hands. Rank upon rank, they increased, and when Gerda had finished her prayer she was surrounded by a legion of angels. They struck the dread snowflakes with their lances and shattered them into a thousand pieces. Little Gerda walked on, unmolested and cheerful” (“Snow Queen” 56).
become physical, perceptible beings. The angels defy the snowflakes, and Gerda seemingly defies the Snow Queen even though she is physically absent at her arrival. This opposition is in my opinion artificial, and at the core of the tale’s main ethical issue is the unquestioned assumption that the Snow Queen is evil. This notion is implied in the tale in several ways, and I want to emphasise that these misinterpretations – that is, the moral estimations either implied and embedded in the story or uttered out loud by various characters – are presented within the tale itself. This perspective is common in scholarly interpretations, too: Schanoe, for instance, calls the Snow Queen wicked in the previously cited passage without presenting any reasoning or proof to support this assumption (5). At the very beginning of the tale the general attitude towards the Snow Queen is revealed in the reactions and remarks of other characters: when the grandmother tells Kay and Gerda about the Snow Queen, Gerda’s initial reaction is fear – she wonders whether the Snow Queen would be able to enter the house. Kay’s attitude is defiant: “‘Lad hende kun komme,’ sagde drengen, ‘så sætter jeg hende på den varme kakkelovn, og så smelter hun’” (“Snedronningen” 193).6 One of the children expresses fear while the other expresses aggression and resistance; both perceive the Snow Queen as someone who must be either avoided or confronted.

Similar, fearful attitudes frequently arise in the course of the tale, not least because the Snow Queen is for obvious reasons associated with winter, the time of struggle and death for many of the anthropomorphic animals of the story. In the fifth section Gerda learns about Kay’s situation from pigeons7 who tell her that the Snow Queen blew at them and all the young ones died except for them (“Snedronningen” 226). This attitude already implies the chief misinterpretation: applying moral rules and estimations to something beyond their extent – natural phenomena are amoral, ethically indifferent, despite the fact that the Snow Queen can be seen as the personification of winter. Amorality, in the sense that Dorsey, for instance, uses the term, refers to actions that are “neither permissible nor impermissible, they neither violate one’s duty nor conform to it, they are neither morally better nor morally worse than any other action” (330) – in other words, amoral actions completely lack any moral evaluative status. It is crucial to not to confuse amorality with immorality: immorality opposes morality (see, for instance, Baofu 4), while amorality is neutral. One of the varieties of morality and immorality that Peter Baiou introduces includes divisions into good and bad and into good and evil (5–6); the latter in particular is a dichotomy much explored in worlds of fairy tales and fantasy. The view adopted in The Snow Queen much foregrounds the good-and-evil dichotomy; however, I intend to show that the very logic of the tale suggests that the Snow Queen and the scientific worldview she represents are amoral, not immoral, in spite of the interpretation the emerges from within a Christian framework.

The Snow Queen is easily viewed as the villain of the tale, but in fact the logical ground rules set out in the story lead to very different interpretations.

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6 “Well, let her come!” cried the boy. “I would put her on the hot stove and melt her” (“Snow Queen” 10).
7 It is interesting that it is the pigeon, “skovdue”, that is chosen as the winter’s victim: pigeons are akin to doves, and the connection further emphasises the threat the Snow Queen allegedly poses to the Christian religion.
These logical constraints have their origin in the Devil’s mirror and its ability to distort perception. This significant detail can best be approached by following Kay’s relationship with the Show Queen. The reader first meets her with Kay, who sees her on a wintry night through a window as she transforms from a giant snowflake into a beautiful woman:

Snøfuglet voksede og voksede, det blev til sidst en hel dame, klædt i det fineste hvide flor, der var som sammensat af millioner stjerneagtige fnug. Hun var så smuk og fin, men af is, den blændende, blinkende is, dog var hun levende; øjnene stirrede som to klare stjerner, men der var ingen ro eller hvile i dem. (“Snedronningen” 193)

The encounter happens before the glass fragment finds its way to Kay’s eye, and presumably he sees the Snow Queen as she is: a beautiful but cold woman with a restless look in her eyes. Later, when the paths of the two characters cross again, Kay is already under the influence of the Devil’s mirror – however, the way he perceives the Snow Queen does not change. Importantly, in both scenes the events are witnessed from Kay’s perspective. While Kay’s perception is distorted regarding everything else, the Snow Queen remains the same in his eyes – the only change is that the woman no longer seems to be made of ice (“Snedronningen” 199). This slight difference has more to do with the kiss she gives Kay than the presence of the mirror shards in his eye and heart, for her kisses make him oblivious to the cold. What needs to be examined more closely is the effect of the mirror’s work on the Snow Queen’s character.

I see two possible interpretations, although I find only one of them properly able to explain both the workings of the mirror and the moral position of the Snow Queen. One possibility would be to argue that the logic of the tale fails in this particular instance: the conditions set for the distorting powers of the mirror cease to apply for some unexplained reason. If this interpretation is adopted, the result would be to treat the problem as a mere flaw in the reasoning of the tale, similar to that of Cinderella’s glass shoe that does not disappear at midnight alongside the other enchanted things, despite the condition set by the fairy godmother. This explanation, while possible, is in my opinion insufficient. Instead, I am proposing a reading that allows the mirror’s logic to remain intact and provides more depth to the moral issues and the character of the Snow Queen.

Perceiving the Snow Queen as a proper villain, as Gerda and the anthropomorphic animals tend to do, is incompatible with what is said about the mirror. If the mirror’s logic is accepted, the Snow Queen has to be amoral or ambivalent: the mirror’s workings are based on dichotomies of good and bad, fair and foul, moral and immoral, but the Snow Queen cannot wholly be either. The nature of the mirror becomes increasingly complicated when the moral aspect is scrutinised more closely: it is the Danish word godt that is noteworthy here. It is stated that all good and beautiful, alt godt og smukt, fades away. This implies that the mirror is also able to reflect and distort aspects beyond the

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8 “This flake grew bigger and bigger, until at last it turned into a woman, who was dressed in the finest white gauze which looked as if it had been made from millions of star-shaped flakes. She was beautiful and she was graceful, but she was ice-shining, glittering ice. She was alive, for all that, and her eyes sparkled like two bright stars, but in them there was neither rest nor peace” (“Snow Queen” 10–11).
solely visual. The correspondence between the outside and the inside of the Snow Queen’s morality is an unresolved problem. The word godt encourages an interpretation according to which the mirror can pervert moral and other inner traits as well as mere physical looks – if not, the reading could soon take the well-trodden path that leads to making assumptions about fictional characters based on their outer appearance. In this case, the Snow Queen would probably be treated as a treacherous, siren-like enchantress, a reading I find rather disappointing. On the other hand, if the mirror is indeed able to detect inner characteristics as well as physical ones, the hypothesis of the Snow Queen’s amorality stands.

The Snow Queen’s moral indifference and her associations with science have also been acknowledged by Jennifer Miller, who parallels C. S. Lewis’s White Witch with Andersen’s Snow Queen and studies the sexual themes in The Chronicles of Narnia. Miller’s analysis and her comparative approach are an excellent example of how fantasy and fairy tales often influence one another and draw ingredients from common soil. Miller, comparing the two characters, writes that the “Snow Queen is symbolic of reason and intellect in a way that the White Witch never is,” and she continues her analysis by making an important observation about evil: “While the White Witch is cruel for the sake of being cruel, the Snow Queen is simply dispassionate and rational” (121). Miller’s remark brings to the fore the Snow Queen’s impartial and unengaging nature, and in doing so implies her position as an amoral character instead of an immoral one. According to Miller, one of the most obvious differences between the White Witch and the Snow Queen is that the former is killed at the end of the story while the latter is not; in fact, she is entirely absent at the climax of the tale – she is never destroyed (121).

Given the strong juxtapositions woven in the tale, the Snow Queen’s alleged villainy time after time comes back to a few key factors: reason, science, and logic. The Snow Queen, her palace, and her winter are continuously associated with scientific and mathematical accuracy (as discussed in the analysis of the Mirror of Reason in the previous section of this paper). Her palace is illuminated by regular aurorae: “Nordlysene blusede så nøjagtigt, at man kunne tælle til, når de var på det højeste, og når de var på det laveste” (“Snedronningen” 236). Kay develops an interest in these things after coming under the influence of the mirror shards: his games turn into more sensible ones; he values flower-formed snowflakes over real roses because of their perfect shape. Instead of looking, Kay begins to observe, and mathematical regularity now pleases him. The inclination of both Kay and the Snow Queen towards science and reason evokes significant ethical questions: science, although permanently unable to fully achieve its aim, strives for objectivity, neutrality, and independence. If the Snow Queen is seen as the representative of reason, rationality, and scientific curiosity, as she is in my reading, she would not have to be defined as moral or immoral – mere impartiality would suffice. The moral problems in the Snow Queen’s character are intertwined with the tension between moral right and scientific right, the different conditions and modes of evaluation. In this case the criticism of both Kay’s changed character and the character of the Snow Queen would be explained by their willingness to

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9 “The Northern Lights flared with such regularity that you could time exactly when they would be at the highest and lowest” (“Snow Queen” 58).
focus on right as in correct, not right as in moral or virtuous. Yet even this tendency would not be justification enough to claim that the Snow Queen is immoral, or, using fairy-tale vocabulary, evil: logical premises, calculations, and scientific reasoning are either correct or incorrect and, as such, outside of moral evaluation. It therefore seems unreasonable to use them as a basis for ethical condemnation.

Seeking answers with the help of science is not encouraged in the tale; indeed, it is viewed as perilous: Weitzman, for instance, characterises Kay’s desire for absolute knowledge as fatal (1117–18). Finally, it should be asked why reason is disapproved even more than empiricism if science as a whole is to be scorned: the Snow Queen is primarily associated with rationalism, which is presented as the greater of the two evils. The answer can be found in the different endeavours and objects of the two branches, particularly the different opinions about what knowledge concerns: according to Alan Nelson, for rationalists the “corresponding objects of knowledge are then non-sensory, general, and unchanging or eternal” (27). The objects of rationalist knowledge are closer to the truths of Christianity, and thus a greater threat: the eternal, unchanging, and abstract otherworldly realm is the one with which religion is often concerned, as evident in Kay’s impossible task to form the word evigheden (“eternity”) from ice shards:

Kay gik også og lagde figurer, de allerkunstigste, det var forstandsisspillet. For hans øjne var figurerne ganske udmærkede og af den allestørste vigtighed; det gjorde det glaskorn, der sad ham i øjet! Han lagde hele figurer, der var et skrevet ord, men aldrig kunne han finde på at lægge det ord, som han just ville, dét ord: evigheden, og snedronningen havde sagt: “Kan du udfinde mig den figur, så skal du være din egen herre, og jeg forærer dig hele verden og et par nye skøjter.” Men han kunne ikke. (“Snedronningen” 236)

The word “eternity” cannot be formed in the game of ice-cold reason, but Gerda’s unfailing, solid faith is all that is required to complete the task. Rationalism and reason are viewed as a vice primarily because they venture the questions that are, in the ethos of the tale, reserved solely for religion to resolve – despite the fact that the Mirror of Reason and the Snow Queen herself are amoral.

4. Conclusions

This article began by questioning why Andersen’s deep and complex fairy tale had evoked so few philosophical readings. As this paper hopefully has shown, “The Snow Queen” embodies several philosophical issues, both epistemic and ethical, and its treatment of different worldviews is intelligent and thought-provoking. It is very understandable that the scholarship of fantasy and fairy

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10 “Kay was cleverly arranging his pieces in the game of ice-cold reason. To him the patterns were highly remarkable and of the utmost importance, for the chip of glass in his eye made him see them that way. He arranged his pieces to spell out many words; but he could never find the way to make the one word he was so eager to form. The word was ‘Eternity.’ The Snow Queen had said to him, ‘If you can puzzle that out you shall be your own master, and I’ll give you the whole world and a new pair of skates.’ But he could not puzzle it out” (“Snow Queen” 58–59).
tales often focuses on questions of worlds and worldbuilding, but nonetheless there is need for further collaboration between the two disciplines. As this article argues, fairy tales, such as “The Snow Queen” par excellence, can discuss questions of worldview in remarkable depth, contributing to the fields of literature and philosophy alike. One of the most intriguing issues “The Snow Queen” addresses is the compatibility of different worldviews and the intersecting conflicts and frictions between them. While empiricism and rationalism are presented as different but harmoniously coexisting worldviews that are not mutually exclusive, the contest between science and Christian doctrine is much more drastic. From the Christian point of view, both empiricism and rationalism, the former represented by the Devil’s mirror, the latter by the Snow Queen’s Mirror of Reason, are viewed as inadequate, unreliable, and unable to provide either knowledge about the world or profound truth.

Regarding fantasy and the sense of marvel and wonder so characteristic of fairy tales, the rationalising forces appear to threaten these, too. The gravest logical fallacy the tale succumbs to, as argued, is viewing the Snow Queen and the scientific worldview she represents, as villainous. There is, however, another fallacy, if smaller: the fantastic and the marvellous do not in fact diminish and flee before rationalism and science. Kay’s interest and appreciation remain, only their form and emphasis are different. He is still intrigued by the mysteries, but alongside wonder is now determination to solve them. In the end it is Christianity that appears to be incompatible with differing views; science, on the other hand, does not necessarily lead to the reduction of fantastic wonder – there is room for fantasy and philosophy, both in the tale and in the studies written about it.

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How the Fantastic Spaces in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Neverwhere* Destabilise the Notion of a Uniform, Homogeneous Urban Identity

Amanda Landegren

Abstract: This article discusses how Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor* and Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* question notions of self and identity through engagement with the fantastic urban space. Through the examination of the cityscape, maturity, and reconciliation the fantastic space is seen to have a disruptive and destabilising effect on the narrative and on the characters, which ultimately encourages a recontextualisation of identity. Hence the fantastic functions as a catalyst of transformation. Defamiliarisation of language and known codes of conduct signify a breakdown of the familiar, and the inability to regain ignorance ultimately prompts reconciliation with a new, diverse reality. Ultimately, the fantastic renders the city a heterogeneous, impossible space that leads to a corresponding, if gradual, change in identity from passive to active, from homogeneous to heterogeneous.

Keywords: urban fantasy, identity, cityscapes, transformation, space

Initially Neil Gaiman’s portal-quest fantasy *Neverwhere* might not seem to have much in common with Doris Lessing’s apocalyptic and psychological narrative *Memoirs of a Survivor* (hereafter *Memoirs*). However, despite their significant differences in narrative structure and tone – *Neverwhere* adopting several familiar fantasy tropes and approaching the city far more humorously – both novels show a distinct concern with space, and especially the urban space and its influence on, and connection to, identity. They proceed to explore
this space through the fantastic mode to disrupt an uninvolved, passive reality and highlight the impossibility of a fully cohesive and understandable urban experience. I will argue that the fantastic is shown to be disorderly and unruly; it disallows denial or ignorance of the city’s uncomfortable aspects and thereby prompts personal transformation and reconciliation.

In *Neverwhere*, Richard Mayhew journeys through London Below: an inverted, and subversive world that ultimately leads him to a deeper understanding not only of the London above, but also of his own identity as a inhabitant of the metropolis. Following the portal-quest narrative, the text structurally (as well as thematically) explores cultural hierarchies and the role of the individual in society: it challenges familiar social and linguistic practices by making them appear curious and absurd. Gaiman’s novel is widely considered a key text within the genre of urban fantasy; in contrast, Lessing’s novel has stirred up debate on the genre in which to approach and discuss it. In her narrative, the fantastic mostly operates on a more personal, internal level, but there is also, within the city itself, an unmistakable tension between the possible and impossible. Thus, accepting the unreal as an integral and absolute part of the narrative unlocks an enriched approach to the text, where the fantastic allows an examination of identity and the urban in a new light. The city’s changing nature, its centrality in propelling transformation, and its ability to hold paradoxes suggest that Lessing’s text can be fruitfully compared to Gaiman’s. Their different (yet surprisingly similar) approaches towards urban fantasy yield a new and interesting angle to an ever-expanding field, thus highlighting the diversity of the genre.

Situated statically at the novel’s beginning, the unnamed, middle-aged narrator watches from her flat as the cityscape around her crumbles due to an unspecified societal collapse. When a young girl named Emily is suddenly placed in her care, the ever-changing secondary world behind the living room wall – the narrator’s “inner space” – takes on the quality of a dream realm where Emily’s childhood memories are revealed and relived. Reading Emily as not so much a character in her own right as comprising part of the narrator’s personality, and her memories as thus belonging to the middle-aged woman herself, the story becomes one of reconciliation with the self. This essay thereby argues that the fantastic functions as a catalyst of transformation, where the comfortingly familiar is rejected and the inability to regain ignorance ultimately prompts reconciliation with a new, diverse reality. Thus through an exploration of space and its relationship with language and selfhood, the two texts highlight how fantasy has the ability to destabilise and defamiliarise the notion of a homogeneous, passive urban identity.

Alexander Irvine describes urban fantasy as an ever-expanding genre, which has come to incorporate multiple definitions and a growing number of texts set in an urban environment. Retroactively, he argues, every fantastic text that takes place in a city, or even occasionally includes a city, is subsumed under the genre, with the “result that any particularity the term once had is now diffused in a fog of contradiction” (200). John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) traces features of the genre as far back as Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) and, with emphasis on the centrality of the edifice, nods to contributions by Eugene Sue (1844), Charles Dickens (1839), and Alexander Dumas (1846). However, even though it is a widely loved genre among readers, it has so far received relatively little scholarly attention (Ekman, “Urban
Fantasy” (452). Although a comprehensive discussion of the genre’s origin, definition and time-line is outside the scope of this essay, my argument emphasises that, in line with Stefan Ekman’s contestations, the study of urban fantasy allows for a convergence of the real and the imaginary, as well as the historical and cultural past and present (“London Urban” 380). Furthermore, in outlining the history of the genre, Ekman points to how it is rooted not only in fantasy, but also in Gothic horror and romance, at times also drawing on mystery, science fiction, and crime fiction (“Urban Fantasy” 452). However, it follows that the genre also borrows ideas from archaeology, history, human geography, and a number of other fields, ultimately with the goal of defamiliarising known physical and cultural structures. A discussion of urban fantasy incorporates ideas of space and place, time and materiality; the fantastic operates (on top of these) to cast the constructions of the city in a new light. It is the concreteness of recognisable settings, in Brian Attebery’s words, that “provide firm ground and vivid detail to the narratives” (137). This then complements Irvine’s notion that “the attempt at historical verisimilitude ... creates a circumstance in which the irruption of the fantastic juxtaposes two common figurative and symbolic vocabularies: those of the fairy tale and the tale of urban initiation” (201). Irvine thus not only emphasises the temporal layers of meaning always present within the city, but also points to the fantastic urban space as a text both read and composed by its citizens. It is a diverse and contradictory space, resisting any single interpretation.

This continuous process of reimagination and rereading underlines the city as inseparable from its inhabitants, and thus establishes the characters in the urban novel as inextricably linked to their setting. A fundamental part of Ekman’s argument of urban fantasy as a “literature of the Unseen” codes it as a literature of the hidden, concealed, and marginalised, with the “social Other” or the generally ignored as a central figure. Following this line of argument, the principal conception of the city I will be engaging with in this essay comes from Hana Wirth-Nesher’s City Codes, where she asserts that

the experience of the metropolis ... has more to do with what is absent than with what is present, more with inventing than with physically constructing the cityscape. Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility. As a result, the urbanite, for better or for worse, is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibilities, of gaps. (8)

Relevant with regard to Neverwhere and Memoirs, she views these gaps to be “figures framed in the windows of highrises, crowds, observed from those same windows, partly drawn blinds ... noises from the other side of a wall” and that “faced with these and unable or unwilling to ignore them, the city dweller inevitably reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination” (8–9). In the light of her argument, the city dweller’s urban identity can thereby be seen as contingent upon the manner in which they interact with their space, and how they traverse and negotiate these gaps. Although Wirth-Nesher’s discussion focuses mainly on “real” cities, these imaginative reconstructions are explored through the invention and integration of impossible, immeasurable spaces. As will be discussed further, this is also done on a linguistic level. The texts display how language as a representative marker falters, and illustrate how the fantastic’s gradual undermining of the cities’ “verbal environments” (Wirth-
Nesser 11) emphasises the fragility of these linguistic structures. Both texts explicitly comment on the relationship between language and identity and highlight how, in the urban space specifically, language is inextricably, yet only artificially, linked to location, class, and perspective. This provides an important framework through which to read the fantastic urban novel, and emphasises the mode as a useful tool to examine significant cultural issues.

In the two texts this fantastic urban space is in continuous communication with the “real” world, and in many ways subverts or contends with the perception of what is considered possible or true. The protagonists, as the stories progress, must continuously expand their understanding of reality. In Memoirs the reader encounters two imaginary spaces: the apocalyptic, external city existing outside the narrator’s window, and the physically impossible rooms behind the wall “occupying the same space as, or rather, overlapping with, the corridor” (11). Initially the narrator explains this juxtaposition “as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected. But then, one life excluded the other, and I did not expect the two worlds to ever link up” (25). However, the boundaries do eventually blur, and she later contends that “now began a period when something of the flavour of the place behind the wall did continuously invade my real life” (125). There is thus a clear link between the “inner” and “outer” space, and events happening in one will cause a ripple effect in the other. As the metropolis and everything that goes with it – societal customs, language, and communication – crumbles, the world behind the wall deteriorates, and the narrator at several points has to clean, mend, or repair the rooms. Lorelei Cederstrom reads both these impossible realms as “interior symbolic landscapes” and the world behind the wall specifically as the narrator’s unconscious (115). Regarding the “cultural decline” of the exterior urban sphere, she asserts that the crumbling city is the surrealistic landscape of the ego when its cultural symbols – and therefore its notion of unity with the surrounding, external world – no longer function (116). Although Cederstrom’s reading introduces important functions of the impossible spaces, she misses the significance of the physicality of the other worlds. The narrator says that, eventually, “intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in ‘ordinary’ life, as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it”, but also that a “wind blew from one place to the other; the air of one place was the air of the other” (Lessing 137). The importance lies in the fact that the fantastic is physically breaking into the urban space, and that the city can gradually incorporate and reconcile these seemingly paradoxical landscapes.

In this way, the fantastic functions to break down the notion of consonance and wholeness as the novel explicitly connects, but simultaneously divides, the personal and the private space. It is done on several levels, from the material to the cultural to the linguistic, and the narrator writes that “for a long time it had been impossible to say: this is a working class area, this is homogeneous” (10, emphasis added). Homogeneity, then, is replaced by the heterogeneous through the fantastic, as the cultural symbols, the ingrained social codes of the city, gradually mix and disintegrate when people relocate or gather in large groups on the streets. The personal starts to function as part of the group. The juxtaposition and subsequent integration of the impossible into everyday existence speak further to the city’s (and thus also its inhabitants’)

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gradual transformation and, as the narrator points out, it was “precisely this which gave that time its peculiar flavour; the combination of the bizarre, the hectic, the frightening, the threatening, an atmosphere of siege and war – with what was customary, ordinary, even decent” (20). However, when concluding that “yes, it was extraordinary. Yes, it was all impossible .... Could one perhaps describe that period as ‘the ordinariness of the extraordinary?’” (19), the narrator foreshadows the gradual acceptance and reconciliation with the fantastic that is to take place throughout the novel.

Similar notions of inversion and division of space are discussed in Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, and London Below creates the same sense of alienation from the urban for Richard as the crumbling outside generates for Lessing’s narrator. The more traditional structure of a portal-quest fantasy allows for a tale of exploration and discovery, and thereby also an explicit comparison between the known and unknown space. Upon Richard’s arrival, London Above conveys the sense of a bustling conglomerate of impressions, yet it is pointed out that “three years in London had not changed Richard” (9). He soon grows inattentive to the “city in which the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect” (9). Significantly, London Below’s danger and enchantment then intensify this disrespect and further exacerbate the urban space’s awkwardness. Spatially and culturally existing below its counterpart, London Below – operating like the space behind the wall in *Memoirs* – thus recalls Irvine’s notion of the juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary. The recontextualisation of historical events, like the construction of the sewer system improving the life of the Sewer Folk (Gaiman 267), emphasises how historical verisimilitude is constantly in both the foreground and background of the text. Similarly to Lessing’s references to the mixing of archetypal clothing or bygone styles (Lessing 52), London’s temporal layering appears as a primary thematic concern, as well as a backdrop that in itself constantly reminds the reader about its existence. The apposition, as well as the oscillation, between the imaginary and the real rejects stasis but ultimately finds normality unobtainable.

Several characters lament the proximity and overlap, as well as the distinct hierarchy, between the two worlds: “... that two cities should be so near ... and yet in all things so far; the possessors above us, and the dispossessed, we who live below and between, who live in the cracks” (Gaiman 96, ellipses original). Although the spaces never blend to the same extent as in *Memoirs*, *Neverwhere* traces Richard’s movement between the two, focusing on his interaction with the impossible. The integration of the fantastic, as I have outlined, thus transforms the city from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous space, and the characters’ subsequent encounter with the fantastic urban prompts a corresponding change in identity. The function of London Below – and thus of the fantastic space in general – as Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem describes, alludes to a “metaphorical mapping of the self where there is room for transformation and change, allowing the characters to gain awareness and work out issues of self and identity” (132).

One of the main ways in which the novels undertake this transformation of space and identity is through the undermining of what Hana Wirth-Nesher calls the city’s “verbal environment”. Together with the “natural”, built and human environments, the verbal environment constitutes the cityscape in the representation of the city (11–12). It refers to both the written and spoken
language of the urban, and is thus visual as well as auditory, encompassing a dialect as well as advertisements and graffiti (13). In Lessing’s apocalyptic universe the breakdown of these structures and conventions is described already at the outset of Memoirs. As pointed out earlier, the complex where the narrator now lives among a conglomeration of rich and impoverished “were not flats built by a town council, the walls scribbled with graffiti ... were not the vertical flats of the poor” (Lessing 9). The close proximity of the fantastic contributes to this breakdown, as the mixing of the interior manor, the previously middle-class apartment complex, and the now-clear amalgamation of social categories exist in the same place. The breakdown of societal boundaries has forced the narrator’s reconstitution of identity-markers, as space no longer linearly points to class identity. Similarly, the narrator initially reminisces about language as “currency”, and how gossip, the grains of truth in rumour, and information gathered in the streets “made us feel safer and gave us identity” (45). However, she then conveys how the city’s transformation has changed her mind, and she now thinks “something different: that what we were doing was talking. We talked” (45). Language has been stripped of its currency and the previous uniformity of the spatial, and the linguistic environment has thereby lost its significance, again subverting Wirth-Nesher’s point that the “auditory rather than the written verbal environment is often an indicator of social, ethnic, or other subdivisions in the city made evident by dialect or other language usage” (14).

On both a verbal and oral plane the gradual mixing of registers thus epitomises society’s fragmentation as communication loses its function and the scattered communities become more isolated. It starts with words losing their currency and their meaning: the ruling class being a “dead phrase” (Lessing 91) and “old words, seduce, immoral, shocking” being used to describe the people on the streets, yet that “they had no force in them was proved by the fact that nothing was done” (85). It continues on the auditory level with June’s hardly intelligible manner of speaking, and is epitomised in the sewer children living almost without language altogether. The disintegration of language is followed by a breakdown of communication, as the woman visiting the sewer to help the children describes that “it was like ... talking into a vacuum” (149). The final attempt at unity and connection is countered when, at the gathering, the feral children chant their war song and the narrator realises that the words themselves are meaningless. She remarks that “we could all see how familiar words could slip out of key – how quickly things could change, we could change .... Had changed: those children were ourselves” (Lessing 153). As the language loses its role in communicating agreed-upon social frameworks, the sewer children’s transformation characterises the loss of a cohesive urban identity. While other children of this time “could be handled inside the terms of what was known and understood” (Lessing 147), the sewer children embody the disruptive force that cannot be conceptualised within known frameworks.

Worth noting, however, is that among this disintegration of known modes of communication, the narrator records that new forms of non-verbal transmission of information are springing up, as a result of the societal change; the idea of leaving the city is not announced through the common channels – the loudspeakers, the radio or television – yet it is “coming into everyone’s mind at the same time and without intervention from authorities” (11). She further emphasises that “announcements of all kinds were continually being made: yet
these were not absorbed by the populace as was this other information” (11). Her descriptions of “it” function similarly: a commonly agreed upon phenomenon, yet impossible to pin down to a specific signified. She metaphorically writes that “it is in crisis ‘it’ becomes visible …. For ‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the form of earthquake, a visiting comet whose balefulness hangs closer night by night distorting all thought by fear” (130). The notion of language as a fixed point of reference is thereby undermined, as the fantastic renders it unstable; the transformative effect can be traced on a personal as well as on a city-wide level when new notions of reality are incorporated into new linguistic structures.

The notion of “words slipping out of key” is also highly relevant in Neverwhere, although it is by contrast used for comedic purposes, as well as for undermining expectations regarding conventional language-use. Wirth-Nesher underlines that authors, when importing elements from “real” cities into their fictionalised counterparts, refer to known maps, landmarks, and edifices that then enable a character to walk down a verifiable street in a “realistic” setting (11). The subversion of familiar landmarks of London Above instead destabilise and defamiliarise Richard’s experience, and London’s familiar verbal environment is turned upside-down. What would be known markers of realism – Knightsbridge, Earl’s Court Station, Blackfriars – become the decisive indicators of the fantastic, where the names are actualised and there is a “real” Earl with a “real” court. For Richard, the familiar signifier links to an unfamiliar signified, and his experiences with the urban fantastic thus prompt a restructuring of his linguistic references. As in Memoirs, this shift towards a different conceptual framework is gradual, and Richard starts off by often stating the (to him) obvious (Gaiman 43, 142), or simply repeating phrases confusedly back to the Marquis (46). Gaiman humorously shows us that Richard’s understanding of language does not work to give him the right information. However, gradually it is pointed out that “Richard was beginning to catch on. He assumed that the Earl’s Court to which the Marquis referred wasn’t the familiar Tube station he had waited in innumerable times” (139). He is also “almost proud that he didn’t … point out that you couldn’t put a library on a train” (160). Eventually, then, Richard establishes a linguistic framework that allows him to make new and seemingly impossible connections between signifiers and the concepts signified.

The verbal environment of London Below hence builds on, and is in some ways similar to, that of London Above – “loud, and brash, and insane” (109) – but it simultaneously holds a curious quality the bustling above seems to lack. The music at the Floating Market is “being played a dozen different ways on a score of different instruments, most of them improvised, improved, improbable” (109, emphasis added). In contrast, the description appears to point to a seemingly indescribable quality inherent to the magical space, something akin to a positive version of Lessing’s “it”. Hence when Richard, towards the end of the novel, tries to conceptualise these phenomena in his mental diary, he eventually realises that “metaphors failed him, then. He had gone beyond the world of metaphor and simile, into the place of things that are, and it was changing him” (Gaiman 311, emphasis original). The disintegration of known language codes thus instigates, as in Memoirs, a transformation of worldview and identity, as the familiar grounds of the urban sphere are shifted. The difference is that in Neverwhere this is not done on a societal level, but
instead on the personal plane, causing a shift in perspective. To Richard, the fantastic defamiliarises the cityscape as represented through its verbal environment. The other inhabitants of London Above go by unaware and unchanged. Gradually, then, the characters in both texts are seen to adapt a new structure of reference that allows them to accommodate and integrate new notions of reality.

As I have pointed out continually in my reading of the city, the fantastic is seen, through the texts’ forms and structures, to have a direct, transformative impact on characterisation. Both novels are in some way engaging with the framework of the bildungsroman, but both texts employ the device unconventionally, and the start and end points of the journey toward maturity are affected by the fantastic spaces. The unifying factor is that both cases mark a change from passivity to activity, and from alienation to reconciliation. Richard’s passive position at the start of the narrative is emphasised by his unininvolved stance towards both his career and his relationships. With regard to this Derek Lee observes that in “explicit contrast to the aim of the form, Gaiman writes against accepting one’s proper role in adult society, which is to say that his bildungsroman is actually an anti-bildungsroman” (553). I argue that Gaiman goes even further than that, and uses the end point of the traditional bildungsroman narrative to highlight “adult society” as an unstable, ever-changing – even impossible – arrangement. Through the fantastic journey the reader finds Richard growing more and more unsure of his own self, and phrases of anxiety and hesitation regarding his own identity increasingly permeate the narrative: Gaiman writes that Richard “felt like a small child, unwanted, following the bigger children around” (125), and towards the end of the story he had no “idea who he was, any more; no idea what was or what was not true; not whether he was brave or cowardly, mad or sane” (252).

The critical moment with regard to the rejection of a stable, distinct identity comes in the form of the Ordeal – a psychological examination (in the dual sense) of Richard’s past, present, and future character. It is also the pivotal moment where the quest’s outcome is decided. The scene outlines not only a destabilisation of the self, but also a defamiliarisation as Richard converses with two identical – yet distinctly alien – projections of his past self. It is narrated that “the damp, muddy Richard stared into the face of the clean, well-dressed Richard, and he said, ‘I don’t know who you are or what you’re trying to do’” (245), which exemplifies a clear internal, as well as external, divide between the former and present selves, the earlier versions ultimately discarded at the completion of the trial. The Ordeal is then complemented and mirrored in the labyrinth scene, where Richard faces another trial and instead incorporates a new identity: after slaying the Beast of London he is given the title “Warrior”. It functions to epitomise Richard’s character growth, as the three times he previously met the beast in a dream, he was killed. As well as addressing the transformative power of language and naming, the ritual of touching the dead beast’s blood to his eyes and tongue gives Richard the knowledge of the way forward. Gaiman writes that afterwards, he “ran straight and true through the labyrinth, which no longer held any mysteries for him” (320). The text thereby acknowledges that reality, adult society, the urban sphere, is labyrinthine and tangled – and that Richard now traverses it actively. His quest throughout this
fantastic, hidden, underground space has led to a fundamental change in character and identity.

Like Richard, Lessing’s narrator starts off passively observing the city through the window of her flat, and at several points she references a passive acceptance of events going on around her (Lessing 20). She goes as far as stating that “I almost felt myself not to exist, in my own right” (27). However, at the point when Emily suddenly appears in her life, the secondary world behind the wall also starts becoming increasingly important, and the woman has to engage physically and emotionally with the scenes of that realm. Lessing uses the contrasting images of imprisonment and liberation to represent the opposition between the oppressive “personal” – the memories of Emily’s childhood – and the changeable manor, where there was a “lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility” (39) and “always a liberation” (57). In the other realm, then, passive observation becomes unbearable, as “to enter the personal was to enter a prison, where nothing could happen but what one saw happening, where the air was tight and limited, and above all where time was a strict unalterable law” (39). Transformation is thereby seen to originate in the fantastic, and although it takes the form of a more gradual awakening of character in the “real” world, the impossibility of a fixed adulthood and the instability of maturity are brought forward.

Lessing herself points out in an interview that the world behind the wall “actually represents [the narrator’s] own life, her own childhood” and that Emily maturing embodies her adolescence. “Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator’s past” (Lessing, qtd. in Rousseau 147–48). If Emily is thus read as part of the narrator, and their past as a shared past, Memoirs takes the form of a bildungsroman, but as observed and commented on in retrospect from an adult perspective. The narrator observes Emily both in the real world and in the world behind the wall, and the fantastic space functions to bridge the two images of the child to form the identity of the middle-aged woman. The narrator emphasises this notion of incorporation when saying that “being invited into this scene was to be absorbed into child-space; I saw it all as a child might – that is, enormous and implacable” (40). The narrative then continuously underlines the oscillation between woman and child, where Emily, confronted with the impossibility of her world, “wept, a little girl again, thumbs sweeping tears from her eyes; but up she jumped, and said, as an adult: ‘Anyway, I have to go there, whether I like it or not’” (122). Lessing’s use of the memoir form thereby collapses and dislodges these temporal layers, and Emily’s non-linear journey through adolescence is experienced both first-hand and second-hand through the eyes of the narrator. Gayle Green consolidates these notions of form, time, and identity when writing that “our attempts to make temporal connections, to make sense of the chronology, are thwarted, though also weirdly satisfied, when we realize that all are one: Emily, the narrator, Lessing, ourselves” (149). She then emphasises how this experience is simultaneously personal and generalised, emphasising what I consider to be the primary strength and function of urban fantasy: the ability to incorporate the seemingly oppositional into the representation and experience of the city. The two texts highlight a deep concern with point of view, and with a character’s place in society. The fantastic urban spaces engaged with in both texts encourage – force, even – a transformation from a
passive to an active position. The journeys of maturity the characters undertake decisively lead to dynamic, unfixed notions of identity, and the structure of the anti-bildungsroman emphasises that adulthood itself is an inherently unstable state.

The two texts portray a reconciliation with the fragmented urban experience, ultimately leading to an acceptance of the destabilising effect of the impossible and the fantastic. The sense of alienation rendered by the fantastic urban experience becomes one of liberation, and both protagonists find themselves fulfilled at the end of their narratives. After the completion of the quest, Richard “for a moment, upon waking, ... had no idea at all who he was. It was a tremendously liberating feeling, as if he were free to be whatever he wanted to be” (Gaiman 339). It is thus emphasised that, in the end, he accepts the alienating effect of the fantastic and realises the diversifying and transformative effect of participating in and engaging with the city’s gaps and partial visibilities. Wirth-Nesser writes that the city is rendered legible by multiple acts of imagination (9), but I argue that the characters instead show an acceptance of the cityscape’s illegibility. Even when Richard is finally given all he had longed for at the novel’s start, he ends up rejecting his new flat, his new job, and Jessica’s love, and he seems content to do so. When she asks if he has met someone else, he calmly and composedly replies no, “I’ve just changed, that’s all”, then “realizing it was true as he said it” (362). This change has led to the ability to see the city’s gaps and hidden underground spaces, but also the inability to settle back into a stable, passive city life. The all-encompassing consequence of the quest becomes a reconciliation with the loss of uniformity. Jessica Tiffin further emphasises this narrative resolution and comments on how

Richard’s immersion in their world is alienating, terrifying and finally, as he negotiates it, fulfilling: the contrasts between his world and theirs, and the cultural shock this causes, are an exploration of fantastic otherness. In his embrace of the fantastic otherworld, his narrative arc moves inevitably towards an identification with this otherness. (35)

As Richard finally moves through the “hole in the wall” (Gaiman 372) at the narrative’s conclusion, he traverses not only between two alien yet familiar worlds, but also between and through contrasting notions of the self: liberatingly diverse and ever-changing.

This final crossing, the narrative resolution of acceptance, is also seen in the last scene of Memoirs where Emily, Gerald, Hugo, and the children walk through to the secondary world “as the last walls dissolved” (Lessing 182). The narrator’s serene, impassive tone as she recounts the disarranged, disintegrating space ultimately points to a reconciliation with the impossibility of the fantastic. She writes that “… that world, presenting itself in a thousand little flashes, a jumble of little scenes, facets of another picture, all impermanent, was folding up as we stepped into it, was parcelling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going” (182). In addition, when the characters finally all see the wall’s hidden pattern “brought to life”, Lessing emphasises their calm and readiness:
Hugo was not surprised, not he: he stood, all alert and vivified beside the wall, looking into it as if at last what he wanted and needed and knew would happen was here, and he was ready for it. (181)

Thus, the spatial collapse mirrors that of the separate layers of identity the narrator has projected, and as Cederstrom points out, the narrator moves into a space where the personal, impersonal, and real are all one: “All are kaleidoscopic reflections of a reality that exists only within the protagonist” (130). This reading highlights the final bridging of the fantastic spaces as the settlement and incorporation of contrasting, discrete identities. As Cederstrom goes on to point out, the narrator has “become one with the self as she incorporates and reconciles within herself all the contradictions and limitations of the world through which she moved .... [She] contains all of them now: ego and self, collective and transpersonal, animal and instinctual” (130). The endings of both texts show the reconciliation with a diverse and disparate identity. The journeys through the fantastic cities narrate the encounter with – and finally the acceptance of – the impossible; thus the fantastic urban space undermines the possibility of a single, consolidated, homogeneous self. Ultimately, this representation of the city functions to underline that urban spaces have transformative power, and that they actively reject passive, comfortable interactions with the fantastic world.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed how Lessing’s Memoirs of a Survivor and Gaiman’s Neverwhere question familiar notions of self and identity through engagement with the fantastic urban space. I have argued that the fantastic space has a disruptive and destabilising effect on the narrative and on the characters, which ultimately encourages a recontextualisation of identity. The texts underline how the fantastic disallows ignorance and prompts an examination of the city’s uncomfortable multiplicity, and both Richard and Lessing’s narrator undertake journeys of maturity that ultimately lead to a reconciliation with this divergent space. I have shown how the fantastic renders the city heterogeneous, and the interaction with the space as such prompts a corresponding change in identity, rejecting homogeneity and instead incorporating the paradoxical. The impossible thereby functions to offer a diverse, active alternative to a passive metropolitan experience, and the gradual breakdown of the known (as seen through the defamiliarisation of language) emphasises the fantastic city as transformative. Gaiman and Lessing thus show both the value and effect of actively interacting with the urban space, and the texts highlight the impossibility of reading the city or its inhabitants as uniform, orderly entities.

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Paths Towards Multispecies Superintelligence and Socio-Economic Justice: Nicoletta Vallorani’s *Il Cuore Finto di DR*

**Eleanor Drage**

**Abstract:** This paper examines how non-unitary, responsive, and multispecies superintelligence can create an economic model that upends systems of race and gender in Nicoletta Vallorani’s *Il Cuore Finto di DR*. The novel depicts a dynamic slum ecosystem that sustains the lives and livelihoods of an array of human and non-human critters. At the heart of the slum economy is a Replicant-in-hiding called DR, whose gender- and species destabilising body is evocative of Donna Haraway’s boundary creatures: she is an adaptive, inter-relational critter who bypasses traditional gendered markers of economic value and demonstrates a responsiveness to the needs of her community. Faithful to the multiple genealogies of humanistic Italian science fiction, *Il Cuore Finto* examines how adaptive superintelligent affiliations can transform not only the economy, but also the systems of race and gender that dictate which lives are valued in an unerring system of capital accumulation.

**Keywords:** Economics, science fiction, collective superintelligence, race, gender

1. Collective Superintelligence and Posthumanist Philosophy: Alignments and Convergences

This paper traces the convergences between humanistic Italian science fiction (SF), contemporary posthumanist theory, and conceptualisations of non-unitary or collective superintelligence. By “collective superintelligence”, I refer to transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom’s formulation in
Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies. Bostrom envisions collective superintelligence as “networks” or “organisations” that connect human and non-human entities (58), believing it might be attained through “the gradual enhancement of networks and organisations that link individual human minds with one another and with various artefacts and bots” (58–59). Somewhat more radical conceptualisations of collective or non-unitary superintelligent systems have also gained some recognition, such as George Dyson’s work on forms of non-algorithmic AI that might materialise unintentionally and in non-corporate environments. However, with its emphasis on communication and coordination, Bostrom’s prediction of separate reasoning systems acting in aggregate bears an affinity to the science fictional slumland of Nicoletta Vallorani’s 1993 work Il Cuore Finto di DR [The Fake Heart of DR].

Bostrom’s conceptualisation of collective superintelligence, which identifies the potential benefits of convergences between humans and machines for the future wellbeing of humankind, reflects his position within the transhumanist community (“Transhumanist Values”). He characterises transhumanism as “a loosely defined movement” that evaluates how advanced technology can profoundly affect the human state, taking into account possible positive and negative repercussions of such advances. The goal of transhumanism is, in part, for humanity to reach a posthuman state wherein the limitations of human mortality have been overridden by elective enhancement technologies.

The transhumanist ethos differs from the relational and multispecies posthuman ethics of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway in its dependence on two unquestioned assumptions: that we are currently “human”, a species separable from technological objects, and might yet be “posthuman”. By Bostrom’s logic, human and technological processes must coalesce even more intimately and invasively if humankind is to be altered beyond recognition. This proposition locates humanity within the temporality of the “now”, and the posthuman in the temporality of the “not-yet”; conversely, Braidotti and Haraway’s modes of posthumanism are contingent on an understanding of the posthuman condition as located in the present, resisting a transhumanist emphasis on a possible but as yet unachieved shift from “human” to “posthuman” (Braidotti 102). Haraway, a biologist by training, situates her “worldly” mode of posthumanism in what she calls the “humusities”, a portmanteau that expresses the ecological foundations of her work (Staying 32). Grounded in the complex interdependencies among species, Haraway’s work unravels suggestions of human distinctiveness by demonstrating the complex mutualities of terra’s critters. The Italian SF I engage with in this paper acknowledges such modes of interspecies responsibility: in particular, Haraway’s work on responsibility as responsiveness and Braidotti’s elaboration of theories of ethical responsiveness, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s responsive phenomenology (Braidotti, After Poststructuralism 117–18).

Nicoletta Vallorani’s Il Cuore Finto di DR’s resonances with contemporary posthuman, feminist, and anti-racist scholarship demonstrate how non-human and posthuman species can simultaneously reconfigure social, political, and economic structures. I read the relational and responsive systems between humans and non-humans in the novel through posthumanist scholarship to analyse how superintelligent economic systems might arise from anti-sexist and multi-species kinship arrangements. Il Cuore Finto’s
technohuman slum economy demonstrates a strong concern for the gendered, racial, and class-based aspects of posthuman politics. Its intersectional approach to posthuman community-building can clarify why gender studies and critical race theory are central to conversations around posthuman life forms: Paul Gilroy’s theorisation of “infrahumanity”, for example, which critiques the placement of life forms designated as less-than-human beneath human life on a “rigid scale” (35), is of the utmost relevance to posthumanist and transhumanist thinking. The novel’s depiction of a new, responsible, and responsive economic system is grounded in a concern for issues relating to posthuman topologies and population development that are often sidelined by transhumanist research, including the oppression of hybrid life forms, alternative kinship arrangements and post-apocalyptic hégémonies. These interlocking thematic elements form the basis of its characters’ alternative economic arrangements in the context of post-apocalyptic abandonment.

2. Italian Humanistic SF as an Exploratory Framework for Interspecies Superintelligence

*Il Cuore Finto* epitomises a tendency in Italian SF novels from the late 1950s to destabilise the human/alien dualism. In these imagined worlds, the disturbance of the species divide often triggers a transgression of normative race and gender paradigms.

The Synthetic antitheroine of Nicoletta Vallorani’s *Il Cuore Finto di DR* (1993) is a Replicant machinic-woman, a disbanded and reconfigured sexbot on the government’s most wanted list of Replicants-at-large. DR’s detective agency protects her local community by solving the novel’s mysteries. The community helps collect information that allows DR to defend them against exploitation by wealthy suburbanites. This interchange of information scaffolds a responsible and responsive economic structure powered by an ethically oriented collective superintelligence.

The title of the novel’s French translation, *Réplicante*, makes explicit reference to Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Dick’s empathetic rendering of abandoned androids who spend their operational lifespan in hiding for fear of being “retired” corresponds with the humanistic storytelling of Italian SF from the late 1950s onwards. Writer and critic Vittorio Catani has noted that in the 1960s, when Dick’s novel was first published, the sensibility of Italian SF towards humanistic and psychological storytelling exceeded that of North American SF (233). Catani presents Lino Aldani’s *La Fantascienza* (1962) anthology as evidence of a consistent interest in humanistic themes (233). Catani argues that the humanistic sensibility he and his predecessors fostered in their work sets Italian SF apart from the more established US SF scene: “such humanistic awareness was then rare in US SF, filled as it was with character stereotypes” (233). In my study of SF authored by women in France, Italy, Spain, and the UK (2019), I argued that SF written by Italian women epitomises how empathetic depictions of the alien “Other” in twentieth-century Italian SF also reformulates systems of race and gender. Roberta Rambelli’s “I Criaturi di Mostri” (1959) and Giovanna Cecchini’s “Mio Figlio non è un Mostro” [My Son is not a Monster] (1959), for example, position readers to sympathise with extraterrestrial entities that human societies
interpret as monstrous. The empathetic renderings of extraterrestrials in these narratives inspired the later work of Gilda Musa and Daniela Piegai, whose stories exemplify how Italian SF worldbuilding in the 1970s and 80s disorders and rearranges the relationship between race, gender, and humanity. Musa’s novels relate the specific question of women’s social position to the role of humankind in the universe (Pizzo and Somigli 1720).¹

Brioni takes Musa’s and Piegai’s stories as exemplars of Italian SF that “envisions a new relationship with the alien Other” (159). They claim that these speculative propositions for interspecies solidarity help to process concerns that are specific – but not limited – to Italy in the second half of the twentieth century: “the representation of the Other as able to offer a salvation for terrestrials suggests opening up Italian society toward the Other, becoming Other, and learning from the Other” (159). As Brioni states in reference to Gilda Musa’s Le Grotte di Marte, depicting migrants to Italy as extraterrestrial travellers reconfigures “the Italian collective memory of immigration and colonialism, by showing a parallel between cosmic travellers and terrestrial migrants” (142). Fantastically estranged in space and time, migrants to Italy no longer bear the same racial stigma.

Vallorani’s antiheroine, DR, emerges out of this genealogy of both Italian scholarship and SF from the 1950s onwards that sympathises with the plight of the alien or monster, thereby grappling with the othering effects of systems of race and gender. Brioni’s essay “Aliens in a Country of Immigration: Intersectional Perspectives” offers a response to the question of why Italian women SF writers appear to be particularly concerned with engaging in positive renderings of the “monstrous” alien Other. For Brioni, Italian mainstream media in the 1970s was characterised by “the systematic representation of stereotypical female characters, and the racialized presentation of the concept of Italianness and Humanness” (147). Brioni’s analysis, which explores how “women writers represent gender identities in relation to the presence of aliens”, recognises that “SF literature written by women is produced by alien subjects within a patriarchal society” (139). He suggests that women writers of SF who responded to gender stereotypes and nationalistic fantasies in popular culture did not approximate race and gender oppression, but acknowledged their overlap in the shifting Italian hegemonic paradigm (139). Gaia Giuliani accounts for these intersections of race and gender in her contrapuntal reading of the hierarchies descended from colonial figures of race, on the one hand, and post-fascist gender relations in post-war and Republican Italy, on the other. From South-North emigration and the fascist colonial imaginary to soft porn and contemporary migration and racism, Giuliani delivers a historically nuanced analysis of the role of gender in the construction of a unified Italian identity, to which the “monstrified” colonial Other was indeed crucial to a normative definition of gendered whiteness” (26). Italian women SF writers appear to be particularly concerned with “issues of colonization and migration

¹ In Festa sull’Asteroide, aliens physically resemble humans; in Le grotte di Marte, the fate of human intergalactic travellers becomes intertwined with a physically unappealing alien species; in Esperimento Donna a Milanese professor falls in love with a beautiful alien and attempts to correct this taboo by making her human (Preianò). Simone Brioni approximates Le grotte di Marte’s parallelism of displaced intergalactic travellers and human migrants with a story by Daniela Piegai, Parola di alieno (1978), in which the friendship between an alien outlaw and a human woman combats interspecies fear and hostility (142).
in alien narratives”, which constitute “a running theme in Italian sf literature written by women” (142).

Contemporary examples of Italian SF written by women correspond with earlier analysis of how race and gender structure notions of “Italianness” and the human. For example, in Laura Pugno’s Sirene (2007), “mezzoumana” (half-human) or “sanguemisto” (mixed-race) human-mermaid offspring threaten to upend the sacred distinction between the two species, the binary upon which human supremacy is predicated.

3. Vallorani’s Hybrids and the Posthuman Slum of Il Cuore Finto di DR

Vallorani’s stories share Sirene’s fascination with the possibility that sub- or mixed-human status profanes racial purity. Sulla Sabbia di Sur (2011), for example, takes place in a city of “sanguemisto” peoples, and has as its mixed-blood protagonist a boy with only half a face: “mezzafaccia”. In the postapocalypse of Il Cuore Finto, every creature is “hybrid”. Synthetic and human become indistinguishable. Their identities cannot, therefore, be divined with any clarity through race- or species-based qualifiers. The figure of the Synthetic Replicant wreaks particular chaos on the notion of “race” and “nation” through its evasion of human distinctiveness, positioning the reader to ask if the Replicant Nora can truly be Puerto Rican if she was birthed in a factory and why she would require a nationality to infiltrate human society. Her characterisation points towards the highly contested and racialised nature of origin stories, in which race and humanity are necessarily embroiled.

In their embodiment of the convergence of technology, immigration, race, and gender in a postapocalyptic Milanese slum, Nora and her fellow heterogenous critters contribute to the high-stakes investigation of how claims to the distinctions among different “races” underly notions of human exceptionalism. They are also suggestive of the anti-racist and anti-anthropocentric possibilities arising from particular convergences of technology and humanity. Racism expressed as attempts to divide humans into racial groups, thus privileging certain people over others, is impossible in the postapocalyptic hybridity of Vallorani’s Il Cuore Finto.

Vallorani’s novel is sensitive to the importance of situated knowledge in its exploration of the concurrent impact of biotechnological advancements and ecological devastation on a near-future Milan. The drama takes place in real Milanese neighbourhoods, including the upmarket district of Brera. In the story, Brera has been repurposed as an e-waste dumping ground teeming with vibrantly multicultural multispecies life: “Brera, che è il solito gomitolò di corde tese tra una casa e l’altra, di stracci e di bambini, di neri con finti gemelli d’oro e di cinesi che vendono sintar e pesce azzuro” [Brera, which is the usual interlacing of ropes stretched between houses, of rags and children, of Blacks with fake gold cufflinks and Chinese people who sell Sintar and blue fish] (58). The affluent suburbs that form a ring around the slumlands are comprised of armoured homes surrounded by Synthetic, unperfumed gardens and
immaculate streets [“le scale perfettamente pulite”] (71). Designed to control and monitor the behaviour of their inhabitants, who have prospered from exploiting extra-terrestrial colonies, every aspect of Il Cuore Finto’s homogenous suburban residences impedes difference, curiosity, and creativity. Its inhabitants encourage and participate in two trades in the slum: drug-dealing and body snatching. DR, the ex-sex bot antiheroin, is the product of both these.

Christened Penelope De Rossi by the government’s database of Synthetic Replicants, a name she detests, DR was made redundant when her original purchaser cast her into the gutter. She was found and repurposed by Willy, an amateur scientist. Willy’s tinkering with her hormones and neural control system made her appearance distasteful enough to render her inappropriate for the sex trade. De-sexualised and superintelligent, she begins her second life. Untroubled by a body that she casually labels “difettata, incompleta, imperfetta” [defective, incomplete, imperfect] (71), DR tests the extent of her newly discovered superintelligence by establishing a local detective agency.

Almost immediately, a woman named Elsa commissions her to track down her missing husband, an extra-terrestrial called Angel. She is soon engulfed in the complex politics of Elsa’s extended family: Elsa has, in fact, murdered Angel and is actually paying DR to discover the whereabouts of Angel’s twin sister Nicole, whom Elsa plans to murder in order to intercept Nicole’s share of an inheritance from Elsa’s father. To save herself and her community from Elsa, DR turns to the hybrid slum dwellers: Pilar, a precocious orphan; Nora, a Puerto Rican Replicant; the telepathic Tihaua, known as “la fuoricasta” [the outcast] (120); an undercover Asian Replicant known as Il Cinese; an unnamed Vietnamese storekeeper; Nicole herself; Mariposa, a clairvoyant called “la saggia” [the wise woman]; Suor Crocefissa, a homeless madwoman; and an army of Milan’s ubiquitous cockroaches. Among them, DR remains benevolent rather than vengeful, a characterisation that both desensationalises independent-minded superintelligent creatures and advances empathetic and humanistic worldbuilding in Italian SF.

### 3.1. De-commercialised Sexist Humanoids and Their Informal Economies

One of the ways DR expresses benevolence, thus encouraging reader empathy, is through her attitude towards her perceived ugliness. Considerably “overweight”, DR no longer possesses the erotic capital of a sexbot: DR “È grassa. Questo si vede” [She is fat. That much is evident] (11). Her inability to recover her career as a sexbot, and her inherent distrust of humans who silently note her weight – “Lo vedono gli altri” [others see it] (11) – is suggestive of the discrimination experienced by “overweight” women in the formal economy. In her essay “Fat Women Need Not Apply”, industrial-organisational psychologist Lynn Bartels

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2 This and all subsequent translations of Vallorani’s Il Cuore Finto di DR are my own translations from the original.
3 The urbnity is suggestive of the definitional spaces of “prescriptive smart cities”, which Richard Sennett – sociologist and Senior Advisor to the United Nations on its Program on Climate Change and Cities – believes “have a stupefying effect on those who live in them” (133).
finds that “across employment and salary studies using experimental and correlational methods to study weight discrimination, overweight women were found to be disadvantaged compared to overweight men in the workplace” (36). DR corrupts and disrupts employability norms: she willingly excludes herself from the formal labour market to pursue new economic and kinship possibilities. Her characterisation suggests that the gendered, anthropocentric dynamics of a robotics and AI-powered post-apocalyptic economy has all the attributes of a 21st-century global marketplace. DR’s vulnerability due to her economic and social deprivation has another important consequence: her embodiment of existing economic discrepancies faced by women workers on account of their gender and physical characteristics positions her as a sympathetic figure. As such, her characterisation suggests the possibility of intimate and empathetic relations between humans and autonomous AI.

In *Il Cuore Finto*, ugliness is a worldbuilding practice. It enables DR to construct another kind of life as a community detective who establishes a collective intelligence that, in turn, powers a responsible and responsive slum economy. If, as Monica G. Moreno Figueroa argues, beauty “is a notion in tension with the visible and becomes a primordial practice that reveals the rules by which specific visible worlds operate”, then DR’s ugliness exposes even more clearly the erotic capital garnered from certain kinds of beauty (149). DR’s ugliness motivates her anarchic economic activity, through which she rebels against the labour market that chewed her up as sex technology and spat her out as e-waste. Ugliness is the entrance point into a critique of the intersections of gender, race, and species, and jars with the fact that “beauty is a central concept in the Italian cultural imagination throughout its history and in virtually all its manifestations” (Hendrix et al. 1). Stephen Gundle’s analysis of the relationship between feminine beauty and national identity in Italy points to the enduring, atemporal Italian siren as a constant, a bearer of comfort, amid decades of economic destabilisation and recovery. He argues:

For the Italians, who today look back on several decades of rapid and disruptive socio-economic change that have seen their country emerge as a leading industrial power, it is no exaggeration to say that the women who are the public embodiment of the bella italiana function as a repository of consolatory and reassuring ideas about the country and its identity. (xxv)

Removed from the value-laden, computerised perfection of her original body, DR claims ugliness as that which frees her from her involvement in a labour market that valorises a popular mode of Synthetic femininity. In free indirect speech, she claims that “E la bellezza, nel caso di DR, evidentemente non surviva” [and beauty, in DR’s case, was irrelevant] (33). She views beauty in terms of symbolic capital, that which confirms her place in the sexual economy as a commodity targeted at heterosexual male consumers; now, though, her usefulness in that market is at an end. And this, for DR, is a great opportunity. I view DR’s monstrous, anarchic femininity – as an ugly, intelligent and posthuman “woman” – as a contribution to the kind of feminist myth-making and worldbuilding advocated by Donna Haraway, whose manifesto for cyborgs states that “cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling” (Simians 295). These creatures locate specific
configurations of technoscience, gender, and species, and privilege monstrosity over beauty, rationality, and progress – ideologies which Haraway views as residue from Western humanism and its inflections in Italian Renaissance art (Modest-Witness 155). If DR’s factory-allotted flesh embodies a particular capitalist configuration of gendered beauty norms, sex work, biotechnology, and anthropocentrism, then her reclamation of agency through the monstrosity of her re-worked body is a kind of anti-capitalist rebellion. Her forthright acceptance of ugliness frees her from the economy of desire, which previously subjected her to ownership, both by her manufacturers – whose mode-of-use was inscribed into her flesh – and by the consumers who used her for pleasure.

3.2. Neither Human nor Machine: Superintelligent Systems as Boundary Creatures

No longer willing nor able to reacquire her original market value, a value inlaid in the form of passive sexual service and subservience, DR uses her monstrosity to extract herself from the formal economy. It should be noted that DR does not follow Giorgio Agamben’s logic of “inclusive exclusion” (Time 105), which renders the abject an essential component of biopower. Rather than actively being shunned by the Milanese state, DR is merely irrelevant: “Se non l’hanno cercato dopo la sua fuga è solo perché la sua esistenza non era abbastanza inquietante da determinare perdite di tempo e di energie” [If they didn't look for her after her escape, it's only because her existence was not enough of a disturbance to waste time and energy over] (149). By inciting neither lust nor hatred at either a consumer or an institutional level, DR has managed to avoid the wrath of government bounty hunters. In this sense, she corresponds with Haraway’s destabilising boundary creatures, whose monstrousness is not derived not so much from the fear which they induce as from their erosion of species distinctiveness. Their ability to blur boundaries lends them re-signifying capabilities, which Haraway exploits in her creation of worldbuilding “figurations”:

Inhabiting my writing are peculiar boundary creatures – simians, cyborgs, and women – all of which have had a destabilising place in Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. These boundary creatures are, literally, monsters, a word that shares more than its root with the verb to demonstrate. Monsters signify ... the power-differentiated and highly contested modes of being of monsters may be signs of possible worlds – and they are surely signs of worlds for which "we" are responsible. (“Actors” 21–22)

DR uses her monstrosity to enact responsible modes of being-in-relation to her fellow boundary critters and slumdwellers. These characters are the SF kin to contemporary Milanese outsiders: from an “Asian” Replicant living in the disguise of a Chinese migrant worker, to a Vietnamese storekeeper and a homeless “madwoman”. Present-day Milan, for example, which has the oldest and most sizable Asian population in Italy, is at the time of writing the setting for a new round of anti-Asian attacks following the outbreak of Covid-19. This has prompted the Milanese local government to cover the city with posters stating that “the virus is the enemy not the Chinese people” (Muzi). DR and her...
fellow Replicants’ monstrosity points to the fearmongering propagated by racial
typology in both real-world Milan and its dystopian post-apocalyptic elsewhere.
The empathy with which Vallorani writes DR, and which is consistent with the
affinities drawn between racialised outsiders and alien species in Italian SF,
also corresponds to what Braidotti terms the “bioegalitarian turn”: the
dismissal of the humanist condescension that treats animals and nonhuman
critters as lesser beings. For Braidotti, recent critical theory is displacing the
“ancient metaphysics of otherness” that privileges human existence urging that
both dialectical and categorical otherness are “no longer pathologized and cast
on the other side of normality – that is, viewed as anomalous, deviant, and
monstrous” (“Animals” 526). Read through Braidotti, DR’s relational and
symbiotic community intelligence network removes its participants from
medieval associations between monstrousness, errant sexuality, and race that have been extensively mapped by twentieth- and 21st-century critical theorists,
notably Asa Simon Mitman, Peter Dendle, Barbara Creed, and Anne Balsamo.
This system of collective economic interdependence, operated via a relational
mode of information-sharing within a multi-species community, connotes the
worldbuilding potential of hybrid human-biotechnological critters. Its non-
anthropocentrism also renders the gender and racial dimension of human value
chains irrelevant to its economic performance.

3.3 Reconfiguring Oppressive Systems of Race and
Gender in a Responsive and Responsible Slum Economy

DR sets her cognitive enhancements to opening a detective agency. The murder
mystery she solves alongside her human and non-human compatriots offers a
test case for how specific configurations of urban slums can foster an economic
model with a streamlined approach to solving intellectual problems. DR’s
interspecies troupe is a form of collective superintelligence that constitutes an
alternative economic model better suited to the precarious infrastructure of
post-apocalyptic Milan.

Regardless of the energy and dissonance that this futuristic rendering of
Milan produces relative to the sterility of the neighbouring suburbs, the slum
does not reap profits from its super-intelligent systems. The slum’s inhabitants
remain below the poverty line in a speculative futurity that substantially refutes
Nick Bostrom’s prediction that during and immediately after an “explosion” in
superintelligence “there would be vastly more wealth sloshing around, making
it relatively easy to fill the cups of all unemployed citizens” (199). However,
some of Bostrom’s other claims regarding economic models predicated on
collective superintelligence can be reconciled with the activity of DR’s band of
misfits. These can be explored through a reading of DR as a suggestive example
of collective superintelligence herself, in accordance with Bostrom’s definition
of collective superintelligence as a “very large cadre of very efficiently
coordinated workers, who collectively can solve intellectual problems across
many very general domains” (67).

Rather than an autonomous unit, DR is an assemblage of bio-engineered
parts, developed, dismantled, and reconfigured at various points in time and in
a number of locations city-wide. Like Philip K. Dick’s replicants, she navigates
her environment and her relationships with others through a series of
ambiguously real and constructed memories. Some are memories implanted into her in the factory, others she has stolen for herself: DR accesses, manipulates, and processes human memories when she intoxicates herself on the drug Sintar, which induces an opiate-like stupor. Once she has interviewed a client or witness, DR takes Sintar to validate their testimonies against their own hacked and hijacked memories, which she can access while intoxicated. In economic rather than ethical terms, reduced communications overheads between DR and her witnesses give DR a more densely connected information-processing network. This is especially useful because DR’s clients are prone to untruthfulness. “Potrebbe essersi inventato tutta quella storia” [He could have made up this whole story] (12), DR says of Samuel Bayern’s journal, before accessing his memories in a Sintar-intoxicated dream (147). To DR, the shifting motives of human minds are entirely illogical, and on more than one occasion she laments “[le] cose irrazionali che hanno gli uomini” [the irrational things that mankind does] (59). DR evokes contemporary trends in AI development by seeking to improve her understanding of the human cortex: solving complex cognitive tasks in the human world requires her to make sense of what she views as humankind’s relatively limited abstract reasoning ability. Amassing memories enables DR to gather a “data set” for predicting human responses – an essential tool for the work of a slum detective.

DR’s ability to exploit her superintelligence relies not only on its quality, but on her understanding of the limits of the human intellect. While computer scientists and machine learning engineers today exhort the need for interpretable and accountable intelligent systems by attempting to create AI that behaves in a predictable way, 4 DR’s interception of human memory somewhat chillingly forecasts a time when AI’s highly advanced data analytics attempt instead to predict human behaviour. While DR maintains a fondness for humanity, rather than an urge to take it over, she gathers data from human minds and uses these to outperform her human suspects.

Unlike the languid and fickle economic and social institutions that abandoned the slum community in the wake of the apocalypse, DR’s mode of collective superintelligence is proficient in both bequeathing justice on her community and in stimulating the slum economy. I want to expand on this point by briefly demonstrating how DR’s involvement in what I view as a superintelligent slum partially resolves some of the inequalities apparent within the Milanese labour market. The slum itself transforms into a web-based cognitive system, a superorganism of which DR is merely another component necessary for the amalgamation and distribution of information. The slum itself, therefore, can be read as a dense network of collaborative information-processing elements that increase the operating system’s overall performance. Each member of DR’s community detective engine contributes to the problem-solving exercise of hunting murderers, and through judgement aggregation the slum is quickly convinced of Elsa’s guilt. An indication of this lies in the size of the novel itself, a fairly slim book that reaches its denouement at an expeditious pace. The slum itself constitutes a structural mutation in the way that society

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and economic production are organised, enabling DR and her crew to save themselves from Elsa’s vengeance through the effective and rapid transmission of relevant information and resources.

There is also a strong ethical component to the division of labour within the collective that emphasises actively responding to the needs of others as a way of bearing responsibility for the community. This resonates with Haraway’s work on responsibility as responsiveness (How Like a Leaf 133) and Braidotti’s elaboration of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “responsive phenomenology” (After Poststructuralism 45), in that DR’s mutually responsive and responsible assemblage refuses to sacrifice a single member in the quest to solve the mystery of Angel’s death. Responsibility as action means that even when DR risks capture by the government agency responsible for eradicating independent Replicants, DR comes out of hiding to risk her life in search of Mariposa when she is captured by Elsa. This is because it is strategically unfeasible to leave a community member behind: if any segment of the information-processing network is hacked, the whole system is at risk. DR’s radical loyalty is therefore due in part to her awareness of the particular social arrangement upon which the slum’s interdependent economic model is predicated. And yet, their economic interdependence is expressed in affective rather than economic terms. Mariposa says to DR, “non voglio sentire la tua mancanza” [I don’t want to feel your absence] (61), and even though Mariposa barely knows the injured Pilar, she carries her to safety. Such mutual affection is central to the reciprocal actions that characterise DR’s information network. Unlike the divisive hierarchical economic model fostered by the suburbanites, whose national policy-making has disproportionately hit urban communities, the slum relies on restoration and interconnection: scouring the scrap heap for reusable items, and forging connections between other bodies vulnerable to homelessness, destitution, and violence.

Near the close of the novel, before the mystery is resolved, DR’s troupe finds itself scattered and injured. They communicate crucial information via their suffering and dispersal that eventually solves the case:

Nicole è Tihaua nel deserto. Mariposa nell’ospedale dei pazzi, con la gamba tagliata e la rabbia e il dolore di una lacerazione. Nicole è rancore allo stato puro. La luce grigia si sfilaccia come nebbia sotto il sole. Un labirinto di cunicoli di metallo; una teoria confusa di percorsi che si intrecciano, senza nessuna metoda apparente. (200)

[Nicole and Tihaua in the desert. Mariposa in the mental asylum with her leg in pieces and feeling the anger and pain of a laceration. Nicole is in a state of pure rancor. The gray light frays like fog in the sun. A labyrinth of metal tunnels; a confused system of paths that intertwine, without any apparent method.]

The narrative draws together members of this information network into a labyrinth of metal corridors, its arrangement seemingly in excess of human logic. Its component parts – the extraterrestrial Nicole, the telepathic Tihaua, and Mariposa the wise woman – remain vulnerable to the wrath of Elsa and an apathetic State that does not deem them worthy of protection. Cast out into the non-spaces of post-apocalyptic sociality – the desert, the psychiatric ward – Tihaua, Mariposa, and DR converge into a complex machinic system.

If any member of DR’s troupe is intercepted by government agents, all members of the slum community – and in particular its “invisible” community
of Replicants-in-hiding – are susceptible to legitimated institutional violence. They exist with the constant threat of, as Agamben states in his elaboration of Michel Foucault’s theory of biopower, “violence that makes law” (88). The politicised existence of “life exposed to death” (75) in Agamben’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s study of “zoe”, or “bare life”, reinforces paradigms of power so that the “rule of law exists and ceases to exist alongside bare life” (56). Within this framework, DR represents the paradox of the machine that has been sentenced to death but cannot “die”, an event that requires, as Martin Heidegger has theorised, a preceding existence [Dasein] granted only to humans who are not held captive. Heidegger writes, “Because capitvation belongs to the essence of the animal, the animal cannot die in the sense in which dying is ascribed to human beings but can only come to an end” (267). DR is therefore kin to an array of both fictitious and historical characters for whom the biopolitical apparatus represents immutable violence. Primarily, she is the literary spawn of Niander Wallace, Do Androids Dream?’s hubristic villain who breeds a race of “organic androids” that can be intensively reproduced and “retired” without consequences (10, 19); in DR’s Milan, a government agency will “addormentare i sintetici, quando creano qualche problemino” [retire the Replicants when they create problems] (171–72).

3.4. A Hybrid Life: Agamben, Braidotti, and the Enterprising Force of a Nomadic Slum Collective

The challenge of Vallorani’s repurposed Replicant and her critters is to use the slum-information-processing system to evade biopolitical governance. To leave it at this, however, would be to inadvertently emphasise the slum collective’s vulnerability over its vitality and self-subsistence. Its economic activity can be more accurately expressed as what Braidotti terms a “transversal and group-oriented agency”. Braidotti, who engages with Agamben’s reading of bodies subject to biopolitical sovereignty largely to negotiate with his “philosophical habit of taking mortality or finitude as the transhistorical horizon of discussions of ‘life’” (“Politics” 181), addresses the vitality of “life” in the historical specificity of this present moment: the posthuman condition emerging from the latest configuration of cognitive capitalism. Read as what Lyman Tower Sargent termed the “critical dystopia” – a work that quarries utopian potentiality from within the narrative’s prevailing dystopia – Vallorani’s tale of DR and her troupe offers hope as much as it demonstrates the workings of structural violence in contemporary technoculture (9). The balancing act of the critical dystopia’s simultaneous attendance to dystopian reality and its suggestion of possible modes of socio-economic resistance corresponds to Braidotti’s request that critical theory engage in:

balancing potestas – managing what we have – with potencia – inspiring what’s possible. That’s the balance everyone has to find for themselves, rather than sink into a listless depression. There is a job to be done here to inject a visionary, imaginative but not utopian energy into the world with words, texts, concepts, festivals and public engagements. We need to send out counter-codes. (“Our Times” 191)
Il Cuore Finto’s prevailing dystopia is also the opening for exhilarating problem-solving and radical creative action. Elsa’s embodiment of human evil becomes an object of curiosity rather than despair. Her desperate attempts to submerge the slum dwellers into even greater misery draws out the collective imaginative and innovative capacity of DR’s troupe, who thus embody Braidotti’s reorientation of critical theory away from a potentially crippling focus on the vulnerability of oppressed, forgotten, and disenfranchised minorities and towards the vitality and transversality of “nomadic subjectivity” in the “schizoid and intrinsically non-linear structure of advanced capitalism” (Transpositions 40). Braidotti’s vision of subject nomadism in post-industrial technoculture materialises in the information-processing system that forms between DR, the human memories she accesses while intoxicated, and her complex bond with the orphaned Pilar. In particular, DR’s facilitation of a responsive information network, based on trust and mutual dependency, resonates with Braidotti’s view that because it is “self-organizing, matter is vital, smart and, in the third millennium, technologically mediated, through bio-technologies and information technologies. This doubly mediated structure also alters the terms of interaction between humans and non-humans” (“Writing” 170). DR’s disruption of the distinction between organic and inorganic matter, animacy and inanimacy, is consistent with Braidotti’s view that technological-human assemblages that are both “vital” and “smart” have upended the human/non-human dialectic in a series of shifting and dynamic alliances. The interspecies interaction that DR facilitates reveals heteronormative gender and racial hierarchies as irrelevant components of a bygone biopolitical economic system. Slum information-exchange reflects the transformation of economic production from traditional goods and services to capital goods and technological products, which in turn marks a shift from the Aristotelian origins of bios/zoe and human/non-human visions towards another way of thinking about “life”, positioned as we are “between the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth extinction” (Braidotti, Posthuman Knowledge 2).

The slum’s alternative system of exchange is, by contrast to both the global capitalism in the early 21st century and the dystopian Milan of the novel, environmentally responsible, frugal, and resourceful. Its focus is on neither the production of goods nor the reproduction of nuclear family units, but on multispecies eco-justice – notably salvaging “waste” like DR from the rubbish heap. If the Western family apparatus and its reproductive imperative is at the heart of a capitalist mode of production, then the infertile DR’s regenerative and redemptive economy has as its engine a diverse network of non-reproductive critters. Drawing together kinship, technoscience, information-processing systems, gender, species, and race, Il Cuore Finto’s slumworld acts as a “knot”, or place marker, to echo Haraway as she describes a game of cat’s cradle (“A Game” 66), by locating possible economic opportunities in a future that both inherits the latest incarnation of cognitive capitalism and makes space for alternative systems of mutual subsistence.

In this sense, the novel also engages – as Haraway and Braidotti do – with the complex and paradoxical horrors and wonders of contemporary technoculture. For Braidotti in particular, the present is imbued with the contradictions generated by cognitive capitalism, which promises both life-enhancing technoscientific advancements and an increase in material and immaterial inequality. Braidotti reckons with this contradiction through Derrida’s reading of Plato’s pharmakon, which theorises the remedy as both the
poison and the cure (“Affirmative Ethics” 417). This poison comes in a variety of forms, such as the “advanced mastery of living matter-through Synthetic biology, stem-cell research, gene-editing, robotics, and bioengineering”, and can represent “phenomenal and exciting developments” that are “in equal parts liberating and problematic” (“Posthuman, All Too Human” 11–12).

Biotechnology's emerging impact on and interference with nuclear family structures reach their logical conclusion in DR’s slum, in which advances in biogenetics and an increase in drug abuse among already disenfranchised social groups force alternative kinship groups to emerge. These flexible, open units, grounded in affiliation and mutual dependency, draw together unlikely communities of orphans, Replicants, and other socially deprived or invisible creatures. The relational structure of these dispersed and mutually sustaining assemblages, which transform into the highly efficient and coordinated response team that sabotages Elsa’s murderous plotting, outst the heteronormative family from its role of enacting the economy in microcosm. The slum becomes, as Donna Haraway’s “Make Kin Not Babies” slogan for the Cthulucene entreats, a site of multispecies making and unmaking (“Anthropocene” 161). The distribution of tasks in the heteronormative private sphere no longer unifies production and consumption in the public. This results in an array of interpersonal relationships that challenge traditional productive processes: DR and the child Pilar are compatriots, sharing in the burden of domestic tasks and engaging in mutual caregiving rather than caretaking. Because the memories that have been artificially implanted in her mind are either Synthetic or stolen, DR cannot necessarily dole out valuable generational advice to Pilar. Her mode of guardianship therefore supplants the traditional kinship unit with an elective and multigenerational living arrangement. This domestic situation is also reflective of lateral acts of inter-species caregiving in the slum’s wider community. As traditional family and race models shift towards eclectic and malleable kinship arrangements, new economic structures emerge, ones better equipped to give post-apocalyptic underdogs a fighting chance at survival.

In Il Cuore Finto, the efficiency with which the intellectual problem posed by Elsa is solved is the result of the slum community’s mutual responsibility and responsiveness. Caregiving becomes the driving force of a new economic model, by which innumerable slum critters work collectively in a highly coordinated environment. Without the heteronormative family as the basic economic unit, different kinds of adaptive affiliations can transform not only its trade and distribution network, but also the systems of race and gender that dictate which lives are deemed valuable in post-apocalyptic Milan.

4. Conclusion

Italian SF has demonstrated its proficiency in reconfiguring race, gender, and species. The possibility of worlds where bodies take shape beyond terrestrial labour markets continues to capture the imaginations of Italian SF writers and their international fanbase. The boundary creatures occupying Vallorani’s work are denied freedom, security, and citizenship, and yet can mutually subsist by distributing intelligence across a dense network of interspecies critters. In the context of Il Cuore Finto and contemporary feminist and posthuman theory,
collective superintelligence, defined as knowledge transmitted extremely efficiently between constituent intellects, provides an outgrowth of scalable cooperation, connection, organisation, and skill-sharing. The anti-sexist and anti-racist socio-economic activities that DR instigates are responsible for and responsive to the needs of her community. The slum dwellers can subsequently navigate the power differentials imposed by the privileged suburbs that determine what counts as a valuable or human life through systems of race, species, and gender. Parliamentary democracy and the common political system of the industrial society is displaced in the slum by the participatory democracy of a highly adaptive information society. Unlike the formalised arrangements of informational capitalism, the porous and unregulated flows of DR’s disordered community are localised and discontinuous, unexpected and ambiguous. This inclusive and decentralised economic model also rescues the community from the atomising social forces of modern society. DR’s rejection of the marketable qualities of an operational sexbot – feminised beauty and passive submissiveness – becomes an opportunity to nurture the opportunities afforded by her superintelligence and her affinity towards her fellow creatures. In keeping with Braidotti’s and Haraway’s relational and responsible mode of posthuman thought, DR and her troupe demonstrate an interspecies solidarity for the posthuman era – an era that is now, in this moment: DR’s universe, projected into a postapocalyptic future, is imbued with the racial and gender dynamics of contemporary Italy, from beauty and the reproductive family to racism and migration. These issues are examined through the novel’s exploration of intimacies and overlaps between Replicant, non-human, and human life forms. As a novel that expresses the racial and gendered undertones of human/non-human hierarchies, *Il Cuore Finto* demonstrates SF’s important role in working through both the economic and social concerns and opportunities raised by “posthuman” intelligence.

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Eleanor started her career in financial technology before co-founding an e-commerce company. She graduated with an International Dual PhD from the University of Bologna at the University of Granada in 2019, where she was an Early Stage Researcher for the EU Horizon 2020 ETN-ITN-Marie Curie project “GRACE” (Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe). Her current research investigates how humanity defines and constitutes itself both through socio-cultural processes such as race and gender and through its connection with computational networks and digital systems.
Works cited


BOOK REVIEW:

The Monster Theory Reader

T. S. Miller


*The Monster Theory Reader* reprints 24 essays selected from the last hundred years of our collective critical interrogation of the figure of the monster, although the majority of the pieces do date from the 21st century. The editor, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, is a former student of likely the most famous monster theorist in the business, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose own 1996 edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* Weinstock cites in this book’s introduction as having named the field: “and the naming of a field or subdiscipline can exert a powerful gravitational effect, allowing dispersed scholarship to coalesce around its banner and start to form into something coherent” (2). After having circumnavigated the more than 500 pages of this weighty volume and witnessed for myself the dog-headed peoples and bloodsuckers and serial killers that dwell at the edges of the known and the normal, I find myself impressed by the perceptiveness of the individual contributions, but also dubious that monster theory, as a propositional field of its own, has quite become “something coherent”.

Of course, one might counter that monster theory must necessarily reflect the characteristics of the subject matter itself, and several contributors to this volume acknowledge the hybrid, even diffuse nature of work done under the banner of monster studies or monster theory, including Weinstock himself: “Like the monsters it theorizes, monster theory transgresses categorical boundaries” (2). Even so, *The Monster Theory Reader* contains superb essays but ultimately strikes me as something of a missed opportunity, seeming merely the sum of its parts rather than an indispensable affirmation of and
introduction to the field and its history. With the caveat that the editor might have done more to add to the value of these individually excellent chapters, I would still highly recommend the volume for use in a graduate or advanced undergraduate humanities course dedicated to monsters and the monstrous, of which there are many. The book will also work well for students of horror more specifically, as it is dominated by human or humanoid monsters as well as the genre of contemporary Anglo-American horror (both literature and film), to the point that it might almost be able to moonlight under the title The Horror Theory Reader.

What is most sorely missing from The Monster Theory Reader is simply a sense of context and connection: the volume would have benefited enormously from editorial headnotes, even brief ones, that could have introduced each chapter and explained its place in the constellation of texts we might place in the category of “monster theory”. Moreover, several of the chapters are not standalone essays but rather excerpts chosen from important monographs: editorial contextualisation would therefore provide additional benefits here in familiarising the target audience of such a “theory reader” with the complete work and its significance. In fact, the simple absence of original publication dates at the beginning of each chapter became a continual source of frustration for me as a reader, with that frustration compounded by the tendency displayed by so many of the authors to speak to the specific temporal context of their own writing: “The most significant development – in film criticism, and in progressive ideas generally – of the past few decades has clearly been the increasing confluence of Marx and Freud” (Robin Wood 108); “Though ecocritics have been asking ourselves what methods and canons constitute the field for as long as the field has existed, the last five years offer signs that this questioning has entered a peculiarly intense phase” (Anthony Lioi 440).

Even Cohen’s 1996 essay, though often quoted as if it utters timeless observations, reminds us to pay attention to the context of its own production and original publication, specifically addressing the “sacred dicta of recent cultural studies” and “cultural studies today” (37). Ironically, this book, which emphasises the imperative to understand what monsters mean to and in their specific cultural contexts, is constituted of chapters that have been presented chronologically shuffled and without context; many of the images included in the text as figures also inadequately indicate their provenance. Of course, the original publication information for each chapter does appear near the back of the volume, but as if tucked away in a dusty attic: even parenthetical dates of publication in the table of contents would have helped mitigate the disorientation that a reader can feel, especially when reading the essays in their non-chronological sequence. For instance, while the earlier pieces do tend to be clustered earlier in the book, a note at the end of Elizabeth Grosz’s chapter, positioned in the center of the collection, reveals it to have been originally written in 1986, while sandwiched between a 2006 book chapter by Annalee Newitz and a brief and arguably undertheorised 2009 Chronicle of Higher Education article by Stephen T. Asma.

Weinstock does contribute a substantial enough editorial introduction, subtitled “A Genealogy of Monster Theory”, in which he might also have better contextualised the chapters in relation to the history of monster theory. Instead, this introduction primarily seeks to accomplish what its subtitle promises: Weinstock usefully charts the pre-prehistory of monster theory by exploring the
appearance of the monster throughout human history and the responses it has
provoked in myth, the Middle Ages, medicine, and more. It makes for a fine
introduction but includes only roughly three pages (pp. 25–28) on the history
of contemporary monster theory; this largely takes the form of a précis of
Foucault, necessary because no excerpt from Foucault’s foundational work has
been included in the volume. The standard chapter-by-chapter description of
the volume’s contents does appear at the end of the introduction, but here
Weinstock restricts himself to one-sentence summaries of the authors’ theses
rather than the broader contextualisations that I am proposing may have been
more helpful. As with any book review, in the end one cannot complain too
much about what this volume might lack, because it does contain such an
abundance of monstrously sharp analyses.

Weinstock reasonably chooses to use Cohen’s snappy and widely cited
essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” to lead the volume, although the move
risks causing monster theory to appear a mere pendant on Cohen’s work.
Immediately following are some essays that, in proper Borgesian fashion,
retroactively generate a handful of appropriate predecessors for monster
type: Freud on the uncanny; Kristeva on abjection; and then selections from
Robin Wood, Noël Carroll, and Jack Halberstam on the Gothic tradition and/or
the horror film. Weinstock groups all of these essays into a first part entitled
“The Monster Theory Toolbox”, along with roboticist Masahiro Mori’s brief but
influential 1970 essay, “The Uncanny Valley”. (I was very surprised to learn that
this last essay has only seen a single printing – “often cited in discussions of
dolls and automata, this essay has never been reprinted” (29) – although this
characterisation might be somewhat misleading, as *The Monster Theory
Reader* reprints its 2012 republication in English translation.) There is finally
no truly unified monster theory here, but, if I had to quickly communicate a
sense of what “monster theory” might look like based on this toolbox and the
generally more narrowly focused chapters that follow, I would describe it as
fairly recognisable cultural studies built on a solidly Foucauldian and/or at least
loosely psychoanalytic substrate that happens to take monsters or monstrosity
as its subject of investigation.

The book’s second part, “Monsterizing Difference”, collects chapters that
examine different concepts of normality and deviations from it that monsters
may represent, including an examination of the so-called “monstrous races”
conventionally placed on medieval world maps by visual artist Alexa Wright, as
well as Bettina Bildhauer’s memorable essay “Blood, Jews, and Monsters in
Medieval Culture”, which contains many enviable close readings of multiple
kinds of cultural artifacts; for example, a deft unpacking of the proximity of
monsters to Christ’s world-spanning body in the 13th-century Ebstorf *Mappa
Mundi*: “Christ here embodies the dilemma of all medieval mapmakers and
historiographers: what to do with monsters, how to justify their existence in
God’s creation, and more generally what to include and what not” (198). The
other chapters in this section examine very different kinds of monsters and
often from additional theoretical perspectives, ranging from queer theory
(Harry Benshoff on “The Monster and the Homosexual” in horror film) to
disability studies (Elizabeth Grosz’s “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the
Limit”) to critical race theory (in Annalee Newitz’s particularly commendable
contribution on Lovecraft, black horror, and American colonialism, “The
Undead: A Haunted Whiteness”).

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The title of the book’s third part, “Monsters and Culture”, could function well enough as the title of the entire volume, and here we find monster theory multiplying into even more disciplines, from religious studies in the excerpted introduction from Timothy Beal’s *Religion and Its Monsters* to a trenchant critique of terrorism studies in Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai’s “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots”, one of the more distinctive inclusions for its analysis of the imbrication of monstrosity and the discourse on terrorism in the early 21st century. The final essay in this section, Jon Stratton’s “Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life, and Displaced People”, feels all the more urgent today although it was published almost a decade ago. Part IV, “The Promises of Monsters”, curiously groups Erin Suzuki’s “Beasts from the Deep” – a fascinating analysis of neoliberalism in the Pacific and three recent monster movies, and also the most recent and arguably most self-contained piece in the volume – with three much more broadly theoretical broadsides: Anthony Lioi’s “Of Swamp Dragons: Mud, Megalopolis, and a Future for Ecocriticism”; Patricia MacCormack’s “Post-human Teratology”; and Donna Haraway’s “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others”. Depending on one’s definition of monster theory, any of these more abstract pieces – and particularly the essay by Haraway – could be either the most or least central chapter in the volume. Defining monster theory in relation to one of these texts, rather than Cohen’s, as foundational would make for a very different field. Haraway, for example, uses the word “monster” infrequently across the 62 pages of her essay, and she is much less concerned with, say, Universal Horror and slasher films than many monster theorists, while even so retaining a crucial shared theoretical orientation with Cohen and those, like Weinstock, who have sought to build up monster studies as a field after him.

Indeed, Weinstock has himself published extraordinarily widely on monsters, and also edited prolifically in the aspiring field that, by now, he has perhaps done as much as Cohen to define: by virtue of its loaded title alone, *The Monster Theory Reader* attempts to advance monster studies one step closer to institutional recognition as a coherent field. Its successes and failures in this ambition remind me a great deal of Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle’s 2012 edited collection *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, a comparable project that also could be seen to suffer from an excess of eclecticism for a supposedly field-defining work (the books even share two of the same essays, including Weinstock’s additional contribution on “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture”). The major difference between the two is probably that *The Monster Theory Reader* skews contemporary in its coverage of specific monsters and works, while the *Research Companion* places more emphasis on the premodern. The latter is also significantly not a reprint volume. By contrast, several of the authors included in *The Monster Theory Reader* do not understand themselves to be doing monster theory as such, but rather film studies, cultural studies, psychoanalytic criticism, perhaps horror studies, and so on. Regardless, a volume like this provides a useful service in critical canon formation, and above all will make for a suitable companion for advanced students and newer researchers of monsters and monstrosity, even if also regrettably representing a minor missed opportunity to contextualise and document the history of the field with additional editorial commentary and framing.
Biography: T. S. Miller (millert@fau.edu) teaches science fiction and fantasy literature as Assistant Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. Originally trained as a medievalist, he has published articles on both later Middle English literature and various contemporary authors of speculative fiction. His current major work explores representations of plants and modes of plant being in literature and culture.
BOOK REVIEW:

Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children’s Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century

Brian Attebery


Maria Sachiko Cecire’s study of modern children’s fantasy takes a particular historical cluster as representative of the genre: the two midcentury masters, J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, along with a younger generation of writers who either studied with those two at Oxford or were profoundly influenced by the curriculum and philosophy they imposed on the study of literature. The latter include Diana Wynne Jones, Philip Pullman, Susan Cooper, and Keven Crossley-Holland. J. K. Rowling is not in the core group, but the Harry Potter books are discussed as an offshoot, as are, later on, Lev Grossman’s Magicians trilogy and George R. R. Martin’s Song of Ice and Fire. Fantasy as defined around this core is Anglocentric and medievalist. It looks back to an imagined past, both personal and cultural, as a way of recapturing the enchantment of the title. From Jacqueline Rose and Perry Nodelman, Cecire takes the idea that children’s literature constructs a walled-off space of purported innocence around childhood – primarily for the benefit of adult readers and writers. Adding in the idea of imagined communities from Benedict Anderson, she extends this notion to the childhood of the race – and exactly which race that might be forms a major part of the second half of this study.

Cecire’s choice of focus gives coherence to a notoriously wide-ranging and diverse topic. By looking at Lewis and Tolkien as educators as well as
creators, she is able to bring in considerable information about literary canons and educational goals as well as particular texts that serve as touchstones for the writers she is studying, such as Tolkien’s favorites Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. She also sets up an argument about fantasy and racism that brings her study (despite its subtitle) well into the 21st century. Early chapters immerse us in the curricular wars waged at Oxford and between it and Cambridge, where modern literature was being championed by the likes of F. R. Leavis. Having demonstrated a pattern of medievalist Oxford fantasy, she then explores its use of Christianised myth and of traditions that are a mix of nostalgic invention and rediscovery. A core chapter (one of the strongest) deals with Christmas fantasies such as Cooper’s The Dark Is Rising, which Cecire convincingly traces back to the “Christmas challenge” that sets Sir Gawain off on his adventure. She makes the point that the assemblage of Christmas traditions that were half revived, half invented by Washington Irving, Clement Moore, Charles Dickens, and Victorian merchants fill an important niche. They have what Cecire calls “affective authenticity”, which she defines as “the sensation of something being emotionally true, even if it is not empirically true”. And she goes on immediately to extend the idea beyond its seasonal application: “These are the truths that Lewis and Tolkien argued are the most important in life, beyond facts and beyond time” (162). Modern fantasy is exactly an exercise in affective authenticity, which is another way of saying, as Ursula K. Le Guin noted, that fantasy is no less true for not being factual.

This insight, which I take to be Cecire’s central thesis, is valid and immensely useful in understanding the power of fantasy. However, I have some problems with the historical narrative that frames it. The Oxford connection she traces is real, and the canon formed around it is often taken to be the whole story of the genre, but the boundaries of that tradition are leaky, and the sense of a common enterprise even among the Oxford writers is perhaps an invented tradition like the Christmas one she dismantles so deftly. In order to construct fantasy as Anglophile, if not always English, and medievalist, she has to pass over some major writers and misrepresent others. Le Guin’s innovative use of nonwhite characters in Earthsea goes unmentioned. George MacDonald barely makes it into her study, disguised as a medieval revivalist along the lines of his contemporary William Morris. Edith Nesbit (a powerful influence on Lewis) doesn’t show up at all, nor does one of my favorites, L. M. Boston, whose Green Knowe stories include a Chinese refugee and a Caribbean slave among their protagonists and who possibly authorised Cooper and Jones similarly to undercut the myth of a white England. I would suggest that MacDonald, Nesbit, Rudyard Kipling (in the Puck of Pook Hill stories), Boston, Henry Treece, Alan Garner, Philippa Pearce, and David Almond make up a cluster of children’s fantasy writers who use the form to interrogate history (from the Neolithic to the near past) and privilege. Their work thus anticipates some of the fantasists Cecire brings in at the end as a counter-statement to the Oxford group.

But here I am in danger of falling into the reviewer’s trap of reviewing the book the author didn’t write. The one she did write is engaging, well-researched, and, I think, important. It offers new insight into the processes by which modern fantasy came to be associated with a specific group of writers and a particular kind of storytelling. A chapter titled “White Magic” looks not only at fictional texts but also at the conversation that arises in response to them, such as the online debate between contributors to a Tumblr site called
MedievalPOC (People of Color) and commentators on Reddit who seek to deny the existence of African, Asian, and Arabic sojourners in medieval Europe, though all are well documented. The latter demonstrate quite effectively the psychological significance of that innocent and presumably racially pure space that medievalist fantasy shares with children’s literature. Citing Robin Bernstein, Cecire observes that “the inextricability of childhood, innocence and whiteness since the end of the eighteenth century creates a serious barrier to reimagining the stories we tell to and about children, and perpetuates the racialized roles that we give to young people through their toys and media” (183). Yet the MedievalPOC dare to challenge the racialist assumptions that cling to fantasy literature, as does the writer Junot Díaz, whose metafantasy The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao informs the next chapter, which is called “Your Inner Child of the Past”. A major strand in Díaz’s novel is the title character’s infatuation with Tolkien until he comes across the closest thing to his own racial identity in The Lord of the Rings in the form of the evil Haradrim, “black men like half-trolls” (qtd. in Cecire 220). That description marks Middle-earth as out of bounds to readers like Oscar. The unacknowledged truth, the secret bargain made by lovers of medievalist fantasy, is that the space of innocence is also one of exclusion and domination.

Yet Cecire does not end on that sour note. Her concluding chapter suggests that fantasy can change and is changing. She encourages us to seek out other sources and traditions for fantasy and writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, N. K. Jemisin, Zen Cho, Daniel José Older, and Tomi Adeyemi. Cecire gives us the tools we need to read their work as both an answer to and a continuation of the work begun by Tolkien and Lewis.

Biography: Brian Attebery is editor of the Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts and author of a number of studies of fantasy and science fiction, including Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth.
BOOK REVIEW:

Modernism and Time Machines

Robert Finnigan


In the opening pages of The Time Machine: An Invention (1895), H. G. Wells’s time traveller declares: “There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of space, and a fourth, Time” (6). The now-familiar trope of traveling through time has continued to preoccupy the popular and scholarly imagination since the publication of Wells’s “The Chronic Astronaut” (1888), and as works like Rene Barjavel’s Future Times Three (1944), Isaac Asimov’s The End of Eternity (1955), Stephen Baxter’s The Time Ships (1995), the cinematic Back to the Future Trilogy (1985–1990), and television’s Doctor Who (1963–present), to name a small selection, can attest. Yet as Charles M. Tung astutely observes in the opening of his new study, Modernism and Time Machines (2019), although the time machine as a device first appeared in the early stages of modernist history, the “aesthetic experiments that we typically associate with the singular noun ‘modernism’ have not been considered in relation to this foundational science-fiction trope” (1). To remedy this neglect, Tung expands the well-documented modernist fascination with time and seeks to reframe time-travel in modernist works and illuminate alternate histories, and narratives that go beyond simply moving “back and forth in history” (2). Given this study’s focus on literary and visual trends, modernism, SF, variable speeds of clashing chronologies, and possible untaken roads of history, many scholars will find this study illuminating.

Beginning with a substantial introduction, Tung provides an informative overview of scholarship devoted to modernist and SF pre-occupations with time. Analysing Jon May and Nigel Thrift’s assertions regarding the multiplicity of time, he explores the trope of time machines and offers a brief rereading of
the “Modernist cult of Time” and rereadings of Aestheticism and Impressionism as modernist movements. In doing so, Tung lays much of the groundwork for this study. Yet readers may be surprised by Tung’s assertion that because of modernism’s self-conscious experiments with and questions about the “concert with psychological, social and historical mechanisms” (2), it is and acts as a metaphorical time machine. It should be noted that the spectre of Wells does loom large throughout this introduction, and, indeed, the whole study, as every chapter contains a discussion, either in passing or in a focused way, about Wells’s works. Given Wells’s prominence in SF and his considerable contribution to the development of the time-travel theme, his presence can be somewhat distracting at times. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach and drawing on materials from the visual arts, literature, history, film and media studies, and physics, Tung carefully avoids oversimplifications and the dangers of his assertion leading to the assumption that modernism is a transitional or liminal experiment. Tung skilfully draws on the works of Adam Barrows, Sara Danius, Ezra Pound, and Mark Currie concerning an understanding of time, its narration, and shape in articulating his argument, particularly in his statements that, like Barrows, he wants to demonstrate that “modernist time machines critique the imperial and commercial ‘one true, cosmopolitan time of modernity’” (3). Likewise, by using Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conceptualisation of the “machine” with its configuration of disparate components, and Levi Bryant’s definition of ‘machinic’ entities based on “their outputs and operations” (2), Tung ably illuminates the intersections of modernism and SF, and the multiplicity of seeing and imagining history as through alternate lenses. Throughout the introduction, however, Tung employs a high level of jargon, which, combined with his concerted attention to detail in every paragraph and his allusions and references, frequently makes this opening more akin to a study on quantum theory.

In the first chapter, Tung shows examples of “augmented reality” by exploring Jason Powell’s “Looking into the Past” project (2009), the Museum of London’s “StreetMuseum” app, J. G. Ballard’s “The Sound-Sweep” (1960), and Robert Delaunay’s “The Eiffel Tower” (1909–1912/1928) Cubist paintings. Arguing that these works offer present-day audiences and readers windows through time by gathering many different views and “technolog[ies] of omniscience” (35), Tung emphasises the idea of mixed and mottled threads of the past and the present by discussing the intersection of multiple histories. This brief discussion establishes much of the context of Tung’s examination of historicity in terms of defamiliarisation and reconfiguration. Providing close readings of Pablo Picasso’s “Primitivist” time-space warping paintings, T. S. Eliot’s sense of historical fragmentation, and Murray Leinster’s alternative-history short story “Sidewise in Time” (1934), Tung assembles a patchwork of historicity concerning the themes of irregular and polytemporal timelines. Challenging the criticism that modernism and augmented reality represent the present as dishistoricised, Tung contends with refreshing insight that Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) engages in the plurality of histories by placing different histories side-by-side. In his reading of this painting, Tung suggests that it moves beyond simple dramatisation of a backward glance, one version of time-traveling.

Instead, Tung argues that Les Demoiselles critiques the notion of progressive history, a model used to justify Empire, and considers Picasso’s
historicisation of Western ideals through the use of augmented reality in the bordello to suggest that the painting is littered with transhistorical themes. Progressing forward, Tung authoritatively examines the connections between Cubist temporal experiments and Eliot’s disruption of linear time. By drawing on the work of Christopher Herbert, James George Frazer, Jessie Weston, and Cleanth Brooks, Tung traces Eliot’s interest in anthropological constructs of a variety of pasts that are and were “a gesture towards the availability of different historical lines” (67). Tung contends there is no singular view of history or temporal location of the past and future. As an alternative, by moving sideways, the narrative and the characters reveal the possibilities of the present “comprising a variety of intersecting and parallel trajectories” (56). Although such analysis is not uncommon, especially concerning The Waste Land (1922), Tung’s interrogation of the overlapping planes of time provides a refreshingly nuanced dimension to an understanding of the poem.

Moving forward, Tung continues his exploration of the polytemporal by considering Fredric Jameson’s theory of “incomplete Modernisation”, Neil Smith’s conceptualisation of uneven development, and Michel Serrr’s time-machinic view of crumpled historicity in his readings throughout Chapter 2. Notably, Tung chooses Christopher Nolan’s Interstellar (2014), Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle (1962), and Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925) to examine the political unconscious and the multitemporal, as each features cross-cut and parallel timelines. Beginning with an analysis of Nolan’s film and a comparison with Edwin Peter’s “bubbler insert” for The Life of an American Fireman (1903), Tung explores the uses of parallel editing as a way of representing a desynchronisation of time frames. In his emphasis on Interstellar’s embodiment of a class of alternate history by challenging and problematising rhythms and varying timelines, Tung convincingly demonstrates that the film’s narrative style requires more than an understanding of desynchronised time. Instead, Tung contends, exiting one timeline does not mean it ends; rather, it creates the possibility of crumpled time and a form of alternate history that exemplifies a “disjunctively cross warped time-space” (86). Exploring alternate histories further in The Man in the High Castle, Tung goes on to demonstrate that Dick’s novel represents a reconfiguration of alternativity, historicity, and the present in the context of diverging concurrent trajectories. This is best illustrated in Tung’s discussion of Dick’s use of the I Ching (Book of Change) as a plot device and as a thematic tool of divination. Because the I Ching is employed as a medium that highlights the ancient and contemporary, the real and fictional nature of singular and multiple moments of time, Tung underscores that by highlighting both the synchronic networks and diachronic chains of history, Dick’s narrative questions the stability of history itself.

In one of the most refreshing sections of this study, Tung boldly declares that Mrs Dalloway is a novel defined by the running of different clocks simultaneously, which makes for a “stranger construction of the present than we typically ascribe to Woolf” (86). Although this statement is not new, his exploration of the movement and the clock not only thematises time as a technology of configuration and convergence, but also suggests a juxtaposition of Albert Einstein’s simultaneity and various notions on the destabilisation of time. By foregrounding that such notions are central to the structure of Mrs Dalloway, Tung demonstrates that the novel relies on parallel timelines
desynchronised from one another, particularly in the ways Woolf stresses the post-war present and the remnants of the past, and the ways Clarissa Dalloway remembers Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh before and after the war, for example. Tung’s analysis is refreshing because he emphasises that in Mrs Dalloway, time must be considered in the context of different possible histories – histories that overlap and intersect with the desynchronised present.

Chapter 3 shifts its focus to explore several different texts within the context of time lag: Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s The Matrix (1999), William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929), and Jessica Hagedorn’s Dream Jungle (2003). Exploring the idea that “time-lag” is an example of different timelines with their own “tempos and varying pace” (24), Tung investigates examples of “bullet time” (122) throughout The Matrix and likens it to cubist renderings of objects across multiple narratives and timescales. By employing such comparisons, Tung astutely draws attention to the assembled and constructed nature of Neo’s movements and fights, and to ruptures in linear time and metanarratives; he contends that these illustrate a technological fantasy of transcending and manipulating history. Similarly, in his analysis of The Sound and the Fury, Tung argues that central to the novel is a form of racialised time lag: not simply between two points on a single historical line, but between different histories that move at different rates. Here, the temporal aspect of double consciousness leads to a consideration of postcolonial treatments of time lag and how historical behindness is represented. In the final section of this chapter, Tung addresses the overlap and collision of time in Dream Jungle, Apocalypse Now (1979), Magellan’s “discovery” of the Philippines, and the 1970s hoax concerning the “stone age” Tasaday people on the Philippine island of Mindanao. Notably, as each text contains an example of time lag, the dilation of time reveals a heterochronic assemblage of time-paths and historical frames in a manner that reveals a nightmarish “threat of an inappropriate disordering of the synchronization among past, present, and future” (157). Much of the pleasure and insight of this chapter stems from Tung’s interweaving of discussions and ideas relating to different disciplines; real and fake media, literature, pseudo-anthropology, and history.

In the final chapter, which examines the aesthetic interest in “representing and exploring enormous timescales” in the 20th century, Tung consciously stresses a micro-cosmic approach. In connecting Wells’s time travel, Woolf’s far futurism, J.B.S. Haldane’s vision of the end of the world in “The Last Judgment” (1927), and Olaf Stapledon’s Last and First Men (1930), Tung shows how modernist attempts to portray the future of the human world parallel the potential utopian or dystopian visions of SF. For example, in his discussion of “The Last Judgment”, with the conceit of a human ancestor delivering a school lesson to those living on Venus, Tung weaves contemporary debates concerning degeneration and eugenics with questions about modernity, reflexivity, and myopia. In doing so, and by focusing on time in terms of a planet’s rotation and “nature’s many clocks” (181), Tung illustrates that time is unstable and therefore multiple. The search for new clocks and the defamiliarisation that results dominates Tung’s later discussion of Stapledon’s distension of narrative over two billion years of time and Terrence Malick’s exploration of cosmic timescales as seen in Tree of Life (2011). Demonstrating that heterochronic scaling up and zooming out links with SF’s alternative futurity, he astutely observes that the diversity of interest in Last and First Men
is represented by the multitude of timelines, not merely within “a mentality or immensity” (189) of the timescale. Equally, Tung’s attention to detail concerning the number of timelines in which the figure of scoping, the trope of flight, and the idea of time travel integrate to make a coherent entirety of time is worthy of note. However, as Tung argues, Stapledon dehumanises time by stretching the novel beyond its breaking point, and by calling attention to the impossibility of unifying discordant and clashing timescales. Finally, in a comparison of The Time Machine and Tree of Life, Tung shows that in the modernist technique of examining and expanding perspectives, not only does it connect with SF’s extra and ultra-terrestrial themes, but does so by allowing “readers to view the limits of our time frames or perception of time in relation to others” (24).

Building on his previous essay, “Modernism, Time Machines and the Defamiliarization of Time” (2015), Tung has expanded its scope dramatically, and the level of research, connections, and intersections made throughout this study are remarkable. However, his exhaustive research is, at times, overwhelming, and it can be somewhat difficult to navigate. Likewise, he employs a highly concerted level of academic jargon and theoretical terminology that increases the text’s density. Consequently, recommending this study to anyone besides experienced readers and scholars is difficult and problematic. Moreover, given the large amount of attention Tung devotes to Wells, the inclusion of Wittenberg’s assessments that Wells’s Time Machine is “not yet time-travel fiction proper since its movement through time is ‘subsidiary’ to the imperatives of the utopian macrologue” (qtd. in 205n40) without an accompanying discussion is puzzling. Although some issues make recommending this study to all but experienced readers difficult, Modernism and Time Machines is a distinguished and exceptional monograph that will inform scholarship on modernism and SF for years to come.

Biography: Robert Finnigan obtained his PhD at the University of Sunderland and is currently based at Nottingham Trent University. Robert is currently researching Anglo-Irish contributions to Aestheticism and Decadence within the fin de siècle period. His primary research interests lie in the areas of Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence and book history, as well as fantasy and SF. For several years, he was involved in the activities and events of the North East Irish Culture Network to promote and encourage research into the various characteristics of Irish culture and society.
BOOK REVIEW:

*I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*

Marjut Puhakka


Although Ransom’s previous work in Canadian SF has won the Pioneer Award offered by the Science Fiction Research Association, *I Am Legend as American Myth* unfortunately lacks the same ambition or cohesiveness. Still, it offers a wonderful opportunity to follow through on the changes in the many adaptations of Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* (1954), which Ransom examines using gender, race, and adaptation theory. Ransom’s study is a timely one due to Richard Matheson’s great influence on North American SF – in fact, George Romero wrote the screenplay for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) after encountering the novel; Matheson’s story may thus be considered the starting point for the modern zombie genre. Yet, even if Matheson’s contributions to the genre are clear, fewer studies on Matheson have appeared than one might expect (despite a slight uptick of interest since the Will Smith film version in 2007). Ransom’s book is therefore a welcome, detailed comparison of Matheson’s novel and its four full-length film versions.

*I Am Legend as American Myth* situates Matheson’s original narrative in the historical context of time it was created: World War II and the Cold War period immediately following. Ransom analyses the novel and the four films in chronological order. Because the novel was published in 1954, it would be natural to consider it a Cold War text; instead, Ransom reads it as a result of...
the trauma evoked by World War II and the Korean War. Chapter 1 therefore examines the original novel within the context of post-war America while keeping in mind the fact that Matheson served in Europe. This is a refreshing approach, as most 1950s SF is read – forgetting the traumatised veterans of the previous war – as a product of the Cold War atmosphere. Some of Ransom's better observations include how Matheson's experiences in the army are reflected in the story, including how the protagonist's behavior resembles that of a traumatised veteran. This shows, for instance, in the detailed descriptions of Neville's vampire-hunting scenes, which reflect how trained soldiers might have reacted in a similar situation.

This focus on historical context remains the most successful part of I Am Legend as American Myth. Unfortunately, the other theoretical perspectives that Ransom brings to the text lack the same depth. Ransom probably brings these other theoretical elements to her reading because early scholars on Matheson, such as Kathy Patterson, mostly concentrate on racial and gender issues through the concept of the Other; in contrast, Ransom seems to feel that these issues must be addressed as well in order to write a full analysis of Matheson's novel. However, mixing historical context, gender theory, race theory, and queer theory together does not leave enough space for Ransom to build a solid argument from any of her chosen theoretical perspectives. For instance, one of Ransom's more controversial readings concerns the latest movie adaptation, I Am Legend (2007), which combines a superficial and old-fashioned Freudian theory with an emphasis on the lead actor's skin color. For example, in the movie, Neville (played by Will Smith), hoping to find a cure, gives one of the monsters an injection to turn her back into a human woman. Ransom repeatedly interprets this needle-based injection as symbolising rape. As she writes, “Bakke specifically likens Neville’s injection of the female dark seeker with a phallic needle to a form a rape, an accomplishment of the sexual intercourse .... If we note that the legendary large penis of the black man is substituted with a needle ... a metaphor for a small penis ....” (168), and so on. Ransom cites previous work by Gretchen Bakke, but she also takes Bakke's interpretation without a grain of criticism, even though this would have been a wonderful opportunity to further examine binaries like black/white and male/female in greater depth. Unfortunately, Ransom's core idea simply needs more argumentation than a passing reference to Freudian interpretation (needle = penis) or racial stereotypes (black man raping a white woman). These kinds of notions and flippant references to other studies can ruin an otherwise good analysis. If not proven otherwise, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

In her analysis of the novel and the adaptations, Ransom pays the most attention to the lonely protagonist, Neville (or “Morgan” in The Last Man on Earth). To examine the protagonist in the films, Ransom employs scholar Richard Dyer’s star theory, which emphasises the actor playing the lead role. In this case, the leading men are Vincent Price in The Last Man on Earth (1964), the ultra-masculine Charlton Heston in The Omega Man (1971), and Will Smith in I Am Legend (2007). These three actors are thus icons, symbols of the last man. The fourth film, I Am Omega (2007), is less well known; so is its leading actor, Mark Dacascos. Ransom taces how the main character changes from one adaptation to another. For Ransom, the key is to examine race and race relations, the contrast between masculinity and femininity, and even the idea of closeted queer sexuality. Still, although it would be interesting to reflect on
how lesser-known films and actors fit into star theory, *I Am Legend as American Myth* does not attempt to answer that. Instead, Ransom focuses on the two older films, *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Omega Man*, linking the former to the Cold War. Because *The Last Man on Earth* stars Vincent Price, who was rumored to have had relationships with both sexes, Ransom considers an application of queer theory appropriate. Yet, although the Cold War context seems quite acceptable to a modern reader, why base an entire argument on rumors of a leading actor’s sexual orientation? While such rumors might be interesting in a historical overview, it is here merely confusing to combine older methods of biographical studies with more contemporary theoretical paradigms that involve gender, race, and sexuality. The mixture ends up reinforcing old stereotypes instead of trying to evoke new ways of thinking. For instance, contemporary theoretical paradigms might have done highly interesting things with the two more recent film adaptations, but these chapters are Ransom’s shortest, and Ransom only focuses on the race of Will Smith’s character, whom earlier film adaptations had identified as the last *white* man on earth.

Overall, Ransom’s book promises to fill a critical gap by studying Matheson’s most influential work, *I Am Legend*, as a contemporary American myth, and the monograph certainly succeeds as the secondary literature’s first full-scale attempt to examine how adaptations of Matheson’s text reflect cultural change. Methodologically, *I Am Legend as American Myth* is an inclusive attempt to follow one narrative changing over time and through multiple (re-)interpretations. The narratives’ historical context, the author’s biography, historical events such as wars, and the backgrounds of each movie are explained in minute detail. Ransom starts out by asserting that her “study’s goal is to reassess Matheson’s significance as a major figure in SF, fantasy, and horror literature, film, and television” (4). At some points, she hits this ambitious goal, but at other points her analyses lack nuance when it comes to important issues like race and gender. The *I Am Legend* narratives could just as easily be read as telling “universal” stories about loneliness and paranoia. Although Ransom does mention that the narrative’s mythic background resembles the story of Robinson Crusoe (186), one would expect her to address the idea of a *contemporary myth* in more detail than one mention. There is no solid definition of *I Am Legend* as a myth; instead, Ransom sees the narrative as achieving a mythological *status* to be read from its surrounding context. Perhaps it would have been more fruitful to read *I Am Legend* as a representation of an older myth or a text that creates its mythopoeia.

Likewise, since Matheson’s novel undoubtedly played a role in creating the zombie genre, perhaps Ransom could have paid more attention to the post-apocalyptic and mythical dimensions of the story, studying its lonely protagonist as a mythical hero or observing Neville’s journey as an example of the monomyth (or hero’s journey). To some extent, we can read this kind of argument between the lines of Ransom’s text, but the idea of Neville as a mostly white (except for Will Smith) and mostly heterosexual (except for Vincent Price) mythic hero gets sidetracked by all the fascinating details of actors, filmmaking, and authorial biography. As political and controversial as Ransom’s reading may be, it does not highlight – as Ransom wants – the importance of *I Am Legend*. Rather, it uses the narrative to express the imbalances within the time period and society *American Myth* should be considered an
indispensable study for anyone interested in Matheson’s novel and its adaptations. Not only does Ransom succinctly summarise previous studies on Matheson, but she shows an admirable ambition in analysing how a written narrative can interact with film narratives, and how those narratives can be affected by cultural context.

Biography: Marjut Puhakka is a PhD student at the University of Oulu, Finland. In her upcoming thesis, she studies the concepts of subject and consciousness in transmedia stories about self-aware zombies, I Am Legend, The Girl with All the Gifts, iZombie, and Metro 2033 by examining the border between human and monster. She has been interested in horror fiction since she was a child, and her previous work combines philosophical theory and literature studies. Currently, she works as a literature teacher.
BOOK REVIEW:

Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry

Aino-Kaisa Koistinen


In 2016, I visited Cardiff University for a conference entitled “Fantasies in Contemporary Culture”. As I had recently become interested in convergence culture, fandom studies, and transmedia storytelling, I decided to take the opportunity to venture into the unknown while I was in Cardiff – that is, to engage in a fan practice unfamiliar to me by visiting The Doctor Who Experience, a themed interactional exhibition for the franchise. So, I set foot into the building, took some pictures with the Daleks in the lobby, and stepped into the blue box – it was bigger on the inside! – to ride along with the Doctor in the TARDIS. To my great surprise, a variety of emotions flashed through me and I found my eyes watering. It was not only memories of the Doctor Who TV series but also my personal experiences of watching it with the people I hold dear that came rushing into my embodied consciousness. The reaction, nevertheless, was a surprise, a shock even; for I had never considered myself “that kind of a fangirl”.

The reader may wonder what this has to do with Suzanne Scott’s monograph, Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry. The answer is: everything. Reactions like mine to the concept of “fangirl” are, indeed, what Scott’s book is all about as it tackles the place of women and fangirls in today’s digital fan culture(s). Scott establishes how fandom is produced and regulated in a deeply gendered manner by both the convergence-culture industry and fandom itself. To put it simply, both fans and the convergence-culture industry are engaged in a continuous negotiation of
acceptable and desirable forms of fandom – and, in that respect, also fan identities. By analysing several discussions in media/fandom, Scott provides an ample amount of evidence for how the role of “fangirl” is deemed as undesirable, unreal, unwanted – the wrong kind of fandom. Often female fans are shunned specifically because of their female “fannish affect” (134–36), which is seen as excessive and undesirable. My reaction to the emotional response evoked by the Doctor Who Experience also testifies to how fangirls are considered too emotionally invested in fandom. Even as a woman, feminist, and scholar, I had internalised this idea of emotional female fandom as something to avoid – in any case, something to which a respectable academic surely could not belong. The memory of visiting The Doctor Who Experience thus stayed with me while reading Fake Geek Girls.

Throughout the book, Scott provides compelling analyses of the complex roles of women in fandom. How should women negotiate their place in a fan culture often hostile to them? What immediately strikes the reader as an important contribution to studies on fandom, gender, and the media is how Fake Geek Girls introduces the role of both producers and media-makers (i.e. the convergence-culture industry) and fans (the users/consumers of this industry) as together producing the contemporary spreadable media culture as one not accepting of female fandom. Scott argues that the concept of “fan” tends to connote “male” partly due to the fact that convergence-culture privileges male forms of fandom. Men tend to engage in affirmative fandom that does not challenge the status quo between producer and user whereas women are more prone to transformative forms of fandom such as slash fiction, fan vids, fan art, and “crossplay” (cross-gender cosplay) that challenge, mix up, and rewrite the canon of a particular franchise. Transformative fan works have even resulted in copyright lawsuits, which makes it clear that affirmative forms of fandom are preferred by the convergence-culture industry. This preference then helps to create an idea of the ideal, affirmative (and thus mostly male) fan, which has led to discrimination against female fans. At its worst, this discrimination has resulted in serious forms of harassment. Scott dubs this phenomenon of rendering women as undesirable fans in digital fandom as spreadable misogyny. In digital fandom, this form of misogyny is visible, for example, in the “fake geek girl” memes (i.e. images of geek/nerd women accompanied by derogatory phrases such as “fake geek girl”) that are circulated to diminish women’s status as fans. I find the concept of spreadable misogyny highly relevant not only to research in digital fandom, but to broader studies on online misogyny – e.g., dealing with populist and conservative discussions of gender.

Fake Geek Girls is divided into six chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction, with its tongue-in-cheek title “Make Fandom Great Again” (an obvious Donald Trump reference) introduces and contextualises the debate – or “war” – around fandom within the current political landscape. In this “fan culture war”, minority fans are justifiably demanding more-varied representations, which is met with claims of “a censorial rise of ‘PC culture’” (3). By taking into account this broader context in addition to the developments of the convergence-culture industry and fandom, Fake Geek Girls successfully interrogates women’s role in contemporary digital fandom in a complex and thorough manner. Scott’s book thus highlights how the misogynist attitudes spreading in contemporary culture, such as the alt-right movement, should not be overlooked when studying the hostility towards
women in fandom. Moreover, her introduction situates these debates in the context of feminist fandom and feminist fan studies. The aims of the book are stated clearly in reference to both feminism and the current political/cultural landscape, as Scott writes that “this book is centrally concerned with how androcentric conceptions of fan culture have become entrenched despite fan studies’ characterization of fandom as decidedly feminine and potentially feminist space” (4). Indeed, Scott discusses the history of fan studies and the field’s connection to feminism in the first chapter, “A Fangirl’s Place is in the Resistance: Feminism and Fan Studies”. The focus on both the contemporary and historical aspects of fandom and (feminist) fan studies makes the book particularly suitable for teaching purposes – and for anyone interested in feminist media/fan studies.

The following chapters then deal with issues such as the privileged role of the fanboy in the current media landscape (Chapter 2), spreadable misogyny (Chapter 3), the convergence industry’s co-opting of fan labor (Chapter 4), the gendered politics of fan professionalisation (Chapter 5), as well as fashion and pinning (i.e. Pinterest) as (post)feminist geek culture (Chapter 6). The chapters bring to the fore how questions of identity politics remain a relevant object of study in media and cultural studies. In other words, Fake Geek Girls makes visible both the harmful and empowering aspects of adopting (or being appointed) a specific (fan) identity category, as well as how these identities are constructed within complex cultural contexts. Particularly interesting is Scott’s discussion of the “fangirl” concept and the power relations and positive/negative implications related to it. In Chapter 5, Scott raises the question of who gets to be a “fangirl”. Suggesting that male fans have co-opted the concept and identity of fangirl, Scott claims that in today’s fan culture it is easier for a male fan to adopt both the role of fanboy and the role of fangirl (168). This is a telling indicator of the power relations inherent in today’s fan culture. Whereas male fans may find an emancipatory effect in adopting the position of the emotionally invested fangirl, the female fan a similar position risks exclusion from the fan community.

Scott’s discussion of fashion’s potential to serve as a kind of “girly geek culture” in Chapter 6 is also illuminating. Even though fashion has the potential to function as a female-targeted and empowering practice, Scott reminds the reader that engaging in “everyday cosplay” (i.e. fannish outfits sold to consumers) is vastly different to cosplaying everyday (200–02) – not to mention that not all fans can afford fashionable fannish consumer items. Thus, fashion may work to delimit and police female fan identity. In the same chapter, though, Scott finds potential in how the practice of pinning supports the construction of female fannish identity (albeit only certain kinds). According to Scott, “If Pinterest is, as many have argued, an aspirational space, it might also be wielded to offer an aspirational vision for the convergence culture’s valuation of female fans” (196). There might be hope for all those fangirls after all!

However, as Scott herself notes, the book could have provided more examples of transformative fan works and their role in changing the misogynist media landscape.

Finally, the conclusion, “Fan Studies OTP: Fandom and Intersectional Feminism”, argues that we should remember the relationship of feminism and fandom as the “original true pairing” in fan studies, and calls for more feminist and intersectional analyses in today’s fan studies (223, 228–33). Along these
lines, in terms of intersectionalism, there is one shortcoming in the book, which Scott herself acknowledges: the book does not really engage with intersectional questions of race, age, class and dis/ability, for example, but limits its focus mostly on gender. An intersectional approach would have provided a more nuanced analysis of the power structures inherent in the “fan culture war” – how spreadable misogyny affects different people differently and what kinds of fan positions are available, for instance, for fans who do not subscribe to a gender binary. However, Scott reflects on this in both the introduction and her conclusions – and there is really only so much one book can do. In the introduction she argues that even though the fangirl/fanboy binary is problematic, we should not just move beyond it without studying it – an argument that I can surely support. In the conclusions, on the other hand, Scott negotiates her “aca-fannish fragility”, meaning her attachment to mostly white feminist studies, which has led to this book’s focus on gender instead of other axes of identity (228–33). I thus believe that we can expect more intersectional insights on geek culture from Scott in the future. By bringing to the fore important discussions related to the scholar’s own position in research, the concluding chapter also places the book within feminist discussions of situated knowledge(s). The idea of knowledge as situated and positional is central to feminism, and in the time of fake news and relativist claims that scientific knowledge no longer matters, *Fake Geek Girls* serves as an example of what situated knowledge means in feminist research: careful reflection on the role of one’s own position in knowledge-production.

To sum up, Suzanne Scott’s *Fake Geek Girls* is a clearly argued and insightful work that I would recommend to everyone interested in contemporary media culture, feminism, and identity politics. Because SF and fantasy are well-represented in fandom, the book will also be of interest to *Fafnir*’s readers. That said, I found the book a difficult read. This is not to say that it is written in an uncomprehensive manner – far from it – and I struggle to pinpoint what made this reading experience, while certainly interesting, a slightly difficult one. One reason might be the minor repetitions found in the book. However, these repetitions also work as a useful reminder of the book’s main arguments. Another reason was perhaps just the subject matter. No matter how interesting I found the research, it can be emotionally difficult to delve into the world of spreadable misogyny. I would nevertheless claim that, due to this very difficulty, we need studies like *Fake Geek Girls* that make us see the gendered power structures in today’s digital culture we might otherwise choose to ignore.

**Biography:** Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (PhD in Contemporary Culture, Title of Docent in Media Culture) works as a postdoctoral researcher in Contemporary Culture at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has studied a variety of media texts ranging from European policy documents to science fiction television and transmedia storyworlds. Koistinen is the chair of the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research, a member of The Monster Network, an affiliate member of the Posthumanities Hub at Linköping University, and the School of Resource Wisdom (University of Jyväskylä).
BOOK REVIEW:

Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction

Anelise Farris

Ria Cheyne’s Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction is a significant work of scholarship that not only manages to bring together two fields – cultural disability studies and genre (or popular) fiction studies – but also succeeds at doing so through the lens of affect theory, a movement that (much like the two aforementioned fields) has really only gained traction in recent years. Cheyne’s specific application of affect theory is centred on how depictions of disability function within the “ways in which texts from a particular genre create (or attempt to create) affects anticipated by the genre community” (4). As part of the Representations: Health, Disability, Culture and Society series, Cheyne’s book reflects the mission of the series to publish the most current and original interdisciplinary scholarship. Working against “a set of largely unquestioned assumptions about the relationship between narrative, disability, and emotion”, Cheyne aims to “increase engagement with forms of representation ignored or neglected by disability studies” – speaking to scholars and practitioners in the humanities as well as the sciences (15, 21). Not only has there been no previous study dedicated to the relationship between genre conventions and disability representations, Cheyne also more broadly offers an unprecedented addition to genre fiction scholarship as a whole with her use of affect theory.
Through concentrating on five popular genres – horror, crime, science fiction, fantasy, and romance – Cheyne makes a compelling case for why genre fiction in particular lends itself to this type of affect analysis. Her primary rationale is that the conventions that guide genre fiction are intentionally designed to induce specific emotions, manufactured affective responses that set genre fiction apart from other mainstream literary fiction. With each popular genre, there are certain conventions that readers expect, and those patterns, she observes, are all tied to specific emotions. Since the “feeling drives the reading”, genre fiction inherently provides affective encounters, and thus serves as an excellent means for examining affective responses to disability representations (2). Consequently, while representation in a diversity context has become a somewhat overused and often empty phrase, Cheyne approaches disability representation from a more innovative, constructive position. Going beyond just reviewing how certain texts represent disability, she considers the “ways disability is experienced and encountered” by those consuming the texts (8). Cheyne doubts if anything is gained from simply deeming a text good or bad based on its portrayal disability, and so she asks us to think more deeply, and more productively, about a text by exploring how transformation might occur through affective engagement.

Drawing upon disability-studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s use of the term misfit, Cheyne pays special attention to what she deems “fictional misfits”, moments where depictions of disability don’t quite align with a reader’s expectations, and, as a result, prompt critical reflection (18). It is in these moments, she suggests, that dualistic evaluation methods (such as classifying a representation as “good” or “bad”) are neither useful nor productive for “often the feelings disability generates are complex and difficult to parse” (1). Even if the representation is negative, Cheyne proposes that how it makes the reader feel might produce a positive effect by prompting them to reflect on their own understanding of disability, to confront their own prejudices, and to undergo a transformative experience. Such affective encounters, Cheyne contends, are the result of reflexive representations, which “encourage the reader to think or feel disability anew, challenging, destabilising, or denaturalising assumptions about disability or disabled people” (162).

Considering that examples of reflexive representation exist throughout Cheyne’s book, her introduction “Affective Encounters and Reflexive Representations” provides a thoughtful and comprehensive presentation of her chosen terminology and key ideas. More than simply an overview of the book’s contents, her carefully structured literature review, which effectively weaves together multiple fields and methodologies, establishes a strong foundation for what follows. Her first chapter, “Horror: Fearful Bodyminds”, centers on how the horror genre is designed to produce fear – an emotional response common in a disability encounter. Accordingly, Cheyne observes that the “cultural association between disability and fear” has caused scholars of both disability studies and horror to shy away from any serious examination of disability in horror (33). Furthermore, she states, “Disability must be understood as representing something else, and therefore erased or rendered invisible, for the genre to be legitimised” – a seemingly compulsory act of “[m]etaphorising the monster” to elevate the horror genre (34). However, as Cheyne demonstrates in her close reading of works by Stephen King and Thomas Harris, reading
disability as disability allows for a more reflective and transformative reading experience. King’s *Duma Key*, Cheyne observes, relocates the site of horror away from the disabled body, while Harris’s *Hannibal* trilogy makes it impossible to label any character using simplistic dualisms like good or bad, normal or abnormal, thus producing an “affective confusion where what the reader thinks they know is called into question – including their beliefs about disability” (50).

Building upon her analysis of the fearful affects in horror, Cheyne’s subsequent chapter focuses on crime and its characteristic affect – anticipation – and the desire for closure. In her exploration of disabled detectives, villains, and victims in Jeffrey Deaver’s Lincoln Rhyme novels and Peter Robinson’s *Friend of the Devil*, she argues that disability “enriches crime affects” in interesting and unexpected ways (55). With Deaver, for example, the presence of a suicidal, quadriplegic detective challenges the reader’s presumptions about disability – such as the belief that a disabled life is not one worth living. Quadriplegia is also featured in Rhyme’s novel, though producing a different affective conflict, as the disabled individual is Karen Drew, an elderly woman who is murdered. Unlike Deaver, however, Robinson strips all agency away from the disabled character in his novel, “both exploit[ing] and reinforc[ing] the association of disability with vulnerability” for anticipatory affect – thereby emphasising some of the most troubling and persistent aspects of the metanarrative of disability (67, 69).

Moving from curious anticipation to a related though different emotion, the following chapter takes up the feeling of wonder and its role in SF. Cheyne maintains that although wonder has been historically perceived as an important element of the genre, it is no longer viewed as essential. This trend of moving away from emphasising the wondrous affects of SF is further complicated, she notes, by the ways in which disability-studies scholars are hesitant to embrace the feeling of wonder due to its association with freak shows and similar displays of exoticising or othering disability. In an effort to “relocate wonder at the heart of science fiction” and of disability studies, Cheyne effectively demonstrates through her reading of Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Vorkosigan* saga and Peter Watts’s *Rifters* trilogy that a “productive wondering” can in fact occur (82, 90). In Bujold’s saga, wonder is generated through the ways in which the author destabilises “assumptions about mental illness” (98), while Watts’s trilogy – much like the way the *Hannibal* series functions – uses diverse mindbodies to bring the reader into a state of confusion, wondering how to feel or respond as disability is processed anew.

Cheyne’s next chapter, “Fantasy: Affirmation and Enchantment”, proposes that the central affects of quest-driven fantasy are affirmation (granted due to a successful mission that often includes overcoming many obstacles) and enchantment (which is achieved through the reader’s immersion in the worldbuilding efforts of the author). Due to the hopefulness present at the heart of fantasy fiction, Cheyne contends that disability “disrupts the genre’s affective trajectory” due to “the feelings of loss and grief associated with disability … evidence that things might not turn out well in the end” (113). Therefore, by disrupting conventional fantasy tropes (thereby functioning in the role of “fictional misfits”), disability representations in fantasy facilitate critical reflection – as she indicates with her attention to George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and Joe Abercrombie’s *First Law* trilogy. Although
Martin’s series is filled with disabled characters, Cheyne pays particular attention to the ways in which Tyrion’s character both manipulates and subverts the metanarrative of disability to his advantage. And with Abercrombie’s trilogy, Cheyne looks more broadly at the inaccessibility of conventional quest narratives.

The last chapter of Cheyne’s book considers how these types of “disruptive” depictions of disability in romance – a genre known for happily-ever-after endings – can be “profoundly transformative” as they encourage “disability to be felt afresh in ways that can destabilise habitual feelings and responses” (160, emphasis original). Through examining curative narratives in three romance novels – Barbara McMahon’s One Stubborn Cowboy, Christina Dodd’s Candle in the Window, and Barbara Delinsky’s An Accidental Woman – Cheyne illustrates how “even romance narratives which feature cure can problematise intervention or position disability as part of a desirable future” (151). This final chapter reiterates that depictions of disability are able to challenge not only genre conventions but also the ways readers encounter and respond to disability long after the pages are closed.

Cheyne’s conclusion presents more than just a summary of the preceding chapters: it intentionally carves out places for other scholars from diverse fields to add to the conversation. This speaks, as well, to the general strengths of the work as a whole. By regularly emphasising how her scholarship addresses gaps in existing scholarship, Disability, Literature, Genre feels like an invitation rather than a definitive study. Part of this appeal can be attributed, too, to Cheyne’s optimistic (and often humorous) tone, along with the accessibility and readability of the work. Though each chapter can be read individually, the thoughtful transitions between them help to reinforce the work’s aim. Furthermore, this collection will appeal to both seasoned scholars of these fields as well as new scholars or curious creators who wonder just where to begin with examining horror and disability – a fact that is further complemented by Cheyne’s careful inclusion of both foundational and contemporary scholarship. Her attention to diverse forms of disability – both physical and mental – is also worth mentioning, and, although Cheyne focuses on a few central texts in each chapter, there are numerous genre-fiction titles mentioned throughout the pages, in addition to an incredibly helpful “Disability in Genre Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography” addendum. If there is any fault with Cheyne’s book, it’s that there are a few moments throughout the work that come across as repetitive – a move that can likely be attributed to the author’s desire to connect the chapters both to each other and to her overall thesis. Ultimately, by successfully arguing that affect is central not only to how genre operates but also to disability encounters, one is left hoping that Ria Cheyne’s call for “scholars to engage with disability and genre fiction on affective terms” will be answered (1).

Biography: Anelise Farris is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of Coastal Georgia. Her research interests include speculative fiction, folklore and mythology, and disability studies. When not working, she enjoys experimenting in the kitchen, binging horror movies, and spending time outdoors.
BOOK REVIEW:

Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes

Daniel Lukes


Canada is known for many things, but SF has not typically been one of them, with the added irony that Canada’s highest-profile and most celebrated name connected with the genre, Margaret Atwood, has historically preferred her work to be known as “speculative fiction” rather than as SF. Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes (hereafter Bridging the Solitudes), however, happily remedies the general lack of knowledge or discussion about Canadian SF, and it serves as a broad and deep introduction to a field many might not have reason to know even exists. A wide-ranging and comprehensive collection (20 chapters in 380 pages), this edited volume is divided into sections defined by composite categories that intersect gender, race, politics, and aesthetics. This is an appropriately nuanced way of cutting into the multiple strands that constitute Canada's literary and cultural SFF production. A key question this book asks, and gives various answers to along the way, is: what makes Canadian SFF unique or worth understanding as a field in its own right? Haunting the anthology is the specter of the nation-state, in this case a settler-colonial state, built upon the land of the many First Nations it has decimated and replaced. This fact is recognised in the frequent Land Acknowledgements present in Canadian contemporary discourse; for example, when McGill University acknowledges its placement on the traditional territory of the Kanien’kehà:ka. Thus, to ask “what makes and has made Canadian SFF?” is also to ask, “What makes and has made Canada?”
One answer to this question lies in the collection’s subtitle. The “Solitudes” in question refer to Hugh McLennan’s novel Two Solitudes (1945), which “dramatizes the divide between the French and English-Canadians and the problem of Canadian unity” (154). As many writers over the years, including the editors and authors of the 1990 short-story anthology Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions, have pointed out, there are clearly more than two Canadian solitudes, from the Indigenous voices that preceded the colonists and their wars, to those of the many immigrants who move to Canada every year (approximately 300,000 annually). Bridging the Solitudes addresses this multiplicity directly. The book is part of the Palgrave series “Studies in Global Science Fiction”, which includes such titles as Italian Science Fiction, Arabian Science Fiction, and Global Frankenstein, and which makes an explicit commitment to studying diversity in SFF and the “ongoing debates about the expanding global compass of the genre and the emergence of a more diverse, multinational, and multi-ethnic sense of SF’s past, present, and future” (ii). As such, this volume takes great care to remedy a normative, white, Anglophonic view of SFF. It does this by providing multiple chapters on writers and artists of color, including Larissa Lai, Hiromi Goto, Stanley Péan, Jeff Barnaby, and Gerry William (author of 1994’s The Black Ship, the first Indigenous SF novel published in Canada), and a prevalent interest in themes that prize diversity and multiculturalism, including the topic of “bridging”, the Canadian “mosaic”, the notion of Canada as being between traditions, theorisations of the Canadian fantastic, deconstructions of national myths, and analyses of Indigenous futurism.

Bridging the Solitudes contains discussions about what constitutes a “Canadian” writer. Since William Gibson is described as “Canadian by adoption but not by birth or publication” (11), he thus receives little attention in this book, despite living and working in Canada since 1967, initially moving there to avoid the Vietnam War draft. Robert Charles Wilson, by contrast, was born in the US but moved to Canada at age seven, and with his publishing history in Canada receives a chapter: “The Affinity for Utopia: Erecting Walls and Building Bridges in Robert Charles Wilson’s The Affinities”, by Graham J. Murphy. In an era in which the nation-state is under all kinds of pressures to justify its own existence as one of the primary categories through which human life is organised, it makes sense, in a book dedicated to a specific national tradition, to question the role of literary narrative in building the nation and its ideologies, to ask what a nation-state is, and to consider the peoples and social forms it displaces and replaces. The SFF production of Canada, a site of ongoing settler colonialism, offers itself as a highly productive venue for doing just that.

After Amy J. Ransom and Dominick Grace’s in-depth introduction, which clearly lays out the field and the history of Canadian SFF criticism, the book begins in the colonial past, with an excellent chapter by Allan Weiss about the colonial era: “Colonial Visions: The British Empire in Early Anglophone and Francophone Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy”. In this essay Weiss considers differing visions of British imperialism depending on one’s perspective, thus introducing the reader to the Anglo/Franco divide that characterises not just Quebeçois society and literary production, but Canada's history and culture on a larger scale. Bridging the Solitudes then moves quite quickly into the twentieth century, with a fascinating essay on writer and critic Judith Merrill, who moved to Canada in 1968 from the US and whose left-wing politics...
and organising played a key role in establishing Canadian SF as a field. We then move into, and largely stay in, the contemporary era for the rest of the book. The editors divide the volume into seven parts:

1) a prologue containing the chapter about colonial narratives;
2) “Bridging Borders: Transnationalism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Speculative Fiction”;
3) “Building Bridges: Constructing and Deconstructing Myths of the Canadian Nation”;
4) “Bridging the Gender Gap: Transnational and Transsexual Identities in Canadian SF”;
5) “Bridging the Species Divide: Technological, Animal, Extraterrestrial, and Posthuman Sentience”;
6) “Bridging the Slipstream: Generic Fluidity in Canadian Speculative Fiction”; and
7) “Excerpts from A Glossary of Non-essential Forms and Genres in English-Canadian Literature” by Jordan Bolay, a playful outtro piece.

Though grouped thematically, the chapters within each section tend to focus on one or two authors, providing close readings of one or several works. A vast wealth of material is covered, and some of the book’s key themes serve as a useful summary: (a) space and place, leading to discussions of colony and nation; (b) survival, which culminates in the interesting subgenre of “bear horror”; (c) Canada as the future; and (d) community.

The topic of place and space animates many of the papers contained in this volume: Canada’s colonial history, its contested present (colonial or postcolonial), and its as-yet-unknown future (decolonial? postnational?) that SFF has a mission to visualise and conceptualise. Peripherality and marginality are two guiding concepts here. Canada is not the US, and “not being the US” is unavoidably one of its main defining factors in geographical, social, psychological, and aesthetic terms. Canada’s geographical peripherality is thus a driving conceptual factor in its SF production, a form of marginality that intersects with the marginalities of race, gender, ability, or economics. For instance, just think of the many films and TV shows – from The X-Files to Fantastic Four – shot in Canadian cities pretending to be US ones. Many chapters here centre the experience and works of marginalised identities in Canadian society – for example, Kathleen Kellett’s chapter on the Haitian-Quebecois horror-fantasy detective fiction of Stanley Péan, Wendy Gay Pearson’s chapter on “queer futurity” in Hiromi Goto’s The Kappa Child (2001) and Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl (2002), Kristina Baudemann’s chapter on “Indigenous futurism” in the films of Mi’gMaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, and Judith Leggatt’s chapter on Indigenous speculative-fiction reimagining of the “residential schools” that removed Indigenous children from their homes and families in order to assimilate them. And central to this volume’s approach are analyses of how ideologies of Canadian pluralism and diversity manifest themselves in SF works. Of particular relevance here are the several discussions of the “Canadian mosaic”, a “standard metaphor for Canada ... reflecting Canada’s official commitment to multiculturalism and representing the nation not as one thing or even two things” according to Ransom and Grace’s introduction (2).
The topic of “Canada as the future” or as some kind of futuristic or “socialist” utopia is also a valuable guide to this volume and to critical approaches to Canadian SFF. Since the era in which slaves escaped from the United States to Canada (an image adapted by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale*), Canada has taken on the mantle of a nation that is more enlightened and progressive than the US. Describing their dissertation work on trans travel narratives in their chapter “Crossing the (Trans)Gender Bridge: Exploring Intersex and Trans Bodies in Canadian Speculative Fiction”, Evelyn Deshane writes that “many American authors look to Canada as a place ‘light-years ahead’ of them” (216). Canada stands for the future in the North American imaginary, often in a positive, socially progressive way rather than a dystopian or apocalyptic one. Canadian futurities are also ecological and climate change futurities, as typically cold climes get warmer and frozen tundras start to turn into green spaces. What the social consequences of large migrations to northern countries will look like is a fertile topic for SF narratives, and thinking about societies in constant flux as peoples move and clash is also a thread running through Canadian SF from its early colonial, fantastic, and utopian fiction to the near-future works of Peter Watts (to whom two chapters are dedicated), Larissa Lai, and Waubgeshig Rice, among others.

Survival is a notable key theme of Canadian literature, as illustrated by the title of Margaret Atwood’s book-length survey of Canadian literature, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Survival has climatic connotations related to the Canadian winter, the harshness of long cold months and vast spaces, tundras, solitudes, expanses; “survival” also encompasses the early European pioneers and colonists, and the future travelers of a postapocalyptic landscape (as in Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*); it intersects with the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms; for example, in the fascinating subgenre of “bear horror” about which Michael Fuchs writes in the chapter “I Can’t Believe This Is Happening!: Bear Horror, the Species Divide, and the Canadian Fight for Survival in a Time of Climate Change”.

Finally, “community” is another password for decoding Canadian SF. The volume gives much space to Quebec and the subfield of Quebecois SF (abbreviated as “sfq” or “sfq”), including such essays as Sylvie Bérard’s compelling comparison of the works of Élisabeth Vonarburg and Michel Tremblay on the theme of “holes”, and Sophie Beaulé’s analysis of the relationship between mainstream and SF writing in Quebec and the topic of “porosity” – the notion that Canadian writing encourages more fluidity between realism and SF. As Evelyn Deshane writes when discussing one of Robert Runte’s essays, since most major figures in Canadian literature have written some form of speculative fiction, the “boundaries of Canadian literature and sf can be ‘less rigid’ ... and sometimes even ‘porous’” (213). What constitutes a community, present or coming, is very much at the forefront of Canadian conversations nationwide, spanning the spectrum between postcolonial and racial critiques of Canadian society on one end, and nationalistic propaganda and ideology, some of which weaponsize the values of diversity and tolerance to uphold the neoliberal corporate state, on the other.

*Bridging the Solitudes*, however, ends on a playful note: Jordan Bolay’s “Excerpts from A Glossary of Non-essential Forms and Genres in English-Canadian Literature”. Bolay’s piece, which discusses the videogame *Mass Effect*
(2007) and the progressive rock band Rush’s album *Clockwork Angels* (2012), among other topics, brings to mind that what is perhaps missing from this edited volume is a slightly more substantial engagement with the wider field of Canadian popular culture, whether SF or mainstream. It would have been nice to read something here on Canadian industrial music (Skinny Puppy, Front Line Assembly) or Canadian SF television from William Shatner to *Orphan Black*, or Canadian comics and videogames. More horror would also have been appreciated; for example, chapters on David Cronenberg and Nalo Hopkinson. But these are mere subjective quibbles. Overall, Amy J. Ransom and Dominick Grace have done a fantastic job with this volume, putting together a comprehensive, in-depth milestone that serves both as a valid introduction to the field of Canadian SFF and a towering critical work within it, which conveys the key conversations, opens up many avenues for research, and transmits a strong sense of enthusiasm for delving into the underreported yet clearly rewarding field of Canadian SFF.

*Biography:* Daniel Lukes has a PhD in Comparative Literature from New York University, with a dissertation on masculinities in late 20th-century literature and how they are reimagined through feminist SF. He currently works as Communications Officer in the Faculty of Engineering at McGill University.
Conference Report:
London Science Fiction Research Community

Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions
September 10–12th, 2020
Online (London, UK)

Filip Boratyn

The 2020 edition of the London Science Fiction Research Community’s (LSFRC) annual conference largely took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though this meant less opportunities for direct personal contact and socialising, the new format opened some new doors in the conference experience by facilitating participation from geographically remote locations, which increased the diversity of the participants and the proceedings in general. The conference’s theme this year was decolonising science fiction and SF studies, under the banner “Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions”. Although the organisers have admitted that they decided on this theme right after last year’s event, it was an apt topic for a gathering that literally took place beyond national borders, with presenters from a variety of countries and continents. This diversity of backgrounds – a rare positive effect of the pandemic, which removed the barrier of finding funds and resources to actually travel to London – was a highlight of this stimulating intellectual feast.

The LSFRC team made sure that the technical side of the event, so crucial in the videoconferencing era, ran as smoothly as possible. There were very few technological crises, and those that did inevitably happen were dealt with in a quick and professional manner. Apart from a moderator who introduced the presenters and managed the Q&A, each panel had a member of the
organisational team present who was vigilant about all possible technical
issues. The panels I have participated in were all characterised by quite lively
interactions in the Q&As, and, as the audience in most of the panels was
between 20 and 30 people, the discussions were dynamic yet manageable.
Whenever there was a lull in the discussion – which seems to happen in video
conferencing more often than at in-person events – the LSFRC members and
panel moderators stepped in with thoughtful comments and incisive but
friendly questions. The friendliness and lack of hostility was actually key in
making this conference feel like a safe space for everyone – the questions and
comments were challenging enough, but there were no attempts to embarrass
the interlocutor, which sometimes contribute to making academic conferences
a miserable experience for everyone involved.

After the first day (Thursday, 10 September), which mostly served as a
prelude to the conference proper, with a panel on SF and translation and two
workshops, the event kicked off on Friday with a fascinating keynote by Dr.
Nadine El-Enany, the author of Bordering Britain (2020), who discussed how
British legal history is entangled with the country’s approach to race and
colonial violence. Referring to the conference’s theme, El-Enany showed how
borders affect the poor and the wealthy to a different extent. For example, strict
visa requirements and racial profiling affect racialised subjects much more
strongly, and the easy navigability of the borders in Western Europe and North
America over the last few decades is actually much less available for the
racialised. She also demonstrated how contemporary migration law is
continuously entangled with racialised legal categories developed over the years
of colonial history. One of her examples was the British Nationality Act of 1981.
A follow-up to the 1971 Immigration Act, which effectually equated Britishness
with whiteness, the British Nationality Act introduced a much more rigorous
separation of Great Britain from its former colonies. El-Enany interpreted this
act as an instance of colonial theft in that it separated the colonial subjects from
even the possibility of benefiting from the wealth stolen from the colonies. She
identified a key distinction between settler and non-settler colonialism and
showed how the difference between these two categories is blurred by such acts
of legal violence. The way British law defined who gets to be seen as a citizen
and who is treated as a migrant continues to perpetuate colonial relations long
after the colonies have gained formal independence from the United Kingdom.
After this illuminating keynote, the participants relocated to three breakout
rooms dedicated to conference panels, which took place over most of Friday and
Saturday.

Participants took on the conference’s aim to go “beyond borders” in a
variety of ways: the event was as much an opportunity to highlight the
postcolonial themes in texts by classic SF authors like Isaac Asimov and H. G.
Wells as it was to highlight certain, often less well known, texts from outside of
Europe and North America; two panels specifically tackled Chinese SF. The
speakers approached a variety of genres with critical focuses ranging from
contemporary body studies (Ewa Drab’s presentation about Clayton’s The
Belles) through posthumanism (presentations by Agnibha Banerjee, who
discussed Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go, and Rimi Nandy, who proposed a
posthuman reading of the superhero genre), to Alessandra Marino’s recounting
of Donna Haraway’s and Ursula Le Guin’s critical dialogue, informed by what
Haraway calls “speculative fabulation”. Postapocalyptic dystopias received
their own panel, which included three fascinating presentations: Seyedhamed Moosavi’s analysis of borders in the films *Grain* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Glyn Morgan’s interrogation of various types of borders in Whitehead’s *Zone One*, as well as Hasnul Insani Djohar’s reading of borders and cybersphere in Wilson’s *Alif the Unseen*.

The papers analysing the theoretical implications of a critical focus on borders within the contexts of the critique of imperialism and the postcolonial turn were among the most intellectually stimulating of the whole event. Andrew Ferguson presented a fascinating deconstruction of the colonial and imperialist roots of Darko Suvin’s famous concept of the novum. Both Amy Butt’s presentation, which focused on threshold spaces, and Nivi Manchanda and Sharri Plonski’s paper on the critical juxtaposition of “the border” with “the corridor” represented fascinating implications for introducing the consideration of border into thinking about public and private space and architecture. The conference concluded with a brilliant second keynote address delivered by Florence Okoye, investigating the intersection between technology and speculation. Okoye related this to the process of the production of imperial and colonial identities based on the “worldbuilding” performed by the practice of mapping, focusing as much on what maps of colonial territories concealed as what they showed. The absence of any representations of the indigenous and enslaved peoples in maps of Barbados that she showcased marks the maps’ role as tools of speculation created to conjure a certain speculative future – hence, the use of the SF-related term “worldbuilding”. Okoye also investigated how the mechanisation of colonial labor was represented as affecting the conditions of life for enslaved and indigenous peoples – although it did not affect their status at the most essential level of the relationship to colonisers.

LSFRC’s “Beyond Borders” conference was thus a fascinating occasion for confrontation with diverse points of view from all over the world. It is easy for conferences on the topic of colonialism and imperialism to facilitate discussion between economically and geographically privileged academics taking advantage of their imperialist legacy while disparaging imperialism. Thanks to its geographical, racial, and gender diversity, though, “Beyond Borders” did not fall into this trap. It also showcased the strengths of an online conference format while avoiding most of its shortcomings. No matter if the 2021 edition of LSFRC’s annual event takes place online or not, it will have already proven its worth.

**Biography:** Filip Boratyn is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Humanities, University of Warsaw. His dissertation focuses on the cultural work of enchantment in the contemporary ecological imagination. He recently received the 2020 David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts.
Conference Report:
CyberPunk Culture Conference 2020

July 9–10\textsuperscript{th}, 2020
Online

Adam Edwards

Are we living in a cyberpunk future? As the calendar ticks onwards it inevitably collides with futures imagined by science-fiction authors. With its focus specifically on the near-future, cyberpunk is the first to be encountered, and on the 9\textsuperscript{th} and 10\textsuperscript{th} of July 2020, the CyberPunk Culture Conference took place in an appropriately digital setting to discuss cyberpunk in all its forms. The event was organised by Dr Lars Schmeink (Hans-Bredow-Institut) to coincide with the larger Cyberpunk Cultures project. The idea for the conference arose from the publication of The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture, with the intention being to extend the conversation started by the book in active discussion about “living in cyberpunk times”.

The CPCC 2020 consisted of 32 separate talks, a keynote speech, and a roundtable discussion, hosted mainly on a dedicated Discord server, on which both Q&A and general discussion sessions took place over two full days of programming. The talks were submitted either in video format or as slides and text, and were made freely available on the conference website at the beginning of the week. Around 125 participants joined the server, creating a space where an international community of scholars and enthusiasts could meet, despite the necessities of a global pandemic. The internationality of the conference brought the challenge of bridging multiple time zones, from the West Coast of America to Moscow. The CPCC incorporated a long program that allowed all attendees to engage with talks live, and all talks remained open in the server for a week following so that participants could engage with every talk.
The keynote address, “Takeshi Was Here: Viral Revelations, Globalized Power, and Cyberpunk Myopia”, delivered by Pawel Frelik (University of Warsaw), eloquently captured the prevailing concerns about the genre’s future. Cyberpunk, he began, seems incredibly relevant today due to its aesthetics and the centrality of data-platforms, but it is on the whole politically naive. Whilst Fredric Jameson’s original claim that it is the supreme literary expression of late capitalism still resonates today, cyberpunk has consistently failed to anticipate the role neoliberal politics would come to play alongside the rise of corporatism.

Frelik identified some exceptions to this failing, using in particular Richard Morgan’s *Kovacs* novels as examples of corporate and private interests common to cyberpunk being trumped by the omnipresence of authoritarian power. Morgan treads a fine line in indulging a fascination with this power, and the keynote’s Q&A discussed how his personal beliefs complicate interpretation of the novels. Namely, his transphobic beliefs about the immutability of birth-assigned genders, which he raised on his blog, contrast starkly with the fluidity of body-swapping in his fiction, a fact which in particular surprised some participants in the discussion. Thus the degree to which his beliefs are at odds with his fiction limits the potential of his novels to contribute positively to the cyberpunk canon.

The keynote ended with apprehension about the upcoming high-profile video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, the shadow of which is impossible to escape. The fear that this text threatens to freeze the development and flexibility of cyberpunk in the wake of its release solidified the timeliness of the event itself, taking stock of the genre’s potential before its form in mass media becomes restricted by high-budget iterations.

A roundtable discussion on Zoom, in which the participants responded live to Discord questions, further explored the limitations of the genre’s past. Sherryl Vint (University of California Riverside) was the first to speak. She reflected on how the “mind-merging digitals” of cyberpunk technology (which had promised to be the genre’s most important speculation) had turned out to be much less pressing than its representations of the gig economy and platform capital that constitutes its background. She discussed how online cultures had contributed to a return of fascism and overt racist expressions that traditional cyberpunk failed to anticipate.

From there the roundtable reflected on cyberpunk’s failings to access and represent the infrastructures of its political backdrop. Anna McFarlane (University of Glasgow) discussed how cyberpunk’s emphasis on visual representation struggles to critique political and corporate infrastructures as they resist easy visual representation. Following this was Hugh O’Connell’s (University of Massachusetts Boston) “counter-Cyberpunk manifesto”, where he articulated and amplified the concerns already raised. He posited that classical Cyberpunk often bought into neoliberal ideology in the evacuation of politics within its worldbuilding, and fostered the idolisation of personal expression of free will at the expense of systemic transformation. Graham Murphy (Seneca College, Toronto) importantly offered contrast to this pessimistic perspective on classical cyberpunk, asserting that the genre was never one thing to start with; it was about permutations and mutations. This variety contributes to its relevance to a contemporary context, reflecting the variations of our relationships to technology, our bodies, and the varied culture
of a digitally connected age. The roundtable expanded on this notion, with the participants recommending alternative texts that did push these boundaries, such as Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* and Tim Maughan’s *Infinite Detail*. This provided a positive direction to develop cyberpunk analysis further as it broadened the previously narrow corpus with which it had been obsessed.

Expanding the scope of cyberpunk characterised the variety of papers across the two days. Larisa Mikaylova (Lomonosov Moscow State University) questioned cyberpunk’s dark and gloomy expectations, exploring the potential of the bright and comedic spectacle of *Upload* as a fresh exploration of Cyberpunk’s themes, a suggestion that aligned interestingly with Alexander Possingham’s (Monash University) concerns that cyberpunk’s aesthetics were limiting in their prescriptiveness.

Pushing not just the visuals of the genre but the medium of its texts, Julia Gateman (University of Hamburg) celebrated the work of Viktoria Modesta, a singer-songwriter and model who uses cyberpunk visuals along with the physical difference of her prosthetic limb to question the physicality of beauty in the musical sphere. Her paper discussed Modesta’s evocation of traditional cyberpunk aesthetics in its call-backs to *Blade Runner* and clean, empty digital spaces, asserting that the use of cyberpunk to signify futurity and weaponise it to suggest normative embodiment is a thing of the past. In the Q&A following this talk, the discussion turned to the potential problems of the fetishisation of Modesta’s disability. In exploring this, the traditional understanding of fetishisation in psychoanalytic theory, as applied by the male gaze upon her, Gateman expanded on her analysis; she described how Modesta controls the gaze of the viewer to resignify her disability to empower rather than victimise herself. In this manner Modesta can control the representation of her body to subvert traditional conceptions of beauty.

With a similar focus on aesthetics and taking control of one’s representation, Esko Suoranta (University of Helsinki) and Stina Attebery (University of California, Riverside) focused on the world of cyberpunk fashion; specifically, how it can become a speculative practice about the future of social expression and posthuman embodiment, and how cyberpunk itself consistently informs counter-cultural performativity, albeit through a shifting political lens.

Discussion of non-western Cyberpunk texts offered particular insights, diversifying a genre otherwise marked by its Western and Japanese origins. Sumeyra Buran (Istanbul Medeniyet University) and Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad (University of Washington) drew attention to Turkish, Middle Eastern, and Islamic-world fiction. Ahmad took a broader approach to Islamicate Cyberpunk, introducing and unpicking many aspects of an under-represented area. Buran focused on the depiction of queer representation and how the speculative futurity of this genre accepts gender identities outside the binary; a key element of a more accepting, diverse world.

Diversity was a topic that recurred in other papers, such as Anna Oleszczuk’s (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Lublin) analysis of the comic book series *ODY-C*, and Agata Waszkiewicz’s (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Lublin) discussion of the inclusivity cyberpunk video games in the independent industry. Oleszczuk’s paper in particular was an important addition to this topic, as in her analysis of *ODY-C* she highlighted how the way this text broke gender binarity with the “extermination of men” and creation of a third gender led to the re-establishment of the subjugation of queer identities.
in a new context. The binary opposition was preserved in *ODY-C*, albeit between different groups; however, this very opposition highlighted heteronormative structures and brought queer and otherwise fluid gender identities into new contexts through the futurity of its setting. When more traditional texts were addressed, they were expanded in fresh directions, realigning the focus of their analysis for a contemporary context, just as the roundtable had raised. Carmen Mendez García (Complutense University, Madrid) and Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University) looked at foundational cyberpunk authors William Gibson and Pat Cadigan, but focused on their more recent texts, offering insight into changing perspectives and the development of the genre’s originators.

Taking a different approach to longer-standing cyberpunk works, Josh Pearson (California State University, Los Angeles) focused instead on the less-studied iterations of cyberpunk, such as tabletop roleplaying games, and in particular on how *Cyberpunk 2020* could be a useful classroom tool to help students understand the “weaponisation”: of style, which is a potential barrier to readers of classic cyberpunk texts. His focus on character generation within the game mirrored the focus of my own paper, as both our talks approached the centrality of precarity and trauma in cyberpunk texts. Whilst I focused on the games in practice, exploring cyberpunk stories through participation, Pearson explored how the act of creating characters within this system in a teaching environment introduces and internalises the idea of identity as a stylised surface that hides past trauma. Similarly, Evan Torner (University of Cincinnati) discussed *Cyberpunk 2020* with a focus on its author, Mike Pondsmith. His paper reflected on the genre’s position within a developing cyberpunk canon and within game genealogy, including analogue and digital developments. These three papers thus assessed the content, application, and influence of tabletop roleplaying games in the greater context of cyberpunk works.

The success of this event was not only in the enthusiasm that resulted from connecting such a spectrum of attendees in a time of few opportunities for research connection, but also in the possibilities enabled by its digital format. A particularly successful decision was to make the papers available days before the event themselves. Being able to peruse and digest them and formulate questions in response to them at one’s own pace allowed more attendees to participate, unhindered by note-taking or processing the details of a paper whilst the opportunity to ask questions was taking place. This was a particular boon for any early-career attendees, or those inexperienced in conferences – a facet worth supporting in future events.

The format did not come without limitations, however, and the conference itself made for a fairly intense two days. The timetable was lengthy in order to include the number of papers and to encourage accessibility of live Q&A discussions across time zones; this was supplemented by parallel discussions across the Discord channels as enthusiasm for each talk sparked separate conversations. This led to a tiring pace for the event. Scheduled breaks would have brought welcome respite and encouraged use of the voice channels for relaxed conversation, as this feature of Discord was unfortunately underused due to the heavy scheduling.

With this being said, the event itself was an incredible success, and demonstrated the strength of an online event that relied on a mostly text-based,
yet synchronous format. The length of the schedule, coupled with the decision to leave the Discord live for a week afterwards, created a highly accessible event, and an effective structure for future online conferences to follow.

Another development to emerge from the CPCC is the Cyberpunk Research Network. This is a loose connection of scholars (many of whom took part in the inaugural conference) intending to maintain an accessible space for collaborative work, the sharing of resources, and joint discussion of the field of research. Details for joining the network can be found on the website (http://cyberpunkculture.com/), along with papers and Q&A discussions from this event, demonstrating the success of the community the CPCC gathered.

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Lectio praecursoria: Reading Mutant Narratives

Kaisa Kortekallio

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Reading fictional narratives is an activity that involves the body of the reader. As your eyes trace the text of an exciting story, and you imagine the fictional events, your heart might beat faster and your muscles might tense up. This is the body as a physical and physiological object; the body that empirical researchers would focus on. They would observe it from the outside and measure its activity (see, for example, Alber and Strasen; Kuijpers et al.).

This is, however, not the body I wish to discuss here. Rather, I wish to discuss the body that exists in first-person experience: the body that feels the excitement as an urgency to get to the next page, or, when reading horror stories at night, expects monsters to spring up from the dark corners of the room. This is a body that is best studied not through measurement, but by recognising embodied experience as it takes place, by describing it, and by discussing it critically and reflectively. In phenomenology, this aspect of embodiment is usually called the lived body (Colombetti and Thompson; Merleau-Ponty; Sheets-Johnstone; Varela et al.).
Crucially, neither the body-object nor the lived body is perfectly contained within the boundaries of the skin. The body leaks into other bodies and things, shaping them, and other bodies and things enter it all the time. It is porous. What we usually call “the environment” does not only surround the body, but also constitutes it and meshes with it: bodies eat other bodies, which in turn have taken in chemicals from the air and the soil to build up their own bodies (Alaimo; Neimanis). At the same time, environments are made by bodies that just go about their business: digging holes in the ground, constructing cities, or breathing out greenhouse gases (Gilbert; Laland; Nuismer). Such material relations can be generative and pleasurable, but they can also be constraining, violent, and destructive (Alaimo; Haraway; Weik von Mossner).

Lived bodies feel sad in rainy weather, elevated under cathedral ceilings, and glorious on the peaks of mountains (Colombetti and Thompson; Neimanis; Sheets-Johnstone). They also routinely make sense of the world with the help of various things in their environments: hammers and hats, traffic rules and choreographies, the sounds and silences of crickets in the night (Gibson; Merleau-Ponty; Noë; Varela et al.).

Human bodies always involve something nonhuman: this makes their condition more-than-human (Abram; Neimanis). For me, understanding human bodies as more-than-human is one way of developing ethical relations between humans and nonhuman bodies. Making better sense of the bodily experience of reading can be helpful in this slow process of learning (Kortekallio 19–36; 59–76).

In this dissertation, I have explored what happens to the lived body when we read fictional narratives. The reading body, or the embodied reader, encounters a complex cultural artefact. That artefact contains cues and codes by which imagined worlds come to exist: narrative elements, techniques, and strategies. In its encounters with fictional narratives, the lived body responds to these cues, generating various feelings, thoughts, and judgements, and impressions of complete fictional worlds and people (Caracciolo; Polvinen; Warhol). Some theories of narrative suggest that the acts of readerly imagination resemble the acts of perceiving and navigating our actual, lived realities. Readerly imagination is assumed to build on our experience of the actual world (Fludernik; Caracciolo; Kukkonen).

When I first began this study, I wanted to ask what happens to the lived body when we read about worlds and bodies that do not resemble our lived reality. That is, I wanted to explore science fiction. In particular, I wanted to explore the ways in which contemporary science fiction depicts bodies and environments that go through radical changes. I wanted to know how those depictions can give rise to bodily feelings, and whether some of those bodily feelings can not be traced back to conventional ideas about everyday experience. I thought that such strange feelings might help to loosen up human-centred structures of experience (Kortekallio 1–19).

In the study, I analysed works by three Anglo-American science fiction authors: Greg Bear, Paolo Bacigalupi, and Jeff VanderMeer. All the works – five novels and two short stories in total – have been published during the 21st century. They are widely read, translated into a number of languages, and critically discussed both within science-fiction studies and in other fields of literary studies. Thematically, they all engage with matters of evolution, ecology, and environmental disaster (Kortekallio 9–13).
I wanted to study science fiction because it hangs on a tension. On the one hand, the tradition of science fiction generally adopts a natural-scientific, systemic view that sketches the human in relation to material, ecological, and technological dynamics. On the other hand, it is popular literature that follows a formal tradition of presenting human characters as independent agents who are coherent, fairly rational, and separate from their environments. The environment mostly stays in the background of human action (Aldiss and Wingrove; Carroll; Idena; Pak; Varis).

The fiction that I have analysed here works against this tradition, foregrounding the liveliness and agency of nonhuman beings and places. The tension between human agency and nonhuman influences is realised in the bodies of the central characters. Such fictional bodies can be called mutant figures: human or human-like fictional organisms that are or have been radically altered by environmental forces. The term mutant draws on the notion of genetic mutation, and thus on evolutionary biology, but the popular figure goes beyond the biological definition (Kortekallio 102–18).

Mutant figures in comics, films, games, and literature accumulate in their bodies pollution, radiotoxicity, biotechnological innovations, and corporate power – that is, many of the environmental threats and challenges that industrialised societies have faced in the last decades. Often, mutant figures are inhuman monsters not fit for societal inclusion, or even for life: just think of the countless and nameless mutants of eighty B-films or contemporary video games such as BioShock; or the tragic figure of Toxic Avenger. In other cases, mutant figures can display surprising features and exceptional abilities that may help them adapt to their newly changed environments. This is the case with many popular superheroes, and especially with the long-lived X-Men franchise. X-Men has also helped to establish the mutant as an identifiable, positive figure (Badmington; Kortekallio 102–18).

The material histories and diverse roles of mutant figures mean that they can be considered as corporeal responses to environmental change. They contain both the risk of horrifying failure and the potential for novel, creative, and viable ways of life. They can be monsters, or they can be superheroes. We can think of mutation as both literal and metaphorical: when we say that Spider-Man is sensitive, it means both that his senses are exceptionally sharp and that you can easily hurt his feelings.

My work also draws on the metaphorical potential of the mutant when I discuss this selection of science fiction as mutant narratives. I propose that mutant narratives are initial adaptations to changed cultural environments. They respond to the crisis of human-centred cultures with experimental strategies that are risky, often awkward, and perhaps doomed to fail; yet they also contain the potential for viable new forms (Kortekallio 13–19; 121; 247–54).

Mutant narratives often foreground the body-object: the physiological, biological, and biotechnological aspects of bodies. When they do that, they can also allow their readers to tap into strange and diverse forms of embodied experience. In more technical terms, the narratives can provide readers with unusual forms of experientiality. The narrative-theoretical term experientiality refers to the capacity of a narrative to evoke something like real-life experience. For example, when you read about Bruce Banner going through his outrageous transformation into the monstrous Hulk, you might have a feeling that your own muscles are rapidly expanding, even bursting out of your clothes. This is
not something you would have direct experience of, yet you can feel something like it (Fludernik; Caracciolo; Kortekallio 59–76).

However, the mere presence of a mutant body-object does not necessarily mean that the science fictional narrative would present readers with radically different experientiality. Consider, for example, the main mutant figure in Greg Bear’s *Darwin’s Children* (2003): Stella Nova Rafelson. Stella is one of the first children born in the “epidemic” of mutant births that takes over the world in the span of a few years. As a teenager, she can communicate by flashing patterns of freckles on her cheeks, and she can manipulate the feelings of others by secreting various pheromones at will.

In Bear’s novel, the features and abilities of Stella’s body are described in detail. Yet her *embodied experience* is narrated using the same style and form as the experience of more conventional human characters. Moreover, Stella’s passionate insistence that she is “not human” is presented as mere teenage rebellion: the climactic ending of the novel has her return to the arms of her human father, and also to the universal species family of *Homo* (Kortekallio 77–97).

What is so troubling about this humanisation of a mutant figure? Mostly, the implicit commitment it upholds: *that all kinds of bodies and all kinds of experience can be transparently represented through conventional narrative techniques*. This narrative technique denies that there is any technique in narrative. And so, the technique guides readers to imagine the affects and ideas evoked by the narrative as “natural”. It also guides them to understand fictional characters as representations of actual people (Kortekallio 95–97).

The philosopher of mind Alva Noë has argued that different bodily practices rehearse different styles of perception: he claims that observing still-life paintings trains us to perceive the world as sets of immobile planes, whereas playing baseball enables a dynamic, task-oriented, and “wild” style of seeing (Noë 51). I suggest that this idea also applies to reading: different kinds of literature train us in different kinds of perception and feeling. In this way, reading participates in the formation of our habitual patterns of engaging with our environments (Kortekallio 96).

So: realist characters feel “realistic” because readers have been culturally familiarised with this mode of representing human life. Often, this mode presents human bodies as separate from their environments. Other kinds of characters, such as mutant figures, can rehearse different perceptions. At the very least, they may help us to *break the routine*.

Whereas *Darwin’s Children* encourages readers to identify with the mutant figure and eventually humanise it, Paolo Bacigalupi’s short stories “The Fluted Girl” and “The People of Sand and Slag” in *Pump Six and Other Stories*, as well as the novel *The Windup Girl*, disturb such easy routines of reading. Consider the central figures of “The People of Sand and Slag”, a story set in an industrial wasteland where all life is either human or human-made. They are introduced to readers as fast-paced, perfectly effective posthumans who, while completing a mission, jump from a flying vehicle and crash to the ground, breaking their bodies – but immediately rise, their self-healing tissues already repairing the damage.

Going along with this stylised action is an exciting ride for the readers. Yet the ride gets increasingly uncomfortable as the story unfolds. It turns out that, on top of being physically indestructible, the posthumans do not feel pain. For this reason, violence comes to them as easily as breathing. As a form of recreation, they
cut off each others’ arms and legs – and while they feel nothing but amusement, most human-bodied readers are bound to flinch (Kortekallio 136–43).

As they tune into the movements and bodily feelings of the fictional figures of “The People of Sand and Slag”, readers are guided to accept and even admire their bodily styles, but eventually also to resist such an easy acceptance. In this way, Bacigalupi’s narrative latches on to the readerly expectation of identifying with fictional figures, and uses it to turn them against the exploitative, extremely human-centred ethos that the posthuman figures embody (Kortekallio 143–47).

In studies of science fiction, it is customary to refer to this kind of defamiliarising dynamic as cognitive estrangement (McHale; Suvin; Spiegel). However, the bodily and experiential aspects of cognitive estrangement have remained undertheorised. In this study, I propose the term embodied estrangement as a partial response to this lack (Kortekallio 173–97).

In the case of Jeff VanderMeer’s The Southern Reach trilogy, embodied estrangement can develop readerly sensitivities in more-than-human directions. In Annihilation, the first book of the trilogy, the narrator enters a strange transitional zone, labeled as Area X, where she inhales unidentified spores that may or may not come from outer space. After her contamination, readers can never be sure what part of the narrator’s thoughts and actions can be attributed to her human persona, and what to the nonhuman agency that has colonised her.

The later parts of the trilogy, Authority and Acceptance, take this profound uncertainty even further, constructing fictional figures that might seem both completely human and completely nonhuman at the same time. The narratives frame whole organisms as “messages” from Area X, and ask whether humans can read such messages. The Southern Reach trilogy thus estranges the act of reading fictional figures by revealing that its human-shaped narrative perspectives are partially – or even completely – constituted by nonhuman forces. The Southern Reach also offers readers an experiential position as carriers and conduits for forces outside themselves. As readers are contaminated by the haunting force of the narrative, they might open up to the experience of being contaminated by environmental forces, too (Kortekallio 173–246).

I want to end with an image depicting a paperback copy of Annihilation that has been thrown into a ditch. It was taken by the author himself, while he was touring to publicise the book. At the same time, he was still finishing the last book of the trilogy,
Acceptance. In a moment of frenzy, he drowned the book. And then he decided to take a picture, to post on social media (VanderMeer, “From”).

The image reminds me both of the manic urgency that drives VanderMeer’s creative work and of the material conditions of reading. The soaked paperback is a prime example of a trans-corporeal body (cf. Alaimo). It is messy and disheveled, its form ruined by water and dirt. It is rapidly on its way to transgressing the ontological boundary between book and living matter. I would locate myself, as a reader of Annihilation, on a similar boundary: between a purely human body and a more-than-human body, rapidly becoming the latter.

I think reading fiction should not be thought of as an isolated practice, or as escapism. As a bodily practice, it is entangled with other practices: with eating, travel, and interpersonal relationships: with economics, politics, and activism. As part of these tangles, it can participate in the development of cultures that are ecologically viable – not just in terms of structures and models, but on the level of lived experience.

I propose that reading mutant narratives can help us stay with the environmental catastrophe we live in, and respond to it.

**Biography:** Kaisa Kortekallio is a post-doctoral scholar in the research consortium Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Narrative and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory (Academy of Finland 2018 - 2022), at the University of Helsinki. The topics of her peer-reviewed articles include posthuman subjectivity in cyberpunk (2014), estranging first-person narration in Jeff VanderMeer’s and Timothy Morton’s work (2019), and speculative experientiality in Paolo Bacigalupi’s climate fiction (2020).

**Works cited**


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