



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and  
Fantasy Research  
journal.finfar.org

A Book Review:  
Winter, Jerome – *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal  
Globalism: Nostalgia for Infinity*

Jari Käkälä

Winter, Jerome. *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism: Nostalgia for Infinity*. University of Wales Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-78316-944-3

New Space Opera is generally understood to repurpose the stories of space-operatic intrigue on an interstellar scale. Often positioned in conscious opposition of the quasi-fascistic undertones of early twentieth-century space opera and its fascination with superweapons and supermen, the emerging subgenre has employed higher literary standards, more believable science, and more ethically considerate political commentary. Especially topical is the way many of these recent works hail from deliberate refutations of the sociopolitical assumptions of traditional space opera, often refocusing the genre on minority narratives in capitalist societies. However, critical scholarship in this area is still relatively sparse.

Jerome Winter's *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism* – the first installment in the new series *New Dimensions in Science Fiction* by University of Wales Press – makes a compelling case for reading works of New Space Opera as multilayered political allegories that respond to the globalization and neoliberalism of our time. Arguing that whereas traditional space opera links with corporate and technocratic visions of global capitalism, the 1990–2000s “globally oriented New Space Opera . . . pitches itself outside and against” (13) these neoliberal interests, Winter constructs a picture of the subgenre as a deliberate rehabilitation of the ideological presumptions of space opera.

### **From Neoliberal Hegemony towards Transnational Inclusion**

The study opens with an introductory section which outlines the prehistory of New Space Opera, and draws parallels between traditional space opera and the development of neoliberal globalism into the hegemonic ideology of the twentieth century. Building on these notions, the first chapter delves into refined analyses of the reinvention of the subgenre from 1960s onwards by examining how New Space Opera begins to sketch out political allegories of global cultural politics. In order to analyze this development, Winter takes the work of Samuel R. Delany as an example of the rising cyberculture and the unrest of the 1960s, and M. John Harrison as an indication of a move toward more sophisticated responses to the emerging technoculture. In his reading, the works of Bruce Sterling and C.J. Cherryh become further anticipations of the New Space Opera as they acknowledge the complexities and ambiguous alliances of the emerging neoliberal era, for example taking note of military Keynesianism, Reaganomics, and the dawn of the neoliberal era.

After laying this groundwork, Winter focuses on how fairly recent works of New Space Opera take on questions of class, gender, and race in respective chapters. With regard to class, Winter presents the works of Ian M. Banks and Ian MacLeod as central examples of the way New Space Opera employs progressive anarcho-socialist desires to combat neoliberal globalism. The fruitful comparison between these two authors allows focus on their radical left-wing politics, as extrapolated from living in a postcolonial globalized Scotland – and suggests that while they begin to reclaim space opera to the Left, they also reanimate the utopian potential of the subgenre in a search for emancipatory utopias to replace neoliberalism.

Following this, Winter focuses on issues of gender through Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian trilogy, and her employment of critical global feminism to combat the double colonization of imperialism and gender-based repression. As Winter compellingly demonstrates, Jones exposes the patriarchal presumptions of fetishized technocracy in traditional space opera and explores the contradiction of global feminism at the divide between neoliberalism and patriarchalism. In Winter's reading, these approaches constitute a nuanced body of work where Jones is looking for tools to fight against inequality which still severely affects women globally.

The final chapter examines the local and global resonances of transnationalization in the science fiction of Tobias Buckell, Karen Lord and Nalo Hopkinson as a way to discern how New Space Opera approaches questions of race. Terming their works as "Caribbean New Space Opera," Winter demonstrates that these authors depict the resistance to monocultural homogenization and map out routes for locally based micropolitics and the postcolonial public sphere to work against the detrimental effects of the privatization and deregulation campaigns of neoliberal globalism. As Winter sees it, Hopkinson, Buckell, and Lord interrogate the hegemonic ideal of free flow of capital, and thus illustrate a utopian, anti-globalization impulse.

By this combination of readings, Winter posits that contemporary science fiction from the Caribbean, Scotland, and global South is beginning to merge with global literature as it responds to American and British popular science fiction by engaging with sociopolitical and historical developments specific to the cultures where they are written. Acknowledging the ongoing development of the subgenre, Winter closes with a prognosis that the most powerful science fictional critique of neoliberal consensus is still to come – taking the works of Caribbean New Space Opera as an anticipation of a rich cultural representation which is enveloped by utopian impulse that contests the neoliberal present.

## Exploring New Space (Operas)

Winter's study offers a plethora of insightful analyses on recent works which have not yet received their due attention in science fiction criticism. However, there are some unfortunate issues with the presentation of his argument, as compelling as it is in itself. The fact that the book is based on a PhD dissertation and some previously published articles shines through at times. In addition to matters of practical editing which are likely to be avoided in subsequent installments of the new series – such as negligible slips where a chapter is sometimes called an article and some individual paragraphs which have the feel of a research proposal – the overall structure of the book resembles that of an article-based dissertation.

While the introductory chapter presents the theoretical framework, it is also a densely packed treatment of the prehistory of New Space Opera, and a discussion, insightful in itself, of how even the crudest pulp era political allegories evoke the emergence of the global phenomenon of neoliberalism. This results in a lengthy and somewhat fragmented introduction which is in danger of burying the outline of the general argument under theoretical and historical concerns. Given the length of the chapter, the sections which track the neoliberal impulses in space opera from pulps to the present could have been more effectively presented in a separate chapter.

The individual chapters, on the other hand, have the feel of standalone academic articles that combine theoretical concerns with rich and highly detailed readings of the chosen examples. This brings about a similar issue as the lengthy introductory section: while the final chapter implicitly concludes the entire monograph, there is no actual concluding chapter which would bring together and assess the implications of Winter's insightful analysis of New Space Opera through the themes of class, gender, and race in the preceding chapters. Apart from structural issues, this lack of a conclusion also leaves Winter's compelling analyses without a more explicit discussion of how each of his chapters points toward utopias within or beyond neoliberalism. Indeed, it would seem a logical conclusion to venture into further comparison of how differently these works address the utopian desire in their examinations of our neoliberal contemporary culture.

The need for a more extensive concluding section is made especially acute by Winter's style of writing where very complex syntax and long, verbose sentences with a high level of detail are at times in danger of overwhelming the overarching line of argumentation. As it is, Winter leaves it up to the reader to work out the final conclusions of his study, but while making the reader work hard is often welcome, framing the analysis with robust introduction and a concluding section would greatly enhance the accessibility and effect of the argument, especially in a study with this level of analytical sophistication. The chosen approach excludes most course textbook usage, which is unfortunate since Winter's study holds potential for offering a sweeping vista into the development of science fictional responses to neoliberalism.

Regardless, Winter's study provides a valuable foray into the analysis of New Space Opera and its potential for effective political allegory. Winter's main implication, that New Space Opera is "hard-wired to address the hyperbolic science-fictionality of our neoliberal present, if primarily from a globally Northern perspective" (129) certainly deserves further critical attention. As Winter surmises at the end of his study that the most powerful science fictional critique of neoliberal consensus is still to come, also his study can be seen as fruitfully breaking the ground for future critical examinations in this field.

*Biography:* Jari Käkälä (PhD, English Philology, Department of Modern Languages) currently works as an hourly paid teacher in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and as a freelance translator.