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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 2/2021

*Esko Suoranta, Laura E. Goodin, Essi Varis, & 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, Eugen Bacon surveys the context and current state of speculative fiction by black writers, both from various African nations and from the African diaspora. She highlights that not only does this body of work increase the diversity of voices and perspectives in English-language speculative fiction, but it also works – at times subtly, at times more overtly – to subvert the structures of power that have perpetuated injustice and bigotry.

Two of the articles in this issue discuss young female protagonists and their explorations of the liminal spaces between reality and fantasy. Debalina Das's "Confronting Ghosts: History, Trauma and Aesthetics in Guillermo del Toro's *El Laberinto del Fauno*" looks at how the film incorporates elements of magic realism into the fabric of its narrative – specifically from the viewpoint of its young protagonist, Ofelia, as a way of addressing the collective trauma of the Spanish Civil War. Krishnapriya K. and Dr. Sumathy K Swamy examine the relationship between the real and fantasy lives of the eponymous protagonist of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, arguing that the characteristics of the fantasy world into which Coraline adventures, as well as that world's relationships with her real world, can provide insight into her personality.

In this issue's third article, "Is there a Woman in this Space Opera? A Gender Analysis of the Aliens of Orion", Dorothea Boshoff and Deirdre C. Byrne examine the depiction of aliens in Marianne de Pierres's *The Sentients of Orion* series, finding that her treatment of these aliens indicates a significant broadening of the gender spectrum as a means for speculative fiction to explore issues of identity and relationship beyond the female/male binary.

We're very pleased to bring you something a little different in this issue. In "A Conversation on AI, Science Fiction, and Work", Daniel Bodén and Michael Godhe interview Jerry Määttä, one of Scandinavia's foremost scholars of speculative fiction, about some of the ways SF has treated the concept and

implementation of artificial intelligence, specifically in the context of labour, jobs, and to what degree the increasing integration of AI into society is (or isn't) accepted.

Eero Suoranta contributes a con report from the Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations conference (GIFCon). He highlights the con's emphasis on reaching beyond the predominantly Anglophone focus of many cons to incorporate works in numerous languages, and perspectives from a wide range of nations and language groups.

As ever, our book-reviews editor has assembled an abundance of fascinating critiques of new works of scholarship. Topics include dystopias; the nature of J. G. Ballard's SF; Irish SF; a wide-ranging study of the work of Arthur C. Clarke; literary Afrofuturism; a new overview of past and current fantastic literature; and two books related to the Inklings: one exploring the tension between progressivism and traditionalism as epitomised by the Inklings' work, and one examining the relationship between J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and classic literature.

We hope you enjoy our contributors' ideas, analysis, and spirit of inquiry over the holidays. All of us at *Fafnir* wish you all the best for whatever celebrations are yours, and for the year to come.

Esko Suoranta, Laura E. Goodin, and Essi Varis, Editors-in-chief

Dennis Wise, Reviews Editor

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research



Trends in Black Speculative Fiction

Eugen Bacon

Empowerment Through Storytelling

Where are the black people? I once asked myself at a speculative writers' event in Melbourne. I looked about and it struck me just how "white" Australia can look on matters of representation in publishing. And I wondered about speculative fiction – is it a "white" genre? Gratefully, this essay tells me otherwise.

Like any fiction, speculative fiction helps the reader to understand other perspectives, seeing the world through a character's eyes, their world, psychological, physical, or imagined. In its qualities of "non-realistic", speculative fiction comes with power inherent in the surreal or abstract: it offers a safe space in which to explore "realistic" themes – for example, racism, sexuality, social injustice, or whichever individual or societal dysfunction – that may be tougher for a writer or reader to tackle or relate to in their fuller constructs or reality.

In a form of subversive activism, speculative fiction empowers a different kind of writing with its unique worldbuilding that has, over decades, emboldened writers like Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison to write a different kind of story that's also about writing oneself in. Morrison was compelled to write something she could relate to, and Butler finally decided to "write herself in" because stories of her time did not feature an "other" like her.

The Rise of Black Speculative Fiction in Anthologies, Collections, and Short Stories

More than two decades after the publication of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (Thomas), black speculative fiction continues to rise as a powerful conversation in genre fiction, and increasingly tackles precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial themes pertaining to

identity and culture, as well as feminist and queer themes pertaining to engaging with difference. Anthologies have become instrumental in the proliferating Afrofuturistic writing that heroes black people in stories from Africa and the diaspora, stories whose visibility is increasingly evident in award nominations and recommendations – for example 2021 Hugo nominee Ekpeki Donald Oghenechovwe, whose novella *Ife-Iyoku* won the 2020 Otherwise Award.

New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color (Shawl) – in its showcasing of interracial and cross-cultural stories – may have stunned its publisher, editor, contributors, and readers by winning the 2020 Locus, World Fantasy, British Fantasy, Ignyte, and Brave New Words Awards. Casting a diverse range of new and established writers, including (among others) Tobias S. Bucknell, Minsoo Kang, Kathleen Alcalá, Alberto Yáñez, and Chinelo Onwual, and featuring a foreword by LeVar Burton, *New Suns* explored intergalactic stories, dream stories, song stories, coming-home stories, futuristic stories, and even self-aware stories that encapsulate person-of-colour chants full of longing and conviction of belonging and place. With the success of *New Suns*, it's no wonder that Solaris announced its acquisition of *New Suns 2* for release in 2023 (“Solaris to Publish *New Suns 2*”).

In Titan's *Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda*, edited by Jesse J. Holland, an exceptional anthology of the Marvel Universe, original short stories feature longing, heritage, and discovery – a reliving of Wakanda in tales that bridge Mother Africa and her diaspora. Making its heroes, or letting them forge themselves, the dominant miscellany, with its brand-new tales of a kingdom, her people, and her legacy, hosts the many faces of T'Challa, who personifies the regal dignity of black people. It interweaves technology, jungle, nobility, gods and duty, heroes, antiheroes, kindred, and honour, in a 512-page book that celebrates black comic books, writers, and artists. The miscellany rekindles all that the reader loves about Wakanda in its shape-shifting panthers, blue-black women with glowing eyes, and the Panther goddess Bast in human forms – the tales grappling with empathy, treachery, belonging, unbelonging, and recurring themes of personal and societal honour. In its stories, what stays with the reader about *Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda* is the nobility of blackness and a deep-seated longing for home reimagined in legends that chant in a language of affection.

Consider *Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Knight & Donald), whose stories of gods, demons, magicians, dead children, refugees, taboos, apocalyptic worlds, and more, saw nominations, finalists and winners in the Hugo, British Science Fiction Association, British Fantasy, and Nommo Awards.... This anthology's warm reception in the speculative-fiction industry and readership could be attributed to the calibre of its stories and authors, as well as the continued response to global events, including Black Lives Matter, that demand the necessity for radical stories of lost or forgotten peoples and cultures. The miscellany also highlights the urgency to decolonise language, while deconstructing and reconstructing the selves and identities of people of colour. Such was the accomplishment of *Dominion* as an anthology that Tor.com commissioned the editors, together with Sheree Renée Thomas, the new African American editor of the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, to edit *Africa Risen* (“Submit to *Africa Risen*”) – a celebration of African storytelling and speculative literature. In 2021, Donald edited yet another anthology, *The Year's Best*

African Speculative Fiction (2021), featuring speculative fiction stories from Africa and the diaspora, published in 2020. It includes fiction by, among others, Tlotlo Tsamaase, Sheree Renée Thomas, Tobias S. Buckell, Chinelo Onwualu, Shingai Njeri Kagunda, ZZ Claybourne, and Suyi Davies Okungbowa. Stories are in the themes of the many faces of African gods, a futuristic Africa, African magic and cultural beliefs...everything African.

In *Nine Bar Blues*, Sheree Renée Thomas showcases in her single-author collection why she's an award-winning writer, poet, and editor in a mesmeric collection that is darkness, hum, and beauty. Opening with "Ancestries", a black mermaid tale that is a poem and a story pregnant with metaphor in the accord and discord of sisters, the collection imbues the reader with emotion and spirit, murmuring with gods and spectral spirits in a robust and richly layered multiverse that casts its gaze on black heroines with Afrocentric names like Yera, Fele, Ava, Nelse, Marva, Old Mama Yaya, and Aunt Dissy. The sky is a muddy river, and lightning bugs flirt with crazy dreams. Sleep is an ocean, and the mind drums with raindrops. The reader falls in love with stanzas of night, rain, wine, bridges, hunger, hearts, loss...silence. They encounter the depth of a woman's heartbreak as she seeks to hide from herself, as she quests to find something she has lost. Clouds of cicadas, carpets of husks, questions resting in darkness, old aunts with blue-black faces – their skins riven in cuts and runes.... Thomas takes the reader places, to voices full of rivers, to the language of trees, to where children laugh and leap within and without a sea of sapphires. Captivating words race together in character-hued dialogue that dances the story forward and offers a textual musicality from an ancient future that gives movement to worlds of sound like thunder breaking the sky.

Exploring Dark Short Fiction #3: A Primer to Nisi Shawl, edited by Eric J. Guignard, with commentary by Michael Arnzen and illustrated by Michelle Prebich, is a strong single-author collection that opens with an extraordinary story of a woman named Fulla Fulla and her visits to the marketplace of death. The primer introduces a highly imaginative mind proficient in conjuring, with Nisi Shawl's subversive text rich in girl empowerment and feminist ideology. Having co-authored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* with Cynthia Ward, an inclusive text on diverse character representation in imaginative genres, Shawl breathes their preaching. *Exploring Dark Short Fiction* is mottled with diverse protagonists and secondary characters: Hispanics in a dystopian world. White folk in post-apocalyptic female driven narratives. Brown-skinned women in folktales set inside villages that host markets, baobab trees, and characters wearing cornrows and wiry tresses. Herein, the reader encounters marginalised identity stories, lesbian stories, hybrid stories, runaway and victim stories, even post-apocalyptic female-driven narratives that subvert expectations with textual charm and illuminating inquiry.

A new collection worth mentioning is Tobias S. Buckell's 2021 short-story collection *Shoggoths in Traffic and Other Stories*, featuring stories of hope, warning, or new futures for its black protagonists who are orphans, migrants, shamans, entities in the city grid....

Increasingly, short stories by people of colour are featuring in Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America qualifying markets ("Qualifying Markets") that pay (at least) 8 cents per word, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, and more. There are also more magazines and resources for black

writers, as published on the website of the African Speculative Fiction Society (“Publishers of Speculative Fiction”), which administers the Nommo Awards for Speculative Fiction by Africans.

Opportunities to contribute short stories to anthologies, such as the upcoming *Life Beyond Us* anthology by the European Astrobiology Institute – presenting strange new worlds beyond ours in stories accompanied by scientists’ essays – are finding more people of colour. Following the success of Wole Talabi’s novella “Incompleteness Theories” in his collection *Incomplete Solutions* by Luna Press Publishing, Talabi edited *African Futurism: An Anthology*, available as a free download (“Free Download of *Africanfuturism*”), and showcasing stories by Nnedi Okorafor, T.L Huchu, Dilman Dila, Rafeeat Aliyu, Tlotlo Tsamaase, Mame Bougouma Diene, Mazi Nwonwu, and Derek Lubangake.

Speculative Fiction in Novels and Series

As black writing in anthologies and collections carry their solid weight in proliferating a wealth of colour in speculative fiction literature today, novels and serialised novels are also contributing to the growing trend. The *New York Times* determined N. K. Jemisin as the most celebrated science fiction and fantasy writer of her generation, with the staggering success of her Dreamblood duology, and the Broken Earth and Inheritance trilogies, which have been recognised with Hugo, Locus, Nebula, World Fantasy, Tiptree, and even British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) awards.

Nisi Shawl’s *Everfair*, published by Tor Books, for example, is an alternate history Afrofuturistic novel in which African natives in the Congo develop steam power in an imaginary utopia. Tade Thompson’s science fiction novel *Rosewater*, part of the Wormwood trilogy, about a city in a near-future Nigeria, an alien invasion future noir, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Nommo Award, and was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award. It accompanied the success of the Molly Southbourne series, now a Netflix TV series (Alberge). Tochi Onyebuchi’s *Riot Baby* and its gaze at family, betrayal, and racism made a few award lists, including the 2021 Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Awards, and won the 2020 New England Book Award for Fiction, the 2021 ALA Alex Award, and more.

Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* won the 2020 Arthur C. Clarke Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Art Seidenbaum Award, was a finalist for a Ray Bradbury Award, and was longlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. This massive tome, at 576 pages, enslaves the reader way beyond its finish. The novel is a fantasy so subtle, it’s extreme; a romance so fragile, it’s lush; a political arena so subversive, it’s sensational. This intelligent book sweeps across class, colour, and generations with its deception, reflection, fraud, prejudice, imbalance, balance, devotion, and hope. It’s a body of astonishments concealed in rebellious text that subverts the reader’s expectations with a comedic drama that’s integral to the story.

Namwali Serpell explores ideology, supremacy, disease, and curiosity in relationships forged and lost. She casts a spotlight on the place of women in society, on the intolerable choices of mothers and their children, on the quest for identity, on a search for belonging. Afrofuturistic in its gaze at colonisation,

independence, and a futuristic continent, the novel interrogates the challenges and intricacies of converging cultures. A vicious book, it hurls upon its gullible cast the cruelty of fate sprinkled with impish humour in a thoroughly researched and ambitious novel that's a fiction of fictions, a poignant grandiosity lavish in language and a magnificent intimacy with Africa – a continent of pent-up resentment finally bellowing her outrage.

Claiming his own playful approach, Zig Zag Clayborne offers *Afro Puffs Are the Antennae of the Universe*, the second book in The Brothers Jetstream saga. Uncensored, this frolicking all-black novel takes the mickey out of anything not black in a space-opera crusade that's science fiction of its own ilk, teleporting the reader – laughing – to new worlds where soul matters, as in black soul, rather than spiritual soul. In sharp contrast, but still grabbing hold of the power of blackness, is Suyi Davies Okungbowa's *Son of the Storm*. This first book in the Nameless Republic Trilogy is writing that celebrates blackness. The novel is rife with politics, superstition, magical realism, and Afrocentric cultures in an inverted colonialism where not only black but woman is power. It follows Okungbowa's award-winning novel *David Mogo Godhunter*, a story in which Lagos succumbs to ruin when the gods fall – a riveting debut of gods bringing chaos, in which Okungbowa brings a new Lagos to the reader.

It is clear from just these select exemplars that publishers, authors, and readers alike have a steeping interest in black people's stories. Thanks to the internet, audio books, and ebooks, the world is in the heart of an ongoing digital revolution that continues to stagger traditional publishing and make best sellers as well as anthologies and collections from smaller presses cheaper and accessible to ravenous readers. As e-publishers and self-publishers create opportunities for writers and readers alike, and more awards recognise calibre and uniqueness, rather than the author's or publisher's muscle, black speculative fiction will continue to rise in global distribution, and be increasingly accessible. A reader has only to look for it in anthologies, collections, even award nominations.

People of colour are increasingly leveraging the supremacy inherent in storytelling to craft revolutionary speculative fiction in stories of soul and claim: snatching their own power with fundamental philosophical questions and confronting themes that not only contemplate but *demand* different futures for black people. Writers from Africa and the diaspora are pushing the envelope, even splitting it, to chart new and perilous (depending on who's feeling threatened) fiction that tackles sombre topics. As writers like N. K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Tannarive Due, Suyi Davies Okungbowa, and Tochi Onyebuchi increasingly become household names among speculative-fiction fans, along with the likes of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Toni Morrison in their recognition in literary worlds, more writers of colour will join them.

And we haven't even got to black speculative poetry and the star-studded line-up of Akua Lezli Hope, Linda D. Addison and Brandon O'Brien – have you read his latest poetry collection *Can You Sign My Tentacle?* (O'Brien). It is almost certain that timeless black writing from Africa and the diaspora will continue to proliferate in the literary market, and readers will increasingly look for it, and find it.

Black writers are my community. I locate affinity with all their black speculative fiction stories that write me in. I can see myself in their protagonists, and their quests to find some truth, or to belong.

Biography: Eugen M. Bacon, MA, MSc, PhD, is African Australian, a computer scientist mentally re-engineered into creative writing. Her novella [*Ivory's Story*](#) was shortlisted in the 2020 British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Awards. Her work has won, been shortlisted, longlisted or commended in national and international awards, including the Foreword Indies Awards, Bridport Prize, Copyright Agency Prize, Horror Writers Association Diversity Grant, Australian Shadows Awards, Ditmar Awards and Nommo Awards for Speculative Fiction by Africans. Bacon's creative work has appeared in literary and speculative fiction publications worldwide, including Award Winning Australian Writing, BSFA, Fantasy Magazine, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Bloomsbury and The Year's Best African Speculative Fiction. New releases: [*Danged Black Thing*](#) (collection), [*Saving Shadows*](#) (illustrated collection), [*Mage of Fools*](#) (novel). Website: eugenbacon.com / Twitter: @EugenBacon

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Confronting Ghosts: History, Trauma, and Aesthetics in Guillermo del Toro's *El Laberinto del Fauno*

Debalina Das

Abstract: Historically, the presentation of collective trauma has been fraught with moral and aesthetic contradictions. Hollywood, in particular, has long struggled to visually adapt national trauma into a collective whole without rendering it into a spectacle; moreso when it comes to non-Western narratives. Given the indispensability of magic realism in the history of Latin America, it stands to reason that a culture that is so steeped in alternative ways of storytelling would employ such techniques in its national cinema. In light of the sudden boom in the popularity of Latin American cinema, this paper attempts to look at how Guillermo del Toro's *El Laberinto del Fauno* incorporates elements of magic realism in the fabric of its narrative in order to speak of the collective trauma of the Spanish Civil War.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War, *Laberinto*, magic realism, fantasy, trauma

1. Introduction

For humans, isolated experiences in the form of trauma problematically defy efforts at representation, but at the same time paradoxically call for testimony on their behalf. To put it another way, stories of trauma demand to be told, but come up against limitations when being coaxed into expression and efforts at testimony. What is of ethical concern is whether the method of representing the experience of trauma stands in the way of its being understood and addressed authentically. In speaking of the representation of a traumatic event, in this case the Holocaust,

Adorno writes that it is “now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (312). The demand for a responsible and ethical expression creates a bridge between the imagination and the moral responsibility of trying to present an unimaginable historical event – a space wherein the power of cinema can be inquired.

Trying to represent an impossible and unspeakable historical event with a marked degree of verisimilitude is problematic, primarily in that it is difficult to avoid a betrayal of both a historical sense of fact and those in a position of victimhood—especially in the instance of collective suffering. If language and memory cannot support the burden of traumatic experience, how is the experience of the victim to be expressed? Just because these events seem empirically impossible surely does not mean that they cannot be imagined. Film attempts to navigate this impossible task of representation, despite being susceptible to the potentially burdensome accusation of inauthenticity.

The aim of this paper is to attempt an understanding of the dialogue between historic cinema in the realm of magic realism, established history, and the collective trauma of a nation. Attempts will also be made to look into the formal techniques of cinematic narrative and how they can provide a point of entry into addressing the integrity and expressibility of experiences and the functioning of memory. Primary focus will be on *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*), the Spanish film by Guillermo del Toro, and the engagement of its elements of magic realism with the collective history of the Spanish Civil War. Finally, I will try to come to an understanding of the aesthetic quality of the presentation of the traumatic event, and the moral question of whether it is appropriate to aestheticise the collective memory of a nation that is still struggling with the trauma of a past that remains largely obscured by historical amnesia.

2. Watching History on Film

In a 1935 letter that is highly revealing about professional attitudes in the industry, Louis Gottschalk of the University of Chicago wrote to the president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer:

If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes to its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it. (qtd. in Rosenstone 50)

This is certainly telling, because what constitutes history has evolved past the idea of a certain kind of all-encompassing truth to incorporate its own theoretical self-awareness as a power construct. Hutcheon writes that historians constitute their subject as possible objects of narratives, and they do so by the very structures and languages they use to present those subjects (192). The events of the past are no longer seen to speak for themselves as actual facts, but are composed into a coherent narrative that is otherwise marketed as objective, for all intents and purposes.

While written history exists on paper because of certain empirical evidence and an acceptance of the idea that they offer a glimpse of what was important in the past, over the last few decades cinematic narratives of the past

have come to constitute a pronounced facet of historiography. Whilst garnering criticism such as operating periphrastically on an emotional level and evoking a nostalgic engagement with the past, the filmic medium, through its variegated, punctuated narrative temporality is not too unlike individuals' own fragmented, irresolute understanding of what constitutes history. But of necessity the rules of engagement of a director's works with the raw materials of the past are – and must be – different from those that govern written history. Information can never be conveyed neutrally, least so by filmmakers:

Like the academic, the film maker can maintain such a viewpoint only through the very act of telling the past: whatever humanity has lost – runs the implicit message – is now redeemed by the creation of this work, by the witnessing of the historical wrongs that this film allows us to share. (Rosenstone 17)

Dramatic films make special demands on both the traditional notion of history and the viewers because they engage in creating the past by selecting certain events and incorporating elements of storytelling such as plot, dialogue, and setting. This can be seen as contributing to the realm of discourse, and unlike written history, which provides literal truths, dramatic films provide metaphorical truths that serve to challenge the traditional discourse of history. As critics like Carlsten and McGarry have argued, popular discourses need to do away with the proclivity to judge the authenticity of film based on their factual accuracy, in lieu of ushering a new perspective with its own set of rules of engagement: it is

precisely because of the liberties film takes with the past that it conveys to the public more successfully the central principle of historiography: that history is a process of interpretation, reflecting a dialogue between past and present. (8)

It is precisely because the telling of history depends on codified narratives that cinema can either legitimise those narratives or provide counter-narratives through its Daedalian plexus of symbolism, images, and sound. Despite the glaring difference between what historians claim as “proper” history and the fabrication that a historic film entails, certain directors in various parts of the world have been burdened enough by history to make them repeatedly turn to the past as a setting for films in which they try to raise significant historical questions (Rosenstone 130).

3. Magic(al) Realism and National Trauma

Much has been said and written about terms such as “marvellous realism”, “magic realism” and “magical realism” as experiments in literature from marginal cultures. Originally seen in the post-Expressionist paintings during the 1920s in Germany, its artistic version was an attempt at “expressing a deeper understanding of reality witnessed by the artist” (Bowers 7), and therefore a break from preceding Expressionistic paintings. The term “magic realism”, most critics agree, was first used by German art critic Franz Roh (1890–1965) in his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (*Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the*

Most Recent European Painting). But it was Fernando Vela's translation into Spanish of certain chapters from Roh's book (and therefore Latin American writers' exposure to magic realism), along with influence of two writers – Arturo Uslar-Pietri (1906–2001) and Alejo Carpentier (1904–80) – that are credited with ushering in Latin magic realism. For instance, Carpentier

used the term “marvellous realism” to describe a concept that could represent for him the mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality in Latin America. (Bowers 13)

While magic realism in European literature remains a genre for individualistic expression, in Latin American literature (or, rather, in most formerly colonised Third World countries' literatures) it performs a more salient social function: forming a distinctive national identity independent from that of Europe. As Kroetsch has observed, magic realism is inherently associated with an understanding of “living on the margins” (15), thereby providing an antithesis to imperialistic discourses and its dehumanizing systems. Viewed through the lens of post-colonial criticism, literature from the margins no longer required the Western eye as an imperative agent of perception. During the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America underwent an interval of political unrest due diplomatic strategies set in place during the Cold War. Writers became united in their desire for nationalisation after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and thus Latin American magic realism literature took off internationally.

The typical narrative of a magic realist text includes a battle between two oppositional systems, with each of them working towards the creation of two diametrically different kinds of discourses. However, since the ground rules of these two discourses are not cohesive, neither one can fully come into being. Consequently, they remain locked in a continuous dialectic, and in a state of suspension. This creates a certain kind of disjunction within each of the discursive systems, leaving them with absences and silences.

So, what makes magic realism a good enough genre to capture trauma?

Historical traumas are constructions of collective memories that cannot be verified through empirical research, or by ascribing an indexical relation between the image and the real. (Meek 10)

The indescribability of historical trauma and its quantification lends itself particularly well to the unreal elements of magic realism. Anchored in historical moments, magic realist texts confront violent and traumatic events, attempting to highlight the falsity or unreality of dominant discourses, hegemonic representations of history, and the canonical obsession with facts as undisputable foundations of history. A fitting example of this would be the massacre of thousands of banana-plantation workers in the fictional world of Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Anos de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Historically, on 6 December, 1928, workers of the Colombian United Fruit Company gathered around the main square of Cien Agas to protest against poor working conditions and inadequate pay. To prevent American interception, Colombian troops under the leadership of then-Colombian governor General Cortes Vargas open fired on the gathering. Reports of casualties have never been confirmed officially, with estimates ranging from

twenty thousand to forty thousand deaths. The event is completely erased from the popular discourse of history, suggesting how historical events in marginalised nations are characterised by referential uncertainty. In Márquez's text, José Arcadio Segundo, the only survivor of the massacre, is plagued with horror and guilt when he realises that not a single soul in all of Macondo remembers the event. Not only is the massacre completely erased from the collective memory, but torrential rains the next day erase any physical evidence left behind.

Primarily because one of the founding principles of magic realism is that reality cannot be explained in a singular and fixed way, it allows a space for the expression of the inexpressibility of trauma. The imagination, then, uses its power to shape language to turn what resists representation into an accessible reality. The realist narrative is ruptured by the unreal to present trauma, and at the same time acknowledge the problems of accurately representing it. The realness of the horror is left to the experience of the audience instead of being objectively stated, allowing them to experience the trauma and its overwhelming effects, which otherwise elude written narratives. As Márquez explains in his 1982 Nobel lecture:

reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude. (209)

As a crucial post-colonial tool, magic realism uses fantasy narratives in the same way that realist narratives are used in Western discourse, but with subverted premises. Discourses about magic are given equal urgency to political discourses, which leads readers to question the authenticity and veracity of both. Because these two strands are so intimately interconnected, the question of whether the reader should accept either as the genuine version of events is enfeebled by the existence of the other. Seen in a wider expansive sense, the strategies of magic realism point to the fortuity of representational choices in contemporary trauma discourse by questioning conventional narrative modes and epistemological assumptions through discursive techniques.

4. *El Laberinto del Fauno*

Guillermo del Toro's 2001 historic horror film *El Espinazo del Diablo* opens with a question:

Que es un fantasma? Un evento terrible condenado a repetirse una y otra vez?

Translation: What is a ghost? A terrible event doomed to repeat itself over and over again? (00:00:57)

In a sense, any trauma that haunts, as trauma tends naturally to do, is a ghost. For decades the Spanish Civil War and its implicated trauma remained heavily censored and were collectively forgotten. Whatever remained of the historiography of the war was overrun with traditional overarching European narratives of good

versus evil, and the nationalist Spanish versus the democratic liberal anti-Spanish. At the time of the transition to democracy, there was an obsessive memorialisation of the Nationalist war throughout the Franco dictatorship, which led to a desire to break with the past. It is argued that this was not a determination to forget the collective history of the suffering, but a conscious act to no longer let the past affect the future. Archibald has suggested that, in addition to the “legacy of fear” caused by the post-war repression and the collective pact of oblivion, one reason as to why the Spanish Civil War has been less represented on screen in Spanish cinema and in Spanish culture in general is because, as a “holocaustal” event, it “may be unrepresentable by conventional artistic modes” (77–78).

For del Toro, who is of Mexican-Spanish descent, the Civil War was not an autobiographical memory, but a traditional one, transmitted to his generation by individuals who had lived through the war. Del Toro has often talked about growing up with tales of the Spanish Civil war in his home (Kermode). These tales have made their way into his films, particularly his incomplete Spanish trilogy: *El Espinazo del Diablo*, *Laberinto del Fauno*, and a third, as yet untitled, film, which is still in production (Hopewell and de la Fuente).

Laberinto offers a complex treatment of historical memory and its intersection with subjective personal memory. In the true fashion of magic realist texts, the film operates on both the realist and magic levels, with the realist narrative set in the context of the Spanish Civil War. The film opens in 1944, when armed anti-nationalists are still fighting against the Franco regime. The child protagonist of the film, Ofelia, who struggles with the recent loss of her father, must learn to adapt to the rules of her new stepfather, the obsessive Captain Vidal, and protect her mother and unborn brother. The magical aspect of the narrative, in true quest manner, requires her to complete a number of tasks so that she can be restored to her original position of princess of the underworld and be reunited with her family.

5. The Cinematography of *Laberinto*

The establishing shot, a visual element that is commonly used to open a film or a sequence within it, it helps establish the tone and the aesthetic of the film by grounding it in a certain geographical location and a fixed time of the day. It also shows the scale of the primary subject in relation to their environment. With genres like high fantasy or magic realism, where an entirely new world needs to be introduced, an establishing shot is crucial. *Laberinto* opens with a few establishing shots that provide the audience with almost all of the information that they require about the film: it is going to end with the death of Ofelia, and this death ultimately leads her to travel to her own kingdom, far away from the real world.

At the heart of the film are two parallel narratives: the actual world where Vidal and his soldiers are trying to weed out the resistance hidden in the mountains, and Ofelia’s three tasks that she must complete to be reunited with her real family in the Underworld. It is only through the eyes of Ofelia that the audience glimpses the two worlds colliding at certain instances in the film; for her, the magical world is just as real as the non-magical one. Although both Vidal and Carmen can see the mandrake, they are only able to see it in its inanimate stage, which makes Ofelia the only person to seamlessly see and navigate both the worlds at the same time. This strict separation of the worlds

for the other characters emphasises the surreality of the Faun's world. This surreality, in turn, positions the reader to feel, rather than know or necessarily understand, the situation. In this way, the "felt" reality might, in Anne Hegerfeldt's terms, convey a "sense of horror ... more profound than could have been expressed in words" (87). The representation of the unreal is, then, as capable of affecting an emotional connection between the reader and the text as more "objective" and "realistic" forms of narrative (88).

One of the most crucial shots in the film, which also serves as the master shot, comes at the 04:45 mark (*El Laberinto*, New Line version). It is a typical layered shot, showing Ofelia and the broken bust in the forest in the foreground while Vidal's men help her mother in the background. Considering that it is a deep space shot, it stands to reason that every element in this shot plays an important role in the narrative, and, as in all master shots, it clarifies the importance of the characters in the scene, and where they are in relation to each other. All of the elements in the shot remain visibly lit (out of focus, but still visible for the audience to notice). Since the frame is so cluttered, it gives a sense of urgency: the eye is drawn to the broken bust, letting the audience know that Ofelia's interaction with it will be exclusively pivotal.



Figure 1. Ofelia sees the bust. *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 00:04:45–00:05:17

On a technical level, the shallow focus helps to isolate the subject, and, usually in films with multiple characters, helps single out one subject whose direction the camera primarily follows. On a narrative level, shallow-focus shots are also used to determine a turning point in the character's life.

The master shot in *Laberinto* foreshadows how Ofelia must exist in the two worlds simultaneously, and must ultimately make a choice between them. However, the one character making her present to both the worlds in equal measure is Carmen, her mother, which is why she remains in the background in this scene. Ofelia has moved to Vidal's camp because of Carmen, and it is in order to find a better world for her mother and brother that she must undertake all the Faun's tasks.

Laberinto not only stores and replays the traumatic energies in the cultural container viewed by the public, but it also processes and transforms

these energies into the more culturally complex spectrum of magic realism, which in itself defies imposed imperialist narratives. The shape of the trauma is changed, made symbolic, turned into a more readable form that might arouse less of a society's fear than the historical event itself.

The “unspeakable” forms a characteristic of trauma and at the same time prevents its expression. According to Stampfl, those who wield the language of the unspeakable are aligning themselves with the victims by choosing a way out. The choice not to represent the trauma allows for more room to misrepresent or even erase bits of the trauma itself (15). One of the most enduring qualities of the film is how obstinately Ofelia insists on the reality of the world that only she can see, but others cannot. The final voiceover in the concluding section of the film is a reiteration of this:

she left behind small traces of her time on earth, visible only to those who know where to look. (01:52:00)

Therefore, Ofelia demands to be seen, and the film demands that the audience come face to face with the horrors of the real world. Historically, other countries across the globe chose for a long time to turn a blind eye to the horrors of the Franco regime so as not to upset the European political balance. Organised purges of Republicans took place, but were effectively removed from official records and, consequently, from history. A number of parallel scenes are drawn up in the film to emphasise the fact that the other world is not without its fair share of violence, death, and horrors. This is the trauma of a war and a nation that demands to be seen.



Figure 2. Vidal's feast. *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 00:39:50–00:39:58



Figure 3. The Pale Man's feast. *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 00:59:35–00:59:40

Figure 2 shows a scene wherein Vidal has thrown a feast for his comrades in war, during which he declares the reduction of civilian rations. Figure 3 shows Ofelia at the frozen feast of the Pale Man, attempting to retrieve a key as instructed by the Faun. The cinematic imagery in both of these scenes is startlingly similar. Both in terms of colour schemes as well as object-to-space ratios in the mise-en-scène suggests the analogous nature of the two worlds: Ofelia is absent from Vidal's feast, only to be present in a similar one in the world down below.

One of the film's central themes posits how children are often victims of adult violence within the context of social constrictions imposed by the Spanish Civil War. Ofelia does not watch children being killed or mutilated, does not actively take part in the war, and therefore all those traumas would apparently remain invisible to the audience. However, the remains of the shoes of the children that were literally eaten by the Pale Man and the sacrifice that she must make of her brother are all lingering implications of what an actual child would have had to suffer during the war. Thus, as a magic realist narrative, the film keeps alive the illusion and mystery inherent in phenomenal knowledge, moreso when the object of that knowledge experiences inexplicable pain.

One of the most telling sequences in the film happens at the 33:16 mark (*El Laberinto*, New Line version), where scenes of both Vidal and Ofelia's pursuits are intercut using the technique known as the match cut. In such transitions, the shapes or movement of two events are matched to suggest a relationship between two disparate objects and create a visual metaphor. However, even as a continuity edit, the match cut, ironically, shows the incongruity of the two time-space locations. In this case, one sequence shows Ofelia crawling through the mud to reach the poisonous toad that is killing the magical tree, and on another level, Vidal and his men are riding through the mountain to intercept a smoke signal. Of course, Vidal fails to find any of the members of the Resistance, but Ofelia manages to complete the first task of retrieving the key. As the narrative progresses, Ofelia manages to complete all of her tasks and returns to the Underworld, while Vidal meets frustrations and

dead ends, and is ultimately shot. This is all the more illuminated in the light of the tagline of *Laberinto*: “Innocence has a power Evil cannot imagine”.

Interestingly, a majority of the shots situated in the Underworld or of the tasks that Ofelia undertakes are either low- or high-angle shots, in which the cameras are situated below or above the usual plane of focus, respectively. In sharp contrast to this, almost all the scenes in the real world are shot at eye level. This allowed cinematographer Guillermo Navarro to subtly differentiate between the two worlds, and allowed the viewers, at least at a subconscious level, to pick up on the aesthetic differences between the worlds.



Figure 4. Ofelia returns to her kingdom. *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 1:50:28–1:50:35



Figure 5. The rebels surround Vidal. *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 1:47:18–1:47:25

The low-angle shots are mostly used when Ofelia is in conversation with the Faun. In cinema, the low-angle shot is typically used to showcase a sense of

power imbalance by making one of the subjects appear larger and seem to be looming. Navarro's use of the low-angle shots makes the Faun appear large, almost like a hulking beast. In contrast, Ofelia appears much smaller, and therefore vulnerable. These shots show from the outset that Ofelia is as powerless in the fantasy world as she is in the real world, and that to survive, she must do as she is told. It is interesting to note that when she is reunited with her family in the concluding scenes of the film, a high-angle shot is used (Figure 4). This shot focuses on Ofelia (with the help of saturated lighting) and shows the sheer scale of the expectations foisted on her: she has been burdened not only with returning to her primordial home, but with the fate of an entire kingdom.

Fantastic cinema, then, explores trauma by remembering it and repeating it in the form of diagetically mediated symbols of loss. The narrative of *Laberinto* chooses to focus on the sites where ideologically dominant models of individual identity is formed, dismantled by trauma and finally re-formed in a post-traumatic context. Ofelia's journey is one where she must shed her grounded identity in the real world to make the ultimate sacrifice and become one with where she actually came from – the Underworld. At the centre of this metamorphosis lies her journey through a literal battlefield. While her physical identity is forged as a citizen of “a clean Spain” under the Franco regime, the primary foundation of which, like any dictatorship, lies in civilian obedience, she must shed this identity to become Princess Moanna. Throughout the narrative, demands are made on the audience to not only work through the anxiety engendered by trauma, but also to question the dominant ideological model from which all of the characters in the film derive their identities.

Colour plays an essential role in the world-building of *Laberinto*. Psychologically, spectators tend to associate certain colours to specific feelings, which in turn triggers an entire array of associations. Therefore, Cinematographers will often use certain colours in specific ways to take advantage of viewers' tendency to associate colours with particular feelings. But that does not necessarily make colour usage exclusive. Sergei Eisenstein in his essay “Colour and Meaning” talked about the inherent objectivity of colours, and how they could be used in storytelling:

... the emotional intelligibility and function of color will rise from the natural order of establishing the color imagery of the work, coincidental with the process of shaping the living movement of the whole work. (151)

In *Laberinto*, vivid and highly saturated colours are used to reflect the dispositions of the characters. For instance, Ofelia and Mercedes are always cast in warm, orange tones and usually placed in medium- to highly lit settings, while Vidal is almost always cast in colder, more muted tones like blues and blacks (Figures 2 and 5). It is also quite evident that two complementary colour palettes are used to designate the two worlds: the fantasy world is mostly saturated with golden, red, and orange hues, while the real world is saturated with browns, blues, and purples; the middle world – the one where the Faun firsts tasks Ofelia with her challenges – is a vibrant green. The palettes of the two main worlds lie on the opposite ends of the colour wheel, and offer a visual key to the two competing realms. The colour scheme itself pushes the audience to recognise which of them is more nurturing and embracing, and therefore

more real to Ofelia. In contrast to the parallel elements that link both worlds (Figures 2 and 3), the difference in colour palettes helps separate them into two different realms.

Figure 5 is significant in that it shows how the two worlds have finally started to bleed into each other, as much in narratological terms as in visual codes. Vidal following Ofelia into the labyrinth and shooting her during his attempt to take his son away from her is his active denial of the fantastic (and the Faun, until the very end, remains invisible to him), but it is his killing of Ofelia which, to all intents and purposes, allows the fulfilment of her third task and effectively brings her back to her own realm. Since this scene is set at night, the primary colours are colder blues, muted greens, and greys. However, the one contrast present, and which has so been associated with Ofelia throughout the film, is the bright yellow of the fire and smoke bleeding through the trees (blue and yellow lie on the opposite sides of the colour wheel). This, combined with the *mise-en-scène*, suggests that the rebels are going to take over and that Vidal's idea of a clean, new Spain will not be fulfilled; the fire that Ofelia's rebellion has started will not die out any time soon.

6. Conclusion

The trauma resulting from historical events can be theoretically located, but in practice, a prolonged trauma becomes very difficult to localise. This is further complicated in the case of the Spanish Civil War, which has been littered with lost voices and discarded fragments of history, in a country pushed to the margins by imperialism's centralising cognitive structures. Consequently, traumatic hauntings like these are characterised by period of latency and a tendency toward repetition.

Lichtenberg-Ettinger suggests that from the archaic foundations of the human consciousness stems the yearning for encounter with the traumatic feelings and a desire for shared eventing with an unknown other (90). As an attempt to master the past, the human subject moves beyond the blocked presentness of the trauma in an attempt to give it a semblance of coherence. As the published history of and commentary about the war during the Franco regime came forth not only highly propagandised, but also heavily censored, it was not surprising that the legislation enacted in the 1960s that allowed greater freedom for authors to publish led to a boom in reactionary voices.

Guillermo del Toro's repeated return to the Spanish Civil War is a performative regeneration or relieving of the trauma. Both Santi's ghost in *El Diablo* and Ophelia's spectral fantasy in *Laberinto* hauntingly return, not as the repressed consciousness of the individual, but as the ghost of a generation forgotten in history. For an individual like del Toro, rewriting the history of a nation that is not entirely his own, and addressing its repressed trauma, would involve a different kind of performativity, one that involves simultaneously remembering and taking leave of it. By attempting to put faces, names, and individuality to the stories of the Spanish Civil War, del Toro breaks the cycle of the structural trauma, retroactivating historical events by not allowing historical repetition. With its twofold narrative style, *Laberinto* engages itself in a rebellious act of remembrance and by extension: the removal, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, of the pact of silence of the Transition years.

In its chronicling of a fantastic tale of an ordinary girl, *El Laberinto del Fauno* claims the ownership of a suffering that had otherwise effectively been forgotten by history. The scenes alternate between factions of a country at war over ideological differences, where murders and overwhelming torture dangerously turn into casual matters of routine, and a capricious, chthonic world thirsty for innocent blood. Fantastical tropes actively deconstruct the dichotomy between fact and fiction, and del Toro, particularly, is able to rewrite the historical trauma that still haunts Spain. In *Laberinto*, history therefore becomes another postmodern narrative that crafts its own discourse, relying on memory, written and oral history, polyphony, intertextuality, and dialogism, while the magic realism invites its audience to contemplate alternative models of history.

Biography: Debalina Das has a Master's degree in English Literature, and is currently in her final semester of her M.Phil (Master of Philosophy) in the same field at University of Calcutta. An avid enthusiast of visual media, Das's predilection for films, television shows, installation art and paintings have allowed her to incorporate multidisciplinary orientations in her approach to any text.

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Through the Portals of the Mind – a Paracosmic Study of Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*

Krishnapriya K. & Dr. Sumathy K Swamy

Abstract: The worlds that children build in their minds may hold the child’s interest for a consistent period of time and evolve into full-fledged paracosms, or may last only for the duration of a single playtime. Studying a child’s fantasy world can be compared to mapping the uncharted terrains of the child’s psyche. Many parallel worlds have been recorded in the pages of fantasy literature for children. Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*, published in 2002, is one such book about a young protagonist’s adventures in a parallel world. This paper studies the parallel world of the eponymous protagonist as a paracosm to illustrate that this imaginary world can serve as effective means to understand the budding mind of Coraline.

Keywords: paracosms, fantasy, children, pretend-play, imagination.

Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It’s a way of understanding it.

Lloyd Alexander

Children create new worlds in their imagination. It is common and natural for a child to create imaginary situations and enact different roles in them during the course of pretend-play. In an elaborate phase of pretend play, a child might indulge in creating a whole new cosmos, parallel to this one, by building it fragment by fragment in their mind.

An extension of the occurrence of pretend play mates into entire make-believe societies, usually to be seen in middle childhood, was first described by Robert Silvey and Stephen MacKeith in England. They labeled these made-up cultures or fantasylands *paracosms*, and showed how such childhood creations might be early signs of creativity, as in the Brontë sisters who went on to be fine novelists. (Singer and Singer 23)

These imaginary worlds are, in many ways, reflections of the real world. However, they vary in degrees of reflection as the child chooses the elements from the real world to incorporate into the structure of the imaginary world. There are instances when the child prefers to alter the rules of the society to suit their imaginary world better. This activity of creation is so prevalent around the world and across time that it is seen as the foundation of creativity by many psychologists. The term “paracosm” was devised by Ben Vincent, a former paracosmist and a participant in the research of Silvey and MacKeith. A child’s paracosm is a product of imagination, memories, and outcomes of experiences in the real world. Therefore, it is quite logical to infer that a paracosm is a child’s perception of the real world, with a dash of their imagination, fantasy, and even a few wishes included.

Paracosms are characterized by their completeness and longevity; by the way the child incorporates real-world conventions, or invented conventions, into an often quite sophisticated alternate reality that he or she revisits periodically over years and may still retain as an adult. (Petrella 3)

Depending on their wishes, children design these imaginary worlds in ways that are in some ways similar to the real world and yet different in their details. The goings-on in a paracosm are absolutely under the control of the child who has created it.

Silvey and MacKeith studied different paracosms created spontaneously and described by 53 adult paracosmists and four child paracosmists. They describe paracosms as a “spontaneously created, but maintained and elaborated, imaginary private world” (173). They characterise their method of studying paracosms, as non-clinical; instead, they assert that it is more humanist and literary in nature, while also incorporating some psychological aspects. According to Cohen and MacKeith, “the typical age for developing paracosms is around age nine, a few years later than the typical age for the development of imaginary companions” (Becker-Blease 494). MacKeith, who published the findings of his research in “Paracosms and the Development of Fantasy in Childhood”, states that despite acknowledging the fictitious nature of the imaginary world, the child maintains a persistent interest in it for a consistent period of time. The imaginary world that the child has created is systematic, and the child considers it with pride because it matters to them. There are infinite ways of imagining a parallel world and no rules limiting how children can create them. “In terms of complexity and age onset, then, Cohen and MacKeith ranked paracosm play at the apex of make-believe activity in childhood” (Root-Bernstein 419).

Paracosms and extensive imaginative play have held the interest of researchers and psychologists for a long time. However, they have also been viewed as potentially pathological. Some have feared that unmonitored paracosmic play might have serious implications for a child’s development and

orientation with reality. However, numerous studies have shown that imaginative worldplay helps children's creativity flourish. Paracosms have been noted as indicators of genius during the childhoods of many highly intelligent people.

These have included nineteenth century luminaries such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas De Quincey, the Brontë sisters, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Anthony Trollope. They also include twentieth century writers C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, Mazo de la Roche, and Jack Kerouac; actor Peter Ustinov; visual artist Claes Oldenburg; graphic artist and writer Leo Lionni; philosopher of science and science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem, physicist and science fiction author Gregory Benford, zoologist-artist Desmond Morris, and neurologist-writer Oliver Sacks. (Root-Bernstein 418)

While the existence of paracosm in childhood does not guarantee artistic success in adult life, as Michele Root-Bernstein writes, "for many children it does signal a flowering of creative imagination and, in some cases, of creative giftedness for endeavors in and well beyond the arts" (420).

Many famous fictional parallel universes – for example, J. M. Barrie's Neverland, Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, and C. S. Lewis's Narnia – have appeared in children's fantasy literature. These parallel universes are fantastic worlds, with societies, cultures, and rules of their own. They are in many ways similar to a child's paracosm. Based on this similarity, this study endeavours to view the parallel universe in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as a paracosm. The Carnegie medal-winning gothic fantasy novella relates the adventures of the young protagonist Coraline in an alternate, parallel universe. In their article "Magical Realism in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*", Hosseinpour and Shahbazi Moghadam analyse the aspects of magical realism in the novella. With its theme and narrative style, *Coraline* has also been studied as a gothic fantasy for children. Numerous studies have examined the gothic characteristics of the book (see Becher; Buckley; Gooding). Moreover, critical studies have examined view the text in the light of feminist and postfeminist theories and articles (see Parsons, Sawers, and McNally; Russell; Wehler). Psychoanalysis has also been attempted upon the book as a whole and on individual characters. Questions of clinical psychology, identity, familial bonding, and interpersonal relationships in *Coraline* have all been examined. In analysing the features and happenings in the book's parallel universe as a projection of Coraline's paracosm, this study attempts to illustrate the effective way a paracosm can serve to understand a child's mind.

The story begins when Coraline Jones and her parents move into a peculiar mansion divided into four flats. The neighbours with whom they share the house are peculiar as well: an aged man who trains mice in the flat upstairs and two ageing former actresses in the basement flat. The flat adjacent to the one into which Coraline's family has moved is still not let. With her parents perpetually busy, the little girl finds numerous ways to keep herself engaged. She has a habit of imagining herself to be an explorer and sets out to explore her new home. While doing so, she comes across a locked door in their new drawingroom. Whenever she asks about the door, she gets no clear answers from her preoccupied parents. Eventually, when Coraline finds out that the door opens only on to a brick wall, she is even more confused. The door leading nowhere is a thing of imbalance and incompleteness, according to Coraline. She

keeps repeating to herself, “It has to go somewhere” (Gaiman 9). Her imagination sets out to correct that imperfection, making the door open onto another parallel universe. This study views this parallel universe created by Coraline as her paracosm, and seeks a better understanding of the psychological landscape of the character’s mind.

A paracosm is fashioned with elements from reality. “Practically all imaginary worlds begin with the template of the Primary World, the world we live in, gradually replacing its default assumptions and structures with invented material” (Wolf 67). Coraline’s paracosm, too, develops from the structure of her primary world: her parents, her new house, and her neighbours. She goes a step further to rectify the lapses she notices in her primary world by making changes in her paracosm. In Walt Disney’s 1951 animated movie adaptation *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice says,

If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn’t, and contrariwise, what it is, it wouldn’t be. And what it wouldn’t be, it would. (00:03:15)

In comparison, Coraline’s paracosm is not a total opposite of her real world, but a blend of her reality and her fantasies. Often, the imaginary aspects are so much in line with reality that she feels that she has not left her home at all. But still, there are a few variations that set the paracosm apart from the real world:

She looked around the room. It was so familiar – that was what made it feel so truly strange. Everything was exactly the same as she remembered: there was all her grandmother’s strange-smelling furniture, there was the painting of the bowl of fruit (a bunch of grapes, two plums, a peach and an apple) hanging on the wall, there was the low wooden table with the lion’s feet, and the empty fireplace which seemed to suck heat from the room. (Gaiman 84–85)

After a closer look, however, Coraline learns to spot the differences in every object she comes across. She observes that even though the things in the parallel universe look familiar, they have taken a sinister turn. There is a gothic air about the entire place. People from Coraline’s family and neighbourhood have their replicas in the imaginary world, too. However, they are not just carbon copies of their real selves. “Paracosms are a way of exploring counterfactual societies, just as imaginary companions are a way of exploring counterfactual minds” (Walker and Gopnik 354). Coraline makes the alterations in the paracosmic replica of her real world based on whatever she heard from her parents and neighbours. Her imagination supplies the details to flesh out the skeletal information she has gathered and understood in her own way.

Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein, who studied fantasy in the form of worldplay, formulated a rubric to differentiate imaginative worldplay or paracosmic play from other imaginative activities such as daydreaming:

In its final form, the rubric established a checklist for imaginary worldplay or paracosm play that (1) required the notion of a specific “other” place, either partly or wholly imaginary; (2) might include the notion of specific persons, either partly or wholly imaginary; and (3) must include the consistent repetition over some period of time of a specific scenario, as evidenced by the naming of places and characters or the elaboration of a continuous narrative or other systematization. (Runco and Pina 383)

The parallel world in Coraline’s imagination fulfills these three conditions. It is specific in its notion of the “other” place. To make the distinction of “otherness” very clear, all the people refer to themselves as “others”: “Other Mother”, “Other Father”, and so on. This leads to the second criterion: the people are partly imaginary and partly real. They have their origins in reality but are developed by Coraline’s imagination. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, the former actresses who live in the basement flat, always speak of their youthful days with nostalgia, which leads Coraline’s imagination to create an image of them shedding their old bodies to regain their youthful appearances on stage: then

they unbuttoned their fluffy round coats and opened them. But their coats weren’t all that opened: their faces opened, too, like empty shells, and out of the old empty fluffy round bodies stepped two young women. They were thin, and pale, and quite pretty, and had black-button eyes. (Gaiman 48–49)

The stories narrated by Miss Forcible and Miss Spink about their theatre days spur Coraline into attaching a theatre, complete with flashing light bulbs and a large stage before a gallery of seats, to the house complex within the paracosm. The dogs that are always with the old ladies become theatre assistants and audiences.

The change in appearance is not exclusive to Miss Spink and Miss Forcible: the appearances of all the people on the other side differ startlingly from those Coraline have met in reality. The thin bodies, pale skin, and button eyes are the common features of the paracosmic counterparts. Moreover, their personalities also undergo a change. For example, in Coraline’s imaginary world, her parents’ replicas are not perpetually busy. The other world is perpetually foggy and ambiguous, and the people are grotesque replicas of those in real life. Their behaviour is in many ways ironic in relation to their appearances: they are exceedingly loving and amiable, to the extent of seeming suspicious.

The other parents are always ready to play with Coraline and shower their attention on her. The Other Mother especially is different from Coraline’s real mother. She is “an all-powerful and sadistic Other Mother, but one, nonetheless, who plays the traditional mothering role admirably. She cooks the food Coraline loves, provides toys and clothing, and wants to play with her daughter rather than prioritize a career” (Parsons, Sawers, and McNally 373). Unlike her real parents, these parents repeatedly say aloud that they love her. This may be her unconscious desire to play with her parents and to enjoy their attention, but as time goes by, Coraline finds it abnormal and would prefer to have her busy yet real parents back. With this realisation, Coraline begins to see the evil aspects in the Other Mother in the paracosm. The sinister attributes are revealed in the appearance of the Other Mother from the beginning, but it takes Coraline some time to acknowledge them.

Silvey and Mackeith specify three criteria that determine true paracosms:

We assumed that a “true paracosm” has three essential characteristics, as follows:

1. The child distinguishes clearly between what he has imagined and what really exists.
2. His interest in his private world is sustained over an appreciable length of time.
3. His private world is important to him, and matters in his life; and he really cares about it. (174)

The parallel universe in *Coraline* fulfills these conditions. The other world keeps Coraline’s attention and interest for a considerable time, allowing her to develop and understand it in many ways. She returns to play in it because it matters to her. Despite her immersion into the fantasy, she is conscious of the existence of her real home. She constantly makes comparisons between the events and people on either side of the door. She knows that she eventually has to return to her real home. This realisation is part of the reason why she refuses to accept the Other Mother’s offer to sew buttons on her eyes and make her stay with them.

The uncanny passageway that Coraline takes to enter the parallel world and the feeling she gets as she moves along the dark space act as foreshadowing of what lies on the other side. Coraline, despite her young age, can understand it:

Coraline took a deep breath and stepped into the darkness, where strange voices and distant winds howled. She became certain that there was something in the dark behind her: something very old and very slow. Her heart beat so hard and so loudly she was scared it would burst out of her chest. She closed her eyes against the dark. (Gaiman 55)

Once back in her real world, Coraline believes that she does not need to go back to the parallel world. Briefly, it appears that Coraline has stopped fantasising and has returned to reality. But the supposed kidnapping of her parents by the Other Mother reveals the lingering traces of her imagination. The remnants of the thrill she derived from the paracosm pulls her back into it, and Coraline re-enters the other world to rescue her parents. She reasons with herself that it is the right thing to do, and that is what brave people do. Coraline gets her idea of bravery from remembering that her father had gone back to the dump yard to retrieve his glasses, which had fallen as he fled a swarm of yellow wasps. “It wasn’t brave because he wasn’t scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again to get his glasses, when he knew the wasps were there, when he really was really scared. *That was brave*” (Gaiman 69, emphasis original).

Coraline once again sets out into the parallel world to rescue her parents. She gets help from a cat that seems to travel back and forth between the two worlds. She then meets the souls of children from different eras who have been confined in a broom cupboard. “The child ghosts that are locked away in this otherworld are former victims of this demon, also called the Beldam, who have been sucked dry of their love” (Becher 100). They urge Coraline to escape the

clutches of the Other Mother; and according to Becher, dramaturgically, they “serve as a warning; as victims, who have to be freed from the clutches of the villain. Afterwards, they serve as helpers” (100). After Coraline frees them, they aid her in her fight against the Other Mother. The resemblance to the Grimms’ fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* cannot be overlooked, especially when the Beldam traps children by tempting them and feeds off them.

Coraline is both a little girl who looks to her parents for inspiration and guidance and a mature girl who knows what she wants and likes. These attributes are exhibited together in both the paracosm and the real world. Keeling and Pollard, who have studied the motif of food and its significance in the novella, conclude:

Coraline is not moving forward into adolescent sexuality; the novel deals with her apprehension over living in a new house and attending a new school. Her response is to regress temporarily into the oral stage, not leap toward adulthood. Given how emotionally static and empty her new life is, food takes up an inordinate amount of psychic space in her mind: it is the day residue out of which she fantasizes the conflict, to reenact the ancient drama of the oral stage. (23)

Coraline continues to imagine the parallel world while, at the same time, she wants to return to reality. The things that seemed interesting in the paracosm in the beginning become less exciting and, in some cases, even disgusting and horrifying. Coraline’s encounters with the ghost children and the cat heighten her desire to close the door to the other world permanently. This desire to return to the real world is reflected in the fading details of the imaginary world. The house and the Other Mother remain the only seemingly solid objects in the paracosm, while the rest takes the form of mist. The appeal of the Other Mother and the possibilities of fun she offered become colourless, and Coraline begins to refer to the Other Mother as the Beldam.

Coraline strikes a deal with the Beldam and tries to trick her way back to her real world. She manages to free the three ghost children as well as her parents, who had been trapped behind mirrors. She even locks the door that opened to the parallel universe, but is unable to forget it completely. She dreams of the three ghost children, who urge her to get rid of the Beldam completely, as they believe that the Beldam will try to capture Coraline. The persistence of the paracosmic play and its lingering effects can be seen in the projection of Coraline’s dreams, which differ from pretend play or paracosms. As Taylor comments, although “dreams are private fantasies created by the children themselves, children do not have conscious control over their dreams. Unlike pretend play, dreams come unbidden to the mind and seem real while they are unfolding” (107). This sense of reality is seen in Coraline’s dreams too. She feels that her encounters with the Other Mother are not over yet, and she devises a plan to cut all the possible ways for the Beldam to reach her.

Coraline’s fading interest in the paracosm and desire to sever all connections with it are not uncommon. Children tend to find new things that seize their attention, and they eventually choose to stop their pretend play. Immersive play comes to an end when the child wants it to. Sometimes, children prefer to end things with a proper conclusion rather than leaving a half-developed story in their paracosm. Coraline, too, wants a proper end to her

parallel world. She tricks the Other Mother into falling into an abandoned well near her house and boards it up. With the satisfaction of defeating the Beldam, Coraline finds it much easier to sleep that night, despite it being the night before the beginning of the school year. “Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realised, there was nothing left about school that could scare her any more” (Gaiman 191–92).

Through her paracosmic play, Coraline, like many other children, learns to deal with her fears and gains confidence. All the elements of the parallel world, including the cobwebs and the Beldam, can be read as manifestations of Coraline’s hidden fears that she finds a way to defeat in the course of her play. However, it should be understood that these advantages of Coraline’s paracosmic play are hidden benefits. As Smith observes, children “do not do exercise play in order to develop their muscles, and they do not do pretend play in order to be more creative. These activities are done for enjoyment, for their own sake” (5). Coraline created the paracosm of the other world, with the other parents, the other neighbours, and the ghost children, just for the sake of it. The benefits, although enjoyed by the child, are recognised in isolation from the satisfaction of the play only by adults.

Studying young children’s paracosms can be remarkably insightful, as they are worlds that the children know they can control and where they are their most authentic selves without external pressure to act a specific way. Children’s behaviour inside their paracosms reveals how they mature. By analysing *Coraline* not just as a portal fantasy but also as one with psychological depth, and by viewing the other world as a paracosm created by the child protagonist, it is possible to derive a great deal of understanding about the character and her development. Within her paracosm, Coraline overcomes her fears, fulfils her unconscious desires, and develops her confidence. Her actions inside the paracosm reveal her mental growth, and her gradual transition from a child who lives in illusions to a young lady who can handle reality. Reading Coraline’s adventures in the parallel universe as a projection of her paracosmic play therefore gives insight into the character’s mindset.

Biography: Krishnapriya K.: A postgraduate in English Literature and author of a short story collection, *Tones of Silence*, Krishnapriya K., is now pursuing her Ph.D. under the guidance of Dr. Sumathy K. Swamy at PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. Sumathy K. Swamy: Dr. Swamy, Associate Professor in the Department of English, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, has guided over six Ph.D. and 27 M.Phil. scholars in her 30 years of experience. With specialisation in American and Commonwealth literature, she has presented and published research papers in various national and international conferences and seminars, in India and abroad.

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“Is there a Woman in this Space Opera?” A Gender Analysis of the Aliens of Orion

Dorothea Boshoff & Deirdre C. Byrne

Abstract: This article provides a textual analysis of *The Sentients of Orion*, a space-opera series by Australian feminist SF author Marianne de Pierres, with a view to investigating the series’s depiction of aliens as a reflection of contemporary views of human gender. This highlights the question of whether aliens are still used to reflect on the state of human gender roles now that society is moving past the simple black and white of the male/female binary. We undertake a qualitative exploration of selected aliens through the theoretical lenses of Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative and queer theory. By drawing on these interpretive paradigms, we suggest that de Pierres’s aliens both register and reflect a significant broadening of the gender spectrum.

Keywords: Marianne de Pierres, *The Sentients of Orion*, non-humanoid aliens, gender, feminist science fiction, queer science fiction

1. Introduction

Aliens are part of the stock-in-trade of SF. In fact, they have been so pervasively woven into its métier that the early pulp magazines, such as *Astounding* and *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, often featured stories about aliens, and the Bug-Eyed Monster was a regular cover image (Aylesworth 10). While SF does not always include aliens, they are a regular feature of the genre and symbolise otherness in all its many manifestations. As Helen Merrick argues, “Even if it is ultimately defused or recontained, the science-fictional alien is imminently disruptive – suggestive of the multiple sexualized and racialized binaries which inflect the category ‘human’, inevitably invoking the other, even as it may be registered as undesirable” (“Queering” 220–21). This article will examine how the depiction of aliens in feminist SF author Marianne de Pierres’s *The Sentients of Orion*

series serves as a mirror reflecting contemporary views of humanity and, specifically, what it means to be a gendered human being.

The binary structure of Western thinking divides the world into Self and Non-Self, or other. The other is different from the self by virtue of one or more features, including age, sex, gender, race, class, religion, ability, language, ethnicity, profession, and geographical location. The initial reaction to an encounter with the other is usually aversion, leading to fear and/or hostility, as seen in the global history of wars and conflicts. These emotions underpin the representation of others as aliens in SF as “unlovable, imperialist and technologically superior” (Oldman 55). Elaine L. Graham observes that aliens are the SF equivalent of monsters as “representatives of the outcast, the marginal, and the abject” (59): in short, all that is not desirable in the human psyche and socius. Alienness also refers to alienation, which forms the basis of othering. Being the othered, or being alienated, are “states of existence not only for imaginary ETs [extraterrestrials] but for all who have been excluded from dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native” (Kaye and Hunter 1).

In this article, we explore one sub-group of terrestrial aliens: women. Many of the points of our exploration apply to other marginalised groups – particularly to racially excluded others – but here we confine ourselves to the fortunes and depictions of women in SF. According to Robin Roberts’s extended discussion of pulp SF magazines in *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (1993), SF authors use the “figure of the female alien” to “affirm the essential otherness of Woman and the threat that she poses to patriarchal society” (9). We take our conceptual entry point from Roberts’s description of the female alien as often being “nonhumanoid; nevertheless, her specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males, suggests that this figure represents human women” (9).

The period covered by Roberts’s survey of pulp SF is roughly the 1950s and 1960s, which corresponds to second-wave feminism. Sarah Lefanu writes:

One of the major projects of the second wave of feminism is the investigation of gender and sexuality as social constructs, thus posing a challenge to notions of a natural law regulating feminine behaviour and an innate femaleness that describes and circumscribes “woman”. (4)

Second-wave feminism revolutionised accepted understandings of gender and sexuality, which goes some way towards explaining its wide-ranging influence on SF. Feminist theory has evolved and diversified considerably since the second wave, into areas such as Butler’s theory of performativity and queer theory. These approaches have shaped our thinking about de Pierres’s aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*.

As feminist theory and notions of social otherness have evolved, the aliens that have made their way into the pages of feminist SF have changed, too. Joanna Russ’s Whileawayans in “When it Changed” (1972), Sally Miller Gearhart’s Hill Women in *The Wanderground* (1975), and the Shorans in Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door into Ocean* (1986) are fairly standard-issue lesbian separatists, displaying the expected levels of anger and distrust towards men. These authors’ fictions are based on the assumption that men and women are

different species, although only Slonczewski explores imaginative ways in which the division can be bridged. By contrast, Ursula le Guin's androgynous Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) queer gender and sexuality in significant ways. The text contrasts not having a fixed biological sex with the arrangements on Earth, where masculinity and femininity are core aspects of identity. The Gethenian blend of masculinity and femininity – if Le Guin's stubborn attachment to the masculine pronoun as “generic” is overlooked – encourages the reader to think about what a binary understanding of gender leaves out.

Aliens in later feminist SF have further queered the gender binary. Octavia Butler's Oankali in her *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1987–1989) have three “sexes”: male, female, and ooloi. The Oankali wish to reproduce with human beings, but sexual union requires an ooloi to be present for conception to take place. The ooloi are an uber-sex, holding the power for life forms to reproduce. Sexual intercourse between humans and Oankali is distinctly queer, resembling human polyamory more than dyadic sexuality. Lilith Iyapo, the human being who first meets the Oankali, is black, thus introducing race into the queer dynamic of humans and Oankali.

Melissa Scott's SF, which appears in the *Paragons of Queer Speculative Fiction* series, conforms to Wendy Gay Pearson's description of “queer” as suggesting a “move not just towards a different conception of sexuality, but towards a different understanding of subjectivity and agency” (17). *The Shadow Man* (1995) is, in part, about the planet Hara, which is “alien” because of its insistence that there are only two sexes instead of the usual five. Regular mems, fems, and herms, who all have their own pronouns, are misgendered into the categories of male or female. In this way Scott models the painful struggles of many LGBTQIA+ people who have been forced to conform to a gender system that does not accommodate them. As this brief discussion shows, Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon's overview of the way aliens in feminist SF have developed (5–7) can be extended into more recent writing. De Pierres's representation of gender-diverse beings in *The Sentients of Orion* fits into the trends that Pearson, Hollinger, and Gordon identify.

The polymorphous shapes, sizes, genders, and sexualities of aliens in feminist SF emphasise Judith Butler's point that gender is not what one *is*, but what one *does*. As early as 1988 Butler asserted, prefiguring her exploration of the performative nature of gender in *Gender Trouble*: gender is an “identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). With this and other discussions of the performativity of gender, such as in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler shifted feminist theory away from the second wave's view of gender as constructed towards a more sophisticated understanding of the discursive and iterative processes that construct it. In a Butlerian reading of aliens in SF, they do not so much possess gender – indeed, there is no such “thing” as gender – as create it through their performances. Octavia Butler's ooloi behave in ways that resonate with both a masculinised drive to conquer and a feminised ease with managing human and alien emotion. Thus, they exemplify a “both/and” performance of gender rather than an “either/or” view. In our reading of de Pierres's aliens in *Sentients of Orion*, we are not overly concerned with the innate gender of any alien, but, in

a Butlerian vein, more with their actions and what these reveal of their relationship with gender norms and conventions.

The body has been the focus of a long tradition of feminist debate and theory, much of which questions the association of women with the body and men with the mind. This thought-tradition begs the question of what happens to gender and sexuality when the body is modified, enhanced, or even absent. Such jettisoning of the body recalls the posthumanist moment, discussed by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). For Hayles, the condition of the posthuman is characterised by three principles: posthumanism

privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, [it] considers consciousness ... as an epiphenomenon Third, the posthuman thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate (2–3)

An intimate part of being human, which is consistently represented in feminist SF, is sex and its social construction in gender systems. Being a man is no longer necessarily the measure of being human, as (white, heterosexual) masculinity has come under fire from feminist critiques of the so-called “generic” male in *mankind*. Humanity is no longer thought of as singular or monolithic, but as plural and diverse. In line with this trend, social understandings of gender have become more inclusive and much less binary. As images of the human change and become more inclusive of a gender continuum rather than a gender binary, the image of the alien in imaginative literature also shifts and develops, incorporating a growing awareness of gender as fluid and multiple. This is the shift we discern in *The Sentients of Orion*.

While the Golden Age of SF saw “the other”, the alien, posing a female threat to patriarchy (Roberts 9), we explore how Marianne de Pierres, writing in the early 21st century, portrays aliens. We probe the ways in which de Pierres has extended the scope of alien gender and sexuality, and we speculate that her aliens reflect on the portrayal of a broad spectrum of humanity. Finally, we argue that de Pierres’s aliens may effectively represent human gender roles in the 21st century. We focus on *The Sentients of Orion*, comprising four volumes: *Dark Space*, *Chaos Space*, *Mirror Space*, and *Transformation Space*. *The Sentients of Orion* has been referred to as a “blockbuster space opera” (Suciu). De Pierres is an established Australian author; all the novels in the series were shortlisted for Aurealis awards, a prominent Australian speculative fiction award established in 1995, while the final novel, *Transformation Space*, won. Her work is the subject of a chapter on “Cyber Punk and Post-Humanism” in *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film* (Weaver 159–85), and *The Sentients of Orion* has also served as the focus of a doctoral thesis (Boshoff). Before these academic texts, de Pierres’s writing, while popularly acclaimed, was largely ignored by the academy. (De Pierres has subsequently completed a PhD in Creative Writing.) Even within a populist genre such as SF, there is canon formation in the “process of inclusion or exclusion” of works deemed worthy of critical attention (Guillory 483). In our choice to focus on de Pierres’s work, we do not subscribe to the division between literary and popular fiction: in our view, de Pierres’s series

is possibly more influential by virtue of its large readership than many, more “highbrow” SF texts.

2. Plot Synopsis and Types of Aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*

The Sentients of Orion presents the reader with a dazzling plethora of aliens, which we will briefly describe here. We also provide an outline of key elements of the series’s plot to facilitate our discussion of the way gender is performed in the text.

Mira Fedor is a pilot who inherits from her father an innate gene that enables her to pilot a sentient biozoon – a race of sentient, biological spaceships – called *Insignia*. The Saqr, a water-based alien species, unexpectedly invade their planet Araldis. During Mira’s flight, she is raped by Trinder “Trin” Pellegrini, the Crown Prince, for the sake of the continuation of the royal line. Trin sends Mira away on *Insignia*,¹ on a mission to find help for Araldis elsewhere in their galaxy, while he leads the survivors of the attack to safety with the help of Djes, a half-alien girl. Mira travels with Jo-Jo Rasterovich, a space pilot, and Rast Randall, a female mercenary, but their mission is waylaid when Mira is captured and imprisoned by the Post-Species Extropists,² who experiment on her and her unborn child before she manages to escape with the help of one of her gaolers, a being called Wanton-poda, who, in the course of helping her to escape, loses its “body”.

As it turns out, with the possible exception of the protagonist Jo-Jo, every character in *The Sentients of Orion* is, strictly speaking, “non-human”. Jo-Jo’s ancestors originate from Earth, but taking into consideration that “his family hadn’t lived on that world, in that constellation, for a thousand years” (*Dark* 111), it can be concluded that there are no real humans in *The Sentients of Orion*. The closest are the “humanesques”, who possess humanoid bodies and recognisably human social structures. But, as Isiah Lavender III writes, “skin color matters in our visions of the future,” and the consciousness of repetitions of the color line can be “acquired only by exploring the possible worlds of SF and lifting blacks, indigenous peoples, and Latinos out from the background of this historically white genre” (3–4). Lavender’s mention of Latinos resonates with de Pierres’s main characters Mira and Trin, who are also Latinos. Their ethnic names and vivid red skins set them apart and, by implication, as inferior to the default race, which is (as we know) white. Apart from their red colour, the alienness of the Latino race is depicted through their method of procreation, in which women have absolutely no agency (other than carrying the baby) and men are fully in control of the procreative process. If not for their colouring and their method of procreation, the humanesque characters could be considered human. It is interesting (and probably not a coincidence) that these very features – the colour red and women’s lack of choice in procreation – are elements used by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *A Princess of Mars* to defamiliarise both the context and the inhabitants of his

¹ De Pierres uses italics throughout the series to refer to *Insignia*.

² A group of aliens who have, through genetic engineering, developed beyond species, gender or body.

imaginary Martian world. For the purposes of this discussion, though, we will consider the red-skinned humanesques in Orion as human.

Several non-human aliens remain in Orion, and their sheer vertiginous diversity, as well as their ongoing struggles for dominance, both reflect and refract the importance of race in SF (cf. Lavender). These include the invading, insect-like Saqr; the biozoon spaceships; Sole, the Entity known as God; Nova, Mira’s “daughter”; Djeserit Ionil, the half-breed consort of the crown prince; and the genetically engineered and highly evolved Post-Species Extropists. We provide brief notes about the gender and gender implications of each type of alien below, as they each carry intriguing gender resonances. The sheer variety of gender permutations among the aliens implies a deliberate attempt by de Pierres to highlight the shortcomings of a binary approach to gender.

The “alien invasion trope” (Attebery 54) is central to the manner in which the Saqr invade Araldis and, in the process, catalyse the events of *The Sentients of Orion*. They are insect-like, “glistening, carapaced” creatures with “six fore-claws and two hind claws” (*Dark* 215). The Saqr are too primitive to have developed a sex or gender. They are notably neither gender-neutral nor have they evolved beyond gender – they are simply lacking in the biological and social qualities that give rise to gender. The Saqr attack with slashing claws, but mostly with “thin, needle-like stylets” protruding from their mouths (*Dark* 216). In this they are strongly reminiscent of A. A. Attanasio’s “zötlis” (54), which puncture human brains with a “feeder tube” intending to cause pain or, in the case of the Saqr, death. They are depicted as non-sentient creatures, and are referred to using the gender-neutral pronoun “it”. Survivors of the attack find that the “[b]astards don’t even need each other to spawn” (*Transformation* 210). The Saqr were initially harmless water creatures, “Tardigrada giantus ... *relative of anthropods*”, but have been genetically altered “*to survive for decades in a dry state*” (168, original emphasis), which made them aggressive. The genetic alteration allows them to be active outside water, thus able to wreak destruction and death on the desert planet Araldis. Water, the natural habitat of the Saqr, is a symbol of the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 345); thus, de Pierres’s linkage of the Saqr’s loss of dependency on water with their lack of gender consideration and sexual procreation is pertinent, as it presents a catastrophic picture of a world that rejects the value of women and the values that have conventionally been coded as feminine: respect, nurturing, and kindness.

Another alien group outside the established gender binary of current society is the biozoon pod, a species of sentient spaceship of no specified gender. While biozoons “do not have a clear distinction between male and female”, they are not “hermaphrodites” either, needing “several of their own kind to reproduce. Two are not enough” (*Chaos* 51). The leader of the biozoon pod is the “Omniarch”, a title that stresses the genderless state of the biozoons, a highly developed species. The biozoons, like Doris Lessing’s highly evolved and androgynous Canopeans, consider that “having emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another ... is normal on the more backward planets” (*Chaos* 142). Through *Insignia*, the biozoons echo the implication that clinging to male/female gender designations stands between humanesques and further evolution (*Mirror* 301). *Insignia* describes biozoon sexuality as “*diverse and subtle ... I need several of my own kind to reproduce. It is our way of keeping*

our species strong. Unlike you who have genetically limited yourselves to a single choice” (Chaos 19, original emphasis). By introducing this alien view of intimacy, de Pierres suggests that human perceptions of gender and sexuality might be weak and limiting. When humanesques try to come to grips with biozoon gender, they mostly try to assign either male or female gender to them, leaving no room for gender indeterminacy (51). Others, like Rast and the mercenaries, not understanding *Insignia* in terms of sex, gender, or sexuality, fall back on making crude jokes (51), which is an uncomfortable parallel to modern-day reality.

Sole, also known as “the Entity” or god, is only a presence: it has no body, gender, or compassion. When the Extropist attacks start, Sole disappears (*Transformation* 50). It does so without bothering to “warn the tyros of the danger. Whatever the nature of its sentience, compassion surely did not feature” (133). Tekton has been “afforded a glimpse into the Entity’s mysteries, and he’d not seen anything resembling compassion among the terrifying dizzying universe of knowledge and experiences he’d been plunged into” (195). Sole’s lack of caring is further evident in the painful manner it chooses to communicate with humanesques. Mira feels its presence enter her “mind like a shaft rammed along her backbone, a painful, stiffening jolt and a sense of invasion” (387). The description has overtones of rape, as if de Pierres places Sole as masculine aggressor against Mira’s feminine precarity. If emotional intimacy is based on affective warmth, closeness, and communication, it is doubtful that intimacy can exist between Sole and any other being in the series. Apart from the fact that their very contact is painful to Mira, there is a depth of miscommunication between them. What Sole sees as “*little problems, little things, little one*” is to Mira a “*cruel game*” played by the Entity (387, original emphasis). De Pierres uses this incident to point out the depth of miscommunication between genders, but also to highlight the conflict between gender fluidity and adherence to static gender norms. Sole, whose very name connotes singularity and one-dimensionality, is a caricature of conventional views of the deity as only masculine, lacking any form of “feminine” tenderness or concern for others.

Mira’s biological “daughter” Nova also poses a complex, queer challenge to the gender binary. Jo-Jo points out to Sole that the Post-Species Extropists’ experiments have caused “some changes” to Nova’s metabolism and that she is “not entirely” humanesque (*Mirror* 202). In spite of this, Mira insists on projecting humanesque qualities onto Nova (203), such as using the feminine pronoun and referring to Nova as her “daughter”. Even though Nova has no particular gender, being born “with no man’s tackle” (79) and without “reproductive organs of either sex” (148), even *Insignia* assigns her the pronoun “she” to help Mira negotiate the unfamiliar gender landscape (155). The use of “she” as Nova’s pronoun prefigures the contemporary trend of respecting pronoun choice as a signal of the individual’s gender affinity, irrespective of bodily configuration.

Baby Nova easily enters the “mind meld” between Mira and *Insignia* (*Transformation* 182) and acts as the deciding factor, “mediating” between Mira and *Insignia*, and later with Sole (200). This could simply be Nova’s nature, or the child could be performing what is expected of “her” dubiously assigned gender: the role of peacemaker. If Nova takes on this feminine characteristic, it is by choice, not by default, as “she” actively rejects other

stereotypically female traits, such as being in need of care (254), and “she” is beyond being assigned a specific gender (148–54).

In Italian, on which de Pierres’s Latino language is mostly modelled, Nova means “new”. Nova is not only a new being heralding a new beginning after the trauma of Mira’s rape; the child is also a new type of humanesque and embodies gender innovation. By ascribing gender-neutrality to Nova, who is benign (in contrast to the destructive Post-Species Extropists and the vindictive Sole), de Pierres portrays the positive aspects of gender fluidity as opposed to highlighting the threat it holds. This, too, is new. Finally, Nova represents hybridity as a new means to address the lack engendered by alienation (Kaye and Hunter 7).

The sheer range of differently gendered species supports our argument that de Pierres is deliberately attempting to show alternatives to binary models of self/other, human/alien. In order to explore in greater depth how de Pierres’s depiction of aliens reflect contemporary views of human gender, we have chosen to undertake an in-depth analysis of the two alien characters who occupy opposite poles on the continuum of embodied and disembodied gender: Djeserit Ionil (“Djes”) and the Post-Species Extropists. These two aliens hold particular resonances for our understanding of what it means to be human and SF’s capacity to interrogate gender through representing aliens.

3. Djeserit Ionil: Woman-Becoming-Water

All the non-humanesque aliens in *The Sentients of Orion* are, with one exception, gender-neutral or “evolved” beyond gender. Djes is racially mulatto – half alien and half humanesque – and therefore seen as inferior by both aliens and humanesques. She is also, as a heterosexual female, the only alien in *The Sentients of Orion* who is pointedly assigned a sex, sexuality, and gender. De Pierres’s deliberate coding of Djes in this manner is a good starting point, therefore, for examining the portrayal of gendered alienness in the series.

For Roberts, an alien is gendered as female by its otherness, regardless of its biology. As previously quoted, Roberts describes the (female) alien as often being “nonhumanoid; nevertheless, her specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males, suggests that this figure represents human women” (9). All these traits, which allude to conventional constructions of femininity, are present in Djes, with whom the Crown Prince, Trin, has an illicit and abusive sexual relationship. Another trait common to alien females, according to Wendy Pearson, is the use of magic and psychic abilities (183), and while Djes shows no sign of telepathy or any other magical power, she is a water creature, symbolic of the unconscious and the intuitive, which are associated with the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 123). These powers, along with the ability to reproduce, are a direct threat to male dominance (Roberts 9). De Pierres thus specifically codes Djes as a traditional female alien and, as such, a threat to patriarchy.

Djes is initially presented as a “ragazza”, a child, but Trin’s perception of her is completely sexual. She is not depicted in the way a child would be, but in the way a woman would be (*Dark* 132), which further elucidates the role Djes is to play, as a child-woman and source of irresistible sexual fascination to the

young humanesque prince. As her character develops, Djes grows into her “*aqua*” species, becoming more water creature and more alien (133, original emphasis). She starts identifying more with the sea creatures than with the humanesque survivors (*Chaos* 362; *Mirror* 43). Trin’s “losing her to the sea” (*Chaos* 363) through her becoming more and more a water creature means she is growing in confidence in her sexuality. Djes’s femininity is signalled by her affinity with water, the element that symbolises the removal or dissolution of boundaries. As she matures, her growing agency in regard to her sexuality, rather than her alienness, becomes more and more threatening to Trin (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 123).

Djes completes her transformation from an abandoned child into a woman with a say in her own destiny, and that of others, when, after learning that Trin raped Mira, “in an oddly final gesture, she scooped water in her hands and splashed it over her face” (*Transformation* 370). Women’s bodies are often associated with liquids: blood, milk, and tears (Kristeva 143). Their psyche is often seen as fluid and watery (Byrne 2). In splashing water over her face, Djes acknowledges the importance of her femininity and takes ownership of it, but not as a force that will swallow her in an ocean of undifferentiation. The water she splashes over her face helps to clear her vision and to see Trin for what he is: a tyrant, a rapist, and a coward. To evoke another cultural archetype, her prince is an unenchanted and unenchanted frog.

After splashing water over her face, Djes leaves Trin (*Transformation* 375). In this act, she is more agential than reactive. She rejects Trin, but also takes up the mantle of leadership and becomes responsible for the future of the majority of the survivors (374). Her actions are conventionally feminine in that she becomes a nurturing, protective, maternal leader. Ultimately, de Pierres portrays Djes fully embracing her feminine qualities. These include, as second-wave feminists noted, the power to reject abusive men. In so doing, Djes brings down the patriarchal system to which Trin is heir. In this, Djes, as the only female alien in *The Sentients of Orion*, powerfully enacts Roberts’s posited threat to patriarchy (9).

4. The Post-Species Extropists

In direct contrast to this positioning of the female alien, de Pierres presents the Extropists, or Post-Species Extropists: further removed from human than the red-skinned humanesques or the accessible, only half-alien Djes, and completely removed from any human quality in their physical appearances and their gender representations. Extropy is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (620) as the “pseudoscientific principle that life will expand indefinitely and in an orderly, progressive way throughout the entire universe by the means of human intelligence and technology”. The Post-Species Extropists in *The Sentients of Orion* are a technologically advanced “multi-species group that opposes” the belief in evolution as a “natural process that should not be interfered with” (*Chaos* 237).

The most striking feature of the Post-Species Extropists is that they have separated their selfhood from having bodies and, like the body-switching characters in *Schild’s Ladder* (Egan 3), occupy others’ bodies. In this way, they enact what Hollinger refers to as the “neo-Cartesian future” (272). Their name

signifies a nod to the term “PostHuman” even as it gestures towards their belief that they are beyond possessing a species. According to them, they are “destined to control and shape their own evolution” using extreme measures of “genetic manipulation” (*Chaos* 237). The evolution of their minds is prioritised over the needs or interests of their host bodies. In this way, they enact the phallocentric privileging of cognition over embodiment. Their habit of invading others’ bodies recalls Bruce Sterling’s two central themes of cyberpunk:³

The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self.
(xiii)

Sterling’s discussion has striking affinities with Hayles’s description of posthumanism as privileging information over corporeality and viewing bodies as mere prostheses, which are also features of de Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists’ behaviour. For them, consciousness is the supreme value.

As the Post-Species Extropists do not have bodies, they do not possess sex or gender. They are not androgynous; neither are they transgender, despite the fact that they swap bodies and (presumably) gender without any difficulty. However, their agender status is even more disruptive of conventional gender norms than their being transgender would have been: like Susan Stryker’s description of transgender theory, they possess a “tremendous utility, both political and theoretical, in the new concept of an antiessentialist, postidentitarian, strategically fluid ‘queerness’” (213). The fact that they perform conventional masculinity in their domineering and threatening actions towards others (*Chaos* 339, 369, 370) strengthens de Pierres’s choice to queer the representation of her most “alien” aliens.

The Post-Species Extropists represent the ultimate “transhumanist vision” in their mastery of “mind uploading” (Hook 2517; cf. More 1998). Kim Toffoletti perceives this “tension between the human and technological [as] indicative of the posthuman”, arguing that it “disrupts traditional understandings of selfhood, identity, the body and reality” (4). Gender is a crucial part of a traditional understanding of identity, and being without a fixed body troubles the ascription of gender. The Post-Species Extropists align with what Joan Haran refers to as an “extreme version of Cartesian dualism” (253). Haran further points out the difficulties that disembodiment might pose for feminist theorists, as it challenges the concepts of “woman” and of “body”: a grasp of both these concepts and of their entanglement is integral to feminism (254). A key aspect brought to the fore by posthumanism (and by de Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists) is a strong “anxiety about boundaries”, including procreative and gender boundaries. The “revolutionary potential of cybernetics to reconfigure bodies” brings with it the threat, if uncontained, to the “autonomy of the (male) liberal subject” (Hayles 113). While retaining the

³ Cyberpunk was, for several decades, a highly masculinist subgenre. Nevertheless, women authors such as Pat Cadigan, Mary Rosenblum, and Laura Mixon have made powerful inroads into the genre. Significantly, the gender and sexuality presented in these new authors’ writing are more queer than traditionally dyadic: for example, Allie in Cadigan’s *Mindplayers* has an ambiguously gendered name, while Rosenblum’s *Chimera* contains explicit homoeroticism.

element of the female alien as threatening to masculinity, the Post-Species Extropists further represent the threat of gender fluidity to the gender binary prescribed by patriarchy. The Post-Species Extropists can therefore be said to “queer the pitch” (Abraham 42) of embodied gender and, indeed, embodiment.

The “corporeal part of the Extropists takes many different forms” (*Chaos* 339). Toffoletti poses the question of whether “posthuman, post-gender images, like queer, bisexual and transgender bodies” can engender a “move beyond a dialectical way of thinking about, not only gender, but other social categories of difference” (82), a question which can be applied directly to the Extropists. While the texts do not elaborate about Post-Species Extropists’ reproduction, the reader may well question whether they change gender as they change bodies. Likewise, does the body they assume change its gender performance in line with that of the occupying Post-Species Extropist, or does the body they assume become gender-neutral in reflection of the occupier? The existence of beings without bodies prods the reader towards asking questions about a “different understanding of subjectivity and agency” (Pearson “Alien Cryptographies” 17).

Throughout Mira’s captivity, de Pierres personalises the impersonal aspects of the Post-Species Extropists by creating a close relationship between Mira and her Extropist gaoler, Wanton-poda, thus lessening the threat they pose to other species. Mira and Wanton-poda manage to escape (*Mirror* 105), but Wanton-poda loses its “host” body “poda” and becomes Wanton only, thereby further “embodying” questions regarding the role of the body in consciousness. The Post-Species Extropists’ post-body state is intriguing for feminist embodiment theory. What remains when the body disappears? How transient is the influence of society on the body if consciousness can exist without it? Would such consciousness still possess a gender/genders? Hollinger raises similar questions:

What might be in store for the human body as it becomes increasingly vulnerable to technological intervention and transformation? What might be its future as virtual experiences become increasingly accessible and increasingly difficult to distinguish from embodied ones? (268)

If disembodiment is one of humanity’s futures, is this not dangerously close to (androcentric) Cartesianism (Hayles 19), where a body is merely a vehicle for consciousness (Haran 253)? From this position “it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important, more essential than material forms” (Hayles 19) rather than seeing the body as crucial to the human experience, as most feminists do (Grosz 14; Bordo; Bartky; Butler; Young).

The Post-Species Extropists are much more technologically advanced than the other beings in *The Sentients of Orion*. In our society, technological advances have already affected human health, age, physical performance, and reproductive issues and, through gender-affirming surgery, have enabled transgender individuals to live in a way that biologically expresses their preferred gender. Hollinger refers to a tendency among feminists to disavow “technoscience” because of their “conventional identification with nature and the body” (274), but other feminists, such as Haraway, no longer see this kind of technological advancement of bodies (and maybe gender choices) as optional (35). We agree with Haraway that technology has become an inescapable part

of human *being* and becoming, although we realise that not all humans subscribe to this view. De Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists imply that, with the aid of technology, there could be a viable post-gender future for sentient beings.

5. Conclusion

There is a clear parallel between the status of aliens in SF and marginalised groups such as women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ people in consensus society. In Golden Age SF, these groups were consistently rendered inferior to the prototypical white (cisgendered) heterosexual man (Wolmark 3; Pearson “[Re]Reading” 183). Djes, as the only female alien in *The Sentients of Orion* series, and the Post-Species Extropists address different aspects of the development of aliens as feminised and sexualised others. Djes represents the threat of the female other to the patriarchal status quo. In her Post-Species Extropists, de Pierres’s aliens call the very meaning of humanity into question. In using these aliens to gesture towards gender-fluid identities and the possible threat they hold for the binary status quo, she also holds forth the tantalising possibility of gender hybridity and a post-gender humanity. Butler’s analysis of gender usurpation aptly describes the situation of many of de Pierres’s aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*: the “language of usurpation suggests a participation in the very categories from which s/he feels inevitably distanced, suggesting also the denaturalized and fluid possibilities of such categories once they are no longer linked causally or expressively to the presumed fixity of sex” (*Gender* 128). Instead of mere replication, de Pierres uses the traditional alien challenge to the patriarchy to question the very meaning of the male/female binary, and, by implication, the meaning of being human. If female aliens are representative of the threat women pose to patriarchy, as Roberts argues (9), the non-gendered aliens of *The Sentients of Orion* are representative of the threat that gender incoherence (Butler, *Bodies* 143–49) and gender fluidity hold for the heteronormative binary status quo.

Biographies: Dorothea Boshoff is a lecturer in English at the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa. Her research interests include speculative fiction, science fiction, feminist approaches to literature, as well as creative writing. Her most recent publication is “Becoming Alien(ated): A case study examining intimacy and loneliness in selected works by Marianne de Pierres”, *Dedalus – Portuguese Journal of Comparative Literature*, forthcoming.

Deirdre C. Byrne is a full professor of English Studies at the University of South Africa. She is one of the Co-Editors of the academic journal *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*. Her research interests include the writing of Ursula K. Le Guin, feminist approaches to literature, speculative fiction, and South African women’s poetry. Her most recent publication is *Entanglements and Weavings: Diffractive Approaches to Gender and Love*, published by Brill in 2021.

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A Conversation on AI, Science Fiction, and Work¹

Jerry Määttä, Daniel Bodén & Michael Godhe

1. Introduction

Karl-Heinz Steinmüller once remarked that SF “has become a unique medium for discussing science and technology, their prospects and hazards, and more generally their social and cultural impacts” (339). In this sense, SF as a genre forms a bridge between science/technology and the public, and is a vital aspect of public engagement with issues arising from scientific development. One such technological subject today is the development of artificial intelligence (AI) research.

At the same time, there is a growing concern that representations of AI in recent SF and popular media are misleading (Goode; Graeber). In this article, ethnologist Daniel Bodén and cultural studies researcher Michael Godhe discuss AI in the light of the future of work with Jerry Määttä, one of the foremost SF scholars in Scandinavia.

2. Some Themes in the Cultural Production of Futures

Michael Godhe (MG): There is an immense debate today on the future of the labour market and how the development in robotics, chiefly in AI, is going to transform society and our interpersonal relations (see, for example, Bodén and Godhe). How is this depicted in the SF genre?

Jerry Määttä (JM): This has been a common subject in popular culture in recent years, especially in SF, but the theme goes a long way back. Usually Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is

¹ This is an abbreviated and revised version of Määttä, Jerry et al. “Ett samtal om AI och science fiction”, in Bodén & Godhe.

mentioned as a starting point, as the novel deals with an artificial life form rebelling against its creator, Victor Frankenstein, a scientist who doesn't take responsibility for his creation. This trope or theme is still recurring in SF today, called the Frankenstein complex (Beauchamp). But perhaps representations of bodiless AI and big computer systems are becoming more common in the genre.

There are, of course, also other AI themes, such as AI functioning as mundane assistants. These are either independent or part of a symbiosis with human consciousness – a cyborg consciousness – and these SF stories often discuss the impact of cybernetic organisms (cyborgs) and AI on society, our social relations, and how we interact with technology. In a way, perhaps we're already there with our smart phones, social media, algorithms, and so on, even if we don't yet have strong or general AI transcending the limits of their programmes and acting independently.

So, rebellion against their human makers is one theme, and AI as assistants or symbionts another. But there are also narratives where AIs are in full control and create new and different civilisations. In these cases, humanity has often been reduced to the role of pets and children to the AI, bereft of any vital function in society.

MG: If we continue with the theme that humanity has become redundant, a common discussion concerns the nature of work and leisure in the future. What is SFs relation to questions on work?

JM: It is important to remember that SF is often produced, published, and distributed by commercial enterprises with expectations of returns on investments. Consequently, the scope of stories produced is pretty narrow, especially in film, since they often have the broad public in mind. The labour market is not a particularly hot topic, even if representations of how work is organised in the future sometimes occur in SF novels, since they are not tied to the same large economic interests as television series or films. But even in commercial SF productions there are often some thoughts in the background concerning the organisation of future labour markets with AI and automation.

The most famous example is perhaps the *Star Trek* franchise. When they produced *Star Trek: The Original Series* in the 1960s, the Federation (only implied in the series) seemed to have abolished all monetary systems. The second-run incarnation *The Next Generation* (1987–1994) introduced the replicator. Thanks to cheap and reliable energy sources, anything could be produced basically out of thin air. On the other hand, *Star Trek* is obviously not a story about AIs governing Earth and humanity. It is rather a depiction of a post-scarcity society, fulfilling its citizens' every basic material need.

In *The Next Generation*, we get to know the android Data, who tries to transcend his basic programming to become as human-like as possible. This is a very idealistic view of humanity as the ultimate goal for machine development, and perhaps not that valid among many thinkers today. It would rather seem that, if a strong AI would ever emerge, humanity is only a short stage that the AI will rapidly transcend. But above and beyond Data there are also spaceship computers in *Star Trek* as well as in other SF, such as Mother in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). These are examples of control systems with a weak or narrow AI.

3. The Future of Work in Science Fiction

Daniel Bodén (DB): The representations of AI you are describing are based on very strong imagery. At the same time, it seems that news media representations of the impact of technology and science on society are also inspired by strong imagery from SF. What is your view on this? Do you see any parallels between SF and news media coverage of AI and other technologies?

JM: Indeed! Not only AI, but also common media coverage of the climate crisis, terrorism, drones, surveillance, algorithms, to name only a few phenomena that are SF clichés. In this sense, we are really living in a 20th-century SF cocktail, even if few, if any, SF novels have come close to describing the situation in the world today. If we could send back a current issue of a newspaper three decades in time, people reading it would probably be very surprised about how some developments have become momentous issues for the world, such as the climate crisis and AI. Two years ago, newspapers reported on the humanoid robot Fedor on his way to docking with the International Space Station – and the robot seemed to be considered part of the crew! These kinds of reports really give you a future-shock, given the sensationalist media logic.

Plenty of media coverage on AI shows pictures of the killer robot from *The Terminator* franchise, a conception of the worst-case scenario: Skynet taking control and trying to exterminate humanity. This is not very popular among AI researchers, who think that this is a way too simplified and sensationalist representation of a future world with robots. At the same time, this is a narrative that has been present since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (1921) – the uprising of robots and the loss of control when our artificial offspring revolt. The abstract thematic in these stories, however, is not simplified, I would say: we lose control over something and suddenly our imagined freedom is lost since the system is governed by something else.

MG: Another question concerns the reorganisation of society and the equal distribution of wealth and goods. If this is possible, questions concerning *absolute* “leisure” arises, something that SF could pose. Iain M. Banks's *The Culture* series (1987–2012) is one example. And there are also novels depicting humanity on the brink of boredom, such as the *Thousand Culture* tetralogy by John Barnes (1992–2006). Humans have become potentially immortal; they don't have to work for their living; and they can do almost anything they wish. But I think there is lot to be desired here (cf. Godhe 2018). Is the SF genre missing out here when it comes to “post-scarcity” and imagining the organisation of work in the future?

JM: Well, people being bored or even committing suicide because they are bereft of meaning in their lives, or fulfilling themselves by becoming mediocre artists and so on, are not especially good stuff for making exciting stories. There is indeed a bourgeois idea that if we are not compelled to work, we can fulfil ourselves by reading or writing books, becoming musicians, or making art. There are people, of course, who would long for such an existence, but many people would probably rather just be gaming or taking drugs. If we somehow, someday, achieve a post-scarcity economy, many communities with different interests would most likely emerge, but this is seldom depicted in the SF genre. One exception is perhaps *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and

Captain Picard on the starship Enterprise: When he retires, he returns to be a winegrower. At least until the recent sequels.

In fact, *Star Trek* episodes and films are almost always taking place outside, or on the fringes of, the utopia, and very rarely in the utopia itself, because it is not very exciting to describe a perfect society. The same goes for Iain M. Banks's *The Culture*, where humans are working and finding meaning in life because they are involved in conflicts – a scenario much more commercially viable, but also more interesting to read about. This takes place in an anarchistic or extreme liberal utopia which is also in conflict with other civilisations and other forms of societies.

4. The Social Function of the SF Genre

DB: We have been discussing SF in media, news coverage, and other contexts. What is the significance of this strong SF imagery in the news media? How does it affect the public understanding of the issues raised?

JM: This is really a big and contested question. When SF emerged as a modern genre in the pulp-magazine market in the US in the 1920s, Hugo Gernsback explicitly wanted the readers of his creation *Amazing Stories* to be influenced and inspired by SF stories. Gernsback was an inventor and, among other things, imported radio parts from Europe. He had an interest in how young boys dealt with electronics. His idea was to inspire future inventions and to spread technological and scientific knowledge among his American readers, especially boys and young men. However, while some were surely inspired, it turned out many of the enthusiasts didn't want to become scientists, but rather SF writers!

At the same time there are numerous anecdotes about SF as a source of inspiration in interviews with people ranging from rocket scientists and AI researchers to entrepreneurs. Look at Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, for example: it is obvious that they have been affected by the SF genre, maybe even computer games and roleplaying games. So, there is an actual influence from SF, and even if the genre seldom invents the future, it can inspire inventions, and broaden people's minds and visions. Some would claim that space travel generally, with satellites and rocket ships, comes from the SF genre, while others would also mention the internet or television. Anyway, virtual reality and cyberspace are definitely inspired by SF, even if William Gibson's cyberspace doesn't resemble today's VR technologies all that much. Maybe Gibson was inspired by arcade games when he wrote *Neuromancer* (1984), or the Disney motion picture *Tron* (1982)?

There is a long list of things that people claim to have been invented in SF, but forecasting is not the primary purpose with the genre, I would say, but rather to test different ideas. In fact, the new field of *design fiction* is, in a way, SF without plot, where SF genre conventions are used to investigate how technology is perceived on an emotional and social level in society. They often create scenarios depicting how technology can be experienced in mundane situations. From the perspective of literary studies, these are quite boring stories – but from a history of technology or sociology of technology perspective, they become much more interesting!

But to try to answer your question: caveats asides, how the genre represents space travel, AI, or other phenomena affects people's hopes, fears, and notions of the future. SF is no doubt a substantial part of the futures industry even if many scientists or even popular science writers do not take it seriously. Some of them perhaps perceive the genre as a threat, and therefore position themselves clearly against SF. It is not uncommon to hear or read scientists saying, "It might sound like science fiction, but this is for real," indirectly showing the scientists' own importance, since the genre has had a bad reputation as extravagant, popular, and commercial culture. The physician and AI expert Max Tegmark, for example, seems to dissociate himself from SF, and the Swedish astronaut Christer Fuglesang is doing the same when it comes to space research. Sometimes this can be a little bit silly, since a lot of AI and space research has indeed been inspired by SF. One of the founding fathers of space flight, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, started his work by imitating Jules Verne!

MG: And what is really interesting here is that Max Tegmark sometimes is more SF than the genre itself.

JM: Yes, *Life 3.0* (Tegmark) is very close to some SF speculations, but also really good SF, I would say! Contemporary science and technology are extrapolated into the future, and even if there is no plot, he sketches some interesting scenarios in just a few pages.

DB: These visions of the future are often recalled by media reports on technological development, where SF becomes a way of conceptualising technology and making extrapolations of technological development intelligible for the prospective recipients. How do you think the average citizen comprehends these SF scenarios when they are canalised through popular news media?

JM: If one is to talk about SF having a large public impact, it is probably not SF literature that should be discussed in the first place, as it is still a rather narrow niche, even within the Anglophone world. And for the few writers who do reach a larger audience, AI issues are rarely at the centre — if you think of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, for example (Collins 2008–2010), it is more about an extreme class society. What ordinary people, nonaficionados, encounter are more often films and TV series, where SF is big even in countries like Sweden. And there, AI issues often concern fear of losing control or being cheated by the machine, as in *Ex Machina* (2014), *The Terminator* (1984), or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In Kubrick's film in particular, the machine is cold and difficult to comprehend. It is just a red, shiny eye that suddenly begins to behave irrationally, unethically, or strangely unpredictably from a human perspective. These are the kinds of depictions we often encounter in movies and TV series.

MG: Can this be turned into an automation issue? The debate about automation is often about the fear of losing one's job and becoming redundant. In reality, it may be automated machines we are talking about, but in SF it is the big AGIs; that is, systems that transcend their programming and think outside themselves. Can you see any relationship between these two scenarios? That instead of making an SF film about workers who are outcompeted by robots, they take it to a much higher level: they wipe us out. Can there be a connection there?

JM: Well, obviously sensational Hollywood films sell more tickets, Blu-rays, or what have you. Abolishing workers makes me think of the film *I, Robot* (2004), which really had very little to do with Isaac Asimov's short stories when

they wrote the script. But in it, the robots are still supposed to take over some physical labour. They are on the streets and they are there as a form of second-class citizens, who then revolt with the help of a supercomputer.

DB: I find it interesting what happens when you draw parallels between the reality that people experience and what is portrayed in these scenarios. For instance, if we go back to Karel Čapek and Rossum's Universal Robots, one might think that the scenario with robots revolting and taking control of the world in some way reflects a specific part in the history of industrialisation – a world where people find themselves in a factory regime where they are subordinated to the authority of the machine system. What is your take on that?

JM: Robots and AI have, to a very large extent, been metaphors for other things in the SF genre. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is perhaps about offspring in general – that is, if you don't take care of and nurture a child, it revolts and becomes a monster.

MG: Frankenstein's monster has also been interpreted as a metaphor for a fear of a working-class revolt (cf. Montag).

JM: In Karel Čapek's example, it is obvious that one can interpret it as a revolt of the working class – and similarly if one watches a Swedish TV series such as *Äkta människor* (*Real Humans*; 2012–2013). That one may not be so much about the working class itself, but rather about immigration and the fear that others will take our jobs. There is a very clear parallel in the party that is created against the "hubots", as the artificial intelligences are called in the TV series. It may not really be so much about hubots, but about the great political issues of our time. This is what SF does when it is at its best, I think, in that it both estranges trends in our time and questions what such developments can lead to. *Äkta människor* has also received international attention. There is a British remake called *Humans* (2015–2018), but also a kind of Russian remake called *Better Than Us* (*Lushshe, chem lyudi*; 2018–2019).

DB: It is obvious that the form of anticipation that SF entails raises a lot of thoughts in people. Would you then say that SF has subversive capacities?

JM: It depends a bit on how you look at AI development. If one thinks that AI is and will be the best thing that has happened to humanity, then the insistence of the SF genre that AI can be dangerous can be seen as a subversive thorn in the side. But a certain scepticism towards AI is probably more widespread, and a large part of the SF genre is perhaps more in line with the public's fears. There is also something deeply conservative and problematic in the celebration of the liberal, Western, humanist, and independent white man that characterises much commercially successful SF. So, it is perhaps in the narrower SF literature above all that one can seriously question the notion of humanity as the crown, or end point, of creation, and to a much lesser extent in SF films or TV series. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) did, admittedly, ask those kinds of questions and scratched the surface a bit when it comes to blurring the line between human and machine. But SF literature probably sides with the machine more often than films and TV series do. In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), it is quite clear that humans are deceived in the end, and that AI is seen as something eerie.

There is a similar scenario in Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), where the AI leaves the main character for other AIs. They are more fun than being with people. This is an idea from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where the plot partly revolves around the Turing Police, checking so that no one creates an AI.

What happens when the powerful AI is created in the end is that he, she, or it is only interested in contacting other AIs on other planets. Humans become completely uninteresting.

MG: There have been lots of movies about AI released the last decade. The very strange movie *Zoe* (2018) is about a company that manufactures androids called synthetics, to become ideal partners to suit different people's needs as determined through computer tests. A female AI who works at the company really falls in love with her creator, with whom she also works. The film ends with them becoming a couple. Is this increasing interest in AI just a temporary trend or will we continue to discuss these issues in five or ten years?

JM: The interesting thing is that the AI question has entered "literary", or at least "middle-brow", culture now, with Ian McEwan's latest novel *Machines Like Me* (2019), which has been heavily criticised by SF readers for reinventing the wheel. But perhaps he is spreading these questions and themes to a non-SF-reading public and an educated middle class who usually won't read or watch SF at all. Then there are those who say that the novel just does again all that *Blade Runner* did almost forty years ago. But he may be doing it in a different, more literary way, to spread the word and the ideas to a new audience. It is the same with some Swedish novels that have been published recently; for example, Marina Nilsson's *Bobby Love* (2019), which addresses the topic of sex robots and may reach a larger, or at least different, reading public than proper SF does. And then, of course, there are Netflix and computer games, which also make these issues more visible than before. Although it is very rare to come across a work in which the theme is deepened with something new that has not already been done in the genre, questions are still asked that can make the public think and reflect. In that sense, the SF genre has an interesting democratic potential.

I personally think that many of the best SF short stories are those that are short and humorous, with interesting ideas being tested. For instance, I'm thinking of Robert Silverberg's "Good News From the Vatican" from the early 1970s, where some tourists sit outside a café near the Vatican discussing the latest, ongoing papal election. One of the leading candidates is a robot. And the short story ends with him coming out on St. Peter's loggia to the cheers of the people, lighting his rocket engines and taking to the skies – the Catholic Church has finally got its first pope who is a robot! The short story is slightly satirical, but at the same time it's not in-your-face satirical, as it also asks serious questions about the deeply human and whether God's deputy on earth could be a robot. It is also a part of creation, in a way, even if it is not a human being.

5. Contemporary Futures

DB: That is very interesting from the perspective of working-life research, where machines and robots are commonly seen as technical solutions to perform a certain function in the production process. In heavy industry, the design of the robot is completely dependent on what kind of product you are producing. But what we are seeing now, which Michael is talking about, and which you yourself have partly touched upon, is that we are now trying to construct robots or artificial intelligences that are humanoid. How are we to understand that development? Are we building new technology that reflects

and commodifies popular cultural ideas, or on what premises are we developing that type of technology?

JM: This is really an interesting question. When you think of the film *I, Robot*, its type of android has been popping up here and there in recent films, advertisements, and what not. I cannot remember seeing that kind of transparent, stylish robot before the film release, and I think it's obvious that popular culture has an enormous impact on how you visualise, conceptualise, design, and develop robots. And the first cell phones with lids in the 1990s were clearly inspired by old school *Star Trek* communicators, in much the same way that tablets like the iPad also resembled some of the technology in *Star Trek*, just to mention a few examples.

But what is interesting about today's technological development is that it's not just about industrial robots or how robots take over manual labour in factories. Now, it's also about the fact that even middle-class jobs are threatened. I heard a great talk by economist Jesper Stage, who explored ideas about AI in SF, and it's obvious we'll be there soon. News texts are already, to a certain extent, being written by artificial intelligences, as well as weather and sports reports.

MG: Yes, we have lived with AI for some time now; another example is cash withdrawals from ATMs or when we make a phone call to different municipal authorities and an AI asks us to specify our business (cf. Wajcman).

JM: And I imagine that many of the specialised tasks we perform can soon be replaced.

MG: Obviously, there are many economic advantages for entrepreneurs, business owners, and venture capitalists in replacing manual labour with robots and AIs. But robots are now also being used in nursing, which may have both benefits and disadvantages. This is a very complex discussion indeed. It is interesting that movies often represent robots and AIs as more humanlike, while in health care, they do not want anthropomorphic robots since they are perceived as uncanny.

JM: But robots in health care must, to some extent, be anthropomorphic and not too terrifying, like having eight arms, et cetera.

MG: And we also know that there are some cultural differences in this matter. American representations of robots are more Terminator-like, while robots in Japanese representations are cuter (see e.g. Haring et al.).

DB: It is interesting, Michael, that preferences in robot design can be culturally conditioned. However, I imagine that the pursuit of more humanoid expressions reflects much of the automation and robotisation taking place in the service sector. Here we can think, for example, of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's response functions, where during a time the citizens could ask questions to the bot "Hanna"; that is, a picture of a woman. This is certainly a way to allay the experience of talking to a machine.

JM: Yes, the gender question becomes very interesting here. And it reminds one a bit of the good robots, or droids, in the *Star Wars* franchise. In a sense, R2-D2 and C-3PO are very humanoid. C-3PO talks like a nervous and submissive person; R2-D2 makes electronic sounds that often resemble baby babble, making it easy for us to have feelings for that machine. And *WALL-E* is another example of a very humanoid robot, since it, or he, looks like a big baby with big eyes.

DB: If you look at fictional representations in the light of Swedish structural changes and the contexts where new technology and new machines have entered the production process, the parallels between fiction and reality become very exciting. And if you go back to the Čapek version, it is obvious that it mirrors mechanisation processes and industrial breakthroughs. Is it possible to do similar comparisons with contemporary representations?

JM: Well, what is the chicken or the egg here? Is it because people once again are interested in AI that so much film, TV series, and literature on the topic is produced, or does it come from producers, directors, writers, and publishers believing that there is a large public interest in AI? Or is it a form of setting the agenda, since they believe that this is an important question, one we should be paying attention to and discussing? Maybe it is all this at once? No matter what, the effect is the same and all these representations are shaping a consciousness of something going on. We do not know the direction of the development or how much is really going to happen. There is no consensus on whether AI is dangerous or not, or if it is possible to ever create a strong AI. The only thing we know is the possibility of AI replacing many of our jobs in the future. Even middle-class jobs like medical diagnosis will be done faster and more efficiently with databases than by doctors with a five-year education. This is a development I believe will essentially transform society.

DB: So you are saying that in some way this will compel people to form an opinion about the development.

JM: Yes, but they can also choose to ignore these questions, obviously. Many of my friends do not have any interest in AI development and the challenges we face. On the hand, I know people who are active in politics and take these questions seriously. They have not been interested in SF before, but are now starting to be since it is a way of asking these questions in a playful manner. The short story with the robot pope is an absurd thought in a popular-science article or in news coverage, but in a genre that is to a great extent about entertainment, it is a fun idea to play around with. And this is what many SF writers do, and what we readers expect them to do.

MG: I think that this is not only a fun idea, since the short story also refers to the idea of human interchangeability, as we see with automation processes. We can also see the automation of religion in, for example, George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), where citizens confess by putting a coin into an automat. The film may leave a lot to be desired, but it also has some clever and interesting scenes.

JM: *THX 1138* was released at almost the same time as Silverberg's short story in the beginning of the 1970s, and there were a lot of issues on the agenda then. A couple of very good SF films asked interesting questions, such as Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972), which discussed whether plants can have more value than humans. Is it worth sacrificing humans to save biotopes? And there were some interesting robots in the film that influenced the droids in *Star Wars*. They are basically sidekicks helping the main protagonist save plants by killing other humans. And then Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* was released in 1973, where overpopulation is one of the main issues, but also the question of work and meaninglessness, represented through the suicide clinic in the film.

MG: Concerning work and a fulfilling life, one of the best narratives I have read is Theodore L. Thomas's 1959 short story "The Good Work". It takes

place in an overcrowded future where gigantic skyscrapers prevent you from seeing the sky. Most humans have the bare necessities, but it is a very dull and meagre existence with only synthetic food. If people want to improve their life conditions, they can apply for a job, which the main protagonist does. The authorities let him work in a maintenance crew, responsible for tightening loose nuts and bolts in a skyscraper. When he finishes his workday, the story ends with the nightshift taking over (without his knowledge), loosening all nuts and bolts again.

JM: This goes hand in hand with Roland Paulsen's (2014) ideas of empty labour. What strikes me here is that what it means to be a human seems to be the same in these representations of the future, for example in *Star Trek*. According to the films and series, humanity will basically have the same Western, humanist morals and ethics as many of us have today, even if we will have AIs or androids like Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, or the hologram doctor in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001), whose programme could be reproduced infinitely. And maybe this is the reason they were reluctant for so long to depict what happens after the *Voyager* series. The next logical step would be to let the hologram doctor and his friends – or copies – take over all human labour, since he can be infinitely duplicated and is extremely intelligent and adaptable. It would also be possible to create a military force consisting of grumpy hologram doctors. That would be an interesting scenario, but perhaps hard to transform into a good television series.

MG: You must not write screenplays for the *Star Trek* franchise, Jerry! One thing I have discovered when I look at the question of work in SF (Godhe 2018), at least in the novels from the 1990s and onwards that I have read, is that there are no children in the future. The whole political economy is absent. In older utopias, such as the writings of many of the utopian socialists in the 19th century, the whole political economy was present when they tried to solve the question of work and redistributive politics. Is it a fair picture that SF gives of the development in automation and AI research, how the future of work might possibly look?

JM: No, it is surely not a fair view. At least not in the big Hollywood productions, which to a great extent play on people's fears of the future. They often give a one-sided, dystopian view of AI: they resemble us and will replace us, and they will have a different ethical and moral consciousness and therefore we must watch out carefully. But now I am talking about film. There are, of course, exceptions, like the Swedish series *Äkta Människor* or *Westworld* (2016–), where we get some sympathy for the robots or hubots (cf. Hallqvist), or a motion picture like *Blade Runner*. When it comes to the perspective of the AIs, literature often goes into more depth, but this is equally not a fair view, since many of the best SF novels tend to anthropomorphise AIs too much. And it is, of course, an open question if AIs will ever have a human-like consciousness or if they are only cold algorithms mimicking our behaviour. But these are the kinds of questions discussed, in some sense. More mundane questions concerning how assembly-line work will look like when humans are redundant are very hard to explore in a popular genre, at least if you have to make it an interesting read.

6. Risks with Futural Representations

MG: SF does not necessarily take place in the future. It can also be very close to our contemporary times.

DB: Indeed. One example is the *Black Mirror* series (2011–). The extrapolation is very close to our times, but thanks to that the effect is strong. There is obviously a strength in pushing the limits and problematising, to make people reflect over matters. But are there any potential negative consequences if we occupy ourselves with the metaphors around technology, and less with the real development?

JM: Of course, there are. If SF is too much occupied with sensational scenarios and rapid technological development, and promises too much, there is a risk that people get too optimistic about the future and believe that things are going to happen much faster than they do. We still don't know how fast AI research will develop, and there is a risk that those investing in AI companies and AI technology, or doing different kinds of research, will realise that things are not going to be happening within the expected pace. And in some ways then, SF and popular science will have deceived people into believing that the future is already here, when strong AI is in fact very far from being realised. But on the other hand, we don't know, obviously. It was only recently that Google tested their so-called quantum computer.

DB: To a large extent, the PR business was responsible for creating the “dot.com bubble” (Mosco). Allow me to make a comparison: would you say that there is a risk that SF is doing the same thing, that it triggers investments?

JM: To create an AI winter, yes! But not SF in itself, but the whole media conglomerate of sensational SF and popular science, and chequebook journalism (cf. Goode). But perhaps it is a good thing that AI is represented as something negative in SF (especially film), since many AI discussions are not all that concerned with ethics. Research now is very rapid and everything that could be tested is probably tested. And maybe engineers involved in AI research haven't got the time to reflect on the possible outcomes of their research. In this case, SF can function as an arena where people in common discuss the potential threats. Then there is always a risk that the threats posed by SF and discussed by people are not the actual questions that matter, as, for example, the question of how to programme ethical parameters. But if you go into such details, the quality of the narrative maybe suffers.

MG: One problem with the AI discussion in popular media is that the development seems to be predestined (Godhe 2020; cf. Goode). As a humanist scholar, I wish that we would ask ourselves more often if we really want to have this development of AI or not. Now we are discussing how to avoid or fend off possible risks with AI – which does not mean that these are not legitimate questions. Is there a risk that SF is part of normalising this fatalistic view?

JM: The question is if it is possible to create an awareness among people how much the future is always changing and open-ended – to make people think about future scenarios in their everyday life, the way SF readers are keen to do. To ponder where we are going to be in five years' time. What will have changed by then? Will people still eat meat? Are we still going to have smartphones? It is a matter of recognising that the future is here as a living dimension of our ordinary lives. This is something SF can prepare us for – that everything could have been, and will be, different.

MG: Maybe this is a way of creating a preparedness for the future? In the UNESCO programme *Anticipation Studies*, they talk about Futures Literacy, the “capability to ‘use-the-future’, for different reasons and in a variety of ways” (Miller, 2018, 2). Riel Miller, the “Head of Foresight” at UNESCO and connected to *Anticipation Studies*, discusses “evocative stories” that enable us to reflect on the present and the future (Miller 2007). And this is obviously one of the strengths of SF. But one question that comes to my mind is whether we put too much hope and prospect in SF. Does the genre in fact have the great impact we are discussing here?

JM: Yes, I do believe so, but maybe not the kind of innovative and unconventional, subversive, societal narratives that SF scholars are primarily interested in. At the same time, there are examples of excellent SF literature circulated to a broader public, like Ted Chiang’s short story “The Story of Your Life”, which was adapted into the motion picture *Arrival*. Chiang’s story brings up a lot of interesting thoughts, and most of these are kept in the film, despite it being a Hollywood product. But I don’t know if all that many people saw it, compared to the *Marvel* movies released in the last decades.

Another example of really good SF literature is the novel *Autonomous* by science journalist Annalee Newitz (2017), where we follow a robot and how he experiences his ordinary life, how people can erase or limit his memory, how he – or she, when the robot eventually alters his/her sex by just changing his/her pronoun – experiences how it is to have intercourse with her human colleague. In the novel, there is also a workshop where the robots can go, when they are not on duty hunting IP pirates in the genetics business, and get secret programmes not known to the humans, making their motherboards crash with no visible signs afterwards. It’s their way of taking drugs, to escape rational thinking and experiencing something else, something unpredictable.

DB: Sounds like a good ending for this interview. I have one last question, though. On the commuter train in Stockholm, I saw a poster from Luleå University of Technology with the slogan: “We turn science fiction into science”. What do you think about this slogan?



JM: Well, it assumes that SF is concerned with the not-yet-real, and this can be contested depending on how metaphorically you want to interpret SF narratives. But it is not clear if they recognise SF as an important genre, or if they are in fact condescending. As we discussed, scientists and science journalists often use phrases such as “this could sound like SF, but now it is for real”. However, maybe it is a sign of the genre’s changing status when you can use “science fiction” in university marketing. And we all live in a sort of SF scenario today. Or, as the SF author Kim Stanley Robinson once remarked: Humans today are now living in an SF novel. The problem is that it is a lousy novel!

Daniel and Michael: Thank you Jerry!

Jerry: Thank you very much indeed!

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Conference Report: GIFCon 2021: Beyond the Anglocentric Fantastic

April 28th–30th, 2021
Online

Eero Suoranta

Organised from Scotland and taking place online, this year's Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations conference (also known as GIFCon) was titled "Beyond the Anglocentric Fantastic". Hosted by the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic at the University of Glasgow, the three-day conference welcomed a group of both early-career and established scholars from a variety of disciplines. While focusing on widely different topics, the presentations were united by their goal of going beyond the typical Anglocentrism of fantasy research and examining the heterogeneity of fantasy and the fantastic in its full glory.

The title of this year's conference can be read as containing an implicit challenge, in at least two senses of the word. On one hand, the organisers challenged the Anglonormativity and Anglocentrism of the fantasy canon and fantasy research, inviting participants to consider alternative traditions of fantasy and the fantastic. On the other hand, this kind of framing – while justified and perhaps unavoidable given the current state of the field – represents a challenge in that it risks recentring the English or Anglo-American sphere by nevertheless treating it as a kind of a yardstick to which the presumed variety of other cultural traditions is compared. Tellingly, I have just referred to an *English* and *imperial* unit of measurement (one that I myself actually first recall encountering in Anglo-American fantasy novels and roleplaying-game manuals), which perhaps reflects the problems inherent in discussing non-

Anglophone traditions while still using English as the accepted common language.

However, the difficulty of going “beyond” in this sense should not be over-emphasised here, especially since the organisers and the presenters of GIFCon collectively did in fact succeed in bringing the sheer diversity of non-Anglophone fantasy to the foreground. In terms of distinct cultures, the fifty or so presentations and three keynotes included discussions of various African, East and South Asian, East European, Latin American, and non-Anglophone West European fantasy traditions, as well as different Indigenous perspectives. Moreover, the types of media examined included not only the usual literature and live-action film and television, but also, among others, comics and graphic novels, video games, animation, theater, and decorative artworks, illustrating the wide range in research topics among the presenters.

Delivered by Xia Jia, SF author and Associate Professor of Chinese Literature at Xi'an Jiaotong University, the first keynote of the conference examined how different American and Chinese science fiction narratives approach the question of “the future we used to believe in”. While Disney’s “supermedia movie” *Tomorrowland* (2015) seeks to establish a certain cultural identity through reference to the audience’s experiences of earlier works that subscribe to a hopeful view of the future, William Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981) portrays this same retrofuturistic dream as unnerving in its perfection and similarity to totalitarian understandings of utopia. Meanwhile, Liu Cixin’s novella “Fields of Gold” (2018) asks what it might take to rekindle humanity’s passion for space exploration, recalling the launch of the Chinese satellite Dongfanghong in 1970 and the role of radio in building a sense of identification with “the big ‘we’” among its listeners. Xia Jia finished her keynote by bringing up a still-unresolved question: how can Chinese science fiction continue to tell the story of believing in something, whether that “something” is future, hope, or simply what “we” used to believe in?

The second keynote, by Sourit Bhattacharya, Lecturer in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Glasgow, began with a timely reminder of the COVID-19 crisis in India and reflections on how much of the modern South Asian fantastic emerges from a sense of disbelief in the face of crisis. In his analysis of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s English-language story “Sultana’s Dream” (1905), Bhattacharya shows that the story features not only a reversal of gender roles, but also a focus on sustainable technologies that critiques colonial modernity and anticipates later ecofeminist thought. The speed at which the story moves from reality to dream and back, however, illustrates how the ethically better world of the narrator’s dream is simply another side of everyday reality, and asserts that “the technological and social revolution is just a matter of time.” In the Q&A, Bhattacharya commented on the exclusion of “Sultana’s Dream” from the canon of English-language feminist SFF, and noted that with regards to efforts to remedy the situation, “the point is not only to remember that Rokeya wrote, but also to remember why she was not read for a long time”.

The third keynote followed a somewhat different format from the first two, being more of an extended Q&A with poet and writer Amal El-Mohtar that began with a discussion of her short story “The Truth About Owls” (2014), inspired by her stay in Glasgow and love for the Welsh language as well as her Lebanese heritage and background. Among other aspects of the story, El-

Mohtar discussed how it reflects the “angst around Arabic” she had felt as a child of immigrants, as well as the freedom and process of discovery she encountered when learning a language that did not carry the same emotional connotations for her. In addition, El-Mohtar spoke about writing conversations and relationships between women, the process of creating the novella *This Is How You Lose the Time War* (2019) with Max Gladstone and how “the parameters of the project” such as the two authors’ distinct writing styles affected its shape, and “the kind of time travel inherent in letters.” Towards the end of the discussion, she also emphasised the difference between “writing what you know” and “writing what you’ve read,” positing that maturing as a writer involves learning to “send yourself out” instead of simply imitating or mixing earlier works.

In the papers presented, Orientalism and (mis)representation of non-Anglophone cultures were, unsurprisingly, major topics, such as in Emma French’s and Lizanne Henderson’s (both University of Glasgow) presentations on the “Monk” character class in *Dungeons and Dragons* and polar bears in folktales and modern-day fantasy, respectively. Several papers also explored how non-Anglophone traditions are revisited and reinvented by contemporary creators working within those cultures: for example, Mario-Paul Martínez and Fran Mateu (Miguel Hernández University) looked at mythology, history, and religion in two recent Spanish video games, while Chengcheng You (University of Macau) examined how the character of Ne Zha from the 17th century Chinese novel *Creation of Gods* has been depicted in several major adaptations. While these kinds of modern interpretations can introduce old stories to new audiences, they also showcase how changing societal values lead re-creators to focus on different aspects of the original, as You noted by highlighting the theme of individualism in recent versions of the Ne Zha story.

In addition to non-Anglophone fantasy traditions as such, several papers also explored the relationship between non-Anglophone works of fantasy and national histories. Primrose (National University of Singapore) posited that in Mo Yan’s novels, fantastical tropes and elements function as a way for the author to “contour the silence around historically repressed memories”, while Daniel Martin (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) looked at two works with a very different attitude towards Chinese history, analysing the fantasy movies *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* (2015) and *Mojin: The Lost Legend* (2015) as examples of the “cultured blockbuster” that is designed to in some way be “educational” or “culturally/politically uplifting.” Meanwhile, Ildikó Limpár (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest) presented a paper on two highly interesting works from Hungary – the comic book *The West + Zombies* (2017) and the comedic film *Comrade Draculich* (2019) – in both of which undead creatures are used to recreate a fictional national past. All three papers also made reference to the connection between history and contemporary politics in works of fantasy, whether that connection manifests through state censorship and requirements for the content of the works or simply because the creators are influenced by ongoing political discussions.

Discussions of language in various forms were also given a prominent place at GIFCon, being represented by their own panel session. The independent scholar E. Dawson Varughese analysed the reality-shaping power of language in Tashan Mehta’s novel *The Liar’s Weave* (2017), while Namrata Dey Roy (Georgia State University) focused on the postcolonial issues

surrounding voice and language in Meg Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) and Bettina Burger (Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf) explored how the use of oral storytelling markers destabilises the form of "the fantasy novel" in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019). Dawson Varughese's and Burger's papers especially demonstrated how it is possible, even in works written in English, to employ non-dominant ways of using language to question cultural hegemonies, such as the Anglocentric fantasy novel formula or dominant ideas of "Indianness".

In the same panel, Martine Gjermundsen Ræstad (University of Glasgow) presented an interesting analysis of different strategies for translating the names of fantastic creatures, ranging from preserving the original term to substituting it with the name of a similar creature in the target culture. Gjermundsen Ræstad noted that reliance on conventional translations (such as using "giants" for the "jötnar" of Norse mythology) has reinforced the prevalence of "domesticative" translation strategies in Anglo-American translations and adaptations of fantasy stories, but suggested that changes in target audiences may lead to the adoption of different strategies. An intriguing possibility left open by her presentation is whether the widespread acceptance of a substitution translation can influence the use of the term in the target language (such as "giants") so that it becomes closer in meaning to the original concept in the source language (such as the Norse "jötnar"), and if so, under what kind of conditions this might happen.

While most papers were presented in the typical manner with slides and a voice-over, some also experimented with the format. In a presentation accentuated with looping animations that was both aesthetically pleasing and deeply insightful, Sandra Mondejar Revis (University of Glasgow) explored the art of "Ma", or "the ability to 'enjoy the blankness'", in the works of Hayao Miyazaki. Exemplified by quiet or "unnecessary" moments such as simple domestic scenes or a character pausing before doing some ordinary action, "Ma" in Miyazaki's films serves such functions as allowing the viewer to relate to the mindset of a character, leaving a child protagonist "space for growth", or providing a contrast to the ravages of war, while also reflecting the director's belief that children need to experience the joys of everyday life. In the Q&A, Mondejar Revis also commented on how Miyazaki's adaptations of Western stories differ from their source material in this respect, suggesting that in, for example, Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986, film version 2004) such quiet scenes tend to be more comedic and lack the philosophical foundation in which Miyazaki's "Ma" is rooted.

One repeated theme of the conference was the reworking and subversion of Anglocentric stories by non-Anglo-American audiences, a "going beyond" where the starting point may indeed become less important than the destination. Nicole Brandon (University of Dundee) delved into the complex relationship between the Indigenous peoples of North America and *Star Wars*, from "Baby Yoda is Native" memes to the Navajo dub of *A New Hope* to contemporary visual artists commenting on the effects of colonialism by referring to the franchise. Brandon's examples highlight that Indigenous audiences are not passive recipients of dominant narratives, but rather meaning-makers in their own right. Meanwhile, in one of the final papers of the conference, Catherine Butler (Cardiff University) looked at Britain as a place for learning magic in Japanese fantasy such as the anime *Little Witch Academia*

(2013–17) and the manga *The Ancient Magus's Bride* (2014–), which are themselves influenced by classic British works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Noting that since at this point many in the contemporary Japanese audience may only be familiar with certain elements of real-life British culture via (Japanese) fantasy stories, Butler suggested that this supplanting of the original in popular consciousness might also offer one way of “going beyond” Anglocentrism, one in which the “centre” of Britain gradually becomes lost in imitation and therefore loses its importance.

On the technical side, GIFCon 2021's use of a Discord server for side discussions gave the conference a much more interactive and relaxed atmosphere than only using Zoom (as well as YouTube for the keynotes) would probably have allowed. Trivia competitions, bingo cards, and the frequent employment of jokes and gifs by the participants (appropriately enough, considering the name “GIFCon”) especially helped build a sense of camaraderie that is hard to achieve in an online event. However, the temporal overlap between sessions and some technical difficulties during the presentations raise the question of whether, for example, making the papers available beforehand and using the Discord for Q&As with the presenters (as was done at the CyberPunk Culture Conference last year) would have made for a smoother and more accessible experience.

The conference also included the launch of *Mapping the Impossible*, an open-access student journal dedicated to research into fantasy and the fantastic and open to submissions from undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as recent graduates. The first issue, to be published in October 2021, will feature papers from both GIFCon presenters and others centered around the theme of this year's conference, while the second (to be published in March 2022) will be a general issue. In light of the quality and variety of papers by early-career researchers at GIFCon, it is fortunate that there will be a dedicated space for pursuing the insights presented at the conference further, and especially the first issue of the journal is likely to be of interest to anyone seeking to understand the full of spectrum of global fantasy.

Biography: Eero Suoranta is a PhD candidate researching alienation in Chinese science fiction at the University of Helsinki. He has also worked as a translator of Chinese SF and as a freelance journalist and literary critic, and has been featured as an expert on Chinese literature and philosophy by the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE.



BOOK REVIEW:

*New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction in
Literature and Other Media*

Sasha Myerson

Isomaa, Saija, Jyrki Korpua, and Jouni Teittinen, editors. *New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction in Literature and Other Media*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. ISBN 978-1527555396.

Over the last decade or so, popular culture has shown an increasing fascination with dystopia. This dystopian turn has been the subject of much discussion in academia, while traditional news and social media provide daily reminders of the climate apocalypses, technocratic surveillance states, resurgent fascisms, and economic collapses currently in progress. It is within this context that the edited volume *New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction* aims to intervene. The interdisciplinary and multi-medium approach taken by this collection is welcome, as is its anti-essentialist approach to genre. It also contains much well-contextualised and readable analysis. Nonetheless, more careful and substantial attention to the broader issues of race, class, and queerness would have helped the book more fully grasp the urgency of contemporary times.

According to the editors, the broad, overarching argumentative thrust of this collection is that “dystopian fiction is an umbrella term” from under which a variety of texts slip in and out (xi). Correspondingly, dystopia is historically contingent, and there is no “essence” to dystopian fiction that “remains the same through changes over time and place” (xii). The editors seek to distance themselves, for example, from the approach taken by M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas in *The Science Fiction Handbook* (2009), which separates out dystopian and (post)apocalyptic SFs, and instead they emphasise the “thematic connectedness and overlapping of these historical genres” (xii). The editors, and several of the contributors, also make frequent reference to the

work of utopian studies scholars Tom Moylan and Lyman Tower Sargent. In particular, Moylan's work on the concept of critical dystopia and his exploration of the fluid boundaries between dystopia, utopia, and anti-utopia are recurring reference points for this collection. Additionally, a commitment to interdisciplinary analysis also ties together the chapters in this collection. Various chapters draw from approaches as diverse as literary studies, game studies, affective science, and animal studies.

To provide an overview, the first part of the book collects together chapters that consider societal dystopia. The first four chapters – by Saija Isomaa, Sari Kivistö, Hanna Samola, and Jyrki Korpua, respectively – all analyse texts that portray the operation and functioning of totalitarian societies. The first two chapters broadly make reference to canonical dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Samola's chapter turns towards feminist dystopia by focusing on Margaret Atwood's canonical *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) alongside Johanna Sinisalo's more contemporary novel *The Core of the Sun* (2013). Korpua's chapter provides a meticulously contextualised analysis of fascist and theocratic visions of English society in two late 20th-century British graphic novels, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (1978–1989) and *V for Vendetta* (1982–1989). Next, Kaisa Kaukiainen focuses on religious subtexts in young-adult fiction, paying particular attention to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008). In the last chapter of this section, Esko Suoranta analyses the tensions between dystopia and utopia in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

Out of this first section two chapters particularly stand out. First, Kivistö's chapter centres on a close reading of *1984*, paying close attention to physical descriptions of pain and suffering. In Kivistö's reading, pain is a "central totalizing force in Orwell's dystopian society" that "prevents all meaning making and social engagements" by doing violence to language (33, 42). Kivistö explores how pain functions at the level of language within *1984* and places Orwell into dialogue with Virginia Woolf's writings on illness. Kivistö contrasts Woolf's assertion that experiences of pain require the construction of a "new language and unusual expressions" with Orwell's novel where "acts of violence remove words and destroy language" (32). Second, Suoranta's analysis of *Bleeding Edge* provides a refreshingly nuanced utopian perspective to Pynchon's engagement with cyberpunk. Questioning Darko Suvin's assertion that "collective and public" utopianism cannot emerge in cyberpunk, Suoranta considers how Pynchon reconfigures the cyberpunk mode (106). In Suoranta's reading, for Pynchon, utopia "remains ever compromised, but as such non-finite and kept open to the possibility of change" (113). Through an analysis of how systems of technology and meaning-making are contested, this chapter carefully draws out a potentially radical, multiple, and ever negotiated open-source politics within Pynchon's novel.

The chapters in the book's second section all engage in some way with representations of the post-apocalypse. The first two, by Jouni Teittinen and Mikko Mäntyniemi, respectively, both focus on the overlapping, folded, and simultaneous temporal relationships between past, present, and future in post-apocalyptic fiction. Both chapters focus on the early 2000s, with Teittinen's chapter centring on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Mäntyniemi looking towards Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The following chapter, by

Sari Piittinen reads the video-game *Fallout 3* (2008) through the lens of Gothic dystopia. Next, Essi Vatiolo's chapter engages with the TV shows *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica*, considering both their boundaries between utopia and dystopia and their understandings of collective human responsibility. Finally, the last two chapters take an ecological turn. Maria Laakso closely reads Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972) as an indicative animal dystopia. By this, Laakso argues that Adams's novel can be "perceived as [a] dystopian eco-novel" which critiques the "destructive capacities of human societies from the perspective of an animal" (203). Finally, Juha Raipola and Toni Lahtinen read Johanna Sinisalo's New Weird novel *Birdbrain* (2010) and its attempts to unsettle colonial narratives of human mastery.

Out of the second half of the collection, Piittinen's chapter particularly stands out. Bethesda's *Fallout 3* is often compared unfavourably with Obsidian's subsequent *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), but Piittinen offers a compelling reading of Gothic monstrosity within the text. Piittinen argues that monstrosity is a point of connection between dystopia and the Gothic. Drawing on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's analysis of monsters as symbolic of social boundaries, difference, and otherness, Piittinen considers the uniqueness of video games as a medium for constructing both destabilising and sympathetic encounters between players and monsters. For Piittinen, *Fallout 3* provides the player not just with "Gothic monstrosities" for the player to defeat, but also with "those whose monstrosity the players must assess" (179). Both Laakso's and Raipola and Lahtinen's chapters provide interesting and engaging close readings of their central texts. Laakso argues that certain animal fantasy novels function as more than just allegories and can be read as animal dystopias, which work to defamiliarise and estrange humans while simultaneously humanising animals. Likewise, Raipola and Lahtinen examine how the novel *Birdbrain* destabilises the boundaries between the human and non-human, critiquing narratives of human rationality and agency from an ecological perspective. In *Birdbrain*, the environment itself comes to have a "menacing agency" as Sinisalo's "novel starts to deconstruct the dichotomy between the human and non-human" (236).

There are however some oversights of methodology and perspective within the collection that should be noted. First, in the chapters that discuss Margaret Atwood, there is no mention of the broader feminist dystopian tradition that underpins her work, including the works of writers such as Suzy McKee Charnas, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr. There is also no recognition of black feminist critiques of Atwood's work. For instance, the dystopian forms of gendered and reproductive discipline depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* have historically been disproportionately targeted at marginalised black women. What is presented as a dystopian scenario for white women in Atwood's text has historically been, and in many cases continues to be, reality for many women of colour.

This is indicative of a wider oversight within the collection where the uneven nature of "dystopia" and "apocalypse" as critical terms is under-acknowledged. As a dystopian text like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) suggests, the apocalypse can be experienced deeply unevenly, and different individuals and communities slip into – and experience – apocalypse at different speeds. While several chapters in the collection acknowledge that dystopia is often utopian for some, the implications of race and class raised by

this assertion are not always fully explored – although, notably, Korpua's chapter does identify in Alan Moore's work an analysis of how fanatical English nationalism operates to oppress and marginalise ethnic and sexual minorities.

Likewise, Laakso, Raipola, and Lahtinen do begin to acknowledge issues of ecology and colonialism, but the reader is given the impression that environmental crisis is being driven by humanity as an undifferentiated whole. Alternatively, it might be argued that western capitalist modernity specifically, along with the neo-colonial relations that underpin it, is the driving force of contemporary ecological destruction. The collection often refers to the warning function of dystopian fiction, but a warning for whom, precisely? A more intersectional analysis is needed: for marginalised people around the world, particularly for black, queer, and indigenous peoples, the most dystopian and apocalyptic predictions that the privileged can imagine have already arrived. While some inroads are made towards these issues in the book, a more substantial centring of texts written from marginalised perspectives would have helped significantly.

However, there is still much to recommend the collection. The writing is clear and engaging throughout, making the text suitable for those new to SF and dystopian studies. There are also enough sparks of new insight and innovation to interest those familiar with the field. Each of the chapters contributes something to the study of its respective cultural texts. And, taken together, the collection offers a range of further interdisciplinary perspectives on dystopian media.

Biography: Sasha Myerson is a PhD student at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research focuses on urban space and the built environment in 1990s feminist cyberpunk SF. Sasha is a former co-director of the London Science-Fiction Research Community and a member of the Beyond Gender research collective. She has written on Japanese cyberpunk film for *Science-Fiction Film and Television* and has co-authored a forthcoming chapter on the SF poetics of Sun Ra.



BOOK REVIEW:
J. G. Ballard

Joel Evans

Wilson, D. Harlan. *J. G. Ballard*. U of Illinois P, 2017. ISBN 978-0252082955.

There are some SF narratives that transcend the boundaries of the genre, not because they have tendencies toward another established genre (realism, the detective novel, etc.), or because they can be placed within a more generalised, speculative bracket, but because they imagine a world in which the framework of science itself no longer applies or makes any sense. The philosopher Quentin Meillassoux labels these kinds of fictions “extro-science fictions”, or “XSF”. For Meillassoux, these types of fiction suggest a world that breaks away from the notion of fixed laws that guarantee the stability of reality and of experience, the likes of which Kant had tried to set out in response to Hume’s scandalous suggestion that we couldn’t really know about such things. Kant’s notion that a world in which the appearances of things constantly shift would lead to the impossibility of perception itself, in fact, is for Meillassoux a version of XSF (8–17). The very fact that we can think of this kind of world – where, for example (and to use Kant’s phrasing), a “human being were now changed into this animal shape, now into that one” (qtd. in Meillassoux 28–29) – means that we aren’t able to refute the possibility of such worlds by means of reason alone. And this is just one, extreme type of XSF world. Meillassoux outlines two less extreme versions: worlds that contain causeless, random events occurring only very occasionally; and worlds that are in thrall to such contingency that it is impossible to establish any fixed laws, but in which perception is still possible. All of these different worlds would elude science – and the frameworks around which SF constructs itself – as there would either be no constant object to observe or represent, or no laws on which to base any study or thought-experiment, or both.

Meillassoux mentions a few existing narratives from literature (rather than from philosophy) that come close to XSF: Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), Robert Charles Wilson's *Darwinia* (1998), Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (1969). And he also mentions a more thoroughgoing example of the genre: René Barjavel's *Ravage* (1974). These novels all conform in one way or another to the suspension of scientific laws in the spirit outlined above.

I think we can class the work of J. G. Ballard – at least in its most experimental guises – as XSF, but this involves expanding the concept a little. For what Ballard's novels do consistently is to question the notion of fixed scientific laws from the point of view of consciousness itself, whereby it is not necessarily (or just) the world at-large that is subject to sudden events without precedent but, rather, human psychology that undergoes a series of shocks and transformations throughout the *oeuvre*. Reading Ballard within a psychoanalytic framework, or even a schizoanalytic framework, thus in some way always misses the point of his work, particularly where Ballard pushes firmly beyond the boundaries of a normative model of human psychology. In the books that do this – *Crash* (1973), *High-Rise* (1975), *Super-Cannes* (2000), etc.— we witness not just a mode of literature that is interested in the parameters of human psychology and what happens when this is transformed, but one that is committed to demolishing those parameters.

What this vacillation between SF and XSF in Ballard's work exposes is a writer who has always been – to adapt a phrase – both *in* and *against* SF. We can see this on an extreme level through the terms we've just been using, but also in the way Ballard mixes surrealism, absurdism, environmentalism, utopia, and crime into the SF genre. It would seem counter-intuitive, then, to try to argue that Ballard is an SF writer in any straightforward, unproblematic, or unadulterated sense. Thus it comes as a surprise when D. Harlan Wilson tries to make precisely this argument in *J. G. Ballard*, which is part of the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series (which has an expanding list of work that is, in many cases, excellent). Wilson makes the argument here that we can class Ballard's work as SF pretty much regardless of the piece being dealt with, notwithstanding the fact that some of Ballard's work only tangentially touches on the genre. He does this partly by using Darko Suvin's definition of SF as being established through a "*novum*", which designates a "totalising phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and addressee's norm of reality" (qtd. in Wilson 8). This makes sense to an extent, but it is obviously much less convincing when we come to novels like *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991).

Whilst Wilson makes some effort to articulate how these books fit into a SF model, this is largely fleeting. As for later novels like *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006), Wilson brackets these also as SF for under-elaborated reasons, which have to do with some of the core themes of earlier novels like *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), *Crash*, and *Concrete Island* (1974) catching up with reality. In any case, Wilson's catch-all classifications don't really leave him with much to prove, and so for the most part the book performs three other discernible, albeit quietly stated, tasks. The first is to chart Ballard's output from its start to its end point, right up until his memoir and final book, *Miracles of Life* (2008). The second is to read the novels and stories from a Deleuzian point of view, the purpose of which is never particularly obvious. And the third is to read Ballard's literary output in relation

to his stated opinions and general biography (this being a common feature of the Modern Masters series).

This latter element of the book feels tired and amounts to an amalgamation of interesting quotations from interviews with Ballard that, if one is familiar with the terrain, will have been encountered before. There are some interesting tidbits here for those unfamiliar with Ballard, though, and generally these help illuminate the work as much as such readings can. For example, Ballard's signature concept of "inner space" – which refers to the site at which psychological transformation and subversion takes place in conjunction with altered external environments – gets a good run-down, particularly in relation to Ballard's extensive corpus of short stories, which Wilson surveys in detail. The Deleuzian aspect of the book – which consists of Wilson applying concepts from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical and schizoanalytical framework – feels fresher, even if not entirely unprecedented within the secondary literature. But here, Wilson has a tendency to slip into jargon, which results in the specificity of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts being lost and any association between these and Ballard's writing feeling out of reach. One example will suffice to illustrate the general point. In Chapter 4, Wilson reads the emergence of the tribal, affectless subject of *High-Rise* as signalling an "operational deleuzoguattarian plateau. The tenants fall prey to desiring-production and devolve into raw desiring-machines" (94). For the reader unfamiliar with Deleuze and Guattari, this statement will be impossible to decipher. But even for the reader familiar with their thought, the mixture of concepts and lack of explication obscures a point that is presumably quite a simple one about the extremes of libidinal economy as rendered in Ballard's novel.

There are some productive theoretical insights here, though. The best are probably how Wilson relates the Ballardian universe to Marshall McLuhan's notion of media as an extension of man. This is a valid comparison and has the advantage of being lucid. For example, Wilson suggests in the introduction that we read Ballard's meditations on consumer culture, undergirded as this is by advertising and desire, in relation to McLuhan's ideas, which in turn invites some interesting associations between McLuhan and Ballard's own notion of inner space. This also allows for further links to be made with the manifest themes of technology throughout the early novels and stories and into the late work, and Wilson does this as the book unfolds. This leads us to the other useful aspect of this book, which is – as already mentioned – to provide a broad and expansive view of Ballard's output. The collection of resources that the monograph brings together is no doubt scholarly and will be useful to those holed up in the suburbs or elsewhere, studying Ballard. But this ought to come with the proviso that any book that seeks, as *J. G. Ballard* does, to pin down such an unwieldy body of work as one thing obscures its intrigue, its complexity, and its sheer defamiliarising qualities.

Biography: Joel Evans is Assistant Professor in Literature at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of *Conceptualising the Global in the Wake of the Postmodern: Literature, Culture, Theory* (2019).

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Space for Peace: Fragments of the Irish
Troubles in the Science Fiction of Bob Shaw
and James White*

Jim Clarke

Howard, Richard. *Space for Peace: Fragments of the Irish Troubles in the Science Fiction of Bob Shaw and James White*. Liverpool UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1800348264.

It has been easy to forget the SF of Bob Shaw and James White. They were, after all, two middle-aged, white, male authors who wrote mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, whose work is mostly that hoariest of SF sub-genres, the space opera, and who espoused cautious politics. They were prolific but not professional writers, in that both had day jobs. They both began as fans, and the only award either won was Shaw's double Hugo for fan writing. They lived their lives in Northern Ireland. It would be all too easy to misread them as parochial outposts of the SF galaxy.

Yet in their lonely championing of futurism in a land hidebound by its own past, Shaw and White are actually hugely significant. Furthermore, their engaging classic-style SF is also enormously readable. Kudos then to Richard Howard for excavating their legacies from the rubble of Irish futurism and reminding us of all their myriad achievements. Howard has done something difficult, brave, and strenuous in producing this study of their work. Academic reviews are often prone to polite hyperbole, but it must be stressed just how important a study this really is.

How so? Well, it's difficult to overstate the neglect of SF in Irish cultural analysis. Possibly the only greater neglect is that of Irish SF within SF Studies. It took until 2014 for the first substantial analysis, Jack Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction*, and until 2018 until Fennell again produced the first significant

collection of classical Irish SF, *A Brilliant Void*. There, despite the brief, polite golf claps from the reviews pages of the *Irish Times*, it might have ended. Thankfully, we have Richard Howard to remind us that, as Irish SF proliferates into young-adult fiction, into Irish language fiction, into postcolonial fiction, and into readerships in Ireland and abroad, it is long past time for scholars to sit up and take notice.

His point of interjection is well chosen, firstly because he focuses on two Belfast writers, one from each of that divided city's communities, united by a love of SF. It is also an astute intervention in that White and Shaw straddle the lengthy era between the immediate post-war period and the end of the century. Examining their bodies of work allows Howard to speculate about post-war Ireland, postcolonial Ireland, Cold War Ireland, and about the fraught recent history of the Northern Irish state. Howard is also excellent in highlighting how, in works such as White's *Sector-General* series (1962–1999), set on a galactic hospital ship, or Shaw's *Orbitsville* trilogy (1975–1990), set on an alien Dyson sphere, their work is as good or better than the vast majority of their era.

His study is therefore intriguingly positioned, strategically facing back towards Irish Studies to inform that particular geopolitical discipline about an entire intersection, that with SF, which it has largely overlooked. Indeed, it strives strenuously at times to command consideration of Shaw and White into future (and futurist) discussions within Irish Studies. Yet it is also inevitably Janus-faced, seeking to restore Shaw and White to their rightful positions as key figures in mid- to late 20th-century SF. Fennell, after all, devoted a mere 20 pages to the two. Howard gives them a righteous 280, which they more than warrant.

Space for Peace is not without occasional challenges for the lay reader, and not only in relation to Irish history, the North-South and urban-rural divides therein, or the complexities of SF fandom and author identities generated across Belfast's sectarian divide. Jamesonian ideologemes and similar terminology deriving from intellectual heavyweights, such as Bruno Latour, Giorgio Agamben, Herbert Marcuse, and A. J. Greimas, occasionally bog down the narrative in places, and betray the book's origins as a highly rigorous doctoral thesis, as does the regular signposting. However, sometimes you need to get the big guns out to make your point.

This is an avowedly Marxist analysis throughout, engaging here with the work of Fredric Jameson on Utopia, there with György Lukács on the historical novel. It's no less relevant for that, and indeed there are plenty of moments where Howard departs from a narrow Marxist reading to either encompass Irish or postcolonial perspectives, or to gently query some Marxist SF approaches, those by Darko Suvin in particular.

Howard is especially excellent at navigating the complex waters of alienness, alterity, and hybridity expressed in both White and Shaw, as well as finding at times ingenious modes of mapping these back onto the Ulster milieu from which both emerged. The limitations of White's imagination in relation to depicting the otherness of alien species in his *Sector-General* novels have persisted in later, especially audiovisual SF, wherein extra-terrestrials located in the *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* or *Babylon-5* universes often present merely a cursory otherness, evoking superficial humanoid alterity, or the otherness of terrestrial animals, while otherwise embodying much the same emotional range, behaviours, and belief systems as humans.

In this context, Howard astutely highlights the sexual anxieties present in White's multi-species environment. White's Catholicism imbues his fiction with a somewhat puritan tang to contemporary tastes, especially with celibacy and monogamy often rigidly enforced. Therefore, the sexual desires evoked by his medic characters who must psychologically don the mentality of aliens in order to treat them becomes a dark and dangerous liminal space, akin, as Howard notes, to "miscegenation and bestiality" (200).

I am therefore personally chastened by Howard's reports of James White's early SF, in particular his debut novel *Second Ending* (1961) and his 1964 collection of stories *Deadly Litter*, which both predate the Second Vatican Council, wherein one may find a positive depiction of Catholicism otherwise unknown in the Anglophone SF of the era. His later 1988 story, "Sanctuary", in which an alien race and Catholic nuns experience a positive first contact, inverts the habitual SF trope of aliens encountering Catholic religious orders, which almost invariably results elsewhere in the demise of the aliens.

In the SF of Shaw and White, the Northern Irish civil war known colloquially as the Troubles walks hand in hand with the Cold War. The latter provides the background noise not only for their era in general, but also for their day-to-day work, since both were employed in Shorts Brothers, an aerospace firm based in Belfast that also constructed missiles for the British military. This, as Howard explains, underpins their mutual depictions of the value of nuclear deterrents ("a kind of realist utopian stance that points to the prospect of world annihilation as a catalyst for world peace" [35]), their attachment to conspiratorial narratives, and their nuanced visions of Utopias, which possess both repressive and redemptive modes.

White's pacifism was a wary one, circumscribed and delimited by a sceptical attitude towards idealism in general and activist causes in particular, perhaps again informed by his experience of the Troubles. Likewise, Howard shows that Shaw and White concur on the need for an overview approach, a mode of escaping localised concerns to obtain a global or even galactic perspective, but they usually do so in the spirit of incrementalism and individualism. The boundaries with the alien Other in their novels may be a permeable one, but the erosion is always temporary, subject to judgement, never permanent.

Howard carefully questions White's well-established pacifism, though, not only identifying the Christian and subversive flavours attached to it, but also highlighting numerous instances of ambiguity in relation to it. He reads White's standalone novel *Underkill* (1979), in which the protagonist comes to sympathise with an alien species engaged in terrorism in Ireland in order to bring about a utopian future, as a distinct question mark over White's pacifistic instincts, although there is of course the alternative possibility that White may have been subtly satirising the utopian motivations that drive all such terror campaigns, in Ireland or elsewhere.

As Howard notes, however, White consistently critiqued pacifism as a kind of ideal rather than achievable reality (239–52). White may simply be a realist about the limitations of pacifism in a universe in which violence and war exist. Alternatively, as Howard argues, pacifism for White is circumscribed by a pressing concern over how to address the "poisonous few" (233), a view itself undoubtedly informed by living through and writing during the civil-war environment of the Troubles. White's anxious positioning of Sector-General's Monitors on the boundary between police and military further suggests this.

For Howard, White's choice of genre – space opera – itself predicates a concern with the application of violence.

There are points one might choose to query, of course. When Howard writes of Shaw's protagonist Tavernor, in *The Palace of Eternity* (1969), referring to humanity as "hideous, pale-skinned mongers of true death" in the eyes of the alien Syccans, is this really Shaw projecting a "racially pure future for space colonisation" (179)? Might it not equally be Shaw somewhat bluntly projecting the physiology of terrestrial coloniality into the wider territory of galactic space? It would, after all, hardly be the first or only example of space opera iterating imperial or colonial discontents.

Shaw had a clear tendency towards transcendental utopian conglomerations, whether human, as with the colonisation of the Dyson sphere *Orbitsville*, or ineffably alien as with the Elder Race creators of *Orbitsville*, or somehow both, as with the "egon mass" depicted in *The Palace of Eternity*. His ability to elide human/alien, human/animal and other Otherings suggests that he may not have been as prone to defaulting to ethnocentricity in space as many other SF writers. Howard is extremely good in delineating the importance of Shaw's "third way" politics as it migrated from his Northern Irish daily life to his galactically located SF pages (143–48); therefore, this particular cavil ought not be overstated.

Howard ends his book with a somewhat unexpected change of pace, moving rapidly outwards from Shaw and White to make an impassioned plea for the discipline of Irish Studies to grasp the opportunities presented by Jack Fennell's work (and implicitly his own), and embrace the substantial, significant, and growing corpus of Irish SF. Amid this, his brief diversion to consider the work of Ian McDonald (273–76) as a Belfast SF writer in the tradition of Shaw and White as much as a purveyor of postcolonial SF is provocative, succinct, and entirely correct.

This makes his final call to arms all the more persuasive. For an island at the forefront of globalisation and high-tech industry to continue to ignore its own futurisms seems perplexingly obtuse. Howard points an accusatory finger at Irish academia in this regard, particularly at its somewhat hidebound understanding of canonicity.

But this reviewer might add a further admonition: Irish SF is simply too good to be ignored, and as SF Studies is currently experiencing a long overdue expansion of its remit to encompass previously ignored futurisms, surely Irish futurism must be one of them? Jack Fennell's earlier work was largely neglected not only by Irish Studies scholars but also by SF scholarship. I fervently hope Richard Howard's immensely important work will not be greeted with a similar shrug of the shoulders. Let us not forget Bob Shaw and James White a second time.

Biography: Jim Clarke has taught literature at universities in Ireland, the UK, and Belarus; currently, he's Assistant Professor of English Literature at Cappadocia University. He is the author of *The Aesthetics of Anthony Burgess* (2017), *Science Fiction and Catholicism* (2019) and the forthcoming *Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange* (2022). He blogs at www.jimclarke.net. He researches religious futurisms and is co-director of the *Ponying the Slovos* project, which explores how invented literary languages function in translation and adaptation: <https://ponyingtheslovos.coventry.domains>.



BOOK REVIEW:
Arthur C. Clarke

Rob Browning

Westfahl, Gary. *Arthur C. Clarke*. U of Illinois P, 2018. ISBN 978-0252083594.

Gary Westfahl's *Arthur C. Clarke* joins five previously published book-length studies of Clarke's fiction, the most recent of which is Robin Anne Reid's *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion* (1997). Justifying the need for this new study, Westfahl cites several publications that have appeared since Reid's book: fiction attributed to Clarke, chiefly as a collaborator; two collections of correspondence (1998 and 2003); and a number of texts about Clarke – most notably, Neil McAleer's updated biography (2013). His primary justification, however, is the fact that a "truly comprehensive survey of Clarke's science fiction has never been produced" (2). Indeed, Reid focuses only on the major novels, and the earlier scholars – Olander and Greenberg (1977), Slusser (1978), Rabkin (1979), and Hollow (1982) – were unable to consider Clarke's late-career publications. In being the first to "discuss, at least briefly, all of the published works of fiction", Westfahl presents credible overviews of the thematic tendencies in the fiction, noting significant deviations along the way, and he offers well-informed observations about how Clarke's interests and attitudes seem to change over the course of his career (2). The comprehensiveness of his research enables him to take issue with several unqualified or potentially mistaken views about the author that one finds in the critical literature, which I detail below. Whether or not one finds all Westfahl's different arguments fully convincing, the book offers a fresh perspective on Clarke and some thought-provoking readings of his fiction that deserve the attentions of scholars interested in this author.

The book is organised into four main parts: a biographical sketch; a survey of Clarke's juvenilia; six chapters focusing on prominent topics and themes in the fiction ("inventions, space travel, human destinies, aliens, the sea, and religion"); and a chapter analysing Clarke's fictional characters (6).

Westfahl articulates his major findings and arguments in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of each chapter, and he dedicates the bulk of his discussions to surveying the various texts that support these claims. In thematically appropriate places, each of the major novels and short stories receives closer attention. The book concludes with an informative appendix on “Clarke’s ‘Collaborations’ with Other Authors”; an excellent bibliography of Clarke’s publications and other work; and a bibliography of secondary sources that is actually a works-cited list rather than a comprehensive listing of scholarship on Clarke.

Westfahl’s overarching purpose is to describe salient aspects of the worldview that Clarke’s body of writings presents to readers. While Clarke did not attempt to unite his different works into a “cohesive narrative”, such as one finds in the oeuvre of Robert A. Heinlein, Westfahl reveals how Clarke created consistent pictures of humanity’s possible futures (44). The source of this consistency appears to be Clarke’s career-long desire to proselytise for exploration beyond present frontiers, both in space and in the sea, which entails evoking a sense of wonder about these places while also recognising the formidable dangers involved in venturing there and being realistic about human limitations. Westfahl points to numerous examples of the limitations in Clarke’s fiction: machines and other technology fail to work properly, are misused, or break down; natural disasters prove to be overwhelming; and isolated individuals or whole societies fall into boredom and stagnation. While one may be more likely to associate dead astronauts with J. G. Ballard, deaths are a common occurrence in Clarke’s realistically imagined outer-space environments. These casualties serve as a check against notions of Clarke as a thoroughgoing optimist about humanity’s future in space.

For instance, against Peter Brigg’s assertion that Clarke “consistently hints that the universe will be man’s and that man ... will emerge the final victor”, Westfahl points out that Clarke “consistently depicts futures wherein humanity is marginalized – or extinct” (74). He observes that Clarke “stands out among SF writers for refusing to embrace [the] consensus future history” that, in Donald A. Wollheim’s summary, involves humanity venturing beyond the solar system, establishing a “Galactic Empire”, and seeking confrontation with God (73). In Clarke’s approach, promoting human space exploration requires keeping up with the latest scientific advancements and technological innovations, and not getting too far ahead of these with the imaginative flights of fancy common in SF, such as technology for faster-than-light-speed travel. Rather than dazzling readers with pioneering firsts or feats of extraordinary heroes, Westfahl observes, Clarke prefers to focus his fiction on the everyday aspects of life in space as experienced by relatively ordinary (albeit well-trained) people doing their jobs. In this way, Clarke’s fiction encourages readers to imagine humanity’s expansion into space as an imminent reality. In keeping with the author’s realistic vision, these narratives rarely venture beyond the solar system.

Westfahl takes issue with a common critical view termed the “Clarke paradox” by Peter Nicholls and John Clute – namely, that

there were effectively two Arthur C. Clarkes: the hard-nosed, practical Clarke, devoted to meticulously plausible descriptions of near-future technology, and the wild-eyed, mystical Clarke, prone to fuzzy, unfounded speculations about mysterious forces underlying the visible universe. (4)

In the chapters on “Alien Encounters” and “Future Faiths”, Westfahl denies that Clarke shifts between two completely different perspectives, one mundane and another mystical; rather, we should understand that Clarke adjusts his mode of expression according to the epistemological nature of the subject matter at hand. When writing about far-distant futures, which sometimes entails imaginative leaps of millions of years, Clarke “appropriately employed language recalling mysticism” as a way of acknowledging how far beyond our present knowledge he is speculating (5). Similarly, if many of the author’s portrayals of aliens seem mysterious or even mystical, this is because Clarke rarely engages in “scientifically plausible” world-building, preferring to respect the likelihood that humanity will not be able to develop the technology necessary for visiting and observing such worlds (94). Characters in his fiction are more likely to encounter artifacts and other fragmentary signs in our solar system left behind by aliens long ago. Critics have suggested that the handling of advanced aliens in works such as *Childhood’s End* function as the author’s own “ersatz form of religion”, and Westfahl supports this view as an example of the occasionally positive attitudes towards religion one can find in the fiction (142). In his chapter “Future Faiths”, however, Westfahl details how Clarke tends to be strongly critical of religion, arguing throughout his career that humanity ultimately should abandon religion in favor of more mature science-based knowledge, even as Clarke (ever the hard-nosed realist) came to believe that aspects of religious practice are likely to persist.

A revelation for me is the chapter on Clarke’s lesser-known fiction and non-fiction focusing on the sea. Westfahl shows how the sublime forces and exotic life forms of the Earth’s oceans are comparable in general ways to the subjects Clarke explores in his fiction set in outer space – only the sea is a domain that the author, as an avid skin diver, could experience first-hand. As in his space fiction, Clarke’s narratives about the sea show a special interest in how extreme environments can come to affect the perspectives of the people who live and work there.

Westfahl contends that “Clarke remains a writer who has never been properly understood”, in part because scholars tend to project their literary expectations onto Clarke and his fiction, which has led to failures in appreciating what is unique about both (3). Because most of Clarke’s own reading activity focused on non-fiction, critics may run astray if they interpret *Childhood’s End* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for instance, through the lens of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Homer’s *Odyssey*, mistakenly assuming Clarke shared their familiarity with such texts. Here, Westfahl pushes against George Edgar Slusser’s thesis about the “Odyssey pattern” in Clarke’s fiction (Slusser 6), a form that involves ambiguous journeys and homecomings, at least where Westfahl finds Slusser forcing his thesis onto texts such as *Childhood’s End* where it does not seem to apply. As Westfahl remarks, Clarke “consistently resists familiar narrative patterns, yet critics insist upon discerning them” (92). A figure he suggests may have had a significant influence on Clarke’s fiction is

the editor John W. Campbell, Jr., who argued that the “writing of science fiction should proceed in the manner of a thought experiment” (3).

The aspect of Clarke’s craft that receives Westfahl’s closest attention is character. Against the common view that Clarke’s characters are “lifeless and wooden”, Westfahl argues that these typically solitary figures “may represent the most fascinating, and prophetic, aspects of his fiction” (149). They tend to be either unattached or removed (physically, emotionally, or both) from family, partners, and friends; but they offset their loneliness through their professional work, which usually involves lyrical observation of the great wildernesses of the world – either space or the sea – and participating in their professional community. Westfahl suggests that this pattern follows the author’s own lifestyle, which can increasingly be regarded as characteristic of the physically isolated, internet-connected lifestyles of our own time (a comparison that feels all the more poignant after a full year of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Among the book’s other merits are Westfahl’s critical commentaries on the sequels to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Rendezvous with Rama*, in which we see Clarke (and, in the case of the latter series, his collaborators) shying away from the intimations of superhumanity that characterise the original books. Clarke generally “preferred stories that conclude with unresolved mysteries,” Westfahl notes, “particularly when writing about aliens” (116). In *2010*, *2061*, and *3001*, however, the transcendent Star Child of *2001* returns to recognisably human form as David Bowman, and the mysteriously powerful monoliths prove to be fallible technological devices of the “all too human” aliens who made them. The three *Rama* sequels, meanwhile, veer away from science and mystery (in *Rendezvous with Rama*, the latter was inspired by Kubrick’s inscrutable aliens, Westfahl suggests) into the social dramas of space opera. In the appendix, Westfahl observes the degrees to which the different novels marketed as collaborations agree with the characteristic themes and writing styles of the works Clarke wrote solo.

Since the chapters are surveys with a tendency to focus on thematic matters, this study should prompt other scholars to follow up on Westfahl’s interesting opening assertions about the unique nature of Clarke’s storytelling skills and prose style. Also deserving greater attention are the special qualities of Clarke’s imagery, specifically his depictions of extraterrestrial environments, which rank among the finest poetry in the genre but receive only passing commentary in this book.

Biography: Rob Browning teaches SF and early modern literature at the University of Montana. His most recent publication is “Nietzsche Among the Aliens in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*” in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, November 2020.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First
Century*

David Callahan

Lavender, Isiah III, and Lisa Yaszek, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. Ohio State UP, 2020. ISBN 978-0814255964.

We are lucky to live in a time when an impressive fleet of creative works identified as Afrofuturist seems to have suddenly appeared as if warp-driven into scanning range. Responding to this activity, a growing amount of enthusiastic academic work has appeared, including several new key works by the editors of this volume. What then can this latest edited collection, which includes several important names in general SF studies, offer to complement what we have already, and could it be a starting point for someone new to the field?

The specific object of this book is signposted in its title: contemporary written manifestations of Afrofuturism. And it partly delivers on this promise, given that some contributors deal more with 20th-century examples than with 21st-century ones. Ultimately, whatever we have in the present is indebted to 20th-century works; these form part of the general continuum of what can seem like a recent phenomenon but is not, or at least not as much as it might first appear. Mark Bould's engrossing chapter on the struggle of mostly 20th-century writer John M. Faucette, for example, speaks to the work of recovery necessary before genealogies and histories can be sedimented, while Nedine Moonsamy's chapter on Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) reimagines a pioneering work of postcolonial literature as also a "pioneering work of African science fiction" (216). Tutuola's definitely estranging prose and narrative, according to Moonsamy, evidence some of the conditions associated with SF,

and this becomes more evident when we factor in Afrofuturist revisitings of African mythologies.

After a crisp introduction by editors Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, there is an invigorating roundtable discussion among several well-known and lesser-known creative writers: Nalo Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl, Bill Campbell, Chinelo Onwualu, Minister Faust, and Nick Wood. The fun of their discussion comes when they disagree on the significance of the term “Afrofuturism”, on whether their – or any work – can be considered Afrofuturist, and their outright rejection of the term in more than one case. After all, no label worth its salt gets away without being contested and denied by its supposed practitioners.

First out of the dock is Nalo Hopkinson, who wonders whether “Afrofuturist” is too specifically American to “contain or reflect those of us whose root context isn’t American” (25), which includes three of her fellow panellists. Kenyan-Canadian Minister Faust rejects the term peremptorily, preferring to think of himself as “Africentrist”. In the end, Hopkinson inclines towards generosity in acknowledging that a potentially confining term such as Afrofuturism can help to draw attention and to focus analysis, with which Nisi Shawl agrees, although Shawl comes down on the side of the vaguer “black speculative fiction community” (27). N. K. Jemisin notes that the term is sliding towards being simply SF and fantasy by black people, with skin colour becoming the prime determiner, as if it were a genre. Where once Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler would be put in the same question-and-answer sessions at conventions, now Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor get reviewed together by non-specialist journalists, so clearly lessons have not been learnt, and sensitive attention to labels and characteristics remains necessary. Sensitive anything, however, is what has often been denied to black authors in ways that highlight the need for the heft that such labels can provide. Lisa Dowdall’s chapter on Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy begins by detailing the mindboggling racist attack on Jemisin for, well ... for being black and daring to dazzle on supposedly nonblack playgrounds. The ironies of such attacks from people who claim to represent the “essence” of SF are more ironic given Jemisin’s brilliant reworking of classic SF tropes in which historical and current categories of what counts as human are interrogated through the alchemy of creative world-making.

Minister Faust points out that much speculative writing by black writers is not set in the future at all, but the present and the past. Nisi Shawl offers AfroRetrofuturism as a link between some of this writing and steampunk, which has a potential that even Faust admits his own quixotic term of “Imhotep-hop” will never quite manage. The inclusion of white South African Nick Wood in the roundtable suggests how overdetermined the “Afro-” part of Afrofuturism can be in its identification with skin colour, an “Afroness” that Wood in no way abrogates to himself. Still, one sees the problem. And where do, say, black writers from Brazil fit in – to invoke just one sort of example that would have been good to see included here – or in the world of scholarship on Afrofuturism in general? It is well known that African-American cultural flows have served and continue to serve as galvanising models for resistance practices throughout the world, and not just in Africa. From African-origin citizens and immigrants from Europe to Polynesia, African-Americans have inspired and energised creative resistance to established hierarchies.

Sheree R. Thomas's good survey, "Dangerous Muses: Black Women Writers Creating at the Forefront of Afrofuturism", ranges backwards and forwards in time: now Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, now Andrea Hairston and Nnedi Okorafor. While many writers mentioned were published only in the 20th century, Thomas's overview reminds us that authors' careers cannot be expected to fall neatly into one century or another. De Witt Douglas Kilgore's "This Time for Africa! Afrofuturism as Alternate (American) History" addresses the popular genre of alternate history with the African diaspora at the centre, focusing on Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood* (2002) and Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988). Gina Wisker's chapter on Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), partly a general synthesis of Hopkinson's work, refers to how some classic SF reruns colonial scripts, so that writing back against colonialist tropes is a key Afrofuturist move. As this has not sprung into existence without earlier progenitors, Wisker and Thomas touch on several of them. They include not just SF writers but others who drew on fantastic folk culture, magical realism, and other forms of popular culture.

Young-adult Afrofuturism is clearly one of the more visible manifestations of the examination of colonialist oppression and history, too, and in many cases we are speaking of crossover fictions enjoyed by adult readers as well. Rebecca Holden suggests that one thing that characterises Afrofuturist writing is that, however far in the future it is cast, it remains "connected to the 'dark truths' of the past of slavery and of the racism pervading the present and most likely the future" (91). In this it serves as a corrective to those narratives of the future in which racial distinctions have disappeared, but no explanation is given as to how we got there. Okorafor and Walter Mosley serve as more extended case studies for Holden. Elizabeth A. Wheeler's chapter using Sherri Smith's YA novel *Orleans* (2013) in the consideration of environmental disasters and crimes as not simply aimed at the environment but as centrally racist illustrates and complements Holden's chapter. Later, Jerome Winter's chapter on environmentalist works, mostly by Sofia Samatar, Jemisin, and Okorafor, further develops the observation that while environmentalist fiction by nonblack authors typically critiques big business, politicians, scientists, or simply "human" blindness to the consequences of capitalism and technological innovation, Afrofuturist authors have a greater awareness of how environmental disaster is linked to instrumentalist colonial attitudes towards peoples *and* the land.

Gerry Canavan's chapter on the African land from which T'Challa (Black Panther) comes – Wakanda – offers a snapshot of the changing circumstances in which black people might become the central agents of heroic stories. Canavan's exposition, however, also reveals the many ways in which references to Wakanda and T'Challa reproduce colonialist tropes about Africa even as they establish an African figure as a powerful and worthy protagonist. In a key observation, the comics are thus both contemporary critiques of American power and self-assumed global centrality but also, given Marvel's lack of commitment to such critique as its final word on America, "always threatening ... to collapse into racism again" (Canavan 183). Such entrenched racism is evoked by the playful title of novelist Deji Bryce Olukotun's *Nigerians in Space* (2014), encapsulating the unexamined prescriptions in which high-achieving black Africans in space are seen as more unimaginable than any number of aliens or alternative futures. In Marleen S. Barr's reading of Olukotun, this

failure of imagination relates less to the sidelining of Nigeria as a source of space travellers than to Olukotun's sidelining of national space(s) in favour of mobility, both spatial- and identity-related.

Notwithstanding the scepticism evident in the roundtable about the term "Afrofuturism", in the coda Lavender and Yaszek reveal that they continue to believe in the "utility of Afrofuturism as a critical term" (231). This is what we expect of markers. They energise us, beckon to us, and lead us to things we might not have noticed. "Afrofuturism" is doing a great job, it seems to me, and this book, of interest to the commander and the cadet, should be added to the fleet immediately.

Biography: David Callahan, Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro, works mainly in the areas of postcolonial studies. His most recent publication is the co-edited *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments* (2019).



BOOK REVIEW:

Fantasy

Katherine McLoone

Armitt, Lucie. *Fantasy*. Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-1138676916.

In late 2020, *Time* magazine published a list of “The 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time” as judged by such current luminaries and bestsellers as N. K. Jemisin, Neil Gaiman, Marlon James, and George R. R. Martin, among others. It is a problematic list, as such lists always are. But its greatest strength is its diversity, especially in contrast with the “Your Picks: Top 100 Science-Fiction, Fantasy Books” published by NPR in 2011, which had only one non-Anglophone author (Jules Verne) and was entirely white. The *Time* magazine list includes authors of color as well as works from beyond the Anglophone world; although there is an unsurprisingly outsized focus on 20th- and 21st-century texts, the list acknowledges the fantastical past as well.

I mention this list not for its ultimate significance, which is minor, but because it is representative of the current state of fantasy – a state that includes current publishing trends and aspirations for the future of fantasy. Fantasy as a genre or mode is not exclusively white, or male, or Anglophone. But fantasy, particularly as a publishing category in the post-WWII era, has often been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as being all those things and nothing more. Only in the past two decades has there been a concerted effort both to publish more diverse speculative fiction in the present, and to rediscover precisely how diverse speculative fiction has been in the past.

That representational and aspirational work emerges in a variety of recent publications. To give just two examples: *The Big Book of Classic Fantasy* (2018) boasts that “almost half of the stories in this anthology are translations, representing twenty-six countries” (xix). In that volume, editors Ann and Jeff VanderMeer chose to portray fantasy’s past diversity as a way of contributing to the conversation about present-day (and future) diversity. A second example

comes from a companion text to the work under review: the second edition of the Routledge Critical Idiom volume *Science Fiction*, by Adam Roberts (2006), which contains chapters on gender and race in SF.

Lucie Armitt's *Fantasy* ignores this conversation entirely, providing instead a survey of white, Anglophone, and mainstream fantasy, broadly conceived. The breadth of that definition emerges in the first chapter, "Defining Fantasy", where Armitt positions fantasy in opposition to the mimetic (that is, the representation of the real). She does not claim fantasy is *unreal*: rather, it is the mirrored real; it is the other; it is the imaginative and sometimes uncanny *locus* from which we must return either within the text (such as Alice returning to the riverbank from Wonderland) or upon closing the text ("and they all lived happily ever after"). This is not Auerbach's mimesis; he portrayed scenes from Dante's *Inferno* as the beginning of a cultural turn towards realism, since Dante's characters were distinct from one another.

But Armitt would describe Dante's *Inferno* as fantastic, as it fits with her "competing-worlds approach to fantasy" (7), a definition that runs the risk of conceptualising *all* fantasy as "portal fantasy". And not just the typical portal fantasy we might think of – which Farah Mendlesohn, cited by Armitt, describes as a "point of entry" for the characters (13). Rather, Armitt argues that portals can exist within a text for characters, or outside of the text for the reader. For instance, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series qualifies as a fantasy not because it has magicians but because it is a portal fiction (entry to Hogwarts); Terry Pratchett's Discworld series "constitutes a separate world of its own" that the reader enters when they begin to read (22).

That distinction relies on a specific positioning of and between the author, reader, and text, as fantasy (unlike mimetic literature) explores the "juxtaposition of competing worlds, wherein one world, purportedly representing 'reality', is left behind in preference for another which is unknown and 'foreign' in the sense of being strange, fabulous or grotesque" (2). This definition risks blurring the lines between fantasy and fiction in general: if I open a novel by Jonathan Franzen, aren't I transported to the realm of upper-middle-class Midwesterners in need of therapy? What about Chimamanda Adichie's coming-of-age novel *Purple Hibiscus*, set in Nigeria? Our own backgrounds determine whether we might consider one of those to be "foreign" or "strange", although both are mimetic rather than fantastic works.

Armitt does acknowledge this tension: "all imaginative work is fantastic: creativity put through a filter of everyday experience. What differentiates fantasy from realism are the *assumptions* made about the fictional world portrayed" (24, emphasis mine). What may be lost in that distinction, though, is the sense of which assumptions are shared between text and audience: to read an ostensibly mimetic work from the distant past – or simply from a present-day culture quite unlike one's own – is to encounter a reality about which one may not have many accurate assumptions.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American scholar and novelist, writes about – and against – American academic writing workshops to argue that the American publishing literary-fiction establishment "pretends that 'Show, don't tell' is universal when it is, in fact, the expression of a particular population, the white majority, typically at least middle-class and often, but not exclusively, male Like all privileges, this identity is unmarked until it is thrown into relief against that which is marked, visible and outspoken, which is to say me and

others like me". In other words, both literary fiction (such as Nguyen's novels) and the speculative-fiction genres (as addressed above) are undergoing a reckoning of which "assumptions" may be assumed.

This is not just a quibble about whether we define fantasy as a genre or mode. (I actually quite like Armitt's "competing worlds" idea and wish she'd explored it further.) Rather, the unexamined nuances of assumptions, foreignness, reality, and the "strange" lead to a problem that emerges throughout this book, as the breadth of Armitt's definition of fantasy, and the number of works she includes in her chapters, results in an illusion of depth that nonetheless promotes a vision of fantasy that is almost exclusively white, Anglophone, and possessed of a set of cultural references that I can only assume are identical to Armitt's own.

In *Fantasy*, Armitt cites a total of 39 primary-text authors, although she mentions many more in passing. Among that number, only five (Ovid, Hans Christian Andersen, Jules Verne, Jean de Brunhoff, and Charlotte Roche) wrote in a language other than English. None are from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or even eastern Europe. The film selection is slightly more diverse, with a smattering of early French cinema. The television shows addressed are all either British or American.

Armitt's broad definition allows her to include *Toy Story* and *Game of Thrones*, Tolkien and Rosetti, *The Nutcracker* and the Grail legends, comic books and J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash*. But Armitt does not include video games, Dungeons and Dragons, popular music such as heavy metal, or Norse mythology. The sole reference to magical realism comes in the introduction, when Armitt recommends readers read a volume on that topic from the same New Critical Idiom series. Salman Rushdie does not appear, nor any Russians. Nor do we get any mention of the vibrancy of fantasy novels emerging from sub-Saharan Africa, or among marginalised populations in North America and the United Kingdom.

Perhaps more troublingly, it is unclear which audience she had in mind for this work; all New Critical Idiom texts are meant to be "introductory guides designed to meet the needs of today's students". When tracing the history of fantasy in the second chapter, Armitt says of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that the "English language version most of us read today [... is the one] translated by Arthur Golding in 1567" (29). Of whom does she speak here? Who is this "us"? My first encounter with the *Metamorphoses* was A. D. Melville's 1986 translation for Oxford University Press; I doubt I am unique, and I know my students read Melville rather than Golding, because that is what I have them read.

Throughout, Armitt seems to assume that her audience comes from a background (both personal and literary) similar to hers; her reference point is her own cultural experience and not those inhabited by others. That is why a section on *The Thousand and One Nights* emphasises not the work itself, but its influence on Coleridge and its popularity in 20th-century cinema, including Disney's animated and live-action versions of *Aladdin*.

To be fair, Armitt acknowledges the "several uncomfortable Orientalist touches" in the Disney film, and acknowledges the political stakes of setting it in the fictional city of Agrabah (37). Yet the result is still a reading – in a chapter titled "A Historical Overview of Fantasy"! – of *The Thousand and One Nights* that explores its Anglophone reception rather than the work itself, much less its

influence on recent fantasies by creators who are not (white) American or European. Similarly, a section on animal tricksters (in Chapter Three) mentions briefly that the Uncle Remus tales were “first derived from African folklore, and thought to have travelled to North America along with the slave trade” but does not address that folklore (65).

This is not, therefore, a book on fantasy, no matter how we define that category. It is a book on Anglophone (mostly American and British, mostly white) fantastical works that sometimes looks at how they engage with and transform older, non-Anglophone texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Those parameters can be their own goal, but Armitt’s narrow focus results in some drastic lacunae. In the fifth chapter, “Fantasy and Politics”, she explores the political through the lens of children’s literature; comic books (including the Japanese influence on American productions in the realm of both mid-century cinema and anime); and utopias and dystopias such as *1984*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and others. (Thus, interestingly, she incorporates what I might classify as SF into this definition of fantasy.)

In that chapter, Armitt does address the anti-Irish, anti-Welsh, and anti-Black sentiment of Kingsley’s 1862 novel *The Water Babies*, as well as the “controversies” over de Brunhoff’s Babar (1931) and Enid Blyton (actively writing from the 1930s to 1950s). Yet, by situating the “controversial” only in the past, Armitt neglects to address the politics in post-WWII fantasy, such as how Tolkien channeled the horrors of the First World War into *Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis’s stomach-churning Orientalism in *The Last Battle*, the racism of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (she does address the sexualised violence of that show in another chapter), or even the whitewashing of Hermione in the film adaptations of the *Harry Potter* series.

Failing to address those issues means Armitt allows herself no opportunity to look at how fantasy has adapted to its problematic past, such as N. K. Jemisin’s record-breaking three Hugo Awards for her *Broken Earth* series, or even Disney’s attempts at diversity with films like *Coco* and *Moana*. In her description of *The Water Babies*, Armitt points out that “what is elsewhere implied covertly is made explicit here: Kingsley’s implied child reader is both English and Anglophile in his/her politics” (113). We might say the same of her work.

However, there is potential here. The third chapter, “Animal Fantasy for Children”, explores Disney movies, *Black Beauty*, the *Uncle Remus* stories (as adapted by Loony Tunes), Winnie-the-Pooh, Paddington, Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, and *Charlotte’s Web*, to name only a few of the texts and authors addressed. Armitt shifts between psychological, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies to examine these works in precisely the way we would expect; this chapter could be useful for a course on children’s literature.

Within that chapter, the praxis of a “competing worlds” definition of fantasy emerges, albeit sometimes haphazardly: a section on animal characters explains that the Paddington (the bear) stories were originally rejected because Paddington was described as an African bear (but there are no bears in Africa); his provenance was therefore changed to “darkest Peru”. A few lines later, Armitt quotes an animal psychologist on our growing understanding of the interior lives of domestic animals. Verisimilitude of bear origins, and the psychology of domestic animals, bump up against the fantastical nature of the

Paddington stories, but Armitt doesn't belabor, or even address, the ways in which she juxtaposes the commercial and the scientific (which is to say, the *real*) with the fantastical in this or other sections. (Later in the same section, she explains, in reference to the movie *Babe*, that pigs can cry when grieving; her citation for that fact is the website minipiginfo.com.)

But the fast pace of the work results in disconnected ideas. Yes, Cinderella is problematic because of "Western patriarchal capitalism" (58). And it is hard to argue with the statement that "[e]specially attractive to young children are baby animals" (62). But there is little follow-through on those ideas: I found myself wanting a deeper articulation of how fantasy, in general, might struggle with such concepts as "Western patriarchal capitalism" or child psychology in relation to Disney films (or anything, really), but Armitt moves so quickly from text to text that there is little opportunity for the true engagement that would result in a comprehensive theory of fantasy.

The fourth chapter, on quests, is indicative of the work's scope, as well as the limitations of compressing that scope into about 170 pages. That chapter addresses the fantastical element of the Grail legend (including Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Tennyson, Twain, T. H. White, Mary Stewart, *The Sword in the Stone* [the Disney animated film], *First Knight* [the 1995 film], and *Merlin* [the TV series]); the landscapes in the *Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and the *Gormenghast* trilogy, as well as the real-life geography of *The Water Babies*; the idea of knowledge in *The Water Babies*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *A Christmas Carol*, and George MacDonald's *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance*; death in that same text, as well as numerous fairy tales and *Peter Pan*; totemic objects in *The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter; monsters in the *Metamorphoses*, *The Faerie Queene*, the television show *Merlin*, and *Harry Potter*. All of that is filtered through relevant theorists (Freud, Kristeva, etc.), and it all occurs in just 25 small pages. It is comprehensive, within the limits discussed above, but this chapter could be its own book. It could be a dozen books.

The best chapter is the final one, on "Fantasy and the Erotic". Here, Armitt looks at eros in fantasy (think: "Goblin Market") and at erotic fantasies (think: a person engaging in imaginative lust, or a character lusting after another character). What stands out is not the theory behind those concepts, but the strong close readings of works from Rosetti's poem to J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* to Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* and Marian Engel's *Bear*, among others. Armitt demonstrates a nuanced understanding of textual analysis (in light of relevant critical theories, including gender theory, queer theory, and disability theory). Although the focus of this chapter is on gender, sex, and eros rather than "fantasy" as many would define it, it is the most cohesive and interesting section of the book.

And, indeed, this book is *interesting*. It confounded my expectations at every turn, in ways both frustrating (as described above) and charming. Minor misrepresentations popped up occasionally. For instance, Armitt's portrayal of Ovid's version of the Orpheus story is disingenuous at best: "Before Ovid," she claims, "the origins of 'Orpheus and Eurydice' lay in oral storytelling" (28). Plato and Virgil might take issue with that claim! Elsewhere, she says that although in "allegorical terms, Aslan is a symbolic embodiment of Jesus Christ, Lewis never allows that metaphorical function to detract from his existence as

King of the Beasts” (63). Allegory and metaphor are not the same, and Lewis explained, more than once, that Aslan was not allegorical.

The glossary may represent, in brief, how this book does both too much and too little. It consists of only 18 terms: anthropomorphism, cartography, chronotope (a term which does not appear elsewhere in the work), dystopia, eucatastrophe, fairy-lore, fairy story, fantastic [Todorov], folktale, the marvelous, medieval dream vision, myth, pornotopia, portal fantasy, nonsense, secondary world, trickster, utopia. Our students need more.

But the little moments – the ones least relevant to a book review but most pleasing to a reader – abound. Armitt briefly links Winston’s dreams (in 1984) to the medieval dream-vision tradition (124). She goes from a mention of “bog people” in *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* to an offhand reference to Seamus Heaney’s poetry (15). She emphasises Monique Wittig’s implication, in *The Lesbian Body*, that Eurydice was scoping out Orpheus’s body as they traveled out of the underworld (158). At times Armitt implies these moments are causational (the past influencing the present); at others she implies an inspired coincidence circulating in and among the texts she delineates as fantasy. There is a tantalising idea lurking here somewhere.

Do those little moments compensate for the gaps? For a casual reader interested in one person’s take on a broad genre, perhaps. For a *user* of the book, however – someone who comes to the New Critical Idiom series expecting that it will provide an introductory, student-friendly guide to a topic, its terms, and its contexts – *Fantasy* fits one of Armitt’s own assertions about “what appeals to us about fantasy: we have a sense of having lost something we cannot quite grasp” (53).

Biography: Katherine McLoone is a lecturer in the Comparative World Literature Program at California State University, Long Beach. A medievalist by training, she is a generalist by circumstance, teaching courses on mythology, fairy tales, fantasy, science fiction, and comedy. In her spare time, she grades papers.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*The Inklings, the Victorians, and the
Moderns*

Anelise Farris

Butynskyi, Christopher. *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns: Reconciling Tradition in the Modern Age*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2020. ISBN 978-1683932277.

“Reconciliation” is a popular term in the current era; it evokes justice and equality and movements that are deemed progressive. When applied to literature, it seems to insinuate that the past should either be changed to better suit the modern world or that certain writers should be left alone altogether. Christopher Butynskyi in *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns* offers a unique, and what many might perceive as counterintuitive, literary take on reconciling the past. Butynskyi suggests that one doesn’t have to choose between the Great Books of the Western World *or* contemporary literature, but that one can appreciate both while learning “what it means to discuss and dialogue in hope of reconciliation despite our perceived individualism and disunity” (vii). In this increasingly divided political era, his work is a refreshing, yet tactfully subtle, plea for harmony and mutual respect. It offers a way for academics and general readers alike to approach literature that contains problematic language or ideologies with which they disagree – since to act otherwise promotes bias and ignores a rich literary history.

Butynskyi argues that the tendency to value progressive, modern ideas – particularly since the turn of the twentieth century – has prevented conservative traditionalists from being recognized as intellectuals. Accordingly, his thesis is that the Inklings and their fellow 20th-century traditionalists were a legitimate intellectual group, a real movement with important contributions, that is too often dismissed due to the prevalence of scientism and secularism.

While this reviewer is fully aware of how contentious this viewpoint is today, that is precisely the point of Butynskyi's book: to argue that this group of thinkers has been wrongfully dismissed by modern humanities scholarship and deserves to be viewed as an important intellectual group. As Butynskyi states, "They were not simply zealots, auctioneers of religion, or polemicists, but intellectuals with a deep concern for the well-being of their fellow man" (4) – a concern which only intensified as a reaction to the unheeded consequences of progressivism. As the book's title suggests, the Inklings – J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield – are a key focus, but Butynskyi discusses a generous number of other traditional intellectuals as well – figures like G.K. Chesterton, Irving Babbitt, and T.S. Eliot, to name a few. Also, it's important to note that although many of those who identified as traditionalists were both religious and conservative, that was not always the case, as Butynskyi highlights. Nonetheless, each individual, regardless of their differences, was united by what the author calls "a common mind": a mind that, in reaction to progressivism, attempted to "reconcile tradition within the realities of their own age" (2, 4).

Their own age saw significant changes in scientific thought. The newfound emphasis on empirical knowledge resulted in the abandonment of religion and imagination – subjects that were central to the traditionalists in both their way of life and their writing. Moreover, the issue was greater than simply the fact that science was replacing these fundamental concepts. Indeed, a far more dangerous consequence of this change for several intellectuals – whose very core values were composed of the metaphysical – was the progressive assumption that to believe in such matters was *unintelligent*. Furthermore, the traditionalists valued permanence and consistency in a world that now thrived on change as the only constant. They believed that authority should not be of one's own creation. Man, simply put, was not God. Although not deities, humans (according to this group) were definitively not creatures to be treated objectively, with detachment, as the present age of scientific innovation saw them. Instead, humans were considered miraculous. To be clear, this group was not anti-science by any means, but they did not treat science as a new religion, either, as it seemed to become for much of the rest of the world. It is with this deep understanding of what characterizes the traditionalists that Butynskyi thoughtfully paves the way for this small yet stubborn group of rebels to finally receive their confirmation.

Although this book is not exclusively concerned with the traditionalists' writings, it is important, before proceeding to an overview of its contents, to stress – as Butynskyi does – the group's devotion to the classical liberal arts. They believed that it was illogical to base one's entire reality on the constantly changing here and now, and for them the classical liberal arts provided a way to connect the past to the present. Following suit, Butynskyi encourages readers to participate in the Great Conversation and "find value in the discussion between the past and the present" (6). As he writes, "My hope is that each chapter explains the perspective of the traditionalist with the intention of both sides finding common ground" (7). Ultimately, this work seeks to reconcile the relationship between traditionalists and progressives – moving away from the "trend of relegating tradition to a place without influence or voice if it shows any resistance to the new status quo" (11). That said, it's crucial to note that while Butynskyi provides a compelling case for the group's intellectual status,

based on their writing and influence, he refrains from engaging as much as one would like with post-1960s literary studies. His attempt at a rationale is akin to the traditionalist view that the “classical corpus addresses, even if adulterated by racism, colonialism, and the like, universal and fundamentally human concepts, such that any human could access the pearls of wisdom therein” (169) – a statement which unfortunately seems to skirt around the issue at hand and is likely to cause some discontent among certain readers. Let me suggest, however, is that Butynskyi is simply laying the groundwork, asking readers to humbly consider this group. As such, he seems to call for a sequel – another book that offers a more concrete way for readers to approach these writers today through post-1960s schools of thought and trends in literary criticism. But again, that is not *this* book.

The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns contains seven chapters, in addition to a thorough Introduction and a compelling Epilogue. The Introduction, “Instruments of Tradition in the March of Progress”, does not waste time providing dense chapter summaries, and, as a result, it reads like a truncated (though well-crafted) chapter in its own right. The first chapter, “Ink and Parchment: A Historiographical Review”, is essentially a comprehensive literature review that achieves three important tasks: it demonstrates how mainstream scholarship (journals that are not exclusively about members of this group, like *Tolkien Studies*) about this group of intellectuals is rare; it positions the difficult role that Butynskyi, like the traditionalists, occupies as a scholar writing “scholarship from a perspective that is often seen as counterintuitive to the current movements of the field” (19); it emphasizes that, despite its perceived rarity in academia, spiritual matters are an intrinsic part of particular disciplines, and, that in the humanities specifically, a “dialogue of what is human will always maintain relevance” (33). The subsequent chapter “Tradition: More than Custom and Convention” sets out the work of defining *tradition*, and in doing so, Butynskyi makes a strong case that a persistent misunderstanding of “tradition” has furthered the polemical arguments against traditionalists. Butynskyi notes, “The Modern Age claims to be relativistic and in search of truth; yet traditionalists are seen as antiquated, thus limiting the voices who are allowed to participate in the conversation”, when in contrast, traditionalists “left room for a narrative that sought an open dialogue between past and present” (41). Chapter Three, “G. K. Chesterton: Mouthpiece of Tradition”, outlines how influential Chesterton’s reactionary views were for this group of intellectuals – of chief importance was his strong aversion to the dehumanization that the Modern Age encouraged.

The latter chapters build upon this material as they illustrate how exactly this robust intellectual group came to be sidelined. Chapter Four, “Raising the Temple of Science: A New Marketplace”, traces the effects of scientism’s replacement of religion as the chief commodity, and in doing so, Butynskyi draws attention to a variety of influential figures like Charles Darwin, J.B.S. Haldane, and James Watson. The following chapter, “Fellowship of Tradition”, focuses specifically on the Inklings and how incompatible their zeal for myth, fantasy, and spirituality was with progressivism. Chapter Six, “The Broader Conspiracy”, is arguably one of the most important chapters in the book as it brings together six traditionalists – not all religious, though all humanists – into conversation with each other. As a result, one witnesses a variety of solutions for how to combat the consequences of progressivism, particularly on

education. For those in academia (what I imagine to be this work's primary audience), the attention to the role of higher education is especially insightful, and this chapter does an effective job of demonstrating how classical liberal arts are far from elitist as they return us all to what unites us: our humanity. The final chapter stems from the attention to curricula in the previous chapter and offers a necessary pedagogical message: cultivate a habit of reading wisely, with discernment and reflection, and do not be afraid – although modernity rejects it – to admit that “Not All Books Are Created Equal”. Lastly, the Epilogue, “Passing the Torch”, is a brief yet poignant summation of the work's overarching purpose: to petition that the “voice of tradition occupies a place at the table” (179).

Despite Christopher Butynskyi's atypical stance, *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns* is a convincing read that not only offers solid support for his argument but also makes a strong case that there is a problem in academia, both in our mission as teachers and in those whose scholarship we consider valuable. As previously mentioned, the intended audience does appear to be academic – or, perhaps, the serious traditionalist or liberal arts enthusiast (who, in either case, is probably, just as well, an academic). My praise throughout this review implies my high recommendation, and besides the previously addressed lack of engagement with dominant, critical discourse, the only weakness that I perceive in Butynskyi's work might actually be its greatest strength in disguise. By the work's end, I found myself asking, “Is the author *actually* a traditionalist?” It's both admirable and mildly frustrating that it's not made more apparent. Notwithstanding the latter, I return to my “tactfully subtle” comment in the opening paragraph and admit that Butynskyi's objectivity is a remarkable feat, and it's imperative to at least consider what he is proposing: “It is one thing to admit the extensive knowledge of the modern case,” he posits, “but it is another to recognize that there could be something deeper that modernity overlooked or ignored due to its focus on progress” (129).

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 reading or writing, she enjoys experimenting in the kitchen, binging horror movies, and spending time outdoors.



BOOK REVIEW:
Tolkien and the Classics

Maria Alberto

Arduini, Roberto, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi, editors. *Tolkien and the Classics*. Walking Tree, 2019. ISBN 978-3905703429.

J.R.R. Tolkien is easily one of the most widely recognised – and also hotly contested – authors whose work and legacy we continue to discuss today. Depending on who you ask, Tolkien may be either a father figure to the genre of modern fantasy or else a bore whose fiction is overhyped (and many points in-between). Additional points of contention abound: his literary style and use of song are polarising – almost as much as his women characters – and his sporadically racialised descriptions of certain characters, often faceless enemy masses, are troubling and cannot be relegated to claims that this was a norm of his time. Moreover, these elements of Tolkien’s work – along with his Catholic background and framing of his own work in reams of paratextual materials – have drawn historically ardent defenders, who in some circles (like many who responded to the Tolkien Society’s excellent “Tolkien and Diversity” seminar this summer) deride queer perspectives, non-Christian approaches, and readings from scholars and fans of color, among others. And all of this is *before* we even begin to consider the tremendous impact that adaptations of Middle-earth have had in media ranging from film to television, videogames, music, fan works, and more. (Lest this be taken as hyperbole, I should admit that as I write this review I am listening to Blind Guardian’s *Nightfall in Middle-earth* on loop for easily the 500th time.)

I mention all of this as a means of providing context for the highly complex venture being undertaken by editors Roberto Arduini, Giampaolo Canzonieri, and Claudio A. Testi, as well as their contributors, in *Tolkien and the Classics*. As the volume’s own introduction asserts, this book has two aims: first, to meet an “ever-growing awareness” of the need to champion Tolkien as a “great literary classic, comparable to those already accepted as ‘canonical’” and second, also via the introduction, “to be enjoyed, and made actual use of”

by students and educators at the secondary and university levels (xvii). These are already two very different projects, with sometimes quite disparate audiences, and each comes with its own complications that *Tolkien and the Classics* meets with mixed success.

As its editors explain, *Tolkien and the Classics* is part of an ongoing project organised by the Associazione Italiana Studi Tolkieniani (AIST), or the Italian Association of Tolkien Studies. The essays collected here are short, about ten pages apiece on average, and almost without exception they offer close, comparative readings that locate parallels between Tolkien and a second author from one of three broad time periods: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the 19th and 20th centuries. Each of these time periods comprises its own section of the volume, and – just as a sampling – the “classic” authors being compared with Tolkien here range from Homer, Euripides, and Virgil in the first section to Aquinas, Malory, and Chaucer in the second, and then Sir Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, J. M. Barrie, and Kenneth Grahame in the third.

As this partial list perhaps makes clear, one definite drawback of this collection is its very broad organisation schema. Though most of the Antiquity authors are Greek, those in other periods are largely British with a smattering of Italians and one American, and there is little recognisable organising principle to their inclusion beyond the contributors’ own preferences and the implication that these authors are “classical” members of a recognised literary canon. In their introduction, Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi maintain that these essays can “assess the parallels or differences produced by similar historical conditions such as war, or explore the common interest in a narrative theme, such as travel” (xvii), but not every essay situates its own argument along these lines: many simply compare the authors thus named. So while there could be merit to any one of these approaches if it had been clarified and discussed further, that particular framing felt lacking here, and without it the collection cannot entirely support either its aim to reach students and educators or its intention to situate Tolkien within an existing literary canon.

For another thing, it is difficult to place Tolkien in a canon of any kind without some exploration of what that canon is (Great? Global? Literary? By, for, and to whom?); how those within it have earned their own inclusion (Taught for centuries? Early examples in relevant genres? Foundational, by which we can often assume colonial as well, influences on other literatures?); and what value comes of canon-making in the first place (Who can be taught? How “seriously” we can take them? What stakes does this identification hold?). In addition, the desire to acclaim Tolkien a “great literary classic, comparable to those already accepted as ‘canonical’” (xvii) is a longstanding one that has been made by medievalists, modernists, and more, so this volume’s own addition to an ongoing conversation is not entirely clear. All things considered, this stated interest in placing Tolkien within a literary canon seems more in keeping with earlier eras of Tolkien scholarship. Likewise, this interest and intent are also tied up with that earlier question of why create and prioritise a canon at all: in a way, this feels like arguing that *if* Tolkien’s work, literary influences, and intertextual fluency meet some pre-existing standard – and one, moreover, that is never explicitly stated – then *this* will be the reason why we continue to read, write about, and teach him.

On a related note, this volume’s sometimes nebulous organising schema and its dedication to close readings over all else also mean that its ability to

reach students and educators was not always clear to me. Admittedly, I am an American educator and academic, and by virtue of working at American universities I am required to teach specific skills to undergraduate students in both my composition classes and many of my literature ones. So this experience certainly informed my own interest in Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi's claim that this collection is for students and educators. However, between the focus on canon-making, the range of paired authors discussed, the somewhat loose organisation schema, and the aforementioned focus on close reading above all else, the promised application for students did not fully materialise for me.

Nonetheless, I personally found many of these essays interesting and informative; many also offered thought-provoking readings that I will certainly return to. For instance, essays on characters from *The Silmarillion* such as Fëanor and Túrin Turambar are much rarer than essays on their successors in *The Lord of the Rings*, so it was pleasant to see these. Before coming into this volume, though, I had already been studying and writing about Tolkien's work for years, and I was reading these texts, even *The Silmarillion*, long before that. If I had not, I am not sure how accessible this volume would be. For less experienced readers, selections such as Sara Gianotto's comparison of Tolkien's Fëanor and Vittorio Alfieri's tragic characters – which she concludes by noting that both authors suggest that “however desperate the situation might be, and despite the constant oppression of fate, there is always a choice, and it is up to us to take it. If we do not choose, we leave nothing behind but the void” (153) – might be utterly opaque. As Gianotto's essay references without the space to explicate fully, the role of “fate” and desperation in Fëanor's story is complex, and the ramifications of this particular prince's decisions are utterly interwoven with just about every other narrative across the *Silmarillion*.

Likewise, a less experienced reader might be left with mistaken ideas about how far the critical conversations surrounding Tolkien's women characters have progressed. For instance, Gloria Larini's chapter, “To Die for Love: Female Archetypes in Tolkien and Euripides”, could be an interesting addition to conversations ongoing in works such as Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan's *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*. However, if this is the first introduction to this topic that a student were to encounter, they might be left with a mistakenly simplistic impression of Lúthien, Arwen, and even Alcestis as characters simply following the “archetypes” of beautiful women who sacrifice their lives for love (25–26). For students, I imagine it would be more beneficial to think beyond the bounds of archetypes and to consider women characters beyond just their relationships with men. Lúthien in particular is actually one of the most powerful and interesting characters in *The Silmarillion*, capable even of besting Morgoth, and placing her in relation with a certain archetype that perhaps partially fits her, but also occludes her, seems a disservice to new readers.

Then too, beyond even the sometimes-esoteric areas of Tolkien scholarship covered here, I am not entirely sure how students at the secondary and university level might use this collection. Classes on the Antiquity period might conceivably cover Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, Euripides, and Virgil alike, as flattened as Greek history and traditions have become in many education systems. However, authors such as Kenneth Grahame, Edgar Allan Poe, and the War Poets of WWI are at once tremendously different from one another and also less flattened into a single tradition or period, thanks to our own closer

proximity to them. With considerations such as this, it becomes unclear whether this volume was imagined to be a reference consulted by single sections or chapters, or else a bibliography of sorts, or perhaps a series of models for students' own essays; it is certainly not an introduction to Tolkien's work. So, whatever student use it might be intended to meet, *Tolkien and the Classics* could have framed and addressed that more clearly.

To return briefly to the essays themselves: although *Tolkien and the Classics* offers a truly mixed bag of reading opportunities, a few stand out. Amelia A. Rutledge, for example, maintains that Tolkien and Sir Walter Scott critique a "chivalric imaginary", and she covers an excellent range of characters who demonstrate the "negative effects of the fanatical will to domination" (126), moving beyond the easily recognisable example of Sauron to name Melkor, Fëanor, and Túrin Turambar as well. Elsewhere, Simone Bonechi's essay on Tolkien and the War Poets manages the heroic feat of fitting an exploration of pre-WWI social tensions, wartime trauma, and differing reactions to modernity into just ten pages. Long-time Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey anchors the collection with a partially autobiographical examination of both personal and literary connections between William Morris and Tolkien.

All things considered, coming to this volume from an American comparative literature program made for an interesting reading experience. Though my own program of study has emphasised many of the same practices espoused by the editors of and contributors to *Tolkien and the Classics* – particularly close reading and detailed comparison of disparate texts – in my experience these practices must also be accompanied by a greater engagement with the existing secondary scholarship. Although certain essays in this volume do cite important works by Tolkien scholars such as Verlyn Flieger, Jane Chance, John Garth, Thomas Honegger, and Tom Shippey (not to mention Shippey's own essay here), they do so less closely or critically than critics in the Anglo-American world have likely come to expect. In this regard, the short length of these essays – which in many cases felt more like conference papers from which longer articles would then be developed – has been a shortcoming difficult for many contributors to overcome.

Scholars who write on Tolkien's contemporaries and influences might find this volume interesting for some of the new connections it forges, if not necessarily for its very brief insights into such connections. For example, other than this volume, I have not encountered essays placing Tolkien in conversation with Marco Polo, as Valérie Morisi does with Chapter 5, or with Italian author Carlo Collodi of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* fame, as Giampaolo Canzonieri does in Chapter 18. Even in such instances, though, I imagine these essays might serve best as starting points for further, more developed conversations about links between Tolkien and those who either might have inspired him or were writing about similar concerns contemporaneously.

Biography: Maria Alberto is a PhD candidate at the University of Utah, where her research interests include adaptation, digital media, and popular culture. Her recent work includes essays in *Mythlore* and *Transformative Works and Cultures*, as well as forthcoming chapters on digital-born romance, fan-studies methodologies, and queer readings of Tolkien's legendarium. She is currently working on her dissertation, which explores connections between fantasy adaptations and uses of the term "canon."



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