

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

A surrealist painting featuring a woman with long, dark, flowing hair. She is depicted in a floating, almost weightless position, with her body angled towards a large, glowing circular portal or vortex at the bottom right. Her right arm is extended, with her hand reaching towards the center of the portal. Her left leg is bent and raised, with her foot pointing upwards. The background is a complex, abstract composition of swirling colors and shapes, including warm oranges and yellows on the left, and cooler blues and greys on the right. The overall mood is dreamlike and ethereal.

Volume 4 • Issue 1 • July 2020  
ISSN: 2514-8915





## EDITOR'S NOTE

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### "Fantastika"

A term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute. It embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space. The goal of *Fantastika Journal* and its annual conference is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies and collaborations. We invite articles examining all mediums and disciplines which concern the Fantastika genres.

"Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction. But I have seen the face of time, and I can tell you: they are wrong. Time is an ocean in a storm. You may wonder who I am or why I say this. Sit down and I will tell you a tale like none you have ever heard." (*Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, 2003)

Time is traditionally seen as being linear; the progression of one moment to the next, a strict separation of past, present, and future based on sequential and causational relationships. Yet memory, imagination, day-dreaming, nostalgia, planning and many other routine processes blur the boundaries between them as temporal linearity appears to fold back upon itself. Certainly, we cannot avoid the reality that time conceptually propels us along in one direction, but it is simultaneously multidirectional and chaotic. Indeed, fiction and art are prime mediums in which we may challenge the conception of time itself, breaking its rigidity apart at the seams to further imagine the very possibility of otherwise impossible futures.

Now, more than ever, we seem to be living in strange times. However, this has also proven to be a time for compassion, support, and community. It is with these aspects in mind that we dedicate this issue in the hope that it will help provoke critical thinking about different temporalities and how the status quo can be productively eschewed. This special issue was born out of the 'After Fantastika' conference that took place at Lancaster University between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> July 2018. In many ways this event was temporally significant for the editorial team, following Chuckie Palmer-Patel's return to Canada after Performing Fantastika (but whose presence was spectrally invoked through Skype during the conference) while we meanwhile welcomed our current Reviews Editor, Matthew Elder, to the team. The conference reflected upon how definitions of time are negotiated within Fantastika literature, exploring not only the conception of its potential rigidity but also how its prospective malleability offers an avenue through which orthodox systems of thought may be reconfigured. By interrogating the principal attributes of this concept alongside its centrality to human thought, delegates considered how Fantastika may offer an alternate lens through which to examine the past, present, and future of time itself. We are grateful to both of the conference's keynotes, Caroline Edwards and Andrew Tate, for delivering their stimulating presentations which helped delegates to think productively about alternate temporal possibilities. This issue opens with an editorial from

## EDITOR'S NOTE

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Andrew who explores David Bowie through his relationship with televised images as well as an artist who thought about days still to come and how the present could be viewed through the anticipation of such futurities. Articles from Sarah Dodd, Alexander Popov, and Katie Stone originated as papers at the conference and their fantastic contributions help capture and reflect some of the conversations that took place over the two days. In addition, Molly Cobb, Sarah France, Nicholas Stavris, and Zoe Wible each bring their own critical and insightful analysis of temporality to what we hope will be an ongoing discussion. To conclude, the issue includes a veritable plethora of non-fiction reviews, fiction reviews, and conference reports that engage with literary texts and events from the last couple of years.

We are very grateful for the support of our colleagues in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University who have continually supported both the conference and the journal itself. We would like to particularly thank Brian Baker, Liz Oakley-Brown, Catherine Spooner, Andrew Tate, and Sara Wasson for supporting the Fantastika community. Our thanks are also extended to Mike Ryder, who stepped up to help as part of the conference team and was an invaluable member of the committee. Congratulations also to Chuckie and Toby on the birth of their son, Alexander Kirin Palmer, who recently celebrated his first birthday.

Finally, I wish to avoid the obvious rhetorical move of calling this issue 'timely' (for as Polly Atkin insightfully suggests, in her review later in this issue, this term frequently becomes a "shorthand for a kind of literary wokeness") but we do hope that you enjoy your time with the content contained within.

Kerry Dodd  
Special Issue Editor

The cover to this issue, designed by Sinjin Li, is an interpretation of the mythical figure of Kairos, the personification of the decisive or active moment. Kairos is traditionally depicted as a man with a golden forelock, the back of his head bald, with wings on his feet carrying a razor. He tips the balance.

This iteration of Kairos is inspired not only by myth, but by the lifestyle and culture of the Ama-San, or Japanese pearl divers. They actively seek, pursue, return to the surface for pause before re-submerging, continuing their hunt, in a series of actions that provoke and encourage continual change, as opposed to one seismic moment of opportunity.

Credit: Sinjin Li  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Sarah Dodd

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This paper uses Mark Fisher's work *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) as a starting point to read two of contemporary Chinese director Jia Zhangke's films: *Still Life* (2006), a study of two intertwined lives just before the flooding of the Three Gorges, and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), a brutal dramatization of four recent criminal cases. Although the films reflect Jia's documentary realism in their representation of today's China, they also involve slippages in time and space that lead to weird and eerie effects: an Unidentified Flying Object speeds across the sky over the soon-to-be flooded Three Gorges; a building takes off into the night like a rocket; snakes slither through a town suddenly transformed into something much older and more violent.

The films depict the landscape of contemporary China as a place of ruins and violence, where the headlong rush towards the future has left ordinary people behind, and I argue that it is these irruptions of the weird and eerie that provide the films with their unsettling power, letting Jia explore the consequences of this speeding-up of time in the period of economic reform since Mao Zedong's death. Whilst the work of Jia Zhangke has garnered much critical attention in recent years, the fantastical elements of his films have yet to be fully explored. Examining the role of time and space in these films can offer insights into how the real and the unreal intersect in his work, providing new possibilities for an exploration of the eeriness of the contemporary Chinese landscape, and enriching current scholarship on the weird and the strange.

#### THE TIME MACHINE AND THE CHILD: IMPERIALISM, UTOPIANISM, AND H. G. WELLS

Katie Stone

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H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) is filled with references to the figure of the child. This article argues for the temporal significance of these references. In it I explore the role of childhood in imperialist narratives of progress, in which the figure of the child is repeatedly

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used as a marker of that which is considered to be temporally other to the white, Western subject. The childlikeness of the citizens of the future, for example, is seen as a sign of their racial, cultural, and biological otherness; an otherness which is continually linked to their position in a distant time. However, this is by no means the only role played by the child in Wells' writing. Drawing on the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch, I argue that the figure of the child – who evokes both the past and the future as mutually constitutive states – can be used to subvert these linear narratives of teleological development. While the figure of the child is often deployed in order to reinforce such narratives, the proximity of childhood and adulthood, which particularly occupied writers at the turn of the century, undermines any stagist understanding of history. When both childhood and adulthood are considered to be performative categories, the act of separating them in time is rendered futile. By exploring the fields of child studies, evolutionary biology and Marxist philosophy alongside Wells' proto-science-fictional text I hope to draw out the utopian potential of the non-linear temporalities which the figure of the child in Wells' writing does evoke. I see this as part of a larger project to rehabilitate childhood as a significant temporal, political and science-fictional category.

### **"TURN[ING] DREAMS INTO REALITY": INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF *SEHNSUCHT* IN TWO TIME TRAVEL NARRATIVES BY ALFRED BESTER**

Molly Cobb

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Though originally derived from eighteenth century German Romanticism and present in cultural and literary spheres since then, the concept of *Sehnsucht*, or life-longings, has only been explored within psychology since around 2007. *Sehnsucht* in psychology is defined by Dana Kotter-Grühn et al in "What is it we are longing for? Psychological and demographic factors influencing the contents of *Sehnsucht* (life longings)" (2009) as a desire for alternative "experiences of life" which focus on "fantasies about ideal, alternative realities" (428). Considering these aspects of how *Sehnsucht* is meant to function psychologically, the relationship to Science Fiction is an interesting one, especially as it pertains to time travel. Science Fiction's ability to literalise the metaphor can make desires for an alternative life less unattainable due to the genre's capacity to fulfil longings that would normally reside outside of reality, especially when these fantasies are centred around escaping one's current time period. In this article I explore the way in which *Sehnsucht* highlights this connection between time travel, escapism, and fantasy within Science Fiction. The desire to escape can be seen in numerous texts by Alfred Bester, but the ways in which Bester engages with the psychology of escape in "Hobson's Choice" (1953) and "Disappearing Act" (1953) are particularly relevant when examining his work through the lens of *Sehnsucht*. In this article I use recent psychological research into how life-longings operate to reframe understandings of these texts by examining ideas of longing and fulfilment in Science Fiction and the relationship

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with *Sehnsucht*. Through this, I argue how ideas of time travel as escapist fantasy, and of literature in general which engages with the psychological desire for a better life, can be reformulated to consider how and why these fantasies are engaged with and fulfilled, for both the characters and readers.

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Nicholas Stavris

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In her forty-sixth novel, *Hazards of Time Travel* (2018), Joyce Carol Oates turns to the genre of speculative fiction in order to examine the developing relationship between human identity and surveillance in the twenty-first century. However, Oates' engagement with contemporary surveillance is not restricted to prophetic speculation. Instead, in her novel she constructs a temporal slide backwards from a not-too-distant future America, the inhabitants of which are subject to a strict regime of continuous observation and control, to a 1950s Wisconsin University Campus. In so doing, as this article contends, Oates returns the reader to an environment epitomised by psychological experimentation and behavioural conditioning, as well as an epoch that heavily informed the popularity and evolution of the dystopian novel, for the purpose of exploring the legacy of the Cold War era. This discussion reflects upon the dystopian future imagined by Oates, one influenced by a culture of post-9/11 securitisation, before examining the Cold War setting that Oates establishes following a narrative leap back through time. Crucially, and through a critical analysis of Oates' retrospective speculations, this article explores how contemporary surveillance methods, typified in the twenty-first century by our relationship with digital technologies, can have a detrimental impact on a person's identity. Oates engages with concerns surrounding surveillance, as many authors have done, through the use of the dystopian genre. However, and in contrast to speculative narratives that explore the present by looking ahead, Oates turns to the past in order to explore the present, fashioning in her novel a narrative timeline that connects issues of Cold War experimentation with contemporary practices of surveillance and control.

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Sarah France

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This article looks to Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) to examine how its post-apocalyptic space can be read as a critique of the destructive phallogentric and hierarchical structures that contributed to its fictional breakdown. Through an exploration of the novel's interactions with gender, sexuality, and maternity, I examine its critiques of the patriarchal culture that led



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to the repudiation of women and nature, the development of nuclear technology, and the destruction of Riddley's pre-apocalyptic world. By critiquing the phallic structures that led to apocalypse and examining the anxieties that fuel the patriarchal order, Hoban's text reflects an attempt to undermine these enduring structures through certain evocations of sexuality and gender: abject figures such as the phallic woman and the castrated man expose the fragility of identity categories and hierarchies of Western culture. Ultimately, the novel situates the metaphorical understanding of the symbolic maternal body as a framework through which to embody opposites and complicate boundaries, thereby undermining and threatening dichotomous binary systems.

**"THEN WHEN ARE WE? IT'S LIKE I'M TRAPPED IN A DREAM OR A MEMORY FROM A LIFE LONG AGO": A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF TEMPORAL DISORIENTATION AND REORIENTATION IN THE FIRST SEASON OF HBO'S TV SHOW *WESTWORLD***

Zoe Wible

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The filmic medium is inherently temporal, presenting information in succession. As David Bordwell highlights, formal conventions are used in classical narrative film in order to regulate the temporal relationship between shots or scenes, in order not to inadvertently confuse the spectator (1985, 74). Ellipsis, analepsis and prolepsis are common features, but usually signalled clearly in order to facilitate temporal orientation. A supernatural, fantastical or science-fictional element can disrupt these conventions, prompting a need for specific ways to signify temporal relationships. Time travel, temporal loops, memory wipes, and other devices can impact how spectators apprehend the information delivered, and the way they assign beliefs, memories and other mental states to a character at a given time.

*Westworld* tells the story of a Western-themed amusement park, in which 'guests' can interact with humanoid robots ('hosts') in a variety of often violent scenarios. The host's memory is (initially) wiped after every 'loop,' which prevents character memory or development, enabling them to retain a positive worldview. This premise also allows for the twist of the first season's ending where cross-cut scenes (which the spectator had been led to believe were happening concurrently) were actually taking place years apart. In both cases, the show guides the spectator's temporal orientation, mobilising and subverting traditional conventions of the medium and genres it belongs to. In this article I analyse how the science-fictional premise of *Westworld*, linked to a remediated narrative structure that borrows from video games, disrupts conventions around the temporal delivery of information, and provides a movement from disorientation to orientation.

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Hal Duncan's *The Book of All Hours* is a labyrinthine exploration of a constellation of themes: time, space, alternate realities, mythology, psychological archetypes. Time is represented as nonlinear and as intricately intertwined with a host of other variables, some of which of semantic rather than of causal nature. Characters reprise or subvert their roles in slightly different iterations of the same stories across the fictional metaverse, mapping out the immense possibilities of story-space and genre. This article analyses the governing dynamics through which the text organises itself in a self-referential framework, and how it structurally reinforces the idea of rewriting history, of eliminating determinism. Writing and art come to signify an act of politically charged cognitive reorganisation. A mythological rebellion cast in modernist forms.

The analysis attempts to demonstrate that the byzantine plot articulates in parallel a kind of genre theory, or what is possible to write. This apparatus is interrogated through the theory of fictional semantics, building on the work of Lubomír Doležal, Thomas Pavel, Ruth Ronen, and Northrop Frye. Associated notions such as *possible worlds*, *compossibility*, *narrative modalities*, *dual systems* and *salient structures* are applied to Duncan's imagined reality in order to elucidate how access to fictional semantics from within the text itself becomes its principal novum. This is in turn used to put into focus the constructed nature of demarcations between actual and fictional, which ultimately brings forward rather radical aesthetic and political implications. The article concludes by tentatively projecting its analysis of genre, world, and character to nonhuman modal systems.

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## EDITORIALS

# AFTER BOWIE: APOCALYPSE, TELEVISION AND WORLDS TO COME

Andrew Tate

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Let's start with an image or, more accurately, an image of images from a 1976 film. A character called Thomas Jerome Newton is surrounded by the dazzle and blaze of a bank of television screens. He looks vulnerable, overwhelmed and enigmatic. The moment is an oddly perfect metonym of its age, one that speaks uncannily of commercial confusion, artistic innovation and political inertia. The film is Nic Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* – an adaptation of Walter Tevis' 1963 novel – and the actor on screen is David Bowie, already celebrated for his multiple, mutable pop star identities in his first leading role in a motion picture. In an echo of what Nicholas Pegg has called "the ongoing sci-fi shtick that infuses his most celebrated characters" – including by this time, for example, Major Tom of "Space Oddity" (1969), rock star messiah Ziggy Stardust and the post-apocalyptic protagonists of "Drive-In Saturday" (1972) – he performs the role of an alien (Kindle edition, location 155).

Bowie's screen status is complicated by the fact of his extraordinary fame and influence as an inventive recording artist with a penchant for theatrical, visually distinctive performance. Julie Lobalzo Wright observes that although he was "never [...] a commercially viable cinematic star" Bowie "can be viewed as a successful crossover star in the cinema owing to three main areas associated with his music star image: visual transformation, emphasis on performance and his non-naturalistic, 'alien' image" (pp.230-231). In the four decades following *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Bowie appeared in many films that might belong to the complex set of genres associated with Fantastika. These roles often play on the aura of Bowie's perceived (and perhaps carefully constructed) other worldliness: for example, he played an angst-ridden vampire in *The Hunger* (1983), Jareth the Goblin King in *Labyrinth* (1986), and a missing FBI agent in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1993). In one of his final acting roles, he portrayed the inventor Nikola Tesla in the 2006 film adaptation of Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995). Bowie was also willing to mock aspects of his heavily mystified identity by appearing as heightened, alternative versions of himself in a number of films and television shows, including the comedies *Zoolander* (2001) and Ricky Gervais' *Extras* (2006). More recently, Bowie's musical and screen personae have been quoted in the performances of actors in mainstream Science Fiction cinema: Michael Sheen, for example, cites Ziggy Stardust as part of the inspiration for his role as Castor in *Tron: Legacy* (2010). Similarly, Michael Fassbender has said that his performance as the android David in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) was partly modelled on Bowie's role as Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (*Huffington Post*).

Newton, in common with many of Bowie's protagonists since Major Tom, is lost, cut adrift from their home, a stranger in a strange land. The character has travelled to earth to try to save his own drought ravaged planet. He reshapes his body to assume a recognizably human form and, in



the film at least, he looks an awful lot like David Bowie in his mid-70s nervy pomp. This alien visitor uses his highly advanced scientific knowledge to become a wealthy businessman with the objective of returning to and saving his apparently dying home planet. However, Newton, in turn, is exploited, becomes corrupted by earthly excesses and his mission fails. The narrative, a rich study of alienation infused by Cold War anxiety, has inspired alternative readings that have interpreted it, for example, variously as a defamiliarizing Christian parable and, via Deleuze, as a critique of subjectivity.<sup>1</sup>

Bowie's iteration of Tevis' character is beguiled by the power of small screen mass entertainment: "The strange thing about television is that it - doesn't *tell* you everything. It *shows* you everything about life on Earth, but the true mysteries remain." This statement interprets television as both revelatory and mystical, a medium that conceals as much as it discloses. Newton's fascination with the screen becomes an addiction; he loathes this seductive human technology but cannot resist its power. In an article on Bowie and film, Frances Morgan notes the disparity between the stranded, earthbound alien's anxiety about these relentless images ("Get out of my mind, all of you!") and the actor's own grasp of what our obsession with this mode of entertainment signifies: "Bowie knows – even if Newton doesn't – that the images are part of us and they're not going anywhere" ("Video On: The Cinema in David Bowie"). The film, and this moment specifically, connects with Bowie's fascination with technology, the future and the family of speculative genres including dystopian and post-apocalyptic romances that haunt his work.

This fear-fascination regarding popular entertainment and technology features on one of the lighter moments on *Station to Station* (1976), the first album that Bowie recorded after playing Newton. The character's displacement and estrangement bleeds into the off kilter, questing mysticism of the album and even the image of Bowie on sleeve is a still from the film. Indeed, the more sinister elements of Newton's character arc fed into Bowie's subsequent pop persona, the Thin White Duke. "TVC-15," a surreal and curiously upbeat number, a hallucinatory story about being swallowed by a television, is probably inspired by Newton's infatuation with the medium.<sup>2</sup> Of all of his back catalogue, this oddity of a song was the one he chose to open his four song set at Live Aid in 1985. The fundraising concert was broadcast to an estimated audience of 1.5 billion on television screens around the world.

\*

In this editorial, I will explore Bowie's relationship with television, and address both the ways in which he responds to the medium of moving pictures and his legacy as a vital intertext in twenty-first century genre television.

Long before he recreated himself, for the first of many times, young David Jones, a child of post-war Britain, became part of the first generation to watch television. He was a fan, in particular, of Nigel Kneale's Bernard Quatermass stories, beginning with the *Quatermass Experiment* (1953), the BBC's first attempt at Science Fiction, screened a good decade before *Doctor Who*. For Simon Critchley, Bowie's early success is "connected to a latent, low-budget science-fiction exuberance,"

a sensibility that is “more *Quatermass and the Pit* than *Stark Trek*” and that became “a template for the ruined landscapes through which the spaceboys and girls of glam, punk and post-punk would run wearing outrageous, often homemade and slightly crappy outfits” (*On Bowie*, Kindle location 175).

A blend of alien mystery, technology and horror tropes bled into Bowie's work from the late 1960s. The ‘Age of Bowie,’ to borrow the title of Paul Morley's recent memoir, is also the age of television: he was shaped by this evolving, frequently maligned medium but he, in turn, has had a weird and lasting influence on its identities. Bowie's emergence as an artist also coincided with the Cold War era Space Race and a renewed interest in travelling to the stars. Space travel gave Bowie a way of thinking about transcendence and immanence, belonging and isolation, community and individuality. Bowie's work, since at least the release of “Space Oddity” in 1969, had displayed a fascination, an obsession even with interstellar travel, life beyond earth, with messianic Star Men who might deliver human beings from a cycle of violence and hatred that seemed to dominate the headlines in the early 1970s. Pegg reads the SF style of his early work as a reflection of existential anxiety: “the alien characters of his early songs merely exploited outer space as a metaphor for his own inner space” (location 163). Alongside this sense of alienation that he translated into an idiosyncratic, DIY SF vocabulary, is a similarly longstanding fascination with dystopian scenarios. In one sense, this anticipates the twenty-first-century turn to future fear, given the powerful soubriquet of the ‘new catastrophism’ by the late sociologist John Urry (*What is the Future*, 34). “Five Years,” for example, the opening song on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) is explicitly apocalyptic in observing a world defined by consumerism that is oblivious to its impending destruction. The scenario of incipient global destruction has become a commonplace of pop culture narrative but, significantly, Neil Cross, the writer of *Hard Sun* (2018) – an apocalyptic thriller made by the BBC and Hulu – specifically cites Bowie's “exultant” and “life-affirming song about the end of days” as a defining influence on the show (*Entertainment Weekly*). This idiosyncratic vision of the end of the world has had a longer cultural legacy than its creator might have imagined in the early 1970s.

Although he was drawn to dystopian scenarios as a storytelling possibility, including an Orwellian influence on the 1984 inspired elements of *Diamond Dogs* (1974), Bowie's work is frequently less bleak than the catastrophic futures that occupy much of our shared contemporary imagination. There are optimistic SF and, perhaps naively Nietzschean ideas on “Oh! You Pretty Things,” a song that appears on Bowie's critical breakthrough album, *Hunky Dory* (1971). The lyric is a breezy take on new generational conflict and imagines the next phase in human evolution, *the homo superior*, that will connect with alien races to inherit the earth. The term *homo superior* – used previously in the *X-Men* comics – was also employed a couple of years later in science fiction show aimed at a teenage audience, *The Tomorrow People* (1973-1979). The titular characters were children and young adults whose incipient supernatural powers – telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation – marks them out as a new phase in human evolution. Nicholas Pegg notes that this is more than a coincidence: Bowie had met with the show's creator, Roger Price, at Granada in 1971, where the two men exchanged ideas (location 7857).

*Hunky Dory* also features Bowie's most earthly of otherworldly songs. "Life on Mars?" is a song that brings together Bowie's fascination with space and his penchant for a gentle surrealism. Unlike "Space Oddity" or "Starman," released a year later, the song's narrative has very little to do with the idiom of SF, indeed the only real connection with the genre is the yearning titular question, returned to in the chorus. The song itself is saturated by adolescent suburban yearning and the power of moving images, even those that rely on cliché. Its narrator presents the world as a (sometimes disappointing) spectacle. The girl in the song is "hooked to the silver screen" but the film proves to be little more than "a saddening bore." The protagonist intuits that her own life has become a series of gestures, played out by others, undermining freedom or spontaneity. This might even connect with the well-known but remarkable origins of "Life On Mars?" Although Bowie is often seen as embodying individuality and originality in his pursuit of art, this particular song was a response, a rewriting of an earlier piece of music. In 1968 Bowie, a songwriter for hire, had pitched an English language version of "Comme D'Habitude," a French chanson, called "Even a Fool Learns to Love." It was rejected and, instead, rewritten by Paul Anka as "My Way." "Life on Mars?" is Bowie's own, later response. And, just as the lyrics address the escalating mediation of everyday life, so too is the song a kind of palimpsest. However, it also suggests the complexity of so-called postmodern pastiche: mimicry, adaptation, allusion, reworking and imitation do not necessarily undermine affect. Indeed, it would be hard to think of a more emotionally charged song, something that is perpetuated rather than diminished by its synthetic nature.

For a song by a very young man – Bowie was 24 when the song was recorded in 1971 – it is surprisingly full of ennui. Paul Morley links the song's powerful invocation of longing to Bowie's childhood move to the London suburbs: 'The question [. . .] was not really was there life on Mars, but was there life in places like Bromley, so distant from the centre of things it might as well be millions of miles in outer space' (*The Age of Bowie*, location 1257). This aspect of the song has a vivid afterlife in popular culture and, in particular, on television. In 2006, the BBC launched an intriguing drama series named *Life on Mars* (the interrogative of the original song was removed), created by Matthew Graham, Ashley Pharoah and Tony Jordan. This television adaptation is, in a sense, one of many cover versions of a classic Bowie song; one that mixes admiration and irreverence for the original by taking elements of the original and creating something new, much as Bowie often did in his own art. The show fuses a police procedural narrative with the SF or Fantasy trope of time travel: Sam Tyler, a detective in Greater Manchester Police, has a car accident in 2006 and wakes up in the same space in 1973. In a voice over, used as part of subsequent episodes opening titles, Sam reflects on the alternative explanations for his predicament: 'Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time? Whatever's happened, it's like I've landed on a different planet. Now, maybe if I can work out the reason, I can get home'.

The show plays as a kind of lovingly critical pastiche of 70s cop shows but with an alien visitor: 1990s Sam is as alien to his own past as Ziggy or Thomas Jerome Newton are to earth. The comedy and drama of the show depends on the friction between his contemporary ethics and the frequently bigoted worldview of his 1973 DI Gene Hunt; Hunt – who frequently refers to himself as the Jean Genie, another of Bowie's alter egos – is an example of hypermasculinity, a kind of id to

Tyler's ego. The show both exploits and critiques nostalgia – that longing for a lost home in the past. It also has an ambivalent relationship with the present which is represented as bureaucratic, dull and affectless. In a drama dominated by aggressive male egos, Bowie's challenge to 70s masculinity and gender constructs haunts the show. The narrative arc of the first season ultimately sees Sam encounter his childhood self and his own parents; the first series allows him to understand a trauma that he had never come to terms with (his father's criminal identity and the true reason that he left the family). It is apocalyptic in this sense of unveiling something that has been hidden; we might say that it attempted to disturb something repressed in British culture: a post-millennial world that saw itself as progressive, just, inclusive and emotionally evolved was haunted by Gene Hunt, a shadow self that the country recognised only too well. The fact that the version of 1973 that was created for the drama was highly synthetic and full of anachronisms that subtly and sometimes deliberately punctured its surface level realism was part of the point: both Sam's experience and the viewers is of an highly televisual, mediated vision of the past, shaped by cop shows, music and popular narrative. It also asks questions about authenticity and imitation; the masks that we wear in our public life and the subjectivities that we inhabit. These, in a sense, are very much the kind of questions with which Bowie wrestled throughout his creative life. He donned illusory, fantastical guises – Ziggy; Aladdin Sane; the Thin White Duke; characters on stage and screen – to think about reality. As Critchley notes, "[t]he truth content of Bowie's art is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it" (location 199). Sam Tyler and Gene Hunt, iterations of different kinds of masculinity in crisis, were created by Tony Jordan, Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah but, even without the zigzag makeup, they might also belong to Bowie's gallery of personae.

Bowie's "Life On Mars?" is referenced in a less direct – but similarly powerful – way in *American Gods* (2017). The narrative imagines a battle in the contemporary US between the old gods, including a version of Odin known as Mr Wednesday, played as a con man by Ian McShane, and the new gods of technology and globalisation. Gillian Anderson plays Media in the show's first season, a god who appears in various celebrity guises (Lucy Ricardo aka Lucille Ball; Marilyn Monroe; Judy Garland) including, very vividly, as Bowie in a replication of the "Life on Mars" suit. Like Bowie, she is represented as a chameleon, one who responds to a shifting landscape.

Twenty-first century television might be regarded as a kind of idol, an alternative to religion, but in key instances it examines displaced spirituality, including traditional ideas of eschatology and less focused forms of religious yearning. The post-secular exploration of spirituality in *American Gods* is also vital to Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah's sequel to *Life on Mars*. *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010) features another traumatised, time travelling detective. Alex Drake, a police psychologist who had worked with Sam Tyler and heard his stories of 1973, is shot in the line of duty and wakes up in 1980. She encounters Gene Hunt and his team, relocated to London, and, like Sam before her tries to return home. *Ashes to Ashes*, set in 1981-1983, continued to push the psychological elements of *Life on Mars* but also ultimately had a more explicitly theological and spiritual dimension. The sequel heightened the overall narrative's focus on mortality, the value of life itself and the pervasive nature of grief. The title borrows the name of Bowie's 1980 (number 1) single – itself an allusion to the Christian rite of burial – and cites the song's apocalyptic imagery. A version of the Pierrot clown



that Bowie plays in its striking video haunts Drake throughout the first series as a kind of angel of death but also as a clue to understanding her past.

The pop theology intensifies in its last season in which the world of Gene Hunt is revealed to be a kind of purgatory for dead police officers, particularly those with unresolved problems. The final episode, playing out as a battle between light and dark, is both Miltonic and Bowiesque. Tanja Stark argues that the artist's "work has always had overt and cryptic markers of a spiritual seeker, his grappling with the Numinous manifesting in riddlesome twists across half a century" ("Crashing Out With Sylvian" 97). Bowie was fascinated by religion throughout his life; he was often, like many of his peers, hostile to its institutional forms but his work also engaged with prayer, God, the power of belief in a variety of forms. He also, surprisingly and spontaneously, fell to his knees and recited the Lord's Prayer at the Freddie Mercury Tribute concert in 1992. It was an odd gesture – televisual, perhaps; to some blasphemous, to others, worryingly conservative. Yet, significantly, it was a typical blurring of boundaries, an image that questioned the line between the sacred and the profane. It was, in a peculiar sense, a moment of apocalyptic television in which a cultural icon seemed to both hide and reveal himself.

Late in life, Bowie returned to the figure of Thomas Jerome Newton, his lonely alien, longing for home, still transfixed by television screens. *Lazarus* (2015), alongside the album *Blackstar* (2016), was the artist's final shared vision. Bowie wrote the music and lyrics for this stage show, part re-writing and part sequel to *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, with a book written by Enda Walsh. Newton, played in this version by Michael C. Hall, languishes in isolated splendour in his apartment, haunted by disturbing visions of two worlds in crisis. He also sings a number of very famous songs by David Bowie. The title, and the opening song, is an allusion to the friend of Jesus who, in the Gospel of John, dies and is raised to life (John 11. 1-44). Bowie's song and the show are both marked by spiritual longing and uncertainty.

Bowie's work plays with apocalypse in a double sense. It is fascinated by the secondary sense of cosmic destruction, of eschatological end and beginning; but also with *apocalypsis* as revelation, unveiling. He often remained silent, ambiguous and cryptic but this demanded further interpretation, further apocalyptic unveiling by his listeners, spectators and readers. Apocalypse is partly about survival, life after loss and grief. Bowie's work, from "Space Oddity" to *Lazarus*, wrestles with the spectre of death but seems to find hope and joy as well as melancholia in the absurdity of life itself. It is easy to sentimentalise and idolise creators, especially when they die. Yet Bowie, like many traditional seers, viewed the present through the lens of an anticipated future: he was oriented towards a time to come, an artist who wanted to think about the next day rather than yearning for a lost golden age.

## NOTES

1. See Dene October, "The (becoming-wo) Man Who Fell to Earth," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power, Routledge, 2015, pp. 245-262; Gerard Loughlin, "The Man Who Fell To Earth" in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Blackwell, 2001, pp.24-47.
2. For a detailed discussion of the song and its origins, see Pegg, location 11248 ff.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the editorial team at Fantastika for inviting me to speak at the 2018 conference and to submit this piece to the journal. I'm also indebted to Brian Baker, Arthur Bradley and Pete Redrup for many years of conversations about Bowie.

## BIONOTE

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## ARTICLES

# IN THE RUINS OF TIME: THE EERIE IN THE FILMS OF JIA ZHANGKE

Sarah Dodd

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Since making his feature debut in 1997, Chinese film-maker Jia Zhangke has made a name for himself as a chronicler of China's urban landscapes and disaffected youth, turning an unforgiving eye on the damage inflicted by the country's transformation into an economic superpower. His films depict the landscape of contemporary China as a place of ruins and violence, where the headlong rush towards the future has left ordinary people behind. Amidst the documentary realism, however, the strange intrudes; surreal, impossible images which unsettle the films' representation of reality, and which plunge their characters back into a mythic past.

Whilst Jia's work has garnered much critical attention in recent years, the fantastical elements of his films are still being explored. Jia himself has stated that there is nothing stranger in his films than has really occurred in today's China:

I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable events have occurred in reality. As they say, "reality is more exceptional than fiction" (Lu, 2006, 126).

This article uses Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) as a starting point to approach two of Jia's films – *Still Life* (2006), a study of two intertwined lives just before the flooding of the Three Gorges, and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), a brutal dramatisation of four recent criminal cases. I argue that the films explore the consequences of the speeding-up of time in the period of economic reform since Mao Zedong's death, providing slips into eerie and mythic time which draw attention to what is being lost and who is being left behind. The article will discuss how Fisher's work can open up new possibilities for an exploration of eeriness in contemporary Chinese film, whilst the focus on the Chinese context can enrich current scholarship on the fantastic and strange.

## China and the Eerie

A man looks over the rubble of a town. A dog wanders into view and wanders away again. In the distance are mountains, and the water which will soon rise. Suddenly, figures wearing masks and white suits come into view, spraying something from packs on their backs. We never learn who these figures are, or exactly what they are doing. They seem to come from another place, another time, another film. Later, an Unidentified Flying Object appears, a building takes off like a rocket into the

night, a tightrope walker makes his way between two ruins.

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* is set in a town about to be flooded as part of the Three Gorges Dam project. It bears all the marks of Jia's realism, yet is interrupted by moments of strangeness. Are these odd repetitions, coincidences, and out-of-place images 'uncanny'? How are we to read them? Sigmund Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* has become a standard way to approach texts and ideas caught up in the jumble of terms relating to the strange, the fantastic, the weird, the eerie. But its influence has perhaps meant that other ways of looking at these texts have been ignored. The *unheimlich* is tied up in ideas of homely and unhomely, the concepts bleeding into one another until the outside is on the inside, the strange within the familiar. Mark Fisher sees this as "a secular retreat from the outside... always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside" (10).<sup>1</sup> It also presupposes a shared understanding of 'home' which is very much situated within a modern, 'Western' way of thinking, in which the home (and by extension, the 'safe' human world) is within protected, man-made boundaries that embody an absolute separation between inside/outside in all forms. Everything 'other' is kept outside – the spiritual, the dead, the past. But this separation is not necessarily so strict in other cultural contexts, or when the experience of home is unsettled, as in the case of migrant workers or others for whom this link is broken. In the Chinese context there are thought to be more porous boundaries between the living and the dead, between the natural and the supernatural worlds, which mean that the movement between familiar/strange and inside/outside loses some of the power upon which the uncanny hinges – the bringing to light of what was secret and hidden.<sup>2</sup> From some of the earliest Chinese tales of the strange to contemporary novels and films, the otherworld is present within this one.<sup>3</sup>

Within this context the revealing of 'unhomeliness' – the strange within the familiar – is nothing special. The home, when it contains an ancestral tablet or altar, *already* links the living to the dead, the past is already 'present.' There is a more fluid understanding of time here than is allowed by the uncanny repetitions and returns within Freud's argument.

Fisher's conception of the eerie, then, can perhaps provide a more nuanced approach. He is focused much more on ideas of landscape and place, and his formulation is to do with presence and absence – or to be more specific, the *failure of absence* or *failure of presence*; something where there should be nothing, nothing where there should be something (61). He explains this firstly through the example of a bird's 'eerie cry' – "if there is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex... a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird"; and secondly through the example of ruins or abandoned structures, where we are forced to ask the questions "*what happened* and *why?*" (62, original emphasis). Here, Fisher tackles the issue of the strange not from the inside (taking the human world as central) but from the perspective of the outside, allowing for a more neutral positioning which does not rely on the presumption of shared cultural conceptions of home.

Yet Fisher still takes a Western-centric approach of taking for granted the separation between the human and the supernatural worlds, underlining the 'otherness' of anything outside



of human experience. Behind all manifestations of the eerie, he argues, is “a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge... that lie beyond common experience” (62). In order to make use of this to approach Jia’s films, we need to supplement his theoretical framework with a different understanding of the strange and of “alterity.” Through an examination of the films through the lens of the eerie, I will argue that doubleness and multiplicity are vital to an understanding of eerie effects in the Chinese context, something which many Western theories of the fantastic and strange do not take into account – that things can be both natural and strange, both possible and unexpected.

### Jia Zhangke

Jia Zhangke is part of what’s known as the ‘Sixth Generation,’ or ‘Urban Generation’ of Chinese filmmakers; directors and writers who were born towards the end of the Mao era, came of age in the early reform era in the 1980s – when China was opening its doors to the rest of the world and to a market economy – and started making their own films in the wake of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the subsequent crack-down on cultural expression. Their lives and work have therefore been marked by great shifts in the country’s experience of time, including the Cultural Revolution, which was an attempt to destroy the ‘four olds’ of ‘Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas,’ and rocket the country into a socialist future under Chairman Mao’s guidance; a wiping out of the past which, as we shall see, has led to an eerie return in the present.

After 1976 the Communist Party began to try to distance itself from the excesses of the Mao era, and bring about a new era of ‘Reform and Opening.’ This saw another leap, from closed Communist country to major player on the world stage. The pace of development has seen the growth of megacities, and huge changes in social and economic experience. The directors of the Sixth Generation, however, turn their cameras away from the glossy shopping malls of Beijing and the skyscrapers of Shanghai, and towards those urban areas such as the *xiancheng* or ‘county-level city’; massive by United Kingdom standards but insignificant in comparison to the so-called ‘first tier cities’ which have been at the forefront of economic development. It is in these lesser known urban landscapes that Jia Zhangke finds his canvas and explores the effects of ‘sped-up’ time on those who have been left behind. His protagonists are migrant workers, hostesses, petty thieves – characters on the margins of society who are failing to benefit from the Party’s dreams, haunted by a past they have lost and a future in which they are not welcome. The landscape of his films is one of construction sites and the ruins of bulldozed homes. As the comparative literary scholar Akbar Abbas observed in a lecture in 2008:

In these films, everything happens in a present made up of two absences: on the one hand, the no-longer-there, a communist past that has gone forever; on the other hand, the not-yet-there, the as yet unrealized hope that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will prove to be the Chinese century. (10)

These absences open up the films to a reading through the lens of the eerie. Different temporalities bleed through in strange ways – not only the Communist past, but also the older past that the excesses of the Mao era tried to destroy, and even perhaps future and fictional time.

### ***Still Life: The Eeriness of Ruins***

*Still Life* tells two stories, connected only by their setting – the ancient town of Fengjie, which is soon to be flooded by the construction of the Three Gorges dam, the world's largest hydropower project.<sup>4</sup> The project can be seen as part of the state's 'grand narrative'; a rhetoric of unbroken progress and grand plans, looking confidently towards the future. But the Three Gorges has played much earlier roles in the country's historical narrative, in the mythmaking surrounding the People's Republic of China (including Mao's famous swims in the Yangtze, proving his vigour as a leader), and further back still, in art and poetry. There are always layers of time here, something the film's soundscape highlights when a passenger ferry on the river broadcasts a poem by the Tang poet Li Bai:

As long ago as the Tang dynasty, the great poet Li Bai wrote  
these lines: "From the walls of Baidi high in the coloured dawn  
/ To Jiangliang by nightfall is a journey of one thousand miles /  
Yet the cry of monkeys from the riverbank behind me / Carries  
to my tiny boat over and over the thousand peaks" (*Still Life*).

As the voice on the loudspeaker continues, the poem gives way to the rhetoric of the Three Gorges Project, and a television screen on board the boat shows footage of Chairman Mao and other former leaders visiting the region. Philippa Lovatt, in an article on Jia Zhangke's "spectral soundscapes," points out that this mixing of audio and visual, of past and present, provides, "a sense of multiple temporalities – the copresence of the revolutionary past with the 'progressive' official discourse of the present" (427). This cinematic layering is repeated again and again in different ways throughout the film, calling attention to the lost and eerily returning past.

The protagonists themselves are searching both for their pasts and their futures. The first of the film's stories follows Han Sanming, a migrant labourer who has come to look for his wife, who he had bought from traffickers years ago, and who had been rescued by the police and sent back to Fengjie. The second follows Shen Hong, who has come to look for her husband and ask for a divorce. Both characters wander through the ruined landscape, watching, occasionally talking, rarely showing emotion. Han Sanming finds work on one of the many construction (or destruction) sites, and the camera gazes across wide vistas of ruined buildings.

The director had originally come to Fengjie to make a documentary on the artist Liu Xiaodong. But fascinated by the landscape and the large-scale demolitions, he ended up staying and making a feature film as well:

When you approach the town of Fengjie by boat, it's like taking a trip back to ancient China. The landscapes have been written about and painted so much that they really do seem to have come out of a Tang Dynasty poem. As soon as the boat docks, though, you're thrust back into the modern world. It's extremely chaotic (Jia, 2008, in Mello, 278).

There's a doubleness to the experience of time in this description of Fengjie – both past and present together, reflecting the importance of landscape to the present. A focus on the landscape in the Chinese context can help develop Fisher's 'perspective of the outside,' further decentring the human and the human world. The immensity of the landscape has played a key role in developing the understanding of the relationship between the human and the natural world in China. From some of the earliest writing on the strange in China, human agency and centrality has been questioned, and the human place in the world unsettled.<sup>5</sup> In visual art the sheer size of the landscape has been emphasised; traditional painting dwarfs its figures in huge landscapes, something which *Still Life* recalls in its horizontal panning shots, which, as Sheldon Lu in "Gorgeous Three Gorges at Last Sight: Cinematic Remembrance and the Dialectic of Modernization" (2009) points out, "mimic the physical act of unrolling scrolls of traditional Chinese landscape painting, and evokes a sense of the immensity of geological time as we imagine how little this view has changed over history" (52).<sup>6</sup>

But this view *is* changing. In a particularly pointed scene, Han Sanming holds up a ten yuan note. On one side is the face of Mao Zedong. On the other, the very spot by the Yangtze River where the film is set, which is about to be lost to the water. There are two pasts disappearing here – the long past embodied by the landscape itself, and the Communist past embodied by Mao. Both are being replaced by what that ten yuan note and many more like it have bought, the "immensity of geological time" being shaken by the forces of the globalised contemporary capitalist world. The landscape which had once dwarfed its human inhabitants is being changed, drowned.

This idea of 'disappearing land' plays an important part in Fisher's own conceptualization of the eerie. His book emerged from a collaborative audio-essay called *On Vanishing Land* (2013), on the Suffolk landscape, and he engages with the strange presences and absences of the English landscape. Other writers who have written on "the English eerie," such as Robert MacFarlane in "The Eeriness of the English Countryside" (2015), argue that it explores landscape in terms of its anomalies rather than its continuities (n.p.). Sceptical of ideas of 'dwelling' and 'belonging' and of packaging the past as 'heritage,' it is "an attempt to account for the turbulence of England in the era of late capitalism," and articulate pressing contemporary concerns, including environmental damage (MacFarlane). In the Chinese context this environmental damage – and the human damage inflicted alongside it – are particularly pressing, and approaching contemporary film through ideas of vanishing, absences, and spectres, seems wholly apt. But the deliberate, man-made vanishing in China adds an extra sense of urgency.

Most of the objects and places on screen are about to be lost. Everywhere we see buildings marked with the character *chai* – to be demolished. The soon-to-be-gone is everywhere in the present, making Fengjie into a haunted landscape even before its buildings and people have vanished. Ruins are inextricably linked with both a sense of anthropocentric belonging and loss, so when they are still inhabited they become charged with an eerie presence. This in-between state, so key to Jia's films and to contemporary China, is not considered by Fisher, but provides an important addition to his theoretical framework. It also provides a link between the physical buildings and the people within them – those inhabitants who are being forced to move, and the migrant workers who move to find a better life. They too are in-between, forgotten, or unseen. The modern word for ruins in Chinese, 废墟 (*feixu*), contains the character for 'abandon, give up, discard,' and the sense of being thrown away, discarded, is as apt for the people on screen as for the buildings.

Unlike Fisher's ruins, surrounded by an enigma, we know what is happening here – we see Han Sanming and the other migrant workers in the process of demolishing the buildings, and we know why. Yet part of what gives the film's ruined landscapes their eerie power is the unquestioning acquiescence to this vanishing. Han does not question what he is doing – none of the migrant workers do; it is enough that they are being given work. But it is work that turns them spectral, compelling those already on the verge of precarity to destroy their own past in order to eke out a semblance of a future, even though – paradoxically – this also removes them from that future. They have been made as ghostly and 'in-between' as the residents of Fengjie's ruined buildings, through a globalised capitalist mode that is itself (as will be discussed below) eerie and spectral. The longer he stays in Fengjie the more Han Sanming comes to the same unquestioning acceptance as its long-term residents, who dully watch the waters rise. Newly arrived, he is bewildered – he asks the motorcycle taxi driver why he would drive him to an address that he knows is already completely submerged. But the residents, in their soon-to-be demolished homes, just shrug. There is an absence of questions at the film's heart – an acceptance of ruin and loss which echoes Fisher's argument that "the eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments" (13). The eerie lacks the quality of shock associated with other aspects of the strange and instead has to do with a "detachment" from the everyday (13). The film's characters watch the disappearance of the past impassively, just as the appearance of a UFO passes without comment, collapsing past, present, and future, reality and fiction.

This can be seen as an example of negative hallucination – of *not seeing what is there*, which is, Fisher says, "both stranger and more commonplace than seeing what is not there" (74-75). Overlooking what does not fit in with our world view is common; we view the world through a constant 'editing process.' But here there seems to be a willing failure to see, a negative hallucination which has become so normal that it is unnoticed but utterly pervasive. There is a shared disconnect between what is there/not there/soon to be not there, which has of course happened on a larger scale over the past decades in China, where the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution are present but unacknowledged. The past is as much of an eerie presence as these other, unexplained, objects.

The image of the passive spectator and seeing/not seeing is a particularly meaningful one in the context of modern China. The “father of modern Chinese literature,” Lu Xun, famously wrote about this in *A Call to Arms* (1922), condemning a country and a culture which could only provide these passive onlookers. His work exhorted his readers to “wake up” and was part of a project of national renewal at the beginning of the twentieth century that finds an echo in Jia’s work at the beginning of the twenty-first. “We cannot stand by and become passive spectators of these tragedies,” Jia Zhangke has said, in relation to the stories that make up *A Touch of Sin*, which I turn to in the following section (Ma, 2013). Jia’s socially engaged cinema refuses to look away, instead drawing attention to the act of not seeing, and to the slippages between times, and between presences and absences, that create these eerie effects.

The foreknowledge of disappearance allows the film to be both slow and urgent at once, given extra pathos by the director’s habitual mixing of ‘the real’ and the staged. Whilst the film tells an invented story of two people and their spouses, many of the cast and the extras are real inhabitants of Fengjie, living in the soon-to-be demolished houses. It is a town which now exists only in memory and pictures, so the film functions as a record of disappearances and as an attempt to preserve both this process itself and what is left. This is perhaps also suggested by the clocks and watches hung up on lines of string in the home of Shen Hong’s old friend, an archaeologist who is trying to salvage what he can before the past is lost forever, an image clearly echoing Salvador Dali’s “The Persistence of Memory” (1931). Yet Dali’s image is a stubbornly ‘Western’ imagining – time melting, sliding away, whereas in Jia’s films, time gains an eerie repetition, with the past both disappearing and returning in unexpected ways. Fisher writes that “There is an irreducibly eerie dimension to certain archaeological and historical practices” (63). In the film this eerie dimension is strengthened; the archaeologist’s work is impossible (the site will be flooded before he can finish uncovering the past) yet the past returns, nonetheless. Here perhaps the film itself becomes a different form of archaeology – a record of the twice discarded, the doubly lost.

The image of the clocks strung on a line is echoed in the very last shot of the film, where a tightrope walker balances high in the air on a rope between two buildings, apparently unnoticed. This could be, as Abbas argues, a symbol of China today, suspended between a lost communist past and a fantasy of the future (15). It could also be another example of that eerie nether-space, where the layers of the past are both present and absent at the same time.

### **A Touch of Sin: The Eeriness of Mythical Time**

To start to unpack this further it is helpful to turn to another of Jia’s films. *A Touch of Sin* is made up of four loosely linked stories, all based on real life events which gained media attention in China – a man whose frustration at corruption in his town leads him to a killing spree; a violent robber; a woman who works at an all-night sauna and kills a man who tries to molest her; and finally a young migrant worker who dies by jumping from his upper-floor dormitory.<sup>7</sup>

Like *Still Life*, the film is deeply rooted in place and time. Each story was filmed in the location where the real-life event took place, and the landscape and season change as the film goes on. Alongside these roots in reality, however, are echoes of the real and mythical past, and surreal encounters. Scenes from *The Water Margin* – a Ming Dynasty novel based upon real figures from Chinese history – play out on the stage of a travelling opera company, evoking a world of outlaws, violence, and tragedy. Later, in the ‘Nightcomer Sauna’ the 1993 Hong Kong film *Green Snake* (directed by Tsui Hark) plays on the television, conjuring up the myth of the White Snake and echoing the imagery of snakes which slither across this section of the narrative. The film is also a radical departure from the director’s previous work, in its shocking, bloody violence. Whilst *Still Life*’s violence was quiet and buried (the murder of a young man who befriends Han Sanming happens off-screen, his body buried under the rubble), in *A Touch of Sin* the violence is front and centre.

In the first story, a miner called Dahai (based on Hu Wenhai, a peasant vigilante who killed fourteen villagers in 2001 in northern China) becomes murderously frustrated by a bureaucracy which will not let him complain about the fact that the village chief has sold off the coal mine to the Victory Corporation, but pocketed the profits which should have been shared between the villagers. He cannot post a letter to the government because he does not know an exact address to write to, and when he complains to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the corporation he is viciously beaten, after which his bandaged head is mocked by the other villagers. Eventually he takes up his rifle, and at that moment there is a kind of growl on the soundtrack, as though he has become possessed by the tiger depicted on the rug he uses to cover up the gun. Turning from a simple villager to an avenging outlaw, he goes on a killing spree, murdering the accountant who covered up the corruption, the village chief, and the CEO of the Victory Corporation, ending up blood-spattered and smiling in the back of the CEO’s car.

Jia is one of the most ‘world-cinema-literate’ of contemporary Chinese directors, and in the film he nods to Westerns and gangster movies whilst also paying homage to homegrown *wuxia*, or martial arts cinema. *Wuxia* is a vital and continuing part of Chinese cinematic history, and the use of the genre’s typical images such as the avenging knight errant and the forest both anchors and unsettles the film’s stories and its exploration of real and imagined time. The characters are anchored in a time and place yet they are also unmoored, made timeless, by their transformation into myth.

Another of the stories is based on the case of Deng Yujiao, a hotel worker who in 2009 killed the man who tried to rape her. In the film she becomes Zheng Xiaoyu, working in the ‘Nightcomer Sauna,’ and is associated with snakes. Walking to work, a snake slithers across the road in front of her. As Jiwei Xiao in “China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke’s *A Touch of Sin*” (2015) points out, “as an archetypal animal of the netherworld, the snake is often associated with *yin* (feminine elements) in Chinese folk myths” (31). That evening she finds herself in a strange kind of fortune-teller’s caravan, surrounded by more snakes. Later, back at work, the 1993 Hong Kong film *Green Snake* plays on the TV, based on a legend of a snake-spirit and her human lover. She is then plunged deeper into myth after she has killed one of the customers at the sauna where she works, after he attacks her, and she stumbles into the night, covered in blood.



Aliza Ma in “A Touch of Sin: Histories of Violence” (2013), points out that:

This combination of historical, legendary, and mythical properties in character and overall narrative is in fact the premise of a form of storytelling called *Yan yi*, as ancient as the concept of migration in China. Jia cites influence from *Water Margin*, an epic *Yan yi* based upon true events about outlaws in the Song dynasty—victims-turned-perpetrators of corruption and torture, who migrated to seek transformation of their fate, and whose tragic destinies parallel those of the contemporary figures dramatized in Jia’s film. (n.p.).

Dahai and Zheng both become something vengeful and mythical, cast out of their own time and into an earlier, wilder time. In her transformation, Zheng recalls both the martial figure in King Hu’s famous film *A Touch of Zen* (1971) (which provides the inspiration for the film’s English title) and the older, spectral figure of the avenging ghost. Her walk through the night streets after the stabbing, covered in blood, casts her as a liminal figure, walking paths between the living and the dead, cast out of her own time. At the end of the film, she ‘returns to life’; a free woman, she goes to work for that same Victory Corporation seen in Dahai’s story. Yet she is still cast as an outsider, looking in.

A third story involves a character, Zhou San’er, who also seems to have stepped out of an earlier time – he is an almost wordless killer, roaming the countryside yet returning home to do his filial duty as a son. (He is based on Zhou Kehua, a fugitive who carried out a series of armed robberies in 2012). But he seems as much of an outsider as Zheng Xiaoyu and Dahai; we see him leaving his family behind, and killing a woman to steal her handbag. Xiao (2015) calls attention to his structural role in the film, tying the stories together. Always on the run, he is indirectly linked to the other characters; “As much a device as a character, Zhou is a needle, with which Jia sews seemingly unrelated characters and incidents into a larger tapestry of social ills and moral ‘sins’” (25). Following Zhou San’er’s travel routes, the four stories progress temporally around the Chinese New Year and spatially from the north to the south; “Personifying violence, Zhou San’er both binds the stories together and, as pulled by Jia, rips apart their social ‘fabric’ to expose the strands unspooling from it” (25).

All of these characters are ghostly – left behind by economic reform and globalisation, they are unseen and unheard, spectres of a lost past. They are unmoored, in different ways, from family relationships and from their hometowns, making them symbolic of the floating population of migrant workers who have driven China’s economic boom but who have been unable to benefit from it. As Xiao in “The Quest for Memory: Documentary and Fiction in Jia Zhangke’s Films” (2011) points out, the prevalence of transport and movement in Jia’s films represents, “the reality of a society in great flux as well as a metaphor for the inner restlessness of its citizens set adrift from home/land and trying to catch up with the change” (n.p.). The eerie can in this way be a more fruitful way of looking at lives in transit than the uncanny, with its unquestioning links to ‘home’ and to notions of

belonging. The migrant worker's presence is a vital component of China's economic rise, yet they are ignored and unseen. In the eyes of the state (which provides everyone with a living permit tied to their place of birth) they are an anomalous presence, denied the rights of urban dwellers whilst driving forward the economic progress which feeds such urban centres. Their eerie absence then becomes a bloody, unsettling presence, a sudden, violent embodiment, making them both utterly present whilst absolutely out of their time.

In the final section of the film, a young migrant worker named Xiao Hui leaves his factory and comes to work in a nightclub in Dongguan, called 'The Golden Age.' The narrative starts to play out like a love story – he meets a young girl, they fall in love; there seems finally to be an element of hope for a future that could be different. But the nightclub peddles a sexualised and nostalgic picture of the past to businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The girls here are dressed up as People's Liberation Army soldiers, singing Mao era 'Red songs' (a reference to the increasing number of clubs and restaurants that are appearing around China, part of what Dai Jinhua and Judy T. H. Chen (1997) call the "imagined nostalgia" of the reform era – a market-driven and market-enhanced nostalgia towards a socialist past).

The young man finds himself unable to cope with the strange unreality of the club and his girlfriend's role within it, so he leaves to find work at another factory. But here, rather than the country's past, it is his own past he is unable to escape, along with the demands of family, who accuse him of wasting money; eventually, he throws himself from the dormitory balcony. This narrative strand was inspired by incidents at a Foxconn factory in Shenzhen between 2007 and 2016, where dozens of migrant workers committed suicide in protest at the dehumanising working conditions and the exploitation of migrant labour.

This section of the film feels quite different from the previous three, as it seems much more grounded in a completely realistic setting. But it is also the most powerful depiction of the feelings of displacement and absence that the film explores. Unlike the other characters, the young protagonist does not resort to violence against others – he is never allowed to become mythic himself, never allowed to be anything more or less than utterly real and in his time. And so this reality, this absolute present, overwhelms him, and leads to his death. He sees through the uncanny simulacrum that the nightclub peddles, but his seeing – or his refusal to play into the pretence – makes it impossible for him to accept it, and thus to exist alongside it.

The Chinese title of *A Touch of Sin* literally means "Heaven will decide," and questions of fate seem to hang heavy around the interwoven stories of both this film and of *Still Life*. Fisher argues that the concept of fate is eerie in that it raises questions about agency; "who or what is the entity that has woven fate?" (12) But as we have seen, his approach seems to take for granted a common understanding of fate which is bewildering and 'other.' In the Chinese context of a closer relationship between the human and natural/supernatural world, this fearful otherness is not present – fate is not 'outside' in the same way. Furthermore, in the contemporary China of Jia's films it is in fact very clear what is acting upon the characters and their lives. It is the village boss who sells off

the coal mine and keeps the profits for himself and his cronies. It is the pointedly named 'Victory Corporation.' It is the faceless global corporation who exploits cheap migrant labour. Rather than a heavenly being, or even the Communist Party, it is business conglomerates who are in control of individual destinies.<sup>8</sup>

It is the eeriness of capital that is at the heart of much of Fisher's argument: "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (11). But in post-socialist China, capitalism is eerie too because it is both present and absent, both seen and unseen, woven into euphemism as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,' or as a 'socialist market economy.' Here is the 'failure of absence' and 'failure of presence' which are Fisher's markers of the eerie; something where there should be nothing; nothing where there should be something; a past which is both here and not here, or, as Abbas argues, a "spectral history of socialism" (12). China's turn to globalisation, he states, "can be thought of not as a contradictory about-face, or as a break with the socialist past, but as the form that a posthumous socialism takes" (10). Contemporary China is full of these eerie ellipses, not least in Xi Jinping's rhetoric of the "China Dream," which traces an unbroken line of history through millennia to the Communist Party's present. It is a dream of prosperity for all, a dream which Jia's films reveal to be empty; yet another failure of presence. The migrant workers and other characters who have lost their rootedness to ideas of home or place are thus forced into eeriness, suspended between time and place. I argue that they highlight the need to extend and develop Fisher's framework of the eerie, exploring the very different ways in which the "globally tele-connected capitalist world" is experienced by different people (64). Conceptions of alterity and experiences of time are not fixed; place and landscape can play different roles. The eerie opens up rich possibilities for future research.

*A Touch of Sin* ends on another striking image of *looking* – Zheng Xiaoyu, released from prison, sees an opera performance of the story of Su San – a wrongly imprisoned woman in the opera *The Trial of Su San*. As she watches the stage, the camera turns, abruptly, and the audience of the opera stares directly into the camera. Are we, as spectators, watching the film or being watched? It is a final, eerie questioning of the stories that we have just seen, and perhaps even of reality. After all the slips into mythic time, this final shot brings us resolutely into the present moment. It is suddenly the audience who are the eerie, uncertain presence – both absent, present, and complicit. Jia's films can in fact be seen as – paradoxically – both eerie objects and a defence *against* eeriness. In attempting to capture disappearance (of landscape, buildings, or people) Jia is confronting the eerie agency of political and economic forces, forcing the audience to see the reality of the world around them, and to pay attention to what has been lost.

## NOTES

1. Fisher argues that, whilst Freud's essay raises interesting possibilities, it also ends in a psychoanalytical interpretation "as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective's rote solution to a mystery" – reducing the enigma of the *unheimlich* to castration anxiety (9).

2. It is also important to note that in Chinese, 家 (*jia*) can mean both 'home' and 'family,' meaning that the concept of home is not simply of a physical place.
3. For more on the natural/supernatural in traditional Chinese thought, see Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Classical Chinese Tale* (1993).
4. The idea of the dam was conceived in the 1950s, with the aim of generating energy and controlling floods. Work began in 1993, and *Still Life* was shot on location in 2006, as the project was nearing its end. Over 1.5 million people were relocated to make way for the dam, and entire towns on the banks of the river were flooded. For more recent work on representations of the Three Gorges, see Corey Byrnes, *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges* (2019).
5. See Robert Campany's *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (1996) for an excellent introduction to the tradition of anomaly tales.
6. There has also been a strand of film-making and fiction in China since the beginning of the reform period in the 1980s, which displaces the human from the landscape. In Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1993), for example, the human figures are swallowed by the vastness of the mountains, and then by water at the end. And in literary metafictional experiments from the same period there are many stories in which the protagonist's existence is thrown into doubt by a landscape turned strange. See, for example, Han Shaogong's "Homecoming" (1985), in which a young man arrives at a mountain village, only to find that its inhabitants have taken him for someone else, unsettling both his memories and his whole identity.
7. Originally approved by the Chinese Film Bureau in 2013, the film was scheduled to be released in November of that year. However, according to an interview with the director, officials "started worrying that the film might provoke social unrest," and the film has not yet been released in China (Rayns, 2014).
8. Xiao points out that the image of an apple appears throughout the film – eaten by Dahai at the very beginning, peeled by Zhou San'er for his son, or by Zheng Xiaoyu's lover – before being evoked in the final story. "The meaning is at once literal and symbolic: everyone partakes of the apple of sin. The allegorical meaning is tied to 'Apple,' the prime brand and icon that represents the triumph of global capitalism. Having bitten into its own 'apple' of capitalism, China is now experiencing euphoria as well as the painful spasms of its new twenty-first century" (2015, 30).

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# **THE TIME MACHINE AND THE CHILD: IMPERIALISM, UTOPIANISM, AND H. G. WELLS**

Katie Stone

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## **Introduction**

In *The Time Machine* (1895), when H. G. Wells' unnamed Time Traveller first steps into the London of 802,701 AD he is greeted by the citizens of the future. The first of these is described as "a slight creature – perhaps four feet high," who is swiftly joined by a group of other "pretty little people," who conduct themselves with "a graceful gentleness, a certain child-like ease" (25, 26, 26). This "child-likeness" is not unusual in this new age. The Eloi described here are not the only occupants of the city they inhabit, and the Morlocks – who live beneath the surface and prey on the Eloi during the night – are a similarly "little people" (26). Indeed, the first Morlock whom the Traveller sees is described as "a queer little ape-like figure" (45). The diminutive stature and seeming lack of complex language exhibited by these future Londoners quickly leads the Traveller to conclude that he is the lone adult occupying this period of history.

In this article I examine the role played by the figure of the child in this influential, proto-science-fictional text. Whether or not one is prepared to argue, as Darko Suvin does in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), that all subsequent Science Fiction (SF) should be considered as having "sprung from" *The Time Machine*, this is undoubtedly a text which does grapple with "the conflicting interpretations of temporality" that Elana Gomel, in "Shapes of the Past and the Future: Darwin and the Narratology of Time Travel" (2009), identifies as a key concern of the genre (Suvin 242; Gomel 336). In Wells' writing competing theories of evolutionary time meet, as linear narratives of teleological development vie with their mirror image: narratives of devolutionary decline. Meanwhile Marxist SF critics, such as Suvin, locate the potential for revolutionary temporal breaks in the text, and all of these disparate temporal models are mediated by the science-fictional device of time travel itself. These conflicting temporalities have been much studied in criticism of the text and it is not my intention in this article to attempt to summarise the interplay between, for example, Gillian Beer's reading of *The Time Machine* as "solar myth" and W. M. S. Russell's analysis of the influence of temporal physics on Wells' writing (219). Rather, this article's focus is specifically on the various temporalities evoked by the figure of the child as it is explored in *The Time Machine*.

To this end, I read the figure of the child as a malleable textual device drawn upon to fulfil a wide variety of literary and political functions. As James R. Kincaid persuasively argues in *Child-Loving* (1992): "What a 'child' is [...] changes to fit different situations and different needs. A child

is not, in itself, anything" (5, original emphasis). And yet, this absence of defined characteristics does not imply that childhood is best understood in universal, or timeless, terms. Indeed, Kincaid suggests that the very act of defining children negatively – by their lack of adult characteristics – is a modern phenomenon, best understood as "an institution that can be traced [not] to some primal 'need' but to specific and fairly recent historical developments" (83). This article will thus examine childhood as both what Claudia Nelson, in *Precocious Children and Childish Adults* (2012), has referred to as an "unstable and anxiety-ridden" category, and a historically situated one (7). More specifically my focus is on the temporality of childhood and how, as Carolyn Steedman argues in *Strange Dislocations* (1998), "the lost realm of the adult's past [...] came to assume the shape of childhood from the end of the eighteenth century onward" (viii). I read this association, of childhood with the past, in the context of the racial politics of evolutionary and imperialist thought at the turn of the century. Nelson has noted that texts written during the Victorian period frequently stress "the childlike nature of adult members of cultures deemed less civilised than Britain's" (4). In such writing childhood evokes a vastly different set of associations than those commonly connected with either the Romantic image of the innocent child – referred to by Richard Locke, in *Critical Children* (2011), as "a static icon in a violently fallen world" – or the later Dickensian waifs which have come to represent Victorian childhood (15). I argue that Wells' "precocious children and childish adults," move between these two shifting models of childhood as the Traveller alternately coos over the "very beautiful and graceful [...] but indescribably frail" (Nelson 1, 25) citizens of the future and adopts the manner of the colonising "white man addressing a Negro," who, as Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) reminds us, "behaves exactly like an adult with a child" (19).

It is my contention that, in Wells' writing, the figure of the child is used to reinforce the linear narratives of biological and cultural progress and decline which frame the Traveller as a representative of "the ripe prime of the human race" (56). The supposed inferiority of the Eloi and the Morlocks, who are continually compared unfavourably to the Traveller, is attributed to their temporal distance from him, which in turn is signified by their child-like stature. Wells' narrative suggests that although modern, white, Western man may have resembled these child-like beings in the dawn of humanity's evolutionary history, and though he may resemble them again in the distant future, he does not resemble them now. In much the same way, the adult Traveller may have been a child, and he may have children in the future but, supposedly, he is not currently child-like. Within this temporal logic – in which childhood is excluded from what is presumed to be the modern day pinnacle of civilisation – identification with the figure of the child becomes a shorthand for temporal otherness. This temporal othering via the figure of the child is symptomatic of an imperialist, white supremacist construction of time. From Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's claim that Africa is "the land of childhood," in *The Philosophy of History* (1837) to cultural anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor's identification of "the savage" as "a representative of the childhood of the human race," in *Primitive Culture* (1871) this temporal weaponisation of childhood is shown to act as a transparently racist, imperialist device (109; 284). As Ziauddin Sardar has argued in her "Foreword to the 2008 Edition" of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Evolution itself," as it is deployed within a colonial framework, "moves from black to white" (xiii).

In a text in which time travel is possible, however, the otherness derived from temporal distance is put under considerable pressure. Moreover, despite the role that childhood plays in reinforcing these linear narratives of imperialist progress, the figure of the child is often evoked at moments of temporal disruption in *The Time Machine* – when that which is deemed primitive, savage or animal is brought into proximity with the modern British gentleman. The Traveller may attempt to use the Eloi and Morlocks' child-like appearance and demeanour as a way to stress his superiority over them, but the memory of his own childhood that they evoke, as well as their role as, as John Huntington in *The Logic of Fantasy* (1982) has put it, "his and our distant grandchildren," undermines the security of the Traveller's supposed distance from them (43). The fact that the past and the future are materially accessible to inhabitants of the present in Wells' text only exacerbates this temporal instability. This is made evident in the scene in which the Traveller first introduces the theoretical innovation upon which his time machine relies: that "Time is really only a fourth dimension of Space" (9). Here, the Traveller draws explicitly on the figure of the child, stating:

Here is a portrait of a man at eight years old, another at fifteen, another at seventeen, another at twenty-three, and so on. All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of his Four-Dimensioned being, which is a fixed and unalterable thing. (8-9)

In this formulation time travel is shown to be imbricated in the "inherently ambiguous relationship between adults and children," evident throughout *The Time Machine* (Huntington 44). Childhood and adulthood are represented as inseparable categories, compressed into the figure of the "man at eight years old" (8). In this configuration childhood cannot be kept at a secure temporal distance from adulthood. Rather, child and adult are considered to be continuous with one another, with the possibility of time travel suggesting potential slippages between these two intermingling states. Far from aligning with the "static, highly idealised picture of childhood as a time of primitive simplicity", which Marah Gubar, in *Artful Dodgers* (2009) has associated with constructions of childhood in earlier Victorian thought, the concept of childhood evoked here is one which makes time travel thinkable (vii). This is a childhood which resists any dismissive evocation of either the static or the 'primitive' past. It exists within, and comprises the temporal security of, the modern, white gentleman whom Wells describes and towards whom his narrative is oriented.

The "man at eight years old," cannot, then, be easily incorporated into a linear understanding of historical time as either progress or decline (8). Rather, this image of childhood and adulthood compressed into one another embodies "the mutual presence of the past and future in each other," which Paul Knight and Neville and Stephen Plaice, in their "Translator's Introduction" (1995) to Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1954-59), have argued lies at the heart of Bloch's utopian philosophy (Plaice et al. xxxi). In Bloch's thought – which profoundly influenced Suvin's definition of SF – temporal compression is central to the disruption of "the banal, automatic belief in progress as such" which characterises capitalist, and I would add imperialist and much evolutionary, thought (199). By acting as a figure who compresses the past and the future into one another, the

child makes travel between them seem possible, thus disrupting the linear temporality of imperial capital. The final section of this article consists of a Blochian reading of Wells' text in which I argue that the imperialist narratives of development which the figure of the child appears to reinforce are in fact incommensurate with the non-linear temporalities that the many child-like figures of *The Time Machine* evoke. Further, I suggest that the ties between the science-fictional imagination and the child felt in Wells' writing offer ways not just of representing, but of actively engaging with, these non-linear, utopian temporalities. Childlikeness in Wells' writing is not merely a descriptor of the occupants of the distant future, themselves so evocative of the distant past. It is a slippery temporal category which accompanies the Traveller on his journeys through the equally slippery temporal paths which make up evolutionary history.

### Childhood and "Primitive Simplicity"

Before this utopian potential can be excavated, however, the common association drawn between childhood and "primitive simplicity," in both literary and scientific writing of the period, must be addressed (Gubar vii). The colonialist implications of this association can be observed, both in texts which work to define childhood – as in Havelock Ellis' *The Criminal* (1890), where he writes that "the child is naturally, by his organisation, nearer to the animal, to the savage, to the criminal, than the adult" – and in those which take colonialism explicitly as their subject (212). For example, as Richard Brantlinger, in *Rule of Darkness* (1988), has noted, Anthony Trollope continually likened "colonies settled by British immigrants," to "children whom the parent country should expect one day to grow up" (5). The fact that this association – drawn between children and colonised peoples – can be found in texts whose register, subject, and provenance are so various, suggests that it is the linear construction of historical time under which they are operating, rather than the idiosyncrasies of any one discipline, which engenders the connection. This is the construction of time which SF has inherited. As John Rieder, in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) has argued, "early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses," and this history is shown to be one in which childhood is weaponised (3). For a text such as *The Time Machine*, which is so embroiled with the "evolutionary theory" that Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon, in "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms" (2012), has argued is "profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology," the infantilisation of colonised peoples is all the more relevant (2). Indeed, prominent evolutionary biologist T. H. Huxley, who taught Wells at the Normal School of Science, engaged in precisely this kind of narrative: claiming, in "Evolution and Ethics" (1893), that "we," meaning white, Western people, "have long since emerged from the heroic childhood of our race," and thus must endeavour to "be something better than a brutal savage" (86, 82). These, then, are the "temporal logics," which, in "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (2003), Kodwo Eshun argues, have "condemned black subjects to prehistory," by connecting them with childhood (297).

In these linear narratives – of either progress or decline – the figure of the child is used as a marker of inferiority and serves to bolster the dominance of that which is considered to be civilised. This weaponisation of childhood is evident in *The Time Machine*, where Wells relies on the figure of the child to maintain the Traveller's position as the embodiment of "the ripe prime

of the human race" (56). For example, the Traveller describes himself as "a schoolmaster amongst children" when surrounded by the Eloi and – in a more overt reference to childhood as a marker of devolutionary decline – he theorises that "the childish simplicity" exhibited by the Eloi is a sign that they are actively "sliding down" the evolutionary ladder (29, 55). Here, the Traveller is implicated in precisely the kind of "racial chauvinism" which Kirby Farrell, in "Wells and Neoteny" (2001), has argued dominated evolutionary thinkers' conceptualisation of childhood at the turn of the century (69). Farrell notes that this kind of chauvinism frequently involved the consignment of supposedly less developed nations to the past, where they were connected, "both with children and with the apes popularly imagined to be our ancestors" (69). By describing the Morlocks as "queer little ape-like" figures, and dismissing the Eloi as "being on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children," Wells reinforces this connection – using multiple identifiers to signify the 'primitive' past and in so doing temporally othering colonised peoples, humanity's evolutionary ancestors and children simultaneously (45, 27).

This weaponisation of childhood as a marker of the regrettable past, or in Wells' case the regrettable future, is discussed by Sally Shuttleworth in *The Mind of the Child* (2010), her study of the psychology of childhood in nineteenth century Britain. Here, Shuttleworth notes that the child is "a figure who is by turns animal, savage, or female" (4). However, she goes on to stress the difference between the position of the child and that of these analogously connected temporal others. As she points out, the child "is located not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the very centre of English domestic life" (4). This proximity to white, Western masculinity grants childhood a unique position from which to challenge the temporal security which an imperialist ideology assures to the British gentleman. Within the various imperialist understandings of historical time which evoke "primitive simplicity" as a marker of temporal otherness the coloniser is presumed to be immune from any temporal fluctuations. However, childhood makes thinkable a variety of nonlinear models of time in which white, Western masculinity is not granted a secure temporal footing from which to distort the "chronopolitical terrain," inhabited by colonised peoples (Eshun 289). As the image of the "man at eight years old" suggests, in *The Time Machine* childhood and adulthood – and thus the 'primitive' past and 'civilised' present – are inextricably linked (8).

### Childish Adults

The proximity between childhood and adulthood in Wells' writing rests, primarily, upon the performative nature of both positions. Although the Traveller's description of himself as a "schoolmaster" surrounded by the child-like Eloi is clearly designed to emphasise his physical and mental superiority when compared to them, it comes at a point in the narrative when he is attempting, unsuccessfully, to learn their language (29). In reality, therefore, it is he who is playing the role of the child and they that of his unwilling teachers. Similarly, although he insists that the Eloi were "like children," in that upon meeting him, "they would soon stop examining [him] and wander away after some other toy," he is immediately forced to admit that "it [was] odd, too, how speedily [he] came to disregard these little people" (30). Far from providing a simple microcosm of evolutionary or historical time – where children are considered to be less evolved, or civilised than

adults – child and adult are thus framed as shifting positions attached to specific behaviours. Indeed, when he cannot find his Time Machine, the Traveller describes himself as, “bawling like an angry child” (36). *The Time Machine* can thus be usefully read in connection with what Gubar has identified as the tendency, among authors of children’s literature working during the fin de siècle, to view “‘child’ and ‘adult,’” less as “binding biological categories and more [as] parts open to players of all ages” (203). Wells’ friendship with Edith Nesbit – whose children’s book *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) documents the travels through time of a group of children who meet a child named Wells in the future – and his description of himself as a “second Barrie,” are here endowed with greater significance (427). If childhood cannot be neatly identified with “a time of primitive simplicity” – as Gubar convincingly argues it cannot be in the work of Golden Age children’s writers such as Nesbit and J. M. Barrie – it follows that the stability of “primitive simplicity” itself, as a marker of temporal otherness, is undermined when it is connected to childhood (vii). If a white, Western, adult man can be childish, what other supposedly primitive, supposedly simple identifiers might he be associated with?

The Eloi and Morlocks’ perceived child-likeness is thus reframed. Although the differences within their biology and culture are still attributed to their temporal distance from contemporary Western society, their likeness to children brings them into close proximity with the representative of that society: the Traveller. The figure of the child here acts as a means to denaturalise the attitude of adult superiority which the Traveller assumes in relation to these small citizens of the future. Not only is he himself shown to be child-like, but the child-likeness of the Eloi and Morlocks is revealed to be a feature, not of their fixed temporal positioning, but rather of his active attempts to cultivate their ignorance. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in the Traveller’s attitude to Weena, the only named Eloi who oscillates in his perception between the position of “a little woman” and that of a figure “exactly like a child” (42, 43). When Weena is weeping out of fear of the Morlocks, the Traveller states:

They were the only tears, except my own, I ever saw in the Golden Age. When I saw them I ceased abruptly to trouble about the Morlocks, and was only concerned in banishing these signs of her human inheritance from Weena’s eyes. And very soon she was smiling and clapping her hands, while I solemnly burned a match. (49)

Huntington notes that it is “concern for Weena’s innocence” which motivates the Traveller here (49). The possibility of learning from Weena, and thus casting her as his teacher, is stifled, not by any inherent incapacity on Weena’s part – she is, after all, exhibiting “signs of her human inheritance” – but by the Traveller’s own adherence to a static model of childhood (49). While he is able to travel through time he thinks of both the Eloi and the Morlocks as existing in a state of “languor and decay” – fixed in time and incapable of transformation (34). And yet, the Traveller’s quickness to extinguish any signs of learning, or teaching, on Weena’s part suggests the instability of her supposed temporal fixity. The reciprocal exchange between this child of the future and modern Man, which does not but



could have occurred here, acts as an example of what Bloch, in *Heritage of Our Times* (1962) called the “gold-bearing rubble” of a text which is otherwise dominated by the decidedly anti-utopian ideologies of imperialism and evolutionary racism (116). To insist on the utopian potential of Wells’ explorations of childhood is thus, as Caroline Edwards has argued in “Unearthing the ‘gold-bearing rubble’” (2013), a way of honouring Bloch’s “unorthodox commitment to unearthing utopian traces within each literary period and form, no matter how seemingly retrogressive” (190).

### Childhood and Evolution

This, potentially utopian, temporal instability need not stand in opposition to Wells’ investment in evolutionary biology. While Gubar sets the idea of child and adult being “parts open to players of all ages,” against the notion that they are “binding biological categories” (203), the highly contested field of late nineteenth century evolutionary biology tended to produce categories which were far from binding (230). As Wells wrote in “Zoological Retrogression” (1891): “There is a good deal to be found in the work of biologists quite inharmonious with such phrases as ‘the progress of the ages’” (98). This can be seen, for example, in Huxley’s “Prolegomena” (1894) in which he discusses devolutionary decline, that is “progress from a condition of relative complexity to one of relative uniformity”: a formulation which, as Suvin argues, was highly influential on Wells’ writing (287). While this theory may seem to support an inverted but nevertheless straightforwardly Darwinian understanding of evolution as predicated on genetic inheritance alone, in Huxley’s essay “Evolution and Ethics” (1893) he suggests that this devolutionary progress is open to manipulation. In a final address to his audience he states: “It remains to us to throw aside the youthful overconfidence and the no less youthful discouragement of nonage. We are grown men, and must play the man” (86). Childhood is certainly used as a marker of inferiority here, and Huxley clearly wants to consign it to the prehistoric status of “nonage” (86). However, he sees this consignment as a task which “remains to us”—one which his readers need to individually engage in, rather than one which is built into their biologically determined position in evolutionary time (86).

While this tendency has often been deployed in service to a eugenicist programme of supposed racial improvement – including in Wells’ own writing, as the work of John S. Partington suggests – I argue that this deployment is not inherent to an understanding of the child as a malleable figure. While the adaptability of the child’s position is open to such white supremacist manipulations, it also works to destabilise the hierarchies upon which those manipulations are predicated. This is evident, for example, in Wells’ handling of the concept of neoteny, that is “the evolutionary process in which the regulatory system retards ancestral developmental rates,” so that “adult animals [...] retain the increased adaptive flexibility of the young” (Farrell 66). In his study of neoteny in Wells’ writing Farrell argues that “Wells periodically rebelled against ‘adult’ fixity all his life” (72). Thus, when the Eloi exhibit “youthful behaviors such as curiosity,” this can be usefully read as a sign, not of their devolved nature, but rather of their ability to defy linear logics of either maturation or decline by embracing the malleability of childhood (67). As is the case with the utopian peoples whom Wells was to describe in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), “the retention of immature characteristics,” exhibited by the Eloi, the Morlocks and the Traveller himself, mark them as figures capable of

transformation (429). What form this transformation will take remains an open question, but it is clear here that childhood does not function as a static marker of a fixed evolutionary past. The figure of the child must thus be understood, not as an external category applied to the otherwise fixed timeline of evolution, but rather as a central point of contention within that timeline – one which is evoked when the question of learning, development, or active transformation is raised.

This disruption of temporal fixity, accessed via the figure of the child, can be usefully connected to the utopian aspects of Wells' writing. As Farrell has noted, there is a connection here to Wells' later utopian works. However, the temporality of childhood delineated in these various evolutionary texts can also read in relation to Bloch's "understanding of a non-contemporaneous present" (Edwards 183). This is evident, for example, in Wells' handling of the image of the embryo. In a letter to Henry James in 1913, Wells wrote:

My art is abortion - on the shelves of my study stand a little vaingloriously - thirty-odd premature births. Many retain their gill slits. The most finished have hare lips, cleft palates, open crania. These are my children! (Henry James 176)

While his reference to prematurity and abortion is clearly designed to set his work against the perceived maturity of James' literary output, Wells' comment need not only be read as a further reinforcement of the linear narratives of maturation which underpin imperialist models of progress. For one thing, the "gill slits" of these literary children suggest a connection to the embryological studies of Ernst Haeckel, detailed in *The History of Creation* (1884), where he observed that human embryos are "scarcely distinguishable from the tailed embryos of dogs" (176; 295). Another evolutionary thinker who found that the figure of the child disrupted his understanding of linear development, Haeckel theorised that "the history of individual development, or Ontogeny, is a short and quick recapitulation of palæontological development, or Phylogeny" (10). Here, evolutionary development is framed, not as linear transformation moving progressively from the past towards the future, but rather as an iterative process which is begun again, as it were, with each individual's birth. In this light, Wells' description of his literary works as embryos suggests, not their inherent inferiority, but rather their potential for future growth. Moreover, they, like the "man at eight years old," are granted the capacity to collapse the "immense spaces of time," which usually separate one stage of evolution from the next (8; Haeckel 310). Coupled with the influence of neoteny on Wells' writing, and his representation of childhood as performative, this collapsed, iterative, non-linear time works to encourage agential transformation, while threatening the supposed temporal fixity of the 'civilised' adult.

The specifically utopian character of this particular mode of non-linear time is evident when read alongside Bloch's comparable depiction of embryonic figures. In an essay on the topic of country fairs, Bloch discusses Gottfried Keller's *Dream Book* (1848). In this novel, Keller describes a country fair which features a display of "the shapes of the evolving human being from the smallest embryo to the fully developed foetus" (quoted in Bloch "Better Castles" 182). Despite the rather

ghoulish nature of this display, Keller claims that “the little fellows actually represented the hopeful youth of the assembly” – a sentiment reiterated by Bloch who argues that “there is a piece of frontier here, set at reduced admission, but with preserved meanings, with strange-utopian meanings” (182). Here, the embryo embodies both the future, in the form of the “frontier,” and the past, with its “preserved meanings” (182). Far from distancing adult from child, past from future, by affixing them to the familiar, linear narrative of development, the embryo, and by extension the child, is thus shown to be a way of conceiving of non-linear temporalities. Nor is this a unique moment in Bloch’s writing in terms of his reliance upon the figure of the child as a significant temporal category. Indeed, his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*, (1954-59) ends with a description of utopia, or “real democracy, without depersonalisation and alienation,” as a state “which all men have glimpsed in childhood,” but to which “no one has yet been” (1376). The utopian future, which does not yet exist, is here accessible only to those who engage with the temporal positioning of the child. Again, the idea that the figure of the child could be simply left behind in a fixed past – or used to demonstrate the fixity of the devolved future – is shown to radically oversimplify the play of memory and anticipation which constitute the decidedly non-linear understanding of historical time which childhood, thus explored, evokes.

### Colonialism and the Land of Childhood

The temporality of childhood – specifically the compressed time evoked by these embryos – can thus be used to undermine the teleological progress narratives which the figure of the child elsewhere appears to support. As Bloch argues, the child, when viewed through a utopian lens, is able to “find affinities in ancient events, as if they were not ancient at all, but new proclamations” (*The Principle* 121). This is not, however, to say that these progress narratives are not felt in Wells’ writing. For example, in the scene in which the Traveller first addresses his guests upon his return from the future, he invites them to “conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe” (41). This invitation is clearly meant to create anticipation for his tale of an implied magnificent future. He exclaims: “Think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age[!].” (41). Here the distance between Africa and Britain is explicitly given in terms of time, with Africa representing the primitive past while the “white man” is compared to the citizen of the future. Moreover, this temporal distancing is further compounded by the fact that the future of 802,701 AD fails to live up to the Traveller’s expectations (41). The Traveller’s momentary identification with this imagined tribesman – in which, as Rieder puts it, Wells invites “the colonizers [to] imagine themselves as the colonized” – is undercut by the citizens of the future, who refuse to fit into his preconceived notion of futurity as an exaggerated version of white, Western modernity (5). As Rieder argues “in his dealings with the Eloi [the Traveller] seems more like a European confronting the enigmatic inhabitants of savage Africa,” than an African tourist in London (87). It is they who are likened to “the animal, to the savage,” while his is the voice of reasoned adulthood – he is considered to be a citizen of the true “Golden Age” (Ellis quoted in Nelson 58; 41).

This understanding of time – in which children, colonised peoples and humanity's evolutionary ancestors are wrongly made analogous – can be traced back, not only through the history of evolutionary thought, but through that of Marxist philosophy. While it is not within the purview of this article to engage in a lengthy analysis of Wells' socialism, it is important to stress that the Marxist models of history which impacted his writing do not necessarily stand in opposition to this linear narrative of imperialist progress. As Robert Young argues: "Marxism's universalising narrative of the unfolding of a rational system of world history is simply a negative form of the history of European imperialism" (33). Thus, while it is certainly true that, as Roger Luckhurst has argued in his 2017 "Introduction" to *The Time Machine*, Wells uses the Eloi to satirise the "privileged progressive world of political radicals," while the Morlocks are used to represent "a literal and metaphorical urban 'underground' of devastating poverty" (xvi, xvii), Wells' class-based critique does not distance these "queer little ape-like figures" from the imperialist racism which can be traced back through Marxist thought to the work of Hegel (45). Charles C. Verharan, in "The New World and the Dreams to Which It May Give Rise" (1997), has argued that Hegel can be understood as the thinker who "articulates [...] most clearly and powerfully" the "insult," that is the imperialist model of history Wells is drawing upon when he uses his imaginary African to symbolise the primitive past. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), Hegel describes "Africa" as "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (109). Like Wells' Eloi and Morlocks in their state of "languor and decay," Hegel sees "Africans" as being in stasis (34). As he puts it: "As we see them at this day, such have they always been" (116). In this way he marks himself out as what Bloch terms, a "cycle-dialectician of the past or, which amounts to the same thing, of that which is eternally occurring" (*The Principle* 245).

However, as Bloch's analysis implies, this is not the only model of time which Marxist philosophy offers. Indeed, Bloch continually positions this Hegelian understanding of history in opposition to his own child-centric, utopian, non-linear temporalities. For example, in *A Philosophy of the Future* (1963) Bloch critiques "the location to which [...] Hegel assigned the Near-Eastern civilizations" (135). Where Hegel claims that the regions of "India and China," were "immersed in the past," Bloch argues that "their influences were felt quite contemporaneously," and denounces Hegel as a "developmental philosopher[s]" (135). Moreover, in his efforts to combat "the notion of history as a teleological progression," which Susan Buck-Morss, in "Hegel and Haiti" (2000), has ascribed to the "element of racism implicit in official Marxism," Bloch draws on the figure of the child (850). It is insofar as Hegel engages with the utopian potential of youth that Bloch values his conception of historical time. For example, when Hegel writes that "it is [...] not difficult to see that our time is a time of birth and transition to a new period," Bloch notes that "where there is a time of 'birth', there is also the womb of a real Possible from which it springs" (quoted in Bloch *The Principle* 246). Here, then, in Bloch's estimation, Hegel has tapped into "the Front of the world process," where new, utopian futures are "born" (247). It is this child-centric version of "utopian hiddenness which exists in embryo or In-itself, and which bursts through again at every stage of the Hegelian process," that Wells' "premature births" evoke (140; Wells, *Henry James* 176).

This is not to say that the mere mention of childhood in either Hegel's or Wells' writing is inherently utopian. For example, Hegel compares "a baby's first breath," which "after a long period of silent nutrition, breaks the gradualness of merely continuing growth – a qualitative leap – and the baby is now born," to "a flash which all at once erects the structure of the new world" (quoted in Bloch *The Principle* 139). This comparison, wherein history is framed as a series of qualitative leaps, is read by Bloch as a sign of Hegel's position as a "non-philosopher of the future" (245). Bloch writes that "the flash of the new beginning," described here, is "merely" a question of "opening up, where the closedness of what is opening up has long since been decided" (139). Rather than acknowledging the utopian potential of the partially born or unborn child – which in Bloch's writing acts as a reminder of "how much youth there is in man, how much lies in him that is waiting" – Hegel uses the child as a marker of absolute, progressive change from one state to another (195). Here, there is no room for the dialogue between adulthood and childhood which Wells' childish adults exemplify, nor for the mutual coexistence of adult and child within each other, suggested by the image of "the man at eight years old" (8). If such child-centric, non-linear temporalities were, however, taken into account, Hegel's designation of Africa as "the land of childhood" would take on new meaning (109). Rather than proving what Babaca Camara has termed "The Falsity of Hegel's Theses on Africa" (2004), by reinforcing a sense of history as "some steadily-rising mountain-slope," a utopian reading of childhood promotes an understanding of time as "far more like a footway worn by leisurely wanderers in an undulating country" (Camara 82; Wells, "Zoological Retrogression" 93).

### From Leisurely Wanderer to Agent of Utopianism

It is important to stress that nonlinear temporality is not in itself a guarantee of either utopian or decolonial potential. For example, when Wells uses the contemporary African traveller as an emblem of the supposedly primitive past the anachronism created is entirely in line with an imperialist project. By compressing past and present together into the person of this imaginary African visitor to London, and then transposing both into the future, Wells aligns himself with the dominant, imperialist strand of evolutionary thought. This compressed time is not that of either Bloch's "future in the past," nor Eshun's "chronopolitical" (*The Principle* 9; 289) Afrofuturist innovations. Rather it is representative of the way in which, as Rieder puts it, "colonialism made space into time" (6). Moreover, these imperialist non-linearities often also draw on the figure of the child. Indeed, the association of the child with colonised peoples, with animals and with humanity's ancestors, is a prime example of this kind of anachronism. As W. B. Drummond elaborates, in his *An Introduction to Child Study* (1907), this was an era in which:

The philologist [...] turns to baby linguistics in the expectation of gaining a better understanding of the origin of human speech. The anthropologist, unable to discover a living representative of primitive man, turns to the child as his nearest representative. The archaeologist finds valuable material in the child's attempts to draw. (4)

Childhood's fluctuating relation to time is not necessarily, then, a sign of utopian potentiality.

And yet, the idea that contemporary adulthood is embroiled in these childish fluctuations does open up the possibility of an active, utopian disruption of the temporality upon which imperialist thought relies. In these various imperial anachronisms the colonising subject remains aloof from the compressions and disfigurements of time. The child, Wells' African traveller, and his child-like citizens of the future may all be forced together into a distorted prehistory, but the white Westerner is presumed to be immune from such fluctuations. However, by filling the future with children; by putting childhood at the centre of his science-fictional reimagination of time as a fourth dimension; by making his Traveller so continually child-like, Wells removes any possibility of secure temporal ground from which to observe these, safely distant, temporal others. Nor does this temporal insecurity stop with the Traveller. In Wells' novella, which is introduced by a frame narrative in which the Traveller recounts his adventures to his guests, those who create and consume science-fictional stories are heavily implicated in the temporal fluctuations provoked by the figure of the child.

This is best illustrated by the Traveller's first meeting with the Eloi, discussed in the introduction to this article. Here, the Traveller attempts to communicate to the Eloi that he has come from the past and, "hesitating for a moment how to express time, [he] pointed to the sun" (26). He then receives an immediate response from one of the "quaintly pretty little figure[s]" around him, who succeeds in "astonish[ing]" him by also pointing to the sun and "imitating the sound of thunder" (26). This leads the Traveller to immediately conclude that this Eloi is "on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children," as he believes that he has just been asked whether he "had come from the sun in a thunderstorm[!]" (27). Not only does the Traveller deny the possibility that this Eloi was also using the sun as a marker of time – the very thing which he professed to be trying to communicate – he also dismisses the idea that the Eloi is engaging in a science-fictional enterprise comparable to his own. When confronted with the fantastic nature of reality, in the appearance of a time traveller, this Eloi speculates in an equally fantastic manner as to how such a reality may have come about. This connects him to both Wells and the Traveller, who entrances his friends back in London with various non-realist stories, as remembered by one guest who asks whether the time machine is "a trick – like that ghost you showed us last Christmas" (15). Whether it is more or less 'childish' to ask whether a stranger in your land has travelled through space rather than time is thus beside the point. What is clear is that even when the Traveller makes his way through "the mists of evolutionary time," and arrives in the distant future, the fantastic tales of his London drawing-room are there to greet him, if only he would listen (Shuttleworth 4).

By casting this Eloi as a possible creator of SF, Wells renders viable the suggestion that both he, the Traveller, and the SF reader are just as implicated in the fluctuations of nonlinear time as this child-like citizen of the future. Here the ability to question, and potentially intervene in, the nature of time is shown to be reserved to the Traveller, not because of his superior genetics or his civilised, scientific knowledge, but because he refuses to acknowledge any speculations which do not originate with him. This determined refusal to engage in a meaningful exchange – reminiscent of the Traveller's attempts to stifle Weena's knowledge – denaturalises the temporal security which he believes himself to enjoy. Much like the Traveller's description of the speculations, anticipations, and memories which make up everyday thought as examples of time travel, the Eloi's curiosity

here detaches time travel from the narrative of technological and imperialist progress which has culminated in the invention of the titular time machine. No longer is the manipulation of time the sole preserve of the white, male, Western intellectual when these smaller, quotidian travels through a time whose linearity they actively subvert is taken into account. As the Traveller himself puts it: "We are always getting away from the present moment" (11).

The history of SF criticism is a history of critics attempting to endow the genre with political and literary legitimacy, often via narratives of linear development. However, when, for example, Suvin distinguishes "mature SF" from the "compost heap of juvenile and popular sub-literature," from which the genre has supposedly developed, he fails to account for the kind of utopian time travel which these temporally unstable, child-like figures make thinkable (10, 22). To consign childhood to the regrettable past is not a politically neutral position. Nor is it one which a reading of *The Time Machine* which focuses on the "gold-bearing rubble" beneath the imperialist surface can sustain (*Heritage of Our Times* 116). By bringing together Wells' writing with Blochian philosophy, evolutionary biology, and decolonial critiques of imperialist time I hope to have contributed to the project set out by Eshun "to force together separated systems of knowledge, so as to disabuse apparatuses of knowledge of their innocence" (297). I argue that it is the "man at eight years old" (8) who refuses to be neatly affixed to any given point in time, who makes this process, of the decolonisation of time, thinkable (8).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is drawn from the second chapter of my PhD thesis and I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Caroline Edwards and Professor Roger Luckhurst for the help they gave me in developing these ideas. Both this chapter and article began as a paper which I gave at *After Fantastika* and thus I would also like to thank the delegates at that conference for their attention and questions, in particular Indiana Seresin whose work has profoundly influenced the development of my thought on time. Thanks to Amy Butt and Robert Stone for their willingness to talk about *The Time Machine* with me, and to Chris Hussey and both of my peer reviewers for their astute comments. The Beyond Gender research collective, the Utopian Acts research network, and the London Science Fiction Research Community continually influence me and provide me with spaces in which it is possible to imagine better futures.

## BIONOTE

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# **"TURN[ING] DREAMS INTO REALITY": INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF *SEHNSUCHT* IN TWO TIME TRAVEL NARRATIVES BY ALFRED BESTER**

Molly Cobb

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## **The Speculative Longings of *Sehnsucht* in Science Fiction**

*Sehnsucht* in psychology is defined by Dana Kotter-Grühn et al in "What is it we are longing for?" (2009) as a desire for "ideal, alternative states and experiences of life" that focuses on both missing aspects of one's current life and "fantasies about ideal, alternative realities" (428). Such fantasies often draw upon an overlapping concept of time that lacks distinction between the past, present, and future, with Kotter-Grühn et al referring to these longings as "a temporally complex experience" (428). Nurtured as they are through imagination and fantasy, these longings are, according to Susanne Scheibe et al in their study "Toward a Developmental Psychology of *Sehnsucht*" (2007), "unattainable in principle" (779). Considering these aspects of how *Sehnsucht* is meant to function psychologically, the relationship to Science Fiction is an interesting one, especially as it pertains to time travel. As Scheibe et al claim, the longings associated with *Sehnsucht* "include simultaneously aspects of the past, present, and future" with the idea that one's longings "are assumed to always extend beyond the present into the past and future" (781). This "tritime focus" positions time travel literature as uniquely capable of engaging with *Sehnsucht* by allowing the possibility of fulfilling such longings regardless of their place in time or how they are temporally experienced by the individual.

The concept of *Sehnsucht*, or life longings, has only been explored within the realm of psychology since around 2007, despite being originally derived from eighteenth century German Romanticism and present throughout cultural and literary spheres since then. Scheibe et al point out in their study "Is Longing Only for Germans?" (2011) that philosophy, art, and culture have, for centuries, evolved around "feelings of longing or yearning for something intensely desired" (603). As such, the life longings of *Sehnsucht*, though a new topic in psychology, are certainly not a new or uncommon topic in literature. Literature's capacity to fulfil longings for alternative experiences and realities demonstrates its relationship with *Sehnsucht*, with these longings often manifesting as a wish to escape from one's current reality. Robert B. Heilman, in "Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience" (1975), comments that there is an "element of escape in reading all kinds of literature" and that "all literature has in it something of the sanctuary, the entering of which resembles an escape from something else" (458, 454). Heilman further comments that literature

allows “escape into [...] a more extensive world [...] than one experiences in actuality” (455). Though Heilman does not specifically mention Science Fiction, connections can be drawn between ideas of “a more extensive world” and the speculative world-building found within this genre.

In addition, with Science Fiction’s ability to literalise the metaphor, so to speak, desires for an alternative life become less unattainable due to the genre’s capacity to fulfil longings that would normally reside outside of reality. This is especially true when these fantasies are centred around escaping one’s current time period, as seen in several works by Alfred Bester. Through time travel, this longing to escape becomes something that can be achieved within the text. However, this fulfilment, due to its speculative nature, can never materialise outside the pages of the narrative, thereby questioning whether these fictional fulfilments can translate to true escapism for the reader. The important role that the individual plays in their own escapism can be seen in the texts discussed in this article. Indeed, it is not so much that these desires are attained, or even that time travel is a valid method of obtaining them, but that the individual, and the role the individual plays in these fulfilments, is key to a satisfied self. The level of control an individual has, the inclusion of fantasy and imagination, and the ability for the individual to alter their surroundings to suit their own desires remains heavily important in whether the fulfilment of *Sehnsucht* is satisfactory or not. Within Bester’s texts, this manifests through the emphasis placed on the significance of the autonomous self and the realisation of one’s true potential through independently enacted escape.

Escaping one’s own reality for an alternative life is a recurrent theme throughout many of Bester’s works, as in Science Fiction more widely. In *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction* (1999), Paul Nahin states that “Time travel fiction is, of course, the ultimate in escapist literature” (31). As well, Terri Paul, in the essay “The Worm Ouroboros: Time Travel, Imagination, and Entropy” (1983), refers to time travel as “the ultimate fantasy” (278). The ability of a time machine to fulfil wishes (as Nahin indicates), coupled with Paul’s discussion that time travel offers a way to go against time’s arrow (and therefore against human mortality in a way), highlights Roy A. Sorenson’s assertion in “Time Travel, Parahistory and Hume” (1987) that the fascination with time travel stems from the “frustration we sometimes feel at being confined to the present” (235). The prospect of fulfilling one’s wish of escaping present reality therefore positions time travel as offering that which other speculative elements may not be able to provide. This tripartite connection between time travel, escapism, and fantasy is key to the way in which *Sehnsucht* highlights the relationship between the use of time travel as escape, escape as a longing, and this longing as being rooted in one’s fantasies about alternative realities.

When fantasising about these alternative realities, Heilman comments that “Real trouble and a truly dismal world [...] would compel tougher and more desperate alternatives” (451). The desire to escape “a truly dismal world” is identifiable in numerous texts by Bester during the 1950s that repeatedly engage with the ever-present threat of nuclear war. The inability of many Americans in the 1950s to avoid the prospective certainty of nuclear war inevitably led to fantasies of a different time; one perceived to be absent of the associated state of paranoia or anxiety and the very real possibility of nuclear annihilation. Films that engage with characters desiring to live in other centuries,

such as Roy Ward Baker's *I'll Never Forget You* (1951), or stories in which characters use time travel to escape a war-torn reality, such as Ray Bradbury's "The Fox and the Forest" (1950), reflect the imaginative engagement with these themes during this period. Though there are various methods of escape, especially in speculative writing, time travel ostensibly offers complete removal from this 1950s' fear of nuclear annihilation by physically extracting the individual from their reality in a way other forms of travel/escape would be less capable of. However, while characters and readers may see this process as a complete escape from nuclear anxieties, this method is emblematic of those very anxieties, as this need for time travel as escapism would not be necessary without those fears in the first place. This need to escape the possibility of, or already existing, war-torn reality can be seen in a number of texts by Bester, but the use of time travel and the 'desperate alternatives' mentioned by Heilman are more readily apparent in "Hobson's Choice" (1952) and "Disappearing Act" (1953). The ignorance of expecting time travel to solve all of your problems, with no consideration of the difficulties involved in this process, is central to "Hobson's Choice," while in "Disappearing Act" sheer desperation unlocks characters' abilities to create and escape into their own fantasies.

In these texts, and many others, Bester engages with the idea of escape through psychology, which positions his works not only as relevant for examining them through the lens of *Sehnsucht*, but useful in exploring how Science Fiction, specifically, can engage with this concept. Bester drew upon psychology extensively throughout his works, with a specific focus on Freudian concepts. He comments in various story introductions in *Starlight: The Great Short Fiction of Alfred Bester* (1976) that near the beginning of the 1950s he "became hooked on psychiatry," further stating that it was his habit "to look at characters from the Freudian point of view first" (242, 219). Bester's attention to, and use of, the psyche relates to his championing of the individual throughout his works. As Tim Blackmore writes in "The Bester/Chaykin Connection: An Examination of Substance Assisted by Style" (1990), "for Bester the search for self is central" (120). Bester's focus on psychology and the independent, individual self is reflected in his works discussed here and highlights the importance he placed on psychological longings for escape being enacted and fulfilled by an autonomous self. With the satisfaction gained through the fulfilment of one's longings dependent on the reciprocal nature between that attainment and one's individual autonomy in achieving it, the relationship between Bester's exploration of escape within his texts and the reader's role in engaging in that escapism highlights the importance of autonomous control over one's own longings, on behalf of both the characters and the reader.

### **The Importance of Autonomous Escape in "Hobson's Choice"**

"Hobson's Choice" highlights the consequences of lacking autonomous control through the character Addyer, a statistician who is investigating population counts across the country to find an explanation for the national population increase. The country is revealed to be a near postapocalyptic wasteland, full of radiation and destruction due to nuclear war, making this increase puzzling. When it is revealed that Addyer was inadvertently investigating time travelling individuals, who were causing the increase in population statistics, he is informed that all theories behind the use of time travel are incorrect. Instead, time travel is essentially used as a form of escape and as "[p]sychological

therapy" (*Virtual Unrealities* 120). As Addyer has discovered time travel without invitation, he is told he must now be sent to another time in order to protect the secret. Addyer finds the concept of leaving his own time enthralling as he declares that he lives in "the worst age in all history" (125). Time travel is thus able to enact his longing to leave his own time; without it, Addyer's *Sehnsucht* would remain in the realm of the unattainable.

On the surface, Addyer is notionally trying to escape the destruction wrought by war and the subsequent deterioration of the country. However, Bester's exploration of the psyche throughout the text indicates that what Addyer is actually trying to escape, unconsciously, is his psychological inability to come to terms with the consequences of war. Bester engages with the concept of psychic numbing by having Addyer take the scale of nuclear destruction across the country seemingly for granted. Psychic numbing is referred to as "mental anesthetization" by Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk in *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (1982), where they state that this apathetic approach to nuclear annihilation is a form of psychological defence designed to override fear, depression, and anxiety (276). Descriptions of Addyer simply being "annoyed" by the destruction or of him "creeping between the deadly radiation glows and only occasionally butting his head against grave markers" without further explanation reflect Addyer's resulting numbness (118). As such, he relies too heavily on physical escape in his longing for an alternative life experience. As his psychological repression of the war travels with him, his ideal alternative life becomes unrealisable as what he is unconsciously avoiding will always remain with him.

Addyer's ignorance of this, coupled with his lack of independence in enacting his escape, further compounds the unsuccessful fulfilment of his desire for an alternative reality. Though Addyer is able to choose which time period he travels to, he is not able to choose the fact that he travels in the first place (though, crucially, he does desire to). The importance of retaining control over one's own escapist longings in Bester's texts becomes evident when considered in conjunction with specific ideas pertaining to *Sehnsucht*. The longings that characterise *Sehnsucht* are based on aspects that an individual has "low or moderate control" over, but that they have a strong desire to change, such as their living conditions or environmental context (Kotter-Gröhn et al 428). However, when Science Fiction renders the unattainable possible, longings which are rooted in fantasy can become reality, granting the individual control over fulfilling them. As Scheibe et al explain, "If life longings are too [...] uncontrollable, a sense of frustration and despair may prevail" but if individuals "felt in control of the occurrence and experience of life longing-related feelings," then those negative associations disappear ("Is Longing Only for Germans?" 605). Therefore, whether these longings are attained depends on whether characters feel they have maintained autonomous control over the experience; a process also connected to the degree to which escapist fantasies allow the audience to maintain a sense of control over their own longings. As Addyer lacks the necessary overall illusion of control, his longing for escape moves into the realm of the uncontrollable and he experiences those emotions of "frustration and despair" as this process is enacted by an external force rather than through his own self.



Addyer being unable to escape the psychological effects of war simply by escaping his own time period causes him to realise that “he had in truth departed from the only time for himself” (126). Addyer’s ignorance reflects the disadvantages of living in another time period, most notably the idea that one would be unable to adjust, especially culturally, to their new surroundings. This inability to assimilate in time is likely why many of the time travellers in the text are said to be “Never satisfied. Always searching,” with the text claiming that they are going “Anyplace but where they belong” (124). In embarking on his journey, “Addyer traveled to the land of Our pet fantasy. He escaped into the refuge that is Our refuge, to the time of Our dreams” (126). The capitalisation of ‘Our’ recalls the opening line that “you and I and Addyer are identical” (113). This idea of escape is therefore supposedly everyone’s idea of escape, with the implication being that everyone wants to be somewhere, and sometime, else. As Jad Smith comments in *Alfred Bester* (2016), “Hobson’s Choice” enables the reader “to reflect on the wish-fulfilment tendency within themselves,” asking them what year they would choose to escape to (120). Though Bester acknowledges that these longings may be universal, he also invites readers to critique their own idea of escape and whether they and Addyer are identical. Particularly as it is covered here, Bester questions the reader’s desire for, and control over, their own escape by implying that they should also gauge how realistic their expectations of literary escapism are and whether they are actually gaining the escape they desired.

With the idea that everyone is entertaining these ideas of escape, it is important to note that Scheibe et al write that Ernst Bloch “deemed the yearning for utopian dreams of a better life” to be a driving force in people’s lives (“Is Longing Only for Germans?” 604). With a focus on the possibility of “something better,” as Bloch indicates in *The Principle of Hope* (1954), and his exploration of how humanity wishes and dreams for these utopian states, Bloch’s approach to longing for an alternative reality can be linked, both culturally and psychologically, to the desire for escape from one’s current reality (vol. 1, 46). However, Bloch notes that even fulfilment that “appears to be sufficiently perfect” in satisfying our longings will still bring melancholy, claiming that, if an individual were required to state absolutely what it is they desire and wish for, they would be “at a loss for an answer” (vol. 1, 193; vol. 3, 1313). Similarly, Kotter-Grühn et al ask, “What do people think will make them feel happy and meaningful?”, further stating that individuals “might have overly positive conceptions” of the ideal, alternative reality they long for, making the “realization of such utopias [...] difficult, if not impossible” (429, 433). Addyer embodies this concept, both in terms of the resulting lack of satisfaction once what he thought he desired is granted, and his misunderstanding of what he actually longed for.

However, this raises questions of whether entertaining escape fantasies that cannot be achieved is fruitless. Rather than implying this, Scheibe et al indicate that these longings, even when unattainable, can have a positive effect on the individual. They acknowledge that, even when longings are beyond reality, searching for utopia helps individuals realise the “fundamental unattainability of optimal states and the essential imperfection of human life” (“Towards a Developmental Psychology” 779). As such, even unattainable longings allow the individual to gain control over their own expectations of life while also, perhaps unintuitively, uncovering one’s own true potential. By encouraging individuals to understand just what the degrees of that potential are,

this process acknowledges that not attaining utopia is not a failure of the self, but a recognition of one aspect of what it means to be human. As this positive aspect of 'failed' longings still requires a degree of control and an understanding of one's own desires, it becomes again not whether one does or does not attain fulfilment, but whether they retain a sense of control.

### **"Disappearing Act" and the Value of Anachronistic Escape over Historical Reality**

In contrast to the unsatisfactory fulfilment of Addy's longings in "Hobson's Choice," the satisfactory realisation of escapist desires in "Disappearing Act" offers an alternate view of escapism by highlighting the importance of self-enacted escape. While time travel in "Hobson's Choice" is enacted upon the protagonist, the characters in "Disappearing Act" autonomously create their own time travel and, subsequently, their own alternative realities. The satisfactory fulfilment of their longings is thus directly linked to the level of autonomy the characters have over their escape, reflecting Bester's adherence to the importance of the autonomous self.

"Disappearing Act" centres around a war for the 'American Dream' that ultimately ends up destroying the very aspects of society it was meant to be protecting – aspects such as "Music and Art and Poetry and Culture" (*Virtual Unrealities* 4). This destruction is revealed in the narrative when a poet is needed to understand why patients are disappearing from Ward T, but no poets can be found. It is eventually discovered that the patients are disappearing into their own escapist fantasies by travelling into the past of their own imaginations. Essentially, escaping a war-torn reality, a similar desire to Addy's, induces such a strong desire to leave their own time that people are forcing themselves to develop the ability to enter their own dreams; they have created an alternate reality based upon their imaginative conception of the past and, through willpower, have made those alternate histories real and enabled themselves to time travel into them.

Fiona Kelleghan, in "Hell's My Destination: Imprisonment in the Works of Alfred Bester" (1994), comments that Bester uses themes such as confinement or imprisonment to explore how these concepts cause "human beings to discover the unknown resources within," with his focus on the individual's potential for greatness a "warning against self-imprisonment by inertia and lack of ambition" (362). The two texts explored here use confinement to a war-torn reality to emphasise this difference between discovering individual capability through breaking free of constraints versus being complicit in passively allowing the self to be acted upon by the external world. Though for both texts the means of escape is time travel, how characters subsequently utilise it to fulfil their longing differs drastically. Characters in "Disappearing Act" successfully achieve their longing for escape when they "discover superhuman abilities in rebelling against their confining circumstances," reinforcing the importance Bester places on the individual imagination while also advocating that one must retain control in order to uncover one's latent potential (Kelleghan 358). Patrick A. McCarthy writes in "Science Fiction as Creative Revisionism: The Example of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*" (1983) that Bester's works often explore "the unfettered imagination" and its relationship "to various forms of control" (63). In "Disappearing Act," the escapist foundations of the characters' time travel relies on altering, and thereby controlling, the past, with their 'unfettered imagination' literally creating the ideal, alternative reality they longed for.

As well, unlike "Hobson's Choice," fulfilment of the patients' desires in "Disappearing Act" remains outside the realm of our reality (namely, our timeline) and characters have complete control over both their fantasies and the method used to enter them. As one of the characters states, "These people have discovered how to turn dreams into reality" ("Disappearing Act" 20). Demonstrating the strength of their longing to escape, patients are not only altering their external world in terms of when they exist temporally, but they are also creating a pocket reality where they are altering history to suit their own longings. As such, the alternate realities that they escape to are full of anachronisms. As the text states: "Nathan Riley has his own picture of what America was like in the early twentieth century. It's faulty and anachronistic because he's no scholar; but it's real for him" (20). Though nostalgic notions of the past are often misrepresentations of history, this biased view enables the patients to create a reality that suits them, regardless of its inaccuracy. Removing the self from reality is said to be "a new fantastic syndrome brought on by the [...] horrors of war" and that, as war intrudes upon the self, the individual must find new routes of escape (14). Reminiscent of Heilman's comment about a dismal world requiring more "desperate alternatives," the characters in "Disappearing Act" are explicitly enacting this form of escapism. As such, the patients in Ward T have quite literally created their "personal utopia," reflecting ideas that "having a controllable sense of *Sehnsucht*" enables individuals to make their desire for a utopian life part of their own self and life story (Scheibe et al, "Toward a Developmental Psychology" 781, 780).

Altering history to fulfil personal longings echoes ideas by Scheibe et al that American culture continuously encourages individuals to "attempt to alter realities to achieve what they want" ("Is Longing Only for Germans?" 605). Sigmund Freud's understanding of 'phantasy' becomes useful when considering the ability of Science Fiction to grant control over what is believed unattainable in *Sehnsucht* (but made real by time travel). Freud, in his essay "On Dreams" (1901), refers to adults as having learned how to "postpone their desires until they can find satisfaction by [...] altering the external world" (119). As well, Scheibe et al report that older adults were more likely to feel a sense of control over their longings, stating that "older age gives an advantage in the mastery of" longings ("Towards a Developmental Psychology" 789). Though it is, of course, unlikely that Freud imagined that mastering these longings meant literally altering the external world by time travelling into one's own alternative reality, it raises interesting ideas about the relationship between fulfilling one's longings and the ability of Science Fiction to grant the unattainable.

The anachronisms present in the characters' alternate realities identify not only how they have altered their external world, but equally relates to the expectation that one's *Sehnsucht* is likely to reside in the realm of the realistically impossible. Scheibe et al claim that, in the longings associated with *Sehnsucht*, "the imperfect present is mentally contrasted with imagined [...] and often counterfactual alternatives of one's life that are idealized and unrestricted by the limits of reality" ("Toward a Developmental Psychology" 781). This echoes not only those ideas of *Sehnsucht* involving imagination but demonstrates how time travel has the unique ability to grant the impossible. While Western readers may be attracted towards speculative fiction due to its potential to engage with the impossible, when imagining alternate realities or histories it is important to note that the ethos of the United States "allows people to start over and pursue a new dream, irrespective of their

history" ("Is Longing Only for Germans?" 605). The patients in "Disappearing Act" do pursue a new dream, rather literally, which is not only irrespective of their own history but of history in general. Bester's representation of the individual self-maximising the potential of their own imagination and taking control of their escape from an unpleasant and confining present, by altering both time and history, reflects the importance of autonomy in not only enacting one's own longing, but in successfully achieving escape from a negative external world.

### Nostalgia, Control, and Self-driven Utopian Escapism

This focus on history and the past indicates the interrelatedness of *Sehnsucht* with the notion of nostalgia. A key difference between nostalgia and *Sehnsucht* is the temporal nature of the longings involved. As mentioned, *Sehnsucht* has a "tritime focus." Svetlana Boym writes in "Nostalgia and Its Discontents" (2007) that nostalgia may be affected "by the needs of the present" and have an "impact on the realities of the future," but it is still "fantasies of the past" (8). Boym goes on to say that nostalgia can feel "stifled within the conventional confines of time and space," prompting the possibility that longings may need to look outside reality for fulfilment (9). Echoing previous discussions of the ability of time travel to ease dissatisfaction at feeling confined to the present, the role of nostalgia in encouraging temporal escapism becomes clearer. Though nostalgia may only fulfil one temporal aspect of *Sehnsucht*, further considerations of nostalgia can highlight exactly how this aspect is engaged with in "Disappearing Act."

The idea that nostalgic desires have the ability "to turn history into private [...] mythology," as Boym writes, reflects the characters' tendency towards 'counterfactual alternatives' as their longing for the past, even an inaccurate past, is so strong that it enables the creation of a reality that never existed. Boym further states that nostalgia can also turn history into "collective mythology," highlighting the potentially damaging aspect of a nostalgia that looks to erase a problematic past and the context that created the undesirable present (8). The tension between private reality and collective reality highlights the tension Bester explores between conformity and individuality by noting the need to ensure the individual is not subsumed by the collective, especially a collective which seeks to disadvantage the individual. In the case of "Disappearing Act," the governmental elite and its desire to win wars no matter the cost ignores the harmful present which they have created, thereby forcing individuals to separate themselves from collective history in order to fulfil themselves as individuals.

Anachronisms within the characters' idealised versions of the past reflect not just the level of control the patients have over their escapist reality but emphasises the idealised aspect of their longings. Though their anachronisms are not intentional, they do highlight how our memory of history operates and the dependency on this subjective understanding. Boym further comments that nostalgia "has a utopian dimension," similar to *Sehnsucht*, but it also indicates a connection to Bester's focus on the individual self (9). A personal reality, created through nostalgia and enacted by the individual involved, promises a more utopian dimension due to its subjective nature as separate from objective history, thereby allowing the self a more successful fulfilment of longing due to the

control over the reality to which they are escaping; something that reflects Bloch's ideas on individual longing.

Considering the concept of control and relative lack thereof in "Hobson's Choice" in comparison to "Disappearing Act," it is key that, in exploring escapism, these two texts present a distinction between passive and active participants. While the patients in "Disappearing Act" actively create and enact their method of escape via their own imaginations, Addy is a passive recipient of time travel as it is forced upon him. Though he does desire to escape his own time period, the underlying lack of a choice still puts him on the receiving end rather than being fully in charge. The aspects of control seen in each text – and the connections Bester is drawing between self-realisation, imagination, control, and individual autonomy over one's own longings – is reflected in wider ideas regarding reading itself as a form of escape, such as how much involvement a reader has in creating and imagining the textual world to which they are escaping.

Through these stories, Bester utilises Science Fiction in a way that fits with what Nahin and Paul state time travel narratives are: escapist fantasies. However, these two stories work well as contrasting examples of unsuccessful versus successful escape; consequently, they reflect Bester's own ideas about escapist fantasies. In "Science Fiction and the Renaissance Man," Bester writes that Science Fiction is "not Escape Fiction; it's Arrest Fiction" (418). Smith comments that Bester considered escape fiction to encourage reader passivity, while arrest fiction required an active reader, reinforcing the concept of the reader as "a free and individual agent" (14). Considering Roland Barthes' assertion in *S/Z* (1970) that texts should "make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text," Smith notes that Bester's texts are "writable"; they invite the reader, through active imagination, to co-create meaning and thus co-produce the work being read (Barthes 4; Smith 14). Regarding this need for reader engagement in co-producing literature, Bester wrote that he believed "that somehow reading should be more than mere reading" (*Starlight* 344). Bester's expectations for readers reflects the autonomous individual he champions within his writing and aligns the reader with the characters of "Disappearing Act" while cautioning the reader about falling into the same trap as Addy. As Smith writes, "Hobson's Choice, for those who might not be familiar with the phrase, is the illusion of choice when no choice really exists, and escapism is just that sort of illusion" (120). The difference with "Disappearing Act" is in Bester's reflection on the importance of individual control and autonomous engagement with one's own escape. Smith writes that "Disappearing Act" "presented escapism in a different light," wherein Bester "recognizes escape as an active, creative impulse akin to writing," further aligning the creative nature of the characters within the text with the creative nature Bester expected of his readers in co-creating (and thereby, co-writing) his fiction, and, by extension, their own literary escape (122, 120).

Having a hand in creating one's own escape allows for subjective input on the part of the reader, similar to the patients in "Disappearing Act" subjectively altering reality to suit their own expectations. As such, the patients of Ward T achieve subjective expression of their *Sehnsucht*, something Scheibe et al conclude to be an important aspect of this psychology, as they assert that *Sehnsucht* shifts individuals from operating on the level of "behavioral (objective) to imaginary

(subjective) expressions" ("Toward a Developmental Psychology" 790). Nahin discusses the idea that the past does not really exist as it is only a creation of our own imaginations, with Paul stating that "we create the world we live in by imposing our subjective point of view upon it" (61; 275). This idea that reality is subjective is a key aspect of the method of time travel produced by the patients in "Disappearing Act" and reflects the importance of the creative impulse mentioned by Smith, as seen in the anachronistic alternate realities created from the dreams and imaginations of the patients in Ward T.

Bloch, in discussing individual longing, claims that "Bare desire and its drive principally hold on to what they have, but the wishing in them that pictures intends more" (47). The difference in "bare desire" and "wishing" that "intends more" can be seen again in contrasting the two texts. Addyer remains firmly in the reality of his timeline, as for him time travel is literal with no expression of the imagination or altering of the timeline to suit fantasies about a utopian existence. On the other hand, the patients in "Disappearing Act," in their wish to escape, create more than "what they have." Bloch further states that this bare desire, in contrast with the wishing, "remains unsatisfiable, that is, nothing that exists gives it proper satisfaction" (47). If nothing exists in reality to satisfy a longing, one may have to look outside reality; it is here that literature can offer a means of escapism not found elsewhere. Science Fiction, and time travel especially, has the ability to create a reality where something that can satisfy that longing does exist. Unlike Addyer, who remains rooted in reality (regardless of his temporal position) where his *Sehnsucht* cannot be fulfilled, the patients in "Disappearing Act" instead create that which will satisfy them rather than expecting external reality to provide it for them. The importance Bester places on the power of individual imagination when the self is pushed to maximise its full potential becomes evident. "Hobson's Choice" draws the conclusion that Addyer is not satisfied by time travelling because he has left the time in which he belongs for a time in which he does not. As Smith writes, the time travellers' "idealizations never match the actual conditions of their chosen realities" (119). When the patients in "Disappearing Act" time travel, they do not suffer the same consequence, as, since they have created their own time, they must belong in it, as it was subjectively designed by them, for them.

However, if literature about escape is equally literature as escape, it also asks the reader to reflect on whether, and why, they may tend to use literature to fulfil their own longings for escape. Bester's creation of fiction that is 'writable' means that he is quite literally asking the reader to co-create their own escapist literature. This subsequently gives the reader some semblance of control and creative input over the already written narrative of the fiction, similar to how characters in "Disappearing Act" have some level of creative control over the already written narrative of history. As such, it can be questioned whether Bester may have seen writable texts as more successful literary acts of escapism than purely 'readable' texts, considering his belief that they encouraged reader passivity and a lack of imaginative input. However, just as Bester invites the reader to be complicit in Addyer's wish-fulfilment fantasies in "Hobson's Choice," he also implicitly invites the reader to be complicit in the author's creation of a literary world; one which may have instigated a longing the reader was not previously aware of until given the opportunity to fulfil it.

This consideration reflects the discovery of time travel in “Hobson’s Choice” as Addyer was not aware it was an option and so did not entertain it as a possibility until it was revealed to him. Here, speculative modes of writing offer the same thing – choices which readers may not have even been aware were choices and, as such, inviting readers to entertain increasingly grander expectations towards what literary escapism may entail. Non-speculative fiction, in contrast, conventionally only offers escapist fantasies that are at least possible, even if not likely, and it is here that speculative writing expands upon and widens not just the possible worlds that readers can escape to, but the very limits of how imaginative those escapist fantasies can be. Time travel fiction encompasses this especially well as it removes the imagination from the confines not only of space, but of time, allowing the reader to imagine not only another time period, but the method of actually visiting it. Readers looking to experience a different time period to satisfy temporal longings of *Sehnsucht* for ideal, alternative experiences have, for example, the option of reading Period fiction and thus temporarily and vicariously experiencing that alternative reality. Time travel fiction, however, though conveying a similar experience, further provides an escapist fantasy that would have to be neither temporary nor vicarious, thereby offering to fulfil temporal longings in a way that non-speculative fiction cannot. Additionally, Period fiction, if realist, can only offer fulfilment of a longing for the past, unlike time travel fiction, which can deliver fulfilment of longings for the future as well, and, specifically in terms of Alternate History fiction, also fulfilment of longings for an alternative present, thus satisfying the “tritime focus” of *Sehnsucht*. Science Fiction therefore offers a fulfilment of longings not likely to be attained in non-speculative works, for both the characters and the readers of that text. Darko Suvin comments in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979) that Science Fiction “has always been wedded to the hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment” (5). Speculative writing, perhaps more than other genres, is thus indicated to be uniquely linked to these idealised longings within the individual.

### **The Role of Science Fiction and its Consequences for the Reader**

The texts discussed here emphasise not only Bester’s championing of an individual in control of their own self and their own escape, but also reflect the way in which Bester envisioned this escape happening in the ‘real world,’ not just the world of his texts. Though Bester offers “a more extensive world” than the one we experience in actuality, as mentioned by Heilman, he also envisions that the reader, in choosing to escape to these grander worlds through reading, would find their longings better satisfied if their control extended beyond simply choosing what book to read (455). If it did stop there, it would end in a similar manner to where Addyer’s control ends – with picking the time period but not able to engage with enacting that choice.

Heilman questions whether the desire to escape through literature reveals a malfunction in ourselves and whether retreating from reality, a common symptom of many psychological disorders, is symptomatic of a “psychopathological state” (441, 442). However, he does point out that escape is not always from something but can also be towards something; that readers may not be running from life, but rather seeking it (453). This desire to seek life ties in well with Bester’s repeated return to the importance of escaping confinement to discover one’s latent potentiality; seeking life requires



the ambition mentioned by Kelleghan in order to find release from the constraints of one's normal reality and rebel against self-imprisonment via inertia. While any fiction may place the reader in a reality that does not reflect their own, speculative fiction requires particular leaps of imaginative and creative impulse, on the part of both the writer and the reader, in order to co-create successful fulfilment of a longing for escape. Thus, Bester's version of speculative escapist literature is a team effort where both parties are engaged with, and have a stake in, that escape.

As these texts show, desire and longing can be satisfied by the mechanics of time travel but are best achieved subjectively and individually, in conjunction with a sense of control. As the struggle between conformity and individuality was a key aspect of Bester's writing throughout his career, it is not surprising that the satisfaction gained by attaining one's *Sehnsucht* depends heavily on the relationship between that attainment and independent autonomy in bringing it about. Connections drawn between the texts themselves and the way in which Bester envisioned the reader engaging with those texts highlights not just the relevance within fiction of longings but the importance Bester placed on having some level of autonomous control over them, with the reader literally enacting what Bester depicts in his characters. As a result, reading his texts becomes a real-world application of the themes explored through his characters, particularly regarding the role of control and creative input in realising longings by uncovering latent individual potential and allowing release from confinement. The expectation that readers will recognise and emphasise with the satisfaction of control over one's own longings reflects *Sehnsucht*'s depiction of the universal nature of the desire for an ideal, alternative reality, even if not admitted to the self, and even if only enacted through reading. As Bloch claims, longing is "the only honest state in all men" (vol. 1, 45).

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# **DYSTOPIAN SURVEILLANCE AND THE LEGACY OF COLD WAR EXPERIMENTATION IN JOYCE CAROL OATES' *HAZARDS OF TIME TRAVEL* (2018)**

Nicholas Stavris

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This article examines the speculations raised by Joyce Carol Oates in her forty-sixth novel, *Hazards of Time Travel* (2018) concerning contemporary processes of surveillance, specifically, how participation in and complicity with surveillance practices can transform and alter the fundamental nature of an individual's identity. Unusually, and unlike many dystopian texts that critique the present world by looking ahead, *Hazards* is not restricted by prophetic speculation. Initially, the early stages of the novel present a not-too-distant dystopian America, one explicitly reflecting the practices of surveillance that have in many respects developed in response to the events of 9/11. However, following a narrative leap backwards through time, Oates' future world is quickly supplanted by a 1950s society plagued by anxieties pertaining to nuclear destruction, and a temporal period that saw the development of Cold War experimentation and psychological conditioning. Through this temporal shift, Oates constructs a connecting timeline between Cold War experimentation and behavioural control and the Surveillance State of her post-9/11 epoch. In so doing, Oates' novel offers up the notion that the post-9/11 era, as well as what David Lyon has referred to as "today's surveillance culture," are rooted in the legacy of Cold War America ("Surveillance Culture" 826). Through a critical analysis of Oates' retrospective speculations, and by following the journey of Adriane Strohl, the novel's chief protagonist who is sent back in time, this discussion explores how practices of surveillance, typified as they are in the twenty-first century by our relationship with digital technologies, can have a detrimental impact on a person's identity, and, ultimately, completely alter the very foundations of an individual's sense of self: their memories.

The introduction of Adriane, a high school student living in a near-future America, occurs within the novel's dystopian present. The citizens of Oates' future America, or the North American States (NAS) as it has been re-named, exists under the strict authority of the Patriot Party, "who controlled all electronic communications and transmissions" (132). In this sense, this first temporal location markedly resembles the world imagined by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Oates presents her nightmare world of unrelenting surveillance as an aftermath of sorts, which in principal has arisen following the 9/11 terror attacks and its after-effects. Following Adriane's high school graduation valedictorian speech – in which she dissents against the government by questioning the nature, values, and norms of her society – she is arrested and sent back in time to 1950s Wausau, Wisconsin, or "the era of Zone 9" (43). This is a place of exile for individuals who have presented insubordinate behaviour and used to rehabilitate citizens who have shown

themselves to be potential dissidents. As Adriane is told: "There, you will attend an excellent four-year university to train yourself in a socially useful profession" (43). Effectively, the past is codified as a space of confinement for non-conformity and a temporal location whereby behaviour can be overseen and governed. Once in Zone 9, Adriane – renamed Mary-Ellen – falls in love with her psychology professor, Dr Ira Wolfman, another exile from NAS. This encounter is further evidence of Adriane's so-called rebellious nature, as Adriane attempts to defy the rules of her exile that forbid her to form relationships with other individuals. Both Wolfman and Adriane are punished for this offence, albeit in different ways. While Wolfman is killed, Adriane finds herself to be living in what appears to be the idyllic setting of Heron Creek Farm. However, as becomes apparent, this third location proves to be nothing more than an illusion and is a place in which Adriane remains subject to conditions of surveillance and control. In this space, Adriane's memories are removed resulting in the fundamental reconfiguration of her identity, thus exposing her journey through time to be an experiment of the mind and a punishment that has forced her into a state of behavioural compliance.

The nightmare world of NAS presented in the novel's opening chapters is demarcated by a temporal break with the past, which has itself become heavily restricted and controlled following a deliberate abandonment and cultural forgetting of history prior to the events of 9/11. Historical 'reality' has been re-constructed by the Government, who have taken control of all historical documentation and written-out any traces of the past that might serve to threaten their position of power and authority. Essentially, history has been re-written. Due to this, the political and societal landscape of Oates' future America has been transformed under the Patriot Party to such an extent that time itself is no longer governed by the pre-9/11 calendar. As Adriane explains: "It was against the law to compute birth dates under the old calendar, but Daddy had told me – I'd been born in what would have been called the twenty-first century if the calendars had not been reformed" (31). 9/11, then, represents a cultural and indeed global shift in Oates' fictional universe, operating in the novel – in an almost apocalyptic way – as a pivotal moment in time. This resulted in a discontinuation with the past and echoes what became an almost entirely Western-centric interpretation of 9/11 and its aftermath in the twenty-first century. Within the context of the novel, the world as it existed prior to 9/11 remains subject to the teachings and restrictions of the new Government, who are in complete control of the country's collective history.

Any information concerning the past deemed to be "'Outdated'/'unpatriotic' information" has been removed from the collective consciousness, "deleted from all computers and from all accessible memory" (31). The dystopian society of NAS, in this sense, follows a specific Cold War literary heritage. For example, NAS sharply echoes the world constructed by Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), in which history has become suppressed and regulated by the Government, achieved through the censorship of books that do not reinforce the laws and policies of the Patriot Party: "The old, 'outdated' (that is, 'unpatriotic') history books had all been destroyed, my father had said. [...] Only reconstituted history and information were allowed, just as only the reconstituted calendar was allowed" (Oates 32). In her analysis of Bradbury's Cold War dystopia, "Ray Bradbury and the Assault on Free Thought" (2013), Daphne Patai examines how the novel highlights fears pertaining to "the suppression of independent thought in whatever form it might take" and suggests that nearly all of

the inhabitants “believe that happiness and harmony are what best characterize their society” (43). The same can be said of the citizens of *Hazards*, who have become indoctrinated into conforming to codes or patterns of behaviour that can only ever underpin the beliefs of the Patriot Party. History, then, is closely monitored and constructed by the Patriot Party, as are the memories of the past world, which are strictly controlled by systems of aggressive surveillance.

The dystopian nature of the novel is epitomised by citizens of the NAS who monitor their own behaviour and social activities so as to avoid being placed under suspicion by the government. Otherwise put, citizens must avoid appearing in any way unique. Lyon, in “Surveillance Culture” (2017), posits that the crucial trait of surveillance in the twenty-first century “is that people actively participate in an attempt to monitor their own surveillance and the surveillance of others” (824). Crucially, contemporary practices of self-policing and of unrelenting, collective surveillance can undoubtedly be found through our engagement with and existence in relation to digital platforms and social media environments. Within these spaces, individuals monitor the thoughts and actions of others while simultaneously observing and policing their own behavioural practices. It is the very act of participatory monitoring and self-policing that typifies the collective culture of surveillance within NAS-23, Adriane’s home state. As with the rest of this re-constituted American society, behaviour is monitored by both the Government and by individual citizens, who have learned to police their own thoughts and systems of belief. Early in the novel, for instance, Adriane makes clear that her father, Eric Strohl, had been given “MI [Marked Individual] status” before she was born and was therefore kept under surveillance by the government for being a “scientifically-minded individual” (6). “[S]uch individuals,” Adriane continues, “were assumed to be ‘thinking for themselves’ – not a reputation anyone would have wished for” (6). Eric’s MI status, however, is only a minor sentence when compared with the more extreme repercussions of behavioural infringement, such as deletion, vaporisation, or execution, which in NAS are televised during “Execution Hours” (6). The way in which the citizens of NAS participate in their own surveillance, through processes of self-regulation and the monitoring of others is indicative of surveillance practices in the twenty-first century. The novel effectively draws on a contemporary culture of surveillance whereby we regulate our own behaviour based on how others view us. Surveillance, in this sense, becomes an active part of how we see ourselves.

The citizens of NAS can be placed under suspicion based on their presumed potential to commit subversive acts. As such, individuals must avoid highlighting this potential by monitoring and regulating their own behaviour in order to appear culturally obedient. Adriane explains that “[a]t Pennsboro High – as everywhere else in our nation, I suppose – there was a fear of seeming ‘smart’ – (which might be interpreted as ‘too smart’) – which would result in calling unwanted attention to you” (17). Students in NAS society must, therefore, modify their behaviour, and indeed, their academic performance, so as to avoid being placed under suspicion as potential dissidents:

It was OK to get B’s, and an occasional A–; but A’s were risky,  
[...] Of course it was just as much of a mistake to wind up  
with C’s and D’s – that meant that you were *dull normal*, or

it might mean that you'd deliberately sabotaged your high school career. Too obviously "holding back" was sometimes dangerous. [sic] (17/18)

The educational setting here notably foreshadows the role of the University during Adriane's exile in Zone 9, a point of discussion to which this article will return. The process by which students at Pennsboro High conform to strict and regulated patterns of achievement, however, not only emphasises the workings of self-policing and control in *Hazards*, but likewise, reveals them to be responding to what Christian Fuchs and Daniel Troittier, in "Towards a theoretical model of social media surveillance in contemporary society" (2015), refer to as "categorical suspicion" (128). Drawing on the thoughts of Gary T. Marx (1988, 219), they purport that "[c]ategorical suspicion means that due to surveillance technologies 'everyone becomes a reasonable target. The new forms of control are helping to create a society where everyone is guilty until proven innocent; technologies that permit continuous, rather than intermittent, monitoring encourage this'" (128). Through the society of NAS-23, and throughout the rest of the novel, Oates engages with contemporary practices of surveillance, whereby humanity is continuously connected to systems of surveillance, including social media platforms, as well as digital devices such as phones, tablets, and computers that monitor our behaviour and govern our actions. Essentially, *Hazards* highlights how we, perhaps unconsciously, self-monitor and self-regulate our own behaviour in the contemporary world through the use of digital technologies. Fuchs and Troittier contend that categorical suspicion has "intensified" in the twenty-first century following the events of 9/11 and with the development of social media technologies in particular, as they suggest: "The focus on fighting and preventing terrorism and the creation of a culture of categorical suspicion is one of the societal contexts of social media surveillance" (128). Oates' portrayal of a culture of self-policing and academic regulation at Pennsboro High, as well as her envisioning of 9/11 as a temporal rupture in the fabric of history effectively demonstrates *Hazards* to be a novel heavily influenced by the post-9/11 rhetoric and the methods of surveillance that followed, in which "suspicion can easily result in the constant monitoring of social media activities of citizens and the police assumption that all users are actual or potential criminals and terrorists until proven innocent" (Fuchs and Troittier 128).

Oates further reinforces the fact that her dystopian society is one that functions on the basis of suspicion and surveillance in her representation of racial categorisation, whereby citizens of NAS have been reclassified under the Patriot Party and placed into a numerical system based on their skin tone:

(The highest ST – SkinTone – category was 1: "Caucasian." Most residents of Pennsboro were ST1 or ST2 with a scattering of ST3's. There were ST4's in a neighbourhood district and of course dark-complected ST workers in all districts. We knew they existed but most of us had never seen an actual ST10.) [sic] (19)



This structure of classification, which defines the surveillance system under the Patriot Party, is a process that provides the Government with control over society through processes of racial discrimination, or what Simone Brown, in "Racializing Surveillance" (2012), suggests are the "'Othering' practices that first accompanied European colonial expansion and that sought to structure social relations and institutions in ways that privilege whiteness" (73). Likewise, this system of classification based on skin tone notably resembles what Lyon has referred to as "social sorting," a system of surveillance in the twenty-first century brought about in the aftermath of 9/11 in which Government authorities and consumer markets alike, monitor individuals "according to varying criteria, to determine who should be targeted for special treatment, suspicion, eligibility, inclusion, access, and so on" (*Surveillance as social sorting* 20). Oates captures the essence of a post-9/11 world through which digital technologies and systems of social sorting have commanded forms of surveillance based on discrimination and control. In this way, Oates effectively illustrates the role that surveillance can and often does play in both the perception and self-monitoring of identity categories.

It is in Adriane's refusal to adhere to the principles and ideologies of NAS that result in her exile to 1950s Wainscotia Wisconsin, or Zone 9. Adriane refuses to obey this culture of self-policing during her life at Pennsboro High – "sometimes I tried harder than I needed to try. Maybe it was risky. Some little spark of defiance provoked me" (18). Likewise, she singles herself out by "saying 'surprising' things – 'unexpected' things – that other students would not have said" and thus questions the socio-political structures of the NAS (21). Adriane's resistance to the behavioural norms of NAS marks her out as an "uncooperative subject" (33). Her interest in censored and restricted information, reinforced by the questions she raises during her valedictorian speech concerning the society's fragmented past, "before the Reconstitution, and before the Attacks," is enough to place her under suspicion as a potential traitor to the country (32). Following Adriane's valedictorian speech, Oates presents what Patai terms the "Grand Inquisitor" scene in dystopian fiction, a passage of "confrontation between the rebellious protagonist and the society's leader or representative" (43). Adriane is detained and questioned along with a number of other scholars "in a Youth Disciplinary 'sweep'" (38). "The question," Adriane explains, "was bluntly put to me: Was I, Adriane Strohl, a collaborator with these students? Was I a co-conspirator?" (38). Once arrested, the scholars are kept separate but collectively interviewed on television screens, a passage in which Oates highlights the interconnection of surveillance and spectatorship.

As Adriane is forced to watch the 'vaporization' of one of the suspected criminals, she exclaims that "A camera was turned on me [...] I had to assume that my face was being beamed into other interrogation rooms, where the Patriot scholars were being held" (40). This passage illustrates not only Adriane's own subjugation, foreshadowing the unseen force that monitors her behaviour during her time in exile, but reinforces her participation in and complicity with the act of surveillance itself, prompting a clear articulation of the audience's own role as participants and spectators of surveillance in contemporary society. The execution of the scholar, ZOLL, JOSEPH JAY [sic], proves to be the starting point of Adriane's character arc, as she transitions from being a rebellious citizen at the start of the novel to a compliant and reconditioned subject in the concluding chapter. The scene serves to introduce Adriane's subjectivity to behavioural control in Zone 9. However, it also supports

an understanding of *Hazards* to be a novel that highlights the intertwined issues of surveillance and behavioural manipulation in contemporary society. *Hazards*, as will be explained, reflects upon the behavioural experimentation practices undertaken during the Cold War and which continue to influence and underpin surveillances practices today.

In the novel's second location, Oates removes the reader from the futuristic, speculative world of NAS-23 and places them deep within the heart of a 'Cold War Campus,' one clearly inspired by the University of Wisconsin, Madison, at which Oates in fact studied (Anderson, 3). Through Adriane's exile at Wainscotia State University Oates draws heavily on the role of the United States Higher Education environment in the 1950s and 1960s and, in particular, the impact of Cold War anxiety upon student life at the University of Wisconsin during this time. Matthew Levin, in *Cold War University* (2013), explains that during the Cold War, and following World War Two, Madison became a "'Cold War university'. Increasingly supported by the federal government, it played an increasingly crucial role in the broad and multifaceted struggle with the Soviet Union" (16). It is through her inclusion of behaviourism and social conditioning, central themes that are played out during Adriane's time in Zone 9, that the temporal connection between the two time zones on which the novel is structured becomes most apparent.

In looking back to the Cold War era, Oates participates in what Andrew Hammond, in his article "The Twilight of Utopia" (2011), suggests became a particular concern in literary criticism during the 1980s, concentrated "on the conscious and unconscious impact of nuclear technologies and of the widespread fear of nuclear disaster" (662). This "so-called Nuclear Criticism," Hammond avows, responded to a literary sea-change amongst authors, as well as poets and dramatists, who had begun to focus directly or indirectly on collective anxieties pertaining to the acceleration and stockpiling of nuclear armaments (662). However, it was not merely nuclear warfare that spearheaded this concern within the arts. In an analysis of the post-War dystopian novel in "The Flight from the Good Life" (1994), David Seed reflects upon an "abiding fear which runs through American dystopian fiction of the 1950s that individuals will lose their identity" amidst widespread reorganisation in the fabric of society (225). Seed explains that "protagonists of dystopias are usually defined in relation to organizational structures" that place the individual at the mercy of a totalitarian State and "draconian" measures (226). Adriane is continuously defined by her lack of autonomy, subjugated to regimes that limit her individuality and freedom of thought and expression.

Significantly, the Cold War period led to a particular development in behavioural experimentation, a development that, as Alfred McCoy argues in his work *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (2007), involved a "massive mind control effort, with psychological warfare and secret research into human consciousness that reached a cost of a billion dollars annually – a veritable Manhattan Project of the mind" (7). "[F]rom 1950 to 1962," McCoy continues, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was experimenting with innovative torture techniques that progressed from the physical to the psychological, leading to a "paradigm" that probed "the essential nature of the human organism to identify its physiological and psychological vulnerabilities" (7, 8). This, McCoy confirms, resulted in a "total assault on all senses and sensibilities,"

a development he describes as “a hammer-blow to the fundamentals of a person’s identity” (8). The impact of psychological experimentation and behavioural control is conveyed through Adriane’s exiled experience, during which she undergoes psychological punishments that re-condition her behaviour over time, thus forcing her into a state of behavioural compliance. Importantly, Oates returns to this particular period in order to provoke an interpretation of contemporary surveillance as being in some way influenced by the experimentations in behavioural science undertaken during this time. Moreover, the novel appears to advance the position that as consumers of digital technologies in contemporary society, and of devices that continue to monitor our behaviour, movements, and actions, we are now being conditioned by digital and virtual technologies in ways not dissimilar from the psychological experimentation practices undertaken during the Cold War era.

Once Adriane arrives in Zone 9, she enrolls on a psychology course under the direction of Dr Ira Wolfman, in which she studies the work of psychologist B. F. Skinner. Adriane attends a seminar on Skinnerian behaviourism, during which she is informed that “Individual, group, and mass behavior can be programmed, conditioned, predicted and controlled” (Oates 90). The premise of Skinner’s operant conditioning, as Saul McLeod asserts (2007), worked on the assumption that through the use of positive and negative reinforcements, and also through the use of punishments typically in the form of an “electric shock,” the behaviour of a subject – usually a rat – could be profoundly altered (3). Edward K. Morris, Nathaniel G Smith, and Deborah E. Altus, in “B. F. Skinner’s Contributions to Applied Behavior Analysis” (2005) claim that “Skinner was not only the most eminent psychologist of the 20th century but also the most eminent behavior analyst of any century. He established a science of behavior, formulated its philosophy, and founded behavior analysis” (121). Skinner’s operant conditioning paved the way for further experimentation into neurological functions, including, for example, the function of ‘pleasure in the brain.’ In his article “Cold War ‘Super Pleasure’: Instability, Self-stimulation, and the Postwar Brain” (2016), Otniel E. Dror makes clear that “[t]he discovery of pleasure in the brain was the immediate effect of the rapprochement of behaviorism with neuropsychology and serendipity” (230). Furthermore, discoveries of brain pleasure through experimentation “also coincided with the anxieties of the Cold War and a unique ‘Cold War rationality’ (which was distinct from ‘reason’)” (228). Skinnerian psychology, and in particular his theory of operant conditioning, becomes crucial to understanding Adriane’s transitional development or journey from dissidence to compliance. It is conveyed in the novel by Oates as a thematic backdrop, secondary to the love story that develops between Adriane and Wolfman. However, it is a theme that allows for an interpretation of Adriane’s existence in Zone 9 to be nothing more than an experimental punishment, whereby Adriane is observed and controlled by an unseen force and which leads to her eventual conformity at Heron Creek Farm. Adriane’s transitional development from dissident to conformer ultimately illustrates how a person’s identity and the very essence of their character can be manipulated and controlled. In a twenty-first century context, then, it is worth considering how our continued utilisation of digital technologies – technologies through which collective practices of surveillance are maintained – are essentially informed by Skinnerian psychology. *Hazards* prompts an interrogation into our relationship with digitisation in the contemporary world, and critically addresses how our participation with surveillance through the use of digital technologies, whereby we perpetually observe the behaviour of others and regulate our own behaviour in return, has

ultimately stemmed from the experiments into behavioural manipulation undertaken by Skinner and his predecessors.

Adriane's monitored condition is hinted at during her first encounter with Wolfman: "Our instructor was returning our midterm exams. He was smiling, though not with his eyes. His eyes moved restlessly over us, impersonal and detached, calculating. I wondered: were we 'subjects' to him?" (87). During her time in Zone 9, Adriane's identity is reshaped or reconstructed through Skinnerian science, transformed through the process of behavioural conditioning. Her behaviour is guided in principle by a set of rules entitled "The Instructions," which are provided for the reader in the opening sections of the novel (3). These instructions forbid exiled individuals from leaving their place of exile – which in her case is the campus – reveal their true identity to other citizens, or "enter into any 'intimate' or 'confidential' relationship with any other individual" (3). Adriane must follow these directives during her four-year sentence, as specified in points six and seven of The Instructions: "The EI will be monitored at any and all times during his/her exile. [...] Violations of any of these restrictions will insure that the EI will be immediately Deleted" (4). Exiles in Zone 9 submit to The Instructions under the belief that they are being watched at all times, verifying the Panoptic-like state of Adriane's environment. Her existence is therefore regulated by an absent presence, subjected to the ideological belief that she is being monitored by some form of unseen observer. Furthermore, Oates compels the reader into participating in the very act of Panoptic surveillance in Zone 9's opening chapter through a brief change in narrative, which temporarily abandons Adriane's point of view and is conveyed instead by the collective voice of the student body at Wainscotia State University:

*She looked like a convalescent. Some wasting disease that left her skinny, and her skin ashy-pale and sort of grainy as if it would be rough to the touch like sandpaper. Her eyes would have been beautiful eyes – they were dark brown, like liquid chocolate – with thick lashes – but they were likely to be narrowed and squinting as if she were looking into a bright, blinding light. (51, original emphasis)*

Here, Oates concurrently stresses our own participation in the act of surveillance, as the audience observe Adriane from a position of unseen authority. Forced by the Government to take on a new identity and new name – Mary-Ellen – Adriane is described from the perspective of her fellow students who have observed her during her initial days and weeks on campus. The essence of Adriane's identity is reduced to that of a closely observed entity that is being carefully considered, analysed, and dissected by the narrator, exemplifying her existence as an experimental subject under constant surveillance.

Adriane's status as an experimental subject becomes progressively apparent both to herself and to the reader. Her anxiety continues to be influenced by her belief that she is being watched, reinforcing the panoptic quality of her surroundings. In essence, the environment of Zone

9 sharply resembles that of NAS-23, as Adriane feels compelled into a position of subordination and compliance. Motivated by her studies on behaviourism, she likens herself to a “laboratory creature that has been conditioned by a menacing visual stimulus to ‘freeze’” (216). She is akin to the rat in Skinner’s maze, a condition to which Adriane becomes overtly aware: “In a new and unexpected variant of a ‘Skinner box’ everywhere I went, in Zone 9, I brought this (invisible) box with me, for I was at its epicentre” (192). Adriane must monitor her own actions in accordance with The Instructions, and is constantly defined by her fear of the unknown watcher. “Often,” she explains, “I caught sight of myself in reflective surfaces, and was struck – stricken – by the person I’d become, [...] [M]y manner was vigilant, hyper-alert. I’d become one of those lab rats that has been frustrated or frightened by shock” (193). In this symbolic moment, Oates foregrounds our relationship with technology in the twenty-first century, encapsulating our use of digital devices, into which we incessantly gaze, as well as our unwavering connection to the social media spaces through which we participate in acts of collective and participatory surveillance. Echoing her refusal to obey the regulations and social norms of NAS-23, however, Adriane continues to perform rebellious behaviour in Zone 9 by resisting the rules set out in The Instructions. She eventually reveals her true identity to Wolfman and enters into an intimate relationship with him. Likewise, after discovering Wolfman is, like her, an exile, they attempt to flee Zone 9 altogether.

The events preceding Adriane’s and Wolfman’s attempt to escape their place of exile exposes the distinct culture of Cold War anxiety into which Adriane has been placed. Whilst in exile, Adriane begins part-time work at the Museum of Natural History, a location within the novel that at first appears to offer Adriane a degree of respite from her monitored state. On one occasion, Wolfman leads Adriane to a bomb shelter, located underground and beneath the museum. It is a location where they can talk privately: “Now, we’re safe!” he explains, “No surveillance” (169). In this space, Oates underscores the collective paranoia that governed the Cold War period as stemming from fears of nuclear Armageddon. Concerning the bunker, Wolfman explains to Adriane that “for a long time after World War II, Americans had lived in terror of a *nuclear holocaust*. School children as young as five or six were drilled in what to do if there was a sudden ‘nuclear flash’ – they were to scramble beneath their desks, bow their heads and cover the backs of their necks with their clasped hands” (171, original emphasis). Here, Oates provides an illustration of what M. Keith Booker in *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War* (2001) refers to as “the long 1950s,” and “the great period of Cold War hysteria beginning soon after World War II and ending sometime around 1964, when nuclear and anti-Soviet paranoia in the United States began notoriously to decline” (3). The shelter visited by Wolfman and Adriane functions as an emblem of this paranoia, a period from which a culture of Cold War experimentation began.

The sections of the novel that follow on from Adriane’s and Wolfman’s intimate encounter in the bomb shelter are notably omitted from the pages of the text and withheld from the reader – “all that passed between us that night,” Adriane reflects, “went unrecorded” – a deliberate absence within the text through which Oates confronts perpetual surveillance through the omission of narrative, and it is from this moment of privacy between them that Adriane and Wolfman embark on a journey in an attempt to escape their place of exile (181). However, what follows is in fact

not Adriane's deliverance from exile, but her complete loss of 'self,' and the fundamental loss of her identity, revealing her experience to have been nothing more than an experiment of the mind. Indeed, Adriane and Wolfman's attempt to escape their exiled conditions at the Wainscotia State setting proves futile. Importantly, though, it reinforces Adriane's confined existence within a Skinnerian box:

Though we'd been walking for six hours, following the trail that Wolfman had carefully chosen for us [...] it seemed that the trail had looped back upon itself, and had brought us again to the entrance of the arboretum, close by the University campus. The tolling sound we'd been hearing was the chapel bell. (272)

Oates underpins Adriane's condition as a trapped subject with the use of a spatial paradox. Described earlier on in the novel as "The Happy Place," Zone 9 has now become a location from which she is unable to emancipate herself and in which she is caught within a spatial loop (45). Furthermore, this section is clearly indicative of our existence within digital spaces in the twenty-first century and which provides the basis for an understanding of the novel's final location. In addition, Adriane's utterance concerning the "tolling sound" prepares the audience for a pivotal moment in her development from dissident to conformer, eventually resulting in the total re-conditioning of her identity. Adriane describes the loss of Wolfman as a vaporisation:

In pine branches overhead a small bird, possibly a bat, was circling strangely, as if rabid. Then, as I started, the thing – black, swift, unerring – swooped down to rush at Wolfman, struck him on the side of the head and entered his head, suddenly aflame, engulfing him in flames within seconds turning the man to vapour only a few feet from me. (273)

Unable to grasp the reality of the situation, or see this punishment for what it truly is, Adriane perceives what is an electric shock to be an animal of some kind. This moment echoes the vaporisation of ZOLL, JOSEPH JAY in NAS-23, and like that moment, has an immediate impact on Adriane, transporting her once again to an entirely new location in the novel's final chapter.

The setting of Heron Creek Farm at first appears to be a location that provides Adriane with a sense of recovery from her exiled state in Zone 9. She finds herself living in an idyllic, rural environment, a place in which she has developed a strong bond with the natural world: "Walking through the overgrown garden, with Rufus at my heels, sniffing and bounding into the dry-rustling corn, I am suffused with happiness" (310). Essentially, this chapter gives the impression of renewal, or recovery. It appears to present Adriane as having recuperated from her exiled state, from her "teletransportation," and from the death of Wolfman, of whom there is no mention in this chapter (65). However, it quickly becomes apparent that Heron Creek Farm is an artificial world, one that exposes Adriane's journey through time to have been an illusion while also representing the final

phase of her subjugation to behavioural conditioning. It is a space that provides the reader with the culmination of Adriane's journey, which appeared at first to be a movement backwards in time. Instead, the final chapter underscores the truth surrounding Adriane's existence in Oates' novel, that she has not in fact travelled backwards through time, but has been subjected to a form of mind-control experimentation designed to recondition her behaviour.

At Heron Creek Farm, Adriane has little memory of what has brought her to this place: "In my former life – (which I can remember only vaguely, like something glimpsed through frosted glass) – I don't believe I lived on a farm, working with the soil, grew things" (310). Adriane has married Jamie Stiles, a scholar she met whilst in exile, and has built a life with him here. Again, though, her recollection of how this happened is absent from her memory: "Somehow it seemed to have been decided between us" (306). Her loss of memory is a clear marker of her reconditioned self and while Adriane has come to accept her life at the farm as her true reality, she does experience momentary, fleeting glimpses that this life is not altogether her own. She briefly considers that the names of her parents on her birth certificate are not real: "Were these my birth parents? Or were they simply fictitious names someone had provided [...]?" (318). Adriane also feels Wolfman's absence when making love to Jamie: "sometimes a sensation comes over me, that I am in the arms of someone else [...] someone whose name I have forgotten" (317). Moreover, this constructed environment is addressed overtly as Adriane attempts to read from a collection of library books:

I saw to my surprise that there were no words on the page – no printed words. [...] I turned pages, and all were the same: blank. [...] Shaken, I replaced this book and opened another at random. And this book did have printed pages, but the print was blurred and incomprehensible as if it has melted. (323)

Adriane's observations, her perception of the blank and distorted pages, confirms the illusory nature of her new existence within this confined space in which she can be observed and controlled. On some level at least, Adriane mistrusts the reality of her surroundings in spite of her acceptance of them. In this respect, Oates is likewise encouraging the reader to mistrust the hegemonic structures in which we operate today. During her time in Zone 9, Oates introduced the notion that Adriane's experiences since giving her Valedictorian speech have been manufactured, presented at one stage as Wolfman and Adriane discuss the execution that she witnessed prior to being placed into exile. Wolfman suggested to Adriane: "If it was a TV monitor, you were probably just seeing a re-enactment. You have no way of knowing if the execution was authentic" (219). Wolfman's utterance epitomises the constructed environment of the farm, which serves as a representation of the reality placed upon Adriane by an external force.

Through the use of this rather unusual setting on which the novel ends – which collapses, distorts, and ultimately abandons the portrayal of Adriane's temporal shift backwards through time – Oates confronts the dystopian realities of the digital age. In particular, Heron Creek Farm functions as a social commentary on our reliance on and existence in relation to digital or illusory spaces in the



twenty first century. In "Big Data Surveillance" (2014), Mark Andrejevic and Kelly Gates suggest that "the flexibility of digital environments can double as laboratory and virtual Skinner box, enabling an ongoing process of experimentation in social control" (194). Adriane has been placed within a space of artificial reality, one not dissimilar from the digital environments that we ourselves utilise in the contemporary world. She remains subject to systems of surveillance and control, failing to understand the full extent of her continued incarceration within a constructed environment. At the same time, in describing this environment as "*a dream*" rather than a nightmare, Adriane is shown to have accepted her condition as an experimental subject (323, original emphasis). She no longer resists her confinement or questions the structures on which her environment functions. Otherwise put, she has been reconditioned – like Skinner's rat – to conform to the rules of her new reality.

Oates' *Hazards of Time Travel* looks backwards as well as forwards in its examination of surveillance and the impact of surveillance practices on human identity. The novel proposes a timeline between the Cold War era and, in particular, Cold War experimentation and the post-9/11 world of aggressive surveillance. However, by blurring the boundaries between reality and artifice, *Hazards* draws attention to the way in which our existence within artificial environments, specifically online, continues to place the human self at the mercy of the unseen watcher. Adriane's existence at Heron Creek Farm is one of a split-identity, caught as she is between a utopian and dystopian way of life. Adriane has entered into a space in which she is 'happy' whilst at the same time continues to function as a closely monitored and highly restricted subject within a system that has complete control over her actions. Concerning the role of technology, namely, the rise of social media in the contemporary world, Lyon posits that "[a] key aspect of today's nascent surveillance culture is the imperative to share. Social media is in some ways synonymous with such sharing" ("Surveillance Culture" 830). 'Sharing' as Lyon maintains, has become a normalised process of everyday life, "in which persons are made more visible by others or—and this is the relevant sense—deliberately make themselves more visible." (831). The process of sharing in the twenty-first century reinforces our participation and complicity with our own surveillance and indeed the surveillance of others. Sharing invites participation whilst in the same instance reinforces the essence of surveillance, that we remain under constant observation and control. Oates' novel purposefully addresses how surveillance can alter the essential nature of the human self. However, Oates critiques our imperative to share in the digital age through Adriane's final words, and the final words of the novel, as Adriane invites us to join her in her new environment: "Please come! I would like to meet you. Stay with us as long as you like" (324).

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#### BIONOTE

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## **"THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER": DISRUPTING PHALLOCENTRISM IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC SPACE OF RUSSELL HOBAN'S *RIDDLEY WALKER* (1980)**

Sarah France

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Metaphorical references to the nuclear have, since the inception of nuclear power, been overtly sexualised and gendered. In her study of nuclear technology's "emphatically male discourse," Carol Cohn lists just some of the euphemisms used in relation to nuclear technology, including "erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs [and] deep penetration" (18). Allusions to victory in nuclear warfare are frequently constructed as a form of sexual dominance: nuclear accomplishment correlates with sexual prowess, and failure is tied to impotence. In 1998, for example, Bal Thackeray, chief of the Hindu government in Mumbai, responded to India's declaration of nuclear weapon proficiency by stating: "we have to prove we are not eunuchs" (*Indian Today*, n.p.). Literary and media representations of the bomb also depict its phallic nature, perhaps most famously and explicitly portrayed in the satirical *Dr Strangelove* (1964): the climactic final scene sees Major T. J. Kong straddle the momentarily impotent bomb in order to ensure it releases and hits its mark, riding it down to its target.

This sexualised symbolic nuclear discourse continues today, as political and nuclear tensions reflect the dangers of the potentially-literal toxic masculinity evidenced in contemporary politics: Helen Caldicott's concept of "missile envy" (287) can be identified in the tweet United States President Donald Trump directed to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in 2018, boasting about his button being "much bigger and more powerful than his."<sup>1</sup> This domineering branch of masculinity can be understood as hegemonic masculinity, a phrase used to define the construction of masculinity which permeates Western culture, prioritising strength, violence, and dominance as desirable masculine traits. In "An Iron Man: The Body and Some Contradictions of Hegemonic Masculinity" (1990), Russell Connell argues that this form of masculinity has become "culturally exalted," therefore "[stabilizing] a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole" (94). Nuclear warfare is seemingly linked with patriarchal and exploitative constructions of gender and sexuality: the passive Mother Earth is penetrated by the overtly phallic and masculine atomic bomb.

It is no surprise that certain post-nuclear apocalyptic fictions explore concepts of gender and sexuality, as post-apocalyptic landscapes provide a space in which to explore alternate discourses outside the realm of patriarchally-encoded language. Often used as a way to interrogate and critique current concerns, fictional representations of the post-apocalypse frequently correlate

with moments of cultural trauma and precarity, manifesting anxieties relating to global disaster and subsequent societal breakdown. Nuclear fears of the Cold War in particular led to a dramatic increase in apocalyptic anxiety, as the reality of an apocalyptic end became increasingly more palpable on a global scale. This amplified anxiety resulted in an extensive outpouring of Post-Apocalyptic fictions which expressed the profound threat of nuclear holocaust through various imaginings of decrepit worlds following devastation, such as those seen in Walter M. Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) and David Brin's *The Postman* (1985). The paranoia established in this period differed to anxieties experienced during non-nuclear wars: advances in nuclear weaponry meant that potential casualties spanned the entire globe, and included culture, ideologies, and metaphysical concepts perceived to be immune to destruction. The unique threat of nuclear extinction is its capacity to destroy not only individual human lives, but the concept of humanity and society itself, and so it undermines society's status as stable and unchangeable. Fears of nuclear holocaust are shaped alongside the fear which emerges with the realisation that our seemingly stable society and its corresponding ideological beliefs are, in fact, unstable. This is often articulated through a breakdown in language, as it is predominantly through language that we communicate meaning and knowledge itself.

Given all of this, it is notable that poststructuralism, as a theoretical movement, gained traction during this era of nuclear paranoia. Poststructuralism questions the accepted belief that meaning in the language of Western culture is determinably fixed, moving away from structuralist claims that language is a consistently defined structure based on a foundational centre. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" (1984), Jacques Derrida argues that "deconstructionism [...] belongs to the nuclear age" (23): this relates in part to nuclear holocaust's ability to highlight the instability of language; its "fantastically textual" nature lies in its existence in the imaginary, as once it happens, it is likely to destroy all who could comprehend it (23). The concept of society, and consequently language, being unable to survive nuclear holocaust therefore recalls poststructuralist theories of language being impermanent and unstable.

But much of the work of feminist poststructuralists explored a desire for this levelling of culture, due to the exploitative hierarchal structures of Western society. Theorists such as Hélène Cixous continued Derrida's criticism of language, particularly the privileging of dichotomous linguistic and cultural structures that create hierarchies and negate women within patriarchal society. Cixous wrote extensively on phallogentric language, encouraging a challenging of restrictive binaries: in "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" (1975), Cixous proposed a questioning of phallogentric language so as to "threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural," proposing a reimagining of the systems of language that take themselves to be implicit and irreplaceable (65). By implying that there are alternatives, the instability of this structure is revealed. Theorising what would occur if this structure falls away results in what Vivian Patraka describes as "binary terror" (166). This is the fear that pertains to the unravelling of our phallogentric language: a fear that what we perceive as a structurally sound system is in fact arbitrary, unstable, and open to destruction – one that is incited by nuclear holocaust.

Anxieties regarding fears of deconstruction pervade much of the Post-Apocalyptic fiction of this era: in particular, Russell Hoban's novel *Riddley Walker* (1980) is emblematic of this collective fear of societal and structural breakdown. The novel follows protagonist Riddley Walker through the derelict wasteland of his world, set years after Eusa (a mythical figure symbolising pre-holocaust society, and which combines *Europe* and *USA*) created nuclear technology, subsequently inciting nuclear holocaust (Hoban 20). The apocalyptic event devastated the world, changing society irrevocably. Pre-apocalyptic language morphed into a new dialect that Hoban names 'Riddleyspeak,' a phonetic patois consisting of split words, double meanings and a surplus of wordplay. The novel is written entirely in this language, and a number of critics have noted the poststructuralist nature of 'Riddleyspeak' and its related anxieties.<sup>2</sup> Created in the epoch of both nuclear paranoia and extensive poststructuralist development, Hoban's fictional representation of the decay of language reflects the collective concerns of the period: that language and society are susceptible to breakdown. This novel evinces the threats of nuclear warfare through its post-apocalyptic landscape and deconstructed linguistic structure. It explores the dangers of reverting to this destructive society, and Riddley's journey through the text represents a literal and metaphorical escape from the phallogocentric culture that is threatening to return to the same destructive cycle. This post-apocalyptic landscape reflects not only the anxieties relating to the Cold War, but the frustration directed towards the destructive structures of Western culture, which encourages the domination of anything configured as 'other.'

The text is clearly a product of its era, yet as these marginalising structures persist, so too does the relevance of Riddley's journey. Additional anxieties have joined the nuclear at the forefront of the cultural consciousness: most notably, the threat of environmental catastrophe. In "Climate Criticism and Nuclear Criticism" (2019), Daniel Cordle argues that "nuclear texts are not a historical curiosity of the Cold War," but in fact share the same representation of planetary vulnerability that is seen in much climate-change fiction. As such, they argue that "literature from that period continues to speak to us [...] offering foci and approaches that can also help to illuminate climate fiction" (Cordle 289). The climate crisis incites an existential terror similar to that posed by nuclear annihilation; the two are closely related in the enormity of their global threat. A growing body of critical work encourages a consideration of the environmental imaginary alongside the nuclear imaginary, examining, as Srinivas Aravamudan posits in "The Catachronism of Climate Change" (2013), how "climate change [continues] the same nuclear logic of planetary obliteration, except slightly more slowly" (8). Both nuclear devastation and absolute environmental catastrophe are incomprehensible and equally "textual," resulting in the same "remainderless destruction" of humanity and those who might remember it (Derrida 23-24). Furthermore, the masculinist hostility and desire to dominate perceived in nuclear vocabulary can also be observed in attitudes towards the environment. Ecofeminists such as Ynestra King have identified that the domination of nature mirrors the patriarchal domination of the feminine: as King writes in "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology" (1989), "the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing" (18). This hierarchical understanding has formed the basis for oppressive cultural and linguistic structures that organise the Western world. It undergirds a system of duality that is constructed on the premise of controlling women, nature, and all considered 'other,' and has the propensity for mass destruction. In "The Metaphors of Radiation: Or, why a beautiful

woman is like a nuclear power plant," Jane Caputi argues that this patriarchal tradition is capable of "causing ecological crises and producing the conditions for nuclear annihilation," as is hypothesised in Hoban's novel (434).

In order to avoid a similar apocalyptic event, it appears essential to criticise these strict models of duality and encourage their replacement. As Caputi suggests:

[i]n order to halt the wasting of the Earth, we now desperately need new and transformative words, symbols and metaphors for female potency, cosmic power, the mysteries of life and death, the being of nature, the sacredness of the Earth, and indeed of nuclear power itself. (434-5)

*Riddley Walker* expresses a frustration with patriarchally destructive structures, yet also uses its post-apocalyptic space to open up room for an alternative. If Post-Apocalyptic fictions offer a space in which to critique societal failings, here those failings are the destructive phallogocentric structures of society which threaten human extinction. Through an exploration of the novel's interactions with gender, sexuality, and maternity, we can more directly examine its critiques of the patriarchal culture that led to the repudiation of women and nature, the development of nuclear technology, and the destruction of Riddley's pre-apocalyptic world. Both the destructive sexuality present in metaphorical nuclear discourse and the masculinist desire to dominate nature emerge in Hoban's post-nuclear landscape. The similarities between Riddley's world and our own reflect the anxieties incited by the patriarchal order, and the notion of humanity's destructive circularity reflects the phallic structures of power that allow nuclear devastation. Certain articulations of gender and sexuality within the text act to undermine the hierarchical constructs of society; abject figures such as the phallic woman and the castrated man expose the fragility of identity categories and hierarchies of Western culture. Despite the text's recurring motifs of maternity and reproduction, the concept of biological procreation is not positioned as a source of redemption, as it often is in apocalyptic imaginings. In fact, most attempts at reproduction result in death.<sup>3</sup> *Riddley Walker* thus denies the reproductive futurism that is often privileged in speculative fiction and which has been critiqued most famously in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004): the figure of the child acts as a signifier for posterity, but only for heteronormative and patriarchal constructions of the future (26-28). This form of reproductive futurism provides no possible alternatives, and as Rebekah Sheldon argues in *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016), it "strips the future of everything but repetition," risking a return to dangerous hierarchical structures (33). Hoban's text instead destabilises the idea of a nuclear family through abject figures and examines the potential of a *framework* of the maternal figure that threatens destabilisation and suggests an alternative, rather than heteronormative and potentially essentialist futurist assumptions relating to reproduction. The novel's use of the symbolic female body and the configuration of the maternal as the site of an alternate creativity can be usefully read through Julia Kristeva's theory of the pre-linguistic Semiotic stage and the maternal body's association with the period prior to Symbolic thinking. Ultimately, it can be situated as a positive space through which language and societal structures can be reimagined in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.



### Post-Apocalyptic Abjection and Gender Disturbance

Despite the apocalyptic devastation experienced, many of the structures of the novel's pre-apocalyptic society remain. By critiquing the destructive nature of the society that assisted in the path to apocalypse, Hoban's post-nuclear world interrogates a hegemonic masculinity that is prevalent in both the novel's pre-apocalyptic society and our own. Riddley's society is ruled by a patriarchal government known as the Mincery and Riddley is expected to succeed his father and take on the role of 'connexion man.' Yet Riddley questions the Mincery's rule and the structures of his community, running away and escaping his restrictive society and the destructive concepts being enforced. In retaining the patriarchal structures of pre-apocalyptic society, Hoban's text is able to critique them and emphasise their destructive nature, as well as the danger of returning to further disaster. This destructive circularity is evidenced in Goodparley's insistence on rediscovering the '1 Littl 1': gunpowder. His success threatens the re-emergence of violence and destruction through explosives and the underlying greater threat: that the knowledge of the '1 Littl 1' will lead to the knowledge of its counterpart the '1 Big 1,' which refers to the nuclear explosion that destroyed the world.

Yet the assumed nature of these patriarchal gender systems is threatened by the presence of abject figures that destabilise the seemingly unshakable laws of patriarchy. Kristeva's theory of abjection outlined in *Powers of Horror* (1981) defines the horror felt on realising that what is perceived to be stable is in fact unstable: the breaking of an unbreakable border, a threatening of the structured laws governing society, that which Kristeva argues "disturbs identities, systems and orders" (4). The disturbance of the supposedly unbreakable order of language incites feelings of abjection, as does the threat of nuclear apocalypse and its capacity not only to disturb, but to completely disintegrate the borders and laws on which society is built. Also used in terms of the body, Kristeva gives examples of abjection in seeing bodily fluids, which expose the fragility of the boundaries of our bodies and incite a realisation of our own decay and eventual death. Considering nuclear holocaust might produce the same feeling of abjection that arises when looking at a corpse: a realisation not only of our own mortality, but of the potential mortality of our system of being. The ever-present, inescapable terror of nuclear warfare disturbs the accepted social order, refusing to respect the rules of language and society as inherent.

The presence of abject figures within Hoban's text exist to threaten hierarchical binary structures, manifesting a threat to the cultural paradigms which resulted in nuclear devastation. The abject is "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," either positioned on the liminal space between two opposing states or alternating between them, refusing stable definition and thus disrupting order (Kristeva 11). Figures of non-determined gender can embody this state between two binary categories, challenging normative understandings of gender and destructive hierarchical thinking. The maternal body has also been positioned as abject due to its shifting form over the course of pregnancy and the ambiguity of the border between mother and child. The act of childbirth embodies further states of ambiguity as a state between life and before-life, which effects a disintegration between the boundaries of self/other. Monstrous articulations of reproductive women disrupt phallogentrism through their abject nature. Maternity is also a reminder of our

individual mortality: maternal generative power reminds humanity of its birth, and subsequently of its inevitable death. In this sense, apocalyptic nuclear anxiety shares the same fear incited by anxiety over the abject, generative, maternal figure: each incites a similar sense of destabilisation. Just as the bomb disrupted the seemingly stable construction of language pre-Riddley, so too do representations of the maternal and reproductive body disturb attempts to return to the destructive system of language and being. The disruption of language construction evidenced in Riddleyspeak is doubly represented in the disruption of normative sexuality and gender in the figures with Riddley's world.

The various modes of abjection in this novel act as disruptive forces; yet they are also potentially transformative. Although the abject is a point of horror, it also possesses a sense of desire and attraction. In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains how monsters are configured as sources of difference and liminality, but the monster also attracts: "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies," demonstrating the desire felt towards the freedom that non-categorisation represents (17). This concept relates to the draw of the apocalypse itself, which Derrida understood as our innate desire to experience annihilation: "Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? dreaming of it, desiring it?" (23). Clearly, society does not desire the devastation nuclear holocaust would create, but only the capacity such a catastrophe has to level the structures of phallocentrism that risk the path back to destruction.

### **Abject Auntys and Castrating Dogs**

Two of the central abject figures of the novel are the phallic woman and the castrated man. Both expose the fragility of gender norms and, in doing so, threaten the wider destructive cultural laws. The most threatening abject woman in the novel is the mythic figure of Aunty, who defies both the binary of gender and the binary of life and death. Aunty is a phallic woman who brings about death through sex, with "[s]toan boans and iron tits and teef be twean her legs plus she has a iron willy for the ladys it gets red hot. When your time comes you have to do the juicy with her like it or not" (90-91). Made of stone and iron, which are markedly unfertile materials, for Aunty sex leads to death, not life. It is the antithesis of fertility: a source of life weaponised with teeth between her legs to sever the chance for biological reproduction. Sex and death are thus tied together through Aunty, mirroring the destructive phallocentric culture of sexualised nuclear discourse that led to the destruction of pre-apocalyptic society. The first mention of Aunty is Lorna's warning of the dangers of the work at Widders Dump. The workers are digging for iron and retrieve "some girt big rottin iron thing": machines that they could melt down to create further machines of destruction (8). The act of digging relates to a metaphorical excavation of the previous world. Lorna describes it as being "connectit to a shovel and a leaver poal and digging up Bad Time" so that the physical work of excavation marks a return to the destructive circularity that risks recreating the apocalypse (24). Lorna states that "Brooder Walker dug [Aunty] up and she come down on top of him," evidencing his compliance in bringing back the technology that could incite apocalypse, and which has led to Aunty's return (24). Aunty comes as a symbol of vengeance to destroy efforts to return to the society which fuelled its own destruction, opposing the forces which attempt to further corrupt Riddley's world.

Aunty's method of destruction for men incites castration fear: a fear of literal and metaphorical emasculation, which here also presents a wider symbol for the destruction of phallocentric society. As castrator, Aunty is bringer of both literal and symbolic death. More specifically she functions as the *vagina dentata*: the vagina with teeth that Antony Alpers argues in *Maori Myths and Tribal Legends* (1964) "appears as an inverse manifestation of the generative, life-giving powers of woman," threatening both the symbol for patriarchal order, and the continuation of life itself (67). Sex with Aunty thus results in castration, an act which also appears elsewhere in the novel: Durster Potter, for example, has "his froat and his pryvits toar out," and is described as being left "dead with his cock and balls toar off and his head near toar off his neck" (67-68). This repeated theme of castration attempts to neutralise phallic authority, presenting an impotence which foreshadows the final impotence in the face of apocalypse. Sex with Aunty thus mirrors the sexualised discourse of nuclear technology, which similarly results in an 'ultimate' castration: the inability to procreate and ensure the continuation of humanity. Castration is most notably demonstrated in the splitting of Addom (atom) which resulted in nuclear apocalypse: "[t]he Right syd uv him had the nek & hed the Left syd uv him had his cok & bauls" (34). Split in two, Addom's head and genitals are separated. The part of Addom, of Eusa's society, which reflects destructive gendered constructs, is removed from the head. The brain is physically separated from the genitals, which were traditionally used to define gender, in a manoeuvre that suggests a potential for the 'head,' or the subject, to act without being defined in terms of gender or sexuality.

The recurrence of cannibalistic acts is an additional source of abjection in the novel, particularly as it is the parental figures who eat their children. Cannibalism incites particular feelings of abjection and is described by Russell West in "Abject Cannibalism" (2007) as an "intersection between nature and culture, between body and society, at the point where the one blends into the other," breaking both the border between the person eating and the body being eaten, and the border of societal law (235). The cannibalistic acts of parents in the novel create monstrous and abject families, undermining heteronormative familial structures and mocking the concept of the nuclear family, and as such refusing the privileging of reproductive futurism. In the myth of the 'Hart of the Wud,' the man and woman callously cook and eat their child in exchange for fire. The violent puppet Mr. Punch repeatedly attempts to eat his baby, finally succeeding in killing both his wife Pooty and his baby and putting them in the frying pan to eat. As his family cooks, another puppet, Jack Ketch, arrives and rather offhandedly notes that he "thot [he] heard a woman frying," to which Punch demands Jack "eat [his] oan wife" and "fynd [his] oan babby" (136). This normalisation of a grotesque encounter suggests that this world is one in which frying and cannibalising your family are typical incidents, resulting in a corrupted presentation of parenthood that refuses any model in which the child is privileged as a symbol of posterity. These families become abject and monstrous, consuming the child instead of caring for them, and in this way call to mind Kristeva's connection between the acts of consumption and speech. Kristeva writes that "oral activity, which produces the linguistic signifier, coincides with the linguistic signifier" (41); she references a case involving a young girl with a phobia of being eaten by a dog, whose phobia grew correspondingly larger as she developed her knowledge of language. The terror surrounding loss of language (and subsequently of society) in the novel is thus communicated through acts of cannibalism, which emerge as a

panicked subconscious response that involves taking real objects into oneself through the part of the body that forms spoken words.

### Post-Apocalyptic *Écriture Féminine*

The abject fear incited by nuclear apocalypse is complicated by the opportunity it gives for re-creation, for a re-figuring of the landscapes of culture and language after they have been violently levelled by the bomb. The destruction of language provides opportunity for it to be rewritten without the restrictions of phallogentrism. Cixous suggested a way out of phallogentric language through *l'écriture féminine*: literally, 'writing of the female.' Cixous argues that language formed through the female provides possibility in its lack of restrictions: "her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (889). The potential in *l'écriture féminine* threatens phallogentrism: "Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord [...] women will go right up to the impossible" (886). *L'écriture féminine* thus presents a realisation of the impossible: the disintegration of restrictive phallogentric language, leaving space for a new language formed through the bodies of women, and allowing them to shed the language and the codes of gender that have for so long positioned them as lesser. The alignment of meaning, language, and knowledge with the symbolic representations of women and the maternal within *Riddley Walker* can be read as a turn towards non-phallogentric language: akin to *l'écriture féminine*, it "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system," as it is non-hierarchical and so lacks the derogative dichotomy of classical linguistic structure (883).

In addition to its abjection, the maternal body is associated with the production of knowledge, in part because of its correlation with procreativity, but also for its connection with the bodily economy of exchange between mother and child in the pre-linguistic stage that precedes the symbolic. Kristeva used the term "thetic phase" in "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1987) to describe the "threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic," a point where "dependence on the mother is severed and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other" (102). This is the point where the restraints of culture and society are assigned, as we move from the pre-linguistic stage (the semiotic) to one ordered by language and hierarchy (the symbolic). To form a writing through the maternal is, in this way, to return to a point before the thetic stage, rejecting the chains of phallogentric language. This semiotic exchange has the capacity to disrupt the symbolic; as such, writing through maternal figures provides an opportunity to write outside of the symbolic. Maternity has been used previously in connection with artistic creation; the trope of the pregnant poetic can be seen in other areas of literature, aligning a creation of language within the brain with creation of life in a womb. The idea of growing a child within the womb breaks the boundaries of self and other, thus threatening the binary. In "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident" (1987), Kristeva proposes that "maternity as such can [...] lift fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature" (298). Maternity is aligned with positive creation, unrestricted by the binaries poststructuralism criticises. Although "defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible," the maternal body can be used symbolically

as a space to examine this reimagining of language, undermining restrictive binaries and threatening the dichotomous system through its abject embodiment (Cixous 92).

### **Tels an Connexions: The Pre-linguistic Maternal Body**

The potential of the abject maternal image therefore aligns with the potential of the destruction of dominant gender systems through nuclear holocaust, creating a space for this alternative to phallogentric writing and structures of oppression. The symbolic female and maternal body is presented as a framework through which to conceptualise an alternative to patriarchal constructions. Knowledge formation in Riddley's world is implicitly tied to sexuality, procreation, and maternity. Riddley's initial interaction with 'telling' in the novel is with Lorna, a 'tel woman' who has the capacity to interpret signs and meanings. The masculine counterpart to the 'tel woman' is the role taken on by Riddley's father: that of the connexion man, a title passed down to Riddley on his father's death, mirroring the patriarchal privileging of continuation through male bloodlines. His society retains prejudiced concepts of masculinity and femininity, particularly when it comes to 'connexions' and 'tels' – Reckman Bessup claims that "what I connect it shows I aint no tel woman nor I don't know nothing about blips nor syns" (13). 'Telling' is seen as women's work, out of the realm of Fister Bishop's world of hunting, and is not as privileged a role as that of the 'connexion man.' Riddley however develops a relationship with Lorna and it is only when Riddley incorporates Lorna's teachings that he is able to attempt his first 'tel,' as his initial attempts repeatedly fail. In fact, it is following a sexual encounter with Lorna that Riddley begins his journey towards being able to 'tel.' Riddley's experience with 'telling' is often related to sexuality, and his movement towards becoming a connexion man is seen as reaching sexual maturity and adulthood. Reckman Bessop warns Riddley: "now your dads gone youwl be connexion man [...] you bes start putting things to gether for your self you aint a kid no more" (14). No longer a child, Riddley has reached a point of maturation and the responsibility of making 'connexions' now lies with him. Despite the presumed masculine role of the connexion man, Riddley's induction into the role relates to imagery of female maturation: Eusa's mark is painted on his stomach with Goodparley's blood and made permanent by carving it into his skin. This ritualistic spilling of blood to signify maturation is reminiscent of a first period. Riddley has reached a stage where he is expected to find meaning and make connexions, just as menstruation signifies an ability to make life. This act can also be read as penetration: the phallic knife penetrates his stomach, spilling blood in the tearing of his symbolic hymen and impregnating him with the ability to 'tel.' The cuts are "3 moufs on me and waiting to say some thing," so that his wounds become mouths through which he can vocalise his new knowledge (43).

However, Riddley's first attempts as a "connexion man" are unsuccessful: to Riddley, "the woal thing [of his Connexion] wer plain," and yet he is unable to articulate it (62). He fails at his first time, and "every 1 wer left hangin. Me and all" (63). His inability to perform is perceived as a humiliating impotence, mirroring the language used in relation to nuclear technology. The hierarchy of knowledge-gaining is demonstrated further as Fister tells Riddley to "leave the telling with the woman and connect with a mans doing" (65). Riddley ignores this phallogentric ideology, leaving his home to find an alternative mode of being. It is not until later in the novel, when he reaches the

symbolic centre of Cambry, that he makes his first true 'tel.' Riddley's physical journey aligns with his mental journey, a move to an embodiment of the female, rejecting the binary structure that prevents his understanding of his own 'tels.' The following passage can be read as Riddley beginning to embrace female understanding:

my head begun to feal like it wer widening like circels on water  
 [...] The stranger it took me the mor I fealt at hoam with it. The  
 mor I fealt like lwd be long where ever it wer widening me to.  
 (120)

These circles relate to the empty centre of origin in language, to the empty space created through nuclear holocaust and to the negated female. Circles can represent the menstrual cycle, relating to the womb at the centre of the woman. Circles are non-hierarchical with no beginning, end, top, or bottom, no way in which superiority can be attributed as seen in the binary-driven nature of phallogocentric language. Widening on water, the circles have a fluidity that relates to the fluidity of language; however, wateriness is also characteristic of female bodies. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz argues that the female body is constructed:

as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow;  
 as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or  
 simply the phallus but self-containment [...] a formlessness that  
 engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order. (203)

This vision of the female body relates to the deconstructive impulse to view language as a fluid, uncontained, unrestricted body, susceptible to spillage; as Paul Williams writes in "Poststructuralism and Nuclear Discourse" (2009) "meaning [is not] carried to the discerning reader without spilling a drop; rather, meanings continually slip away from attempts to pin them conclusively to the text" (249). Language flows, sensitive to slippage and spillage, constantly deferring meaning. Riddley's mind "widening like circels on water" can therefore be interpreted as a sign of his opening up to concepts of *l'écriture féminine*, which provide an alternative and non-hierarchical mode of communication.

The climax of the novel sees Riddley entering the epicentre of Cambry, moving beyond the influence of patriarchy. Riddley initially feels "the han of Power clampt on the back of [his] neck fealt the Big Old Father spread and take me" (159). He feels the power within him "strong with it and weak with it both," and experiences an overwhelming sexual desire directed towards the earth: "Not just my cock but all of me it wer like all of me wer cock and all the world a cunt and open to me" (159). Riddley in this moment is overwhelmed by the destructive nature of hegemonic masculinity and the desire to repudiate and dominate nature, a reminder of the patriarchal thinking which lead to this creation of 'Zero Groun.' Caputi argues that this acts as a reminder to Riddley, that "if [men] bow/boy to the Big Old Father/God, the payoff will be their ultimate assumption of that divine paternal privilege to dominate, rape, and destroy all others" (434). Yet Riddley "wernt man a nuff," he is unable to enact the masculine ideal, as his journey has progressed him beyond the belief that

this form of masculinity is desirable (159).

At this point the space appears to come alive and Riddley experiences a euphoric moment in which he is finally able to make his first accomplished 'tel.' Myths he previously transcribed were passed to him by others; this however, "aint no story tol to me nor it aint no dream. Its jus some thing come in to my head wylst I ben on my knees there in that stoan wood in the woom of her" (163). Riddley is only able to create new meaning when he is within the symbolic 'woom,' a reminder of a stage before structure, order, and language, aligning the creation of his story with the site of the maternal. Riddley's 'tel' contains copious imagery of life and creation coming out of the stone and how it might be destructive to phallocentric thinking. The novel describes the stone men under the ground:

lying on the groun trying to talk only theres no soun theres  
grean vines and leaves growing out of their mouf [...] breking  
the stoan mans face a part. Back in to earf agen. Them stoans  
ben trying to talk only they never wil [...] Trying to be men only  
cant talk. (164)

The vines associated with life and new beginnings break apart the stone men who can no longer talk or survive above ground. The stone men represent patriarchal authority from pre-nuclear society: "it myt be Punchs face or it even myt be Eusas face" (165). Eusa is the combination of Europe and the USA, or the everyman – the 'you sir' – and the puppet Punch is representative of destructive masculinity. Punch abuses and eventually kills his family, mirroring how pre-Riddley society destroyed their world (65). Yet they also represent the patriarchal authorities within Riddley's own world: "It wer the face of my father what ben kilt ... It wer Belnot Phist [...] the Littl Shynin Man ... Yes it wer Goodparleys face moren any bodys may be" (165). Ultimately, the stone men represent phallocentric thinking itself, as Hoban writes that "its jus only stoan men walking unner the groun like that. Women have some thing else" (164). Following nuclear annihilation, the empty space of Cambry is overwhelmed by the womanly mythic figure that can be seen as representative of *l'écriture féminine*, and the stone men of phallocentrism can no longer sustain themselves. Phallocentrism is thus destroyed to make way for a non-hierarchical form of thinking and speaking. Hoban criticises the male-dominated discourse of the patriarchal order through reference to reproduction: "A man myt get 100s of childer but the onlyes new life growing out of him wil be that dead mans vine at the end of his run" (170). Phallocentric language has fallen, producing only the 'dead mans vine,' an image of phallic impotence representing the destruction of patriarchal structures. An alternative is provided in a language formed from the "1 with the woom [...] with the new life coming out of her," resulting in symbolic birth instead of impotence and death (170). Kristeva argues that "[r]eal female innovation [...] will only come about when maternity, female creation and the link between them are better understood," and Riddley is moving towards understanding this link, as opposed to pre-nuclear holocaust's devaluation of femininity, and abjection of the maternal body ("Dissident" 298). In the empty centre, cleared of phallocentric restrictions after the nuclear blast, Riddley denies the hegemonic masculine ideal and better understands this link between maternity and creation,



observing the potential for a new understanding of structures, superior to the 'dead mans vine' of phallocentrism. Riddley feels "programmit different then from how [he] ben when [he] come in to Cambry" (166). He feels a change within himself: "some thing growing in me it wer like a grean sea surging in me it wer saying, LOSE IT. Saying LET GO. Saying THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER" (167). Fluidity returns, clearing Riddley's attachment to previous gender-based assumptions, urging him to let go of the destructive nature of dichotomous structures which prescribe power to one side of the binary and weakness to the other.

*Riddley Walker* works to critique the arbitrary nature of gender roles and destructive notions of masculinity that have resulted in the persistence of dominating patriarchal tendencies which risk inciting an apocalypse: a catastrophic event which seems increasingly likely in the contemporary moment, whether nuclear or environmental. Riddley's post-apocalyptic landscape articulates the dangers of allowing these tendencies to remain uncriticised, and speaks to the endurance of patriarchal structures which last even beyond apocalypse. As terrifying as apocalyptic imaginings may be, equally terrifying is the fear that humanity could experience such a trauma and still refuse to learn from it. In a world where this fear has been realised, Riddley's journey provides an exploration of an alternative, encouraging an abolition of gender systems and an affinity with nature, an empathy that is arguably lacking from pre-apocalyptic society. His experience positions him as a figure of potential, not restricted by his gender or his sexuality, and in this way Riddley comes to represent a futurity not founded on heteronormativity or any form of gender hierarchy, but on a freedom from structures of marginalisation, domination, and oppression.

## NOTES

1. @realDonaldTrump. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the "Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times." Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works." *Twitter*. 03 January 2018, 4.49 p.m., <[www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992)>.
2. For critical examinations of Riddleyspeak, see: Maynor and Patteson (1984), Dowling (1988) Mullen (2000), Porter (2000), and Gannon (2003).
3. For more recent criticism exploring the rejection of reproductive futurism in speculative fiction, see Bellamy (2018).

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**BIONOTE**

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# **"THEN WHEN ARE WE? IT'S LIKE I'M TRAPPED IN A DREAM OR A MEMORY FROM A LIFE LONG AGO" A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF TEMPORAL ORIENTATION IN THE FIRST SEASON OF HBO'S WESTWORLD**

Zoe Wible

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The filmic medium is inherently temporal, presenting information in succession through a series of images that the viewer constructs as unfolding in linear time.<sup>1</sup> The medium is characterised by this temporal relationship between shots, scenes, and, in the case of television, episodes and seasons. As David Bordwell highlights, formal conventions are used in classical narrative film and television shows so as to avoid inadvertently confusing the spectator, working with the limits of the spectator's "perceptual-cognitive abilities" (1985, 74). A supernatural, fantastical or science-fictional element can disrupt these conventions, prompting a need for specific ways to signify temporal ordering: time travel, temporal loops, memory wipes, and other unnatural devices can impact the construction of a coherent timeline. This disruption differs from (but sometimes complements) other non-speculative disruptions that pertain to narrative and filmic organisation. These disruptions often mirror the film's narrative thematically, highlighting issues of memory as they relate to trauma and mental illness, for example in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), or Rowan Joffé's *Before I Go to Sleep* (2014). These films question the audience's subjective, perceived experience of time, using film's malleability when it comes to temporal orientation. A temporal disruption rooted in a supernatural or speculative element operates slightly differently, by changing the way natural laws in the storyworld affect characters and narrative. As such, this temporal disruption enables a further exploration of the intersubjective (as well as subjective) experience of time and enables 'unnatural' ways of being in time. While Leonard (in *Memento*) was the only character unable to form long term memories, the androids in *Westworld* are all deprived of memory, causing alienation and lack of identity.<sup>2</sup> The show's first season shows the evolution of a select few androids as they slowly become able to retain their memories, which consequently impacts their sense of self. This article demonstrates that the disruption caused by a speculative element invites us to explore both thematic ideas around memory and self, alongside aesthetic or narratological innovations around the temporal delivery of information. Indeed, how do we process temporal information when the very foundation of time (memory) is unstable?

Several scholars have already highlighted that a disruption of natural laws can impact conventions of filmic representation, creating a higher potential for confusion on the part of the spectator. In *Time Lapse: The Politics of Time-Travel Cinema* (2004), Charles Tryon analyses

several films featuring time travel, linking them to new media technologies, arguing that they are often associated with disruptions in our mediated experience of diegetic time. This potential for misunderstanding can be deliberately exploited for aesthetic and narrative purposes. In this article, I analyse the first season of the Home Box Office (HBO) show *Westworld*, demonstrating how the science-fictional premise of the show, linked to a remediated narrative structure that borrows from video games, disrupts conventions around the delivery of temporal information. This participates in wider discussions around our consumption of filmic media, especially in the era of streaming services and ‘binge watching.’ Just as the characters of *Westworld* struggle to figure out “who they really are” (a sentence repeated at least once every episode), especially in relation to others, the show interrogates the viewer’s relationship with narrative and memory in regard to the formation of the self. In particular, it encourages the viewer to be extremely attentive and active (both while viewing the show itself, and within fan spaces).

The show presents the story of a Western-themed amusement park, in which ‘guests’ can interact with androids (‘hosts’) in a variety of often violent scenarios. The park’s lawless ‘Wild West’ theme encourages the guests to leave morality behind and indulge in violence against the hosts. For example, Dolores’ (Evan Rachel Wood) ‘narrative’ places her at the mercy of other hosts, and the guest can choose to save her, by killing her attackers, or rape her. The host’s memory is wiped after every ‘loop,’ which prevents personal growth, and enables them to retain a positive worldview by forgetting their victimisation. The show directly addresses the ethical and aesthetic implications of the host’s narrative, particularly the conflict between Robert Ford (the Park’s co-founder, played by Anthony Hopkins) and Lee Sizemore (the Head of Narrative, played by Simon Quarterman). This opposition can also be mapped onto another dichotomy, explicitly discussed in the show: that between ‘game’ and ‘story.’ The following graph shows the number of times the words ‘game,’ ‘story,’ and ‘narrative’ are mentioned per episode of the first season.

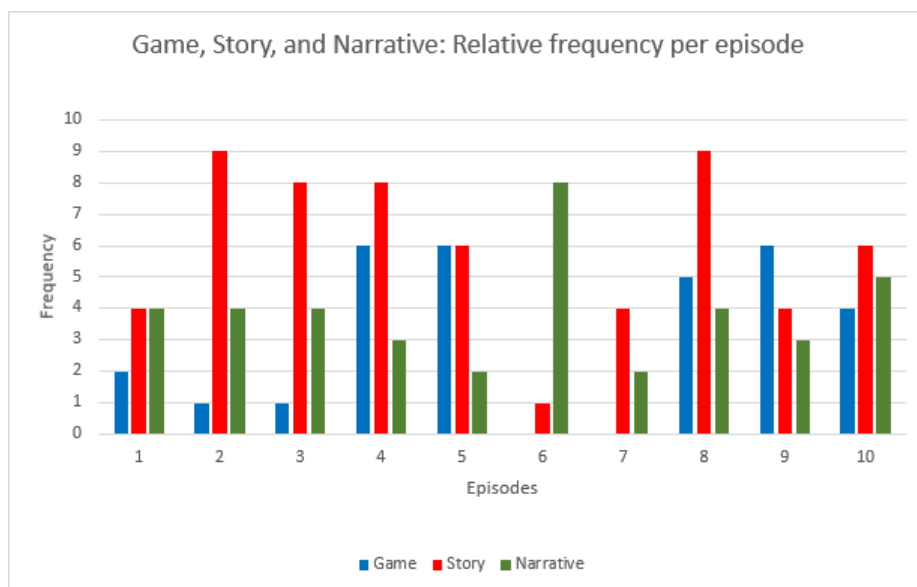


Figure 1: Lexical analysis of the frequency of ‘game,’ ‘story,’ and ‘narrative’ per episode

'Narrative' is used thirty-nine times over the course of the ten-episode series and refers to the general discursive apparatus put in place by the park to tell a story. 'Story' is used fifty-nine times, to refer to the content of the narratives, their moral values, or qualities. In the last episode, Ford explains his view on stories: "Since I was a child I've always loved a good story. I believed that stories helped us to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being" (S1E10 01:25:08). 'Game' is used thirty-one times, often in opposition with 'stories'. For example, Logan (Ben Barnes) often justifies his violence towards the android by claiming "it's just a game!", whereas his brother-in-law William (Jimmi Simpson) prefers to engage with the emotional and moral content of the stories. As the preceding graph shows, the frequency of these three terms in dialogue varies from episode to episode, as the three themes are played against each other. Episode 6 is pivotal in that it shows Maeve (Thandie Newton) explore the compound "behind the scenes". As she discovers the workings behind the narratives she had unwittingly been participating in, this episode invites us to reconsider the relationship between stories (and their delivery) and the characters' sense of self. The 'game' aspect of the Park is made possible by the passivity of the androids due to their lack of memory retention. As Maeve (and some other hosts) eschew this passivity, the rules of the game change. In the second half of the season, the hosts get to not only play the game, but influence the overall narrative.

In the first season, the main narrative drive comes from the hosts' progressive retention of memory, leading to potential autonomous consciousness and emancipation. The hosts have to be able to recover lost memories to understand the fabricated reality presented to them, build their identity, and make decisions regarding the future. Similarly, as the spectator's understanding of the world grows, they come to realise that everything is not as it seems. Our limited capacity for processing information is heavily activated by the show's textual richness – the quantity, speed, and ways in which information is presented. A high textual richness creates informational and emotional overload, which can cause the viewer to ignore, overlook, or forget, details that might cue them in regarding future plot twists.

While several scholars have analysed the philosophical, political, and psychological questions raised by the show (Menger 2017, Jeffs and Blackwood 2017, Seaman-Grant 2017), little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which its narrative techniques enable, prepare, and reveal the plot twist. Conversely, several scholars have considered the specific narrative and stylistic strategies of temporal ordering in so-called 'Quality' or 'Complex' television, including, Paul Booth's *Time on TV: Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television* (2012) and more recently J. P. Kelly's *Technology and Narrative Form in Contemporary US Television Drama: Pause, Rewind, Record* (2017). However, these works focus primarily on the mode of consuming these shows, linked to their distributive technologies. For my purposes, the more apposite studies are rather Jason Mittell's *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015) and Melissa Ames' anthology *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programming* (2012). Mittell adapts Bordwellian cognitive film theory to long-form television shows and its "flexi-narrative" style – a narrational mode, peculiar to long form shows, which combines episodic and serialised elements. Ames' anthology is more specifically focused on the temporal element of millennial television shows, arguing that they tend to:

play with time, slowing it down to unfold the narrative at rarely before seen rates (time retardation and compression) and disrupting the chronological flow itself (through the extensive use of flashbacks and the insistence that viewers be able to situate themselves in both the present and past narrative threads simultaneously). (8)

*Westworld*, on the other hand, problematises the spectator's ability to situate themselves in time, surreptitiously interweaving two decades-apart timelines, while leading the spectator to assume the events happen more or less simultaneously. The show's narrative structure, coupled with the science-fictional elements, misdirects the spectators, before revealing its ruse at the end of the first season. In Ames' anthology, Casey J. McCormick considers the way several contemporary Science Fiction (SF) shows, such as *Dollhouse* (and, I would argue, *Westworld*), present a "narrative [that] is highly self-aware, interconnected with other narrative counterparts, and hyperlinked to postmodern culture at large" (2012 206). McCormick considers this type of narrative to be "posthuman" as it is "deconstructed, temporally complex, nonlinear, and multisubjective," but also because it engages with "cognitive theories that reflect both narrative and thematic concerns" (206). In the case of *Westworld*, the post-human aspect of the narrative is reinforced by the targeting of a specific audience: highly tech-savvy and organised fans.

The androids' journey towards self-awareness, and towards a true understanding of their reality, is mirrored by the spectator's growing understanding of the world and events being portrayed. Both journeys involve a reorientation of the self in time; the first season presents a movement away from timelessness and misdirection towards the creation of memory and identity. As the androids gain self-consciousness, and some form of 'humanity,' they also eschew the limitations of the scripted loops and cliché storylines they were previously confined within. Similarly, the androids move away from a conception of time governed by video game logic (infinite loops) towards one governed by filmic logic (which consists of a logical, causal organisation of events). Finally, the spectator's understanding of the show's narrative structure is similarly changed by the end of the first season – a realisation that I will evidence by contrasting select scenes from the pilot and finale.

### **The Background of Classical Narration:**

In *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), David Bordwell introduces a thorough cognitive approach towards narrative in film and the way the spectator processes information. While watching a film or television show, the spectator is bound by a mandated temporal form: shots and scenes follow each other in a prescribed order, with no inherent deixis (grammatical or syntactical structures that encode time, person, gender, number and so on). A scene can be defined as a series of shots happening in a continuous time and place, which makes it the basic temporal marker of film. Bordwell explains that "the cinematic signifier does not have formal marks that could characterize its temporality, not even equivalents of autonomous monemes, the specialized lexical items of language (yesterday, today,



tomorrow etc.)” (62). The spectator must infer the temporal logic of the work by using cues provided by the narration, drawing upon medium-specific and genre-specific schemata as well as intrinsic norms (the standards introduced by the work itself). Bordwell considers that classical narration is characterised by a high level of orientation. Shots succeed one another in such a way as to guide the spectator. Conventional techniques are in place in order to help the spectator orient themselves in time, either directly expressed (intertitles, dialogue) or indirectly inferable (seasonal changes, characters aging).

Three common film techniques disrupt the linear flow of time: flashbacks, flashforward, and ellipses. In order to show how they function, I will follow the distinction between *Fabula* and *Syuzhet*, theorized by Formalists and reworked by Bordwell. The *Fabula* refers to the constructed story the spectator pieces together, composed of a chronological and causal chain of events occurring within a specific time frame and space. The *Syuzhet* refers to the actual arrangement of the *Fabula* in the film, the order and manner in which information is presented to the spectator (Bordwell 49). Flashbacks and flashforwards make the spectator create a mental construction of *Fabula* events, but also several other versions corresponding to the different characters’ knowledge: ‘What does X character know at Y point in time?’ Similarly, ellipsis (temporal gap) elides irrelevant events. Not all films or shows present flashbacks or flashforwards, but the vast majority of them utilise frequent and numerous instances of ellipses. Common knowledge about film easily accommodates ellipses and spectators are familiar with the story moving ahead in time and to different locations. As per the principles of classical narration, most ruptures in temporal linearity are clearly delineated and signified so that the spectator is rarely confused, and temporal disorientation is usually localised and short-lived. In contrast, *Westworld* problematises temporal orientation by presenting a setting that seems to exist in two different times (a Wild West embedded in an unspecified future), problematising questions of historicity as well as genre.

The generic hybridity (between SF and Western) is a major factor that contributes to the blurring of temporality. The entirety of the show happens either within the Delos compound (in a non-descript, minimalist decor with slightly futuristic technology), or in the Park (a mythicised version of the American Wild West). The very premise of the Park (and the show) creates temporal confusion as the androids do not age. Not only do they not change over time, but their apparent age does not match their actual age. For example, in the pilot, Chief of Security Ashley Stubbs (Luke Hemsworth) says about Dolores: “You know why she’s special? She’s been repaired so many times, she’s practically brand-new. Don’t let that fool you. She’s the oldest host in the park” (S1E01 01:25:00). The fact that neither the park nor its androids change makes it possible for scenes to take place years apart, without any sign of this temporal gap. This creates what Bordwell calls a “suppressed gap”: information is withheld from the spectator without their knowledge (55). A close analysis of the pilot (“The Original”) demonstrates how common filmic techniques such as voice-over and cross-cutting encourages the spectator to make false assumptions and fill in the gaps in knowledge incorrectly.

### "The Original": Temporal Misdirection

Mittell explains that the pilot of a show serves a dual purpose: it has to be inspirational (to make people want to keep watching), but also educational; it has to provide narrative exposition and introduce a complex storyworld, especially in cases of high concept shows such as *Westworld*. From a storytelling perspective, "Pilots must orient viewers to the intrinsic norms that the series will employ, presenting narrative strategies so we can attune ourselves to its storytelling style" (57). Mittell aptly compares this orientation to the tutorial level of a video game, in which the product literally teaches us how to interact and engage with it. In the case of *Westworld*, both the story and storytelling norms contribute to the creation of a feeling of temporal ambiguity. In the absence of clear temporal markers, one can suppose that the viewer falls back on the default assumption that shots and scenes are occurring chronologically (with the exception of a couple of clearly delineated flashbacks, such as Arnold's memories of his deceased son). Perceptive or genre-savvy viewers might question this assumption, but the textual richness of the scenes also captures their attention and misdirects them.

From a stylistic and storytelling point of view, several features introduced early on in the pilot episode suggest a complex storytelling structure and textual richness: information is presented in great quantity through a variety of means and at a fast rhythm. Informational and emotional load impact our attention and hypothesis-making: they can serve as a distraction to discourage viewers from potential cues they might have picked up on. A close analysis of the opening scenes of the pilot can illuminate how textual richness can introduce intrinsic norms about storytelling strategies, create both informational and emotional overload, and introduce cues regarding the potential misleading quality of the narration.

The pilot of *Westworld* introduces no fewer than fifteen named characters and contains thirty-seven scenes. Sizemore confirms the park as a metonym for the show's narrative ambition when he exclaims: "We sell complete immersion in a hundred interconnected narratives" (00:27:30). Stylistically, this textual richness takes the form of frequent cross-cutting, ellipses, spatio-temporal jumps, and the use of voice-over and voice-off. The quantity of information and the speed at which it is presented to the viewer creates a heavy cognitive load that demands sustained attention. The pilot opens with a man's voice over a black screen – "First, have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?" (00:00:02) – before the character of Dolores appears, with an extreme close-up of her open, staring eyes, on which a fly is walking. The colour balance is cold and dark, her face basked in a dark, blue hue. This is an example of what Mary Ann Doane, in "The voice in the cinema: The articulation of body and space" (1980), calls a "voice-off":

Voice-off refers to instances in which we hear the voice of a character who is not visible within the frame. Yet the film establishes, by means of previous shots or other contextual determinants, the character's "presence" in the space of the scene, in the diegesis. He/she is "just over there," "just beyond the frame line," in a space which "exists" but which the camera does not choose to show. (37)

Because of Dolores' position, facing the camera, we can hypothesise that she is interrogated by a character standing behind the camera, whom we cannot see. A voice-off suggests that there is a space beyond the scope of the camera, an 'elsewhere' that problematises the selective nature of the framing.<sup>3</sup> The man's voice asks her what she thinks of her world. The show then cuts to a top-down medium shot of Dolores in bed. In contrast with the previous shot, the colours are bright, warm, and vibrant. Dolores continues in a voice-over which, contrary to voice-off, implies the voice is speaking from a temporal and spatial distance. Prospectively, the audience supposes that they are seeing a memory, brought about by her answer to the man's question (this is the first major false assumption the spectator is invited to make). She explains that she chooses to see the beauty in the world, not the ugliness, as the episode shows her walking down the stairs and out the front door of her house, as slow, languid non-diegetic piano music starts playing. The voice-over stops and the Dolores the viewer sees addresses her father, still off-screen at that time, before the camera follows her and reveals him, sitting on a chair on the porch. They exchange a few words about natural beauty and painting. As she gazes into the distance, the viewer transitions to a sweeping shot of a Western landscape, with canyons and plains, while Dolores's voice-over resumes her musings about the beauty and order of the world (00:00:44). The shot cuts to a close-up of an automated piano, as it starts playing a jaunty, lively tune, which spectators will soon learn to recognise as the Sweetwater theme (00:00:53). The male interrogator resumes in voice-over, asking Dolores what she thinks of the newcomer. The episode cuts again to images of a man, sitting on a train, arriving at Sweetwater (00:01:01). Within one minute, the show has established its storytelling strategies, cross-cutting between five different times and places, with voice-off and voice-over operating transitions between the spaces. Viewers are also encouraged to find thematic connections between the voice-over and the shots: Dolores talking about natural beauty is for example coupled with shots of beautiful nature. This is a mental operation that creates a lot of cognitive load, especially as, at this point, a first-time viewer is not familiar with the characters and the settings. This coupling of the voice-over with the visuals also 'primes' us to interpret the following shots similarly: discussion of the newcomers is coupled with shots of a man, soon identified as Teddy, inviting viewers to believe him to be one of the human 'guests' who visit the park. This is the second major false assumption the show invites the spectator to make.

By the end of the episode, the two false assumptions are corrected, with the revelation of the existence of 'loops' and of Teddy's true nature. Until the end of the episode, there have been no indications that the events presented (Dolores waking up, Teddy arriving) have occurred multiple times. As the end of the episode reveals, these events are part of their respective narrative 'loops', which play out time, and time again and the images viewers see in the beginning of the pilot could be from any of those multiple iterations. Secondly, the end of the episode also reveals that Teddy, who was assumed to be a human guest, is actually an android host playing out his own loop. As a consequence, the spectator is invited to ponder the nature of several characters, in particular, the Man in Black. The original *Westworld* (1973) featured a nameless android also nicknamed the Man in Black, prompting viewers of the show to hypothesise that its own Man in Black would end up being an android too. This hypothesis can be strengthened by the revelation that Bernard, a member of the Park's staff, is an android (which he finds out at the same time as the spectator, in episode seven,

“Trompe l’Oeil”). Both Teddy’s and Bernard’s twists can be seen as further misdirection, red herrings encouraging the spectator to focus on the possibility that the Man in Black could be an android too. This distracts from the actual twist (the existence of two timelines). *Westworld* therefore goes further than other ‘puzzle’ or ‘twist’ films: not only does the show present a twist, but it also anticipates the perceptiveness of forensic fans and gives them a false sense of confidence. This ‘twist-on-the-twist,’ or ‘trick’ aspect, is also linked to the serial nature of the product and the existence of an involved fanbase, which sets apart *Westworld* from films like *The Sixth Sense*.

Over the course of the first season, spectators and characters are invited to try and make sense of the world in front of them. The presentation of a partial resolution at the end of the first episode provides immediate satisfaction. As such, the pilot promises further puzzles, but also further resolutions. This encourages the spectators to keep watching (as Mittell suggests, it has an “inspirational” vocation) and teaches them how to watch (it is “educational”): looking for clues to the puzzle (56). As such, *Westworld* differs from shows like *Lost* (2004-2010) – deemed unsatisfactory by many fans for the lack of resolution – and *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) – the narrative of which is radically confusing, without much substance to latch on to. Furthermore, as Catherine Zimmer explains in “Serial Surveillance: Narrative, Television, and the End of the World” (2018), “both viewers and characters struggle to understand the meaning of repetitions, the location in time of events, and the identities of themselves and others. [...] *Westworld*’s narrative enunciation becomes increasingly synonymous with the technology that supplies the premise of the show” (21). The “technology” mentioned here can refer to the very premise of the Park, conceived as a metaphor of open-world video games. Games (and puzzles) present challenges to be resolved, which is part of the gratification participants get from them. This ludic inspiration is not merely a thematic exploration, but it also permeates the very narrative structures used in the show. In particular, the temporal presentation of events borrows from video game logic, before reasserting a more specific filmic logic later on.

### Temporal Circularity through Remediation with Video Games

The re-evaluation of temporality is enabled by a remediation with video game temporal logic. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), define remediation as “the way in which [new media] refashion older media, and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (14). *Westworld* can therefore be seen as a Complex Television show remediating video games: the very premise of the show mimics the concept of many video games. The player (‘guest’) is invited to enter a fictional world, separate from their own specific time and space. The show’s main narrative arc explores questions of morality, identity, and memory. This exploration is centred on the contrast between video game temporal logic, and filmic temporal logic. In *Video Games and Storytelling* (2015), Souvik Mukherjee highlights the unique function of time and memory (156). In particular, save mechanics enable the player to resume the game at a previous save point (in order to avoid an undesirable outcome, such as a loss of items, or after the death of the player character). Contrary to flashbacks, this return in time is also an erasure: the events that happened after the save are removed from the Fabula. The player character’s health and other statistics are restored to a previous state, as well as their abilities and

skills. Video game logic is therefore defined by a rupture of linear temporality and causality, as reality can be erased and re-written at will. In the first episode, Teddy overhears a guest saying to his friend that the first time he came to the Park he acted in a moral way, but the following time he decided to “go black hat,” and re-do previous narratives without a moral compass (S1E4 00:48:42). As such, the show mimics games like the *Red Dead* series (2004-18), which take place in an open world inspired by the Far West that players can explore at their leisure.<sup>4</sup> It also includes a built-in morality system in the gameplay: the player’s actions impact their levels of reputation or fame, influencing how non-playable characters react.

Maeve, the android who acts as the town brothel’s Madame, initially embodies this video game logic too; once she realises that dying allows her to get a glimpse at the world ‘behind the scenes’, however, she stops caring about the drives built into the scripted narrative loops, exclaiming “none of this matters” as she asks Hector (Rodrigo Santoro) to kill her (S1E04 00:55:04). Both Maeve and Dolores abandon the clichéd and stereotypical narratives scripted for them and move into the sphere of the metanarrative. As the season progresses, the show increasingly foregrounds the discrepancy between video game and filmic logic. Many critics (in both television and video games studies) have analysed the show’s use of video games, mostly in relation to violence and morality. For example, Ellen Menger discusses morality and gaming practices in *Casual and Hardcore Players in HBO’s Westworld (2016): The Immoral and Violent Player (2017)*, and Larry Busk compares *Westworld* to the violence of Roman circus games in “Westworld: Ideology, Simulation and Spectacle” (2016). This discussion of violence and morality has overshadowed a more formal analysis of the influence of video game narrative logic on filmic media. I argue that *Westworld* invites a closer look at its ludic influences for two reasons. Firstly, the contrast between filmic and ludic logic, exemplified by the creation of memory (and influenced by the show’s own narrative drives) makes erasure turn into memory, and the spectator (along with the androids) gets reoriented through time. Secondly, the interactive aspect of video games also mirrors the spectator’s own engagement with *Westworld*: the show’s availability on streaming services facilitates the creation of an active, attentive fandom. I argue that *Westworld*’s most innovative and significant contributions to the current media landscape reside less in its discourse on violence, but rather within its invitation of collective interactivity. I therefore suggest that *Westworld*’s progressive exploration of temporal orientation encourages media-savviness and ultimately draws the spectator’s attention towards specific information delivery strategies (especially of temporal elements). As such, it bridges the gap between Mittell’s analysis of operational aesthetics and video game theory analyses of ludonarratives, such as Clint Hocking’s (2007). A closer look at how the second half of the season presents a reorientation through time demonstrates how *Westworld* celebrates personal agency; as the androids create their sense of self through their memories, the spectator is also invited to (re)create a mental map of the story. This reorientation also draws attention to narratological and stylistic elements in a way that promotes media literacy.

### Temporal Accumulation: The Creation of Memory and Identity

The show problematises the existence of loops by highlighting how the video game logic of circular sameness cannot exist in a medium such as film (or television shows) that functions by accumulation. This is made obvious by the repetition of certain scenes or shots, which serve to both foreground the existence of loops (similar to video games), but also to highlight the specificity of filmic media. These scenes include Dolores waking up (repeated four times over the course of the first season), the attack on her family ranch (twice), Dolores dropping a can from her shopping basket (four times), and, at a smaller scale, character catchphrases like Clementine's "You're new, not much of a rind on you" (repeated eight times). Let us consider the repetition of Dolores's morning scene further as its affective impact evolves as it gets repeated. The show's layered meaning is due to the discrepancy between what the spectator and characters know: for Dolores each iteration is a new, unique one and she has no memories of the atrocities she has suffered. The spectator, meanwhile, retains memories of the events in-between and knows both what happened to Dolores in the past and what is likely to happen again in her future. Due to the cumulative nature of the medium, the interpretation of a scene is automatically impacted by the scenes that came before; the meaning of Dolores's waking up scene becomes more sinister every time viewers see it. The lighting and music of the scene change – as opposed to the acting, framing, and composition, which remain the same – creating a tension between familiarity and strangeness. Her father changes too: at the end of the first episode, the android who played that role malfunctions and is replaced. Dolores greets her 'new' father in exactly the same way as before, showing the same affection and familiarity, as if after a lifetime of filial love. Ironically, the android that has been repurposed to be her father was one of those who attacked her ranch in previous iterations of the loop. Nonetheless, this irony is available only to the spectator, who functions according to filmic logic, but not to Dolores, who remains unaware. Over the course of the first four episodes, the show has therefore introduced both repetition and variation in the representation of the scene, prompting the evolution of the spectator's emotional interpretation of it. In the second half of the first season, the show presents the androids' journey towards self-discovery, which paradoxically involves a sense of loss. As Zimmer puts it:

Despite the intellectual effort involved in the complex layering of plots, the revelations that emerge are deeply affective. The hosts' self-discovery is inextricable from their loss of self, amid realizations that they have lived their (artificial) lives hundreds of times, and died perhaps just as many. (22)

Escaping the repetitive and mindless video game logic they had been scripted in, both Dolores and Maeve start having visions of what viewers are led to believe are past events and loops. By the end of the season they seem to have recovered their memory and can keep it even after being rebooted. They are able to look back on past experiences with new eyes and realise they had been fooled. Similarly, at the end of the season, the spectators realise that the narrative they had been invested in had been misleading, and that characters were not who we thought they were.

### Temporal Reorientation through the Revelation of the Plot Twist

A plot twist by definition invites us to look back on the narrative information presented previously and interpret it in a new light. As Daniel Barratt explains in "Twist Blindness" (2009), plot twists are often accompanied with flashbacks that show viewers scenes that they have seen before, inviting them to interpret these differently (74). This is the case with the twist in the first season finale of *Westworld*, which prompts viewers to reconsider their understanding of the season's timeline. Throughout the first season, viewers have followed Dolores's journey with William and Logan, as well as the Man in Black's quest to find the Maze (which brought him in contact with Dolores). The plot twist is twofold: firstly, these two plotlines had actually been happening decades apart, and secondly, William and the Man in Black are actually one person. A closer look at the twist itself shows storytelling techniques similar to the ones identified at the opening sequence analysed earlier, in particular the cross cutting and the use of voice-over narration. The scene opens with The Man in Black beating up Dolores, trying to extract information about the maze, when Dolores mentions that William is going to come and save her. The Man in Black chuckles, surprised that she "[does] remember some things after all," and says he knew a guest named William (00:28:17). He starts telling his story. The scene cuts to a flashback of William, frantically looking for a missing Dolores, killing and torturing soldiers who might have hurt her. The scene alternates between dialogue inside the flashback and the Man in Black's voice-over commentary (in third person, past tense). William picks up a discarded gun and a black hat, but does not put it on. The scene cuts back to the 'present' and the Man in Black comments that William "couldn't get [her] out of his head" (S1E10 00:33:30). Another cut to the flashback, showing William arriving to Sweetwater, where he finally finds Dolores "right back where [he] started" (00:33:35). Their eyes meet, but she does not show any sign of recognition, only the polite interest at meeting a stranger. Dolores drops a can: this is part of her traditional loop and how she originally met William. Viewers have seen this scene repeated three times already, the can being picked up by Teddy, William, then the Man in Black. In this flashback, the can is picked up by an anonymous guest, to whom Dolores smiles coyly. William realises that not only had her memory been wiped (meaning she has no memory of their relationship), but their meeting was not genuine but merely scripted to attract guests by inviting them to assist Dolores. The emotional impact of this scene on the spectator relies on the epistemic distance between William and viewers on one side and Dolores on the other: his memory of her causes him pain and longing, compounded by her absence of memory of him. William's position at this moment mimics the viewer's perspective of the hosts' loops: the epistemic distance between humans and hosts (and between filmic and ludic logic) also creates a layered affective tone.

The camera tracks forward, closing up on William's upper body as he puts on the black hat (S1E10 00:36:06), obscuring his face. When he straightens up, the scene cuts back to the 'present' and it is the Man in Black viewers see. Speaking to Dolores, he switches to the first person and present tense, cementing the viewer's realisation that he is an aged William: "I really ought to thank you Dolores. You helped me find myself" (S1E10 00:36:10). As Dolores herself realises who he is, the scene cuts to four other flashbacks, overlaid with the Man in Black's voice-over: "my path always led me back to you, again and again [...] I guess your path led you back here, again and again [...]"

you were lost in your memories, even then" (00:37:02). The flashbacks show scenes that viewers have seen before, of the journey Dolores undertook with young William. The other characters in it disappear midway through the shot, leading us to understand that, in those scenes we saw, Dolores was actually alone, and she (and viewers) were hallucinating her memories. This scene invites viewers to reconstruct past scenes along three axes: the identification of characters (William is revealed as the Man in Black), the temporal inscription of certain scenes (decades apart), and the truth value of the images presented to us by the narration (some of them being hallucinated memories). This reconstruction is guided by the very same filmic techniques that made the disorientation possible in the first place: flashbacks, repetition, cross-cutting, and voice-over. Dolores's knowledge of events is being reshuffled, along with the viewer's. Dolores' exit of her loops is done through filmic devices that had previously been used to hide said loops.

### Conclusion

An analysis of *Westworld* opens up several avenues for further research, particularly in the fields of cognitive psychology, and transmedia narratology. From the point of view of cognitive psychology, Fantastika texts are uniquely positioned to explore questions of temporality both thematically and narratologically. Further research could be made using experimental protocols and quantitative measurements to further analyse spectator's reactions to temporal displacements, especially as it pertains to such aspects as neuroatypical spectators or variations in viewers' age and gender.

*Westworld* bridges television shows and video games not only in its text itself, but in the technological apparatus that delivers it and the viewing practices it encourages. Just as a player can play a game several times (and re-playability is a highly valued quality), re-watchability and the potential for fan engagement are prized by producers. The importance of sustained loyalty is highlighted in the narrative itself, in episode two, when Ford explains the attraction of the park:

The guests don't return for the obvious things we do, the garish things. They come back because of the subtleties, the details. They come back because they discover something they imagine no one had ever noticed before, something they've fallen in love with. (S1E2 00:53:50)

From the perspective of transmedia narratology, the highly self-aware embedded narratives of *Westworld* present both overt and hidden temporal complexities, relying on the narratological and thematic influences from video games in order to explore themes of memory, identity, and humanity. As such, it presents a unique (and extreme) example of remediation between two new media: serialised television fiction and video games. The commonalities and discrepancies of the two media are highlighted as much by the show as in the conflict between androids and humans. *Westworld* is a compelling example of how it is possible to engage with cognitive theories that, as McCormick suggests, "reflect both narrative and thematic concerns" (206). Just like the 'bicameral mind' theory that gives its title to the season finale, the show is based on the dialogue – between



film and video games, between narrative structure and themes, between humans and androids, and between illusion and truth. Broadly speaking, a close analysis of representational strategies peculiar to Fantastika texts participates in the everlasting debates about temporality in art. While comparative narratology and transmedia theory tend to focus on how the medium affects the content, a closer study of remediated Fantastika texts can bring to light the cross-pollination and synergy between different media within one single text.

## NOTES

1. In this article I will use 'filmic' to refer to narrative films and television shows.
2. The TV show is based on the 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton.
3. This notion is further complicated later on in the season, when it is revealed that the voice does not belong to a person physically present in the scene, but to one of Dolores's memories. As such, this 'elsewhere' space becomes an 'elsewhen,' which is emblematic of Dolores's journey.
4. At the New York Comic Con, *Westworld* showrunners Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy have explicitly quoted *Red Dead Redemption* (2014) as one of their main sources of inspiration, mentioning its Western theme, its open world, and the exploration of morality (See Osborn 2017).

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**BIONOTE**

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# REWRITING MYTH AND GENRE BOUNDARIES: NARRATIVE MODALITIES IN *THE BOOK OF ALL HOURS* BY HAL DUNCAN

Alexander Popov

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This article explores the relations between fictional time, genre, myth, and narrative modalities in Hal Duncan's novels *Vellum* (2005) and *Ink* (2007) – known collectively as *The Book of All Hours*.<sup>1</sup> It argues that by exposing the principles of fictional world construction and applying them in a manner uniquely suited to Science Fiction (SF), the texts sensitise the reader to actual processes of world construal and disrupt, or rather make fluid, implicit ontological constraints. As it is able to delineate those principles against fictional worlds that are factually and metaphysically diverse, but also maximally coherent in the larger SF framework, world-building becomes aligned with implicit theory building. Throughout this article, I trace such homomorphisms between the novels and theory – more specifically fictional semantics, as developed against the idea of possible worlds in philosophy. The argument draws on the work of theorists like Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and Thomas Pavel to provide a schema for describing the narrative actants and fictional worlds as shaped by modal structures, which are largely a product of cultural practices. The metanarrative mechanisms of the novels are then explained using this apparatus, which demonstrates the usefulness of SF in challenging fundamental assumptions about the grammar of thought. Finally, the same theoretical and methodological approaches are considered as tools for expanding narrative engagement with the world beyond strictly human domains, connecting the overarching argument to works from recent theoretical developments such as Object-Oriented Ontology and agential realism.

*Hours* is a fictional text with a relatively simple story and a recursively complex plot. It tells of a narratological rebellion against the powers that be: a Covenant of one-time gods turned angels. This rebellion unfolds across the Vellum – a metaverse of possible worlds:

[T]he Vellum, is like... the media of reality itself, the blank page on which everything is written, on which anything *could* be written. The Vellum isn't the absolute certainty of some city-state of Heaven; no, it's the vast wilderness of uncertainty, possibility, the fucking primal chaos itself, and this angel empire of their dreams is just a colony of settlers trying to tame it, make it fit with their puritan ideals. (*Vellum* 38, original emphasis)

The reality of the Vellum is written and controlled in a special language called the Cant. The Cant is spoken by the *unkin* – humans who at some point have glimpsed the reality underlying their worlds and have become more than human. Unkin are able to bend physical laws and to travel between the folds of the multiverse, in what is called *three-dimensional time*. As Joey, one of the unkin protagonists, explains:

He's come to think of time as a shape, with volume and mass, with three dimensions that he labels frontal, lateral and residual. He's walked forward and backways from cradle to grave, and slid sideways into alternatives, branches, parallel streams. A step or two in lateral time has taken him into worlds where the fascists won the Second World War, where Russians reached the moon first, where humanity never evolved beyond Australopithecus. (*Ink* 138)

The three dimensions of time define a metaverse of possible worlds that also corresponds to a genre schema that differentiates between three types of narratives: 1) stories that have happened (Historical Novel) or will happen (Hard SF); 2) stories in different historical timelines (Alternate Histories); 3) stories in worlds operating under alternate physical and metaphysical laws (Fantasy, Metaphysical Fiction), “whole worlds that should not be” (138). *Vellum* and *Ink* are hybrid texts, blending motifs and forms from SF, Fantasy, Pulp, Horror, War, and Adventure Novels. The central novum of the series, as per Darko Suvin's definition of SF, is not the giant zeppelins, the orgone-powered guns, the time travel or the thermodynamics underlying the metanarrative technology (*Metamorphoses* 79-101). Rather, the novum is the use of fictional semantics as a world-constructing device within the broad fictional world itself. The unkin are able to travel through the folds of the Vellum due to the morphological congruence between the different realities; specifically, semantics takes precedence over direct causality. 3D time becomes not just a temporal, but also a spatial and metaphysical model. The novels show repeatedly that, through their cubist arrangement, the multiple worlds of the Vellum are organised according to specific laws of world construction and are rewritten by the ink, also known as *the bitmites* – intelligent nanite machines, which the chief angel Metatron unleashes and that subsequently turn against him, spurring the rebellion into motion. This process exposes the world building framework as more flexible than initially apparent.

The narratological rebellion is kindled by two main events. One is the finding of the Book of All Hours by Reynard Carter, a person of unkin descent. The Book contains countless world maps, folds in the Vellum, which Reynard uses as his sole guide in a depopulated universe he has to traverse alone for an eternity. The other event is the hunting down and the killing of Thomas Messenger by Carter and Pechorin, soldiers of the Covenant sent to conscript all unaligned unkin in their war against Hell. Thomas is followed by his sister Phreedom, also turned unkin by the siblings' older friend Finnan. His death triggers an unexpected turn of events across the Vellum. Thomas' story is spliced with several others, unfolding in parallel realities or backwards in time. These confluences of personae and timelines recur throughout the novel. Phreedom's story, for instance, is mirrored by

that of the goddess Inana, sister of Dumuzi/Thomas; Carter and Pechorin are also latched onto their own metanarratives. Later on Finnan is captured by Metatron and brutally interrogated. This brings him back to his past and to the Battle of the Somme, where he is forced to order the execution of young Thomas, the brother of his wife Ana – another iteration of Phreedom's psyche. Overlaid upon the war narrative, a mythical plot plays out – of the bound Prometheus, guarding the secret of who would bring down Zeus and the lords of Heaven. I will refer to this parallel-world and multi-temporal organisation of the text in order to demonstrate how juxtaposition is used to highlight the narrative mechanics underlying fiction and social constructions, drawing specifically on possible worlds theory as expounded by Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and Thomas Pavel.

Fictionality, according to fictional semanticists, is a pragmatically-determined property. In *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994) Ruth Ronen recognises that this is a specific kind of position with regards to the given cultural context, namely texts that are considered as versions of reality (12, 20). Fictional worlds are non-actualisable possible worlds and are thus full of gaps. And yet, when reconstructing the worlds from text, the reader always seeks to impose upon them maximal coherence (92). Therefore, whenever possible, the reference world for fictional realities is the actual one, based on regions of similarity and overlap between these possible worlds: on compossibility and accessibility relations between them (61, 65).<sup>2</sup> This is the extensional aspect of fictional semantics, which correlates fiction with the actual world and its possible states. But there is also an intensional aspect that organises textual material according to the internal laws of the fictional world – endowing it with what is called in fictional semantics 'authenticity'.<sup>3</sup> Such authenticity – the fictional quality of *world-ness* – is generated by complex systemic interactions of focalisation and narration (177). That is, a fictional world is a *modally structured universe* – a reality where objects (including states and events) are comprehended in specific ways by narrative agents.

*Hours* makes explicit these principles of world construction and reconstruction. The system of 3D time itself, as discussed in several blog posts by Duncan – such as [Notes Toward a Theory of Narrative Modality](#) (2009) and [Modality and Hamlet](#) (2010) – and also in his book *Rhapsody* (2014), can be interpreted structurally on the basis of modal systems in language. Lubomír Doležel provides a schema for the different functions of modal operators in *Heterocosmica* (1998): modal verbs of *alethic* character indicate what is possible, impossible, or necessary in a world; the *deontic* indicate what is permitted, prohibited, or obligatory; the *axiological*, what is good, bad, or indifferent (closely related but attached to personal desires and fears are *volitive* operators); and finally, *epistemic* ones indicate what is known, unknown, or believed (114). Thus lateral time, or alternative histories, can be explained via the epistemic modalities of what is known to have happened, and residual time – or worlds with different metaphysics – is constructed through variations in the alethic modal make-up of fictional worlds. The deontic and axiological modalities determine the specific focalisations found in the worlds – what is seen as desirable and permitted according to social, or codexal, conventions and according to personal ethics and drives (126).<sup>4</sup>

The latter modalities (social and affective) are elevated in Doležel's systematisation to the ontological status of the former (metaphysical and spatio-temporal):

The highest form of social organization produces uncontrollable events. The social process is thus analogous to the nature process and joins the mental process in a triad of spontaneous, intentionless, random event-generation. In all these processes, the individual is manipulated by suprapersonal forces that he or she is unable to stand up to, because they cannot be identified. In exploring the fate of the individual subject to anonymous, intentionless social processes, fiction has constructed a new mythology, which ranks among the most powerful achievements of modern literature. (112)

*Vellum* and *Ink* show the modal skeletons of fictional worlds by recurrently comparing different versions of them, structured differently along the alethic and epistemic axes (what is possible and what is known). While the physical and historical foundations of worlds are being radically reconfigured and these 'errata' are construed within the text as the product of an entirely material process, deontic and axiological modalities – traditionally perceived as much less stable in fiction and in actuality – remain more or less constant. In all realities of the *Vellum* – from the one populated by angelo-satyrs and fairies to the one that comes closest to the actual world – Thomas' fate remains unchanged, which is always a direct result of the axiological and deontic structuring of reality. The metaphysical phase space is revealed to be much vaster than the confines of contemporary models of the physically possible. But the tiny subset of the *Vellum* in which the plot of the books is contained is cordoned off by a fence of modal structures erected by society and mythology, by the human and the unkin overlords of humanity.

The rebellion is therefore a "revolution of the psyche" rather than of metaphysics (*Ink* 232). It is about rewriting myth so that different possible worlds become accessible. The revolution aims at relaxing the conditions on compossibility for possible worlds, endowing certain world states with ontological validity and making it possible for previously excluded entities and events to co-exist with the rest. *Hours* thus aims to map narrative space anew; it explores exhaustively metaphysical and historical potentialities, making use of SF's readily available tropes and reading protocols, in order to expand and reconfigure the moral and emotional coordinate systems that are ontologically permissible in fiction. SF's inherent narrative drive towards vaster physical realities is implicitly tied to a loosening of the constraints on focalisation in fiction.

Viewing the novels from this analytical perspective, it is not surprising that their characters can be easily interpreted as representations of different modal stances within the world structures. Thomas/Puck is the eternal sacrifice, or the *pharmakos* in Greek tradition; Northrop Frye describes this figure in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) as "guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (41). He is the *Puer aeternus*, or eternal child, in the Jungian model of archetypes; his perfect innocence is what makes him a Christ-like figure. Finnan/Prometheus is another kind of *pharmakos*, but able to resist the forces of the world; his knowledge that *anyone* could topple Zeus plays a major role

in transmuting the hive mind of the bitmites. This knowledge stands in for the realisation that *any* narrative system is susceptible to change. Phreedom/Inana is the hunter-avenger figure, while Reynard seeks to understand and reflect – Ka, the mirror in the seven-fold Egyptian model of the soul referenced in the books. Joey Pechorin, probably named after Mikhail Lermotov's *Hero of Our Time* (1840), is the *nihilist*, the Jungian shadow – completely indifferent to the axiological structuring of the world. Jack Flash, one of the 3D-time incarnations of Carter, is the archetype of the Id – the sheer force that goes against the grain of the world, the *axiological rebel* as described by Doležel. The nihilist and the rebel are subsumed under the broader category of the *axiological alien* (Doležel 124).

The dialectical relations that play out between Reynard, Joey, and Jack, centred on knowledge and values, are especially strong in the second novel of *Hours*. They are, however, active from the beginning of the larger text, as evidenced by this early dialogue:

[Reynard: ] "Maybe, it is just some fucking old, old hoax. But...  
I just want to know. My whole life, I've wanted to know if... it's  
real."

"Nothing's real," said Joey.

"Everything's real," said Jack. "Everything is true, nothing is  
permitted." (*Vellum* 21, original emphasis)

The driving force of the novels is about what is permitted and possible to write and imagine. The end of *Ink* is a counterpoint to all preceding narratives: an elegy of two shepherds, Jack and Puck, who get to live and love each other in an idyllic pastoral world modelled after Virgil's *Eclogues*. The revolution against Heaven is successful and this has opened up the possibility for another set of myths to be written, for a different modal organisation of the psyche to develop. In some of the most overtly science-fictional and at the same time pulpy sections of the novel, the weapons that the revolution is actually fought with are based precisely on the theory of modality: zen grenades that deconstruct logic; orgone or chi guns that release the sexual energies of their victims; vorpal blades that do not conform to the standards of what is possible or probable. Fictional semantics does not merely provide a skeleton for constructing this metaverse, but also reflexively rewrites itself as an over-arching framework.

To understand how narrative and metanarrative are instrumentalised (and weaponised) in *Hours*, I turn to another theorist of fictional semantics – Thomas Pavel and his seminal work *Fictional Worlds* (1986). Pavel's book provides an investigation of demarcational issues of fiction: the question of establishing boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Pavel argues that domains of fictionality are historically conditioned, that fictionality is a mutable property (80). Its imaginary meta-spaces are developed first at the level of social and cultural production and as such are subject to promotion and demotion with respect to the actual world (99). Mythological systems, for instance, are in certain



historical periods weakened and prone to leak entities into fictional domains. Prior to those changes, the same entities are seen as actually existing (41). This cultural shift is perhaps necessary in order for domains like these to actually be called mythological in the contemporary sense; before the shift they are inseparable from the real, though perhaps enjoying a special status.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the transplantation of existing entities and events from the domain of the actual to that of the legendary is labelled *mythification* (77). This geological character of fictional domains is used by Pavel to argue that:

[fictional beings'] fate is linked with the movements of populous groups that share the same ontological destiny. Fictionality cannot be understood as an individual feature: it encompasses entire realms of beings. (42)

As such, fictional domains are born, grow, die, and change in systemic ways, via the mediation of a collective imaginary. By this logic, actual domains of reference too are determined by consensus, not so much via "commitment to the truth of particular statements [rather] than [via] *epistemological adherence* to the linguistic practice of a given community" (22, original emphasis). Mythology, fiction, religion, and other "marginal referential practices" receive this status "only in contrast to some culturally determined ossification into normality" (27).

The codification of normality is an organising motif in *Hours*. The Book itself is an attempt to do this on a scale that encompasses the whole of humanity, but an even more focused and narratively self-contained illustration is available in the epilogue to *Vellum*. Making no contact with the rest of the story, it takes place at a community called Endhaven, a little port of order amidst the Evenfall – the nano-technological apocalypse unleashed by the bitmites. The refugees that make up Endhaven's population live under the aegis of the rag-and-bone man, in return for which they abide by a contract with him. The reader learns little of the specifics of this contract, but it is clear that Endhaven is a kind of clerical tyranny and its inhabitants have forfeited their own moral views in order to escape dissolution. This changes for the narrator Tom – named so because he "looked like a Tom" – with the arrival of Jack, the axiological alien who helps Tom realise that the citizens of Endhaven are in a mutually constitutive relationship with the rag-and-bone man (*Vellum* 441). The latter is revealed as a sad creature, little more than an algorithm. He would enjoy destroying his subjects, but this ability is literally not programmed in him:

You people. You give up your dreams to me, sell out your hopes for a trinket or two and, you know what? Really? Honestly. Your souls are worth nothing. Nothing! [...] I'd kill you all now, [...] but it's not within the contract. (*Vellum* 456)

All it takes to negate the rag-and-bone man's power is to question and recast his contract as fiction:

"Your contract isn't worth the paper it's written on," says Jack.  
 "You think those are the souls of Endhaven? Are you sure they're not just... marks? Maybe there's no secret essence inside me or you them or anybody, *nothing* except what we choose for ourselves. No fate, no future, no past... except what we choose." (*Vellum* 461, original emphasis)

This realisation marks the transition between *Vellum* and *Ink*: from a universe with a more or less fixed modal structure, to one in dynamic flux. In *Ink*, as a consequence of the Evenfall, the angel-controlled human worlds have disintegrated into an archipelago of city-states and pocket dimensions ruled by Dukes – the latest, post-angelic incarnation of the unkin. Outside of them is the Hinter, a chaotic landscape of "yesteryears and tomorrows of desire" (98). The existing order has regressed to a quasi-feudalism occasionally combined with nationalism; the collapse of the old system by no means guarantees progressive change. It is amidst this reactionary upsurge that the seven protagonists carry on with their rebellion, attempting to establish mastery over one of the most important narrative instruments in the novels, one that is able to institute a deep, structural shift. I will call this instrument *double vision*.<sup>6</sup>

Double vision can be described and explained via recourse to the theory of fictional semantics, which offers a closely-aligned theoretical construct termed *dual systems*. Pavel defines a dual system as "a complex structure linking two or more universes in a single structure so that there is a detailed correspondence between the components" (56). A subclass of dual systems is called *salient structures*: "those dual structures in which the primary universe does not enter into an isomorphism with the secondary universe, because the latter includes entities and states of affairs that lack a correspondent in the former" (57). The *Vellum* is, patently, a dual system with multiple component universes that are in complex relations of accessibility with each other. These relations are what allows for the dual sub-systems in the narrative to be transformed into salient structures. The emergent pairings are frequently invoked to induce locally non-causal narrative transformations. The parallel retelling of the Inana-Dumuzi myth and the story of Phreedom Messenger's quest to find her brother is an instance of this. Double vision as narrative technique has at least two functions: it helps the reader accept as plausible the eventual splicing of Inana and Phreedom, and, more importantly, provides an explanation of the splicing process itself. Materially, it is the bitmites that turn the narrative parallelism into a correspondence in 3D time – in the confrontation between Phreedom and Carter and Pechorin, the nanomachines are mixed with the spilled blood of dead gods in Eresh's tattoo parlour, which transmutes them into an active narrative force. However, this is possible in the first place only due to the structural alignments between the two worlds. Implicitly then, to become unkin means to be elevated to a fictional role positioned between those of a world-bound character and of a reader – to gain access to the metanarrative unfolding across salient structures.

A second prominent example of double vision is the interrogation of Finnan by the Covenant agents in *Vellum*. One of Metatron's angels puts on the mind of a comrade of Finnan's from World War One in order to gull him into opening up in his delirious state. The invasion of his mind alternates between the unkin Finnan pinned to a chair in near-future America, Finnan the soldier at the Somme and later at a war hospital being treated for a mental disorder, and Finnan as Prometheus bound. The same kind of dynamic plays out, with the different narrative strands fading in and out of focus, until Finnan's story too is given overarching coherence in 3D time. In addition to that, the angel assaulting him mentally is gradually woven into the narrative he has assumed as camouflage. He subsequently moves against the Covenant forces, thus becoming one of the seven archetypal rebels.

Salient structures are typically only partially available to characters (as in religious rituals that require participants to temporarily align a slice of the actual reality with a secondary numinous world) or are accessible through a very specific focalisation. In the present cases, however, the characters are given access to their own *metaselves*; they are literally rewritten by the self-aware and self-reproducing fictional world endowed with agency through the figure of the bitmites. The importance of salient structures reaches its peak in the first part of *Ink*. Post-Evenfall, a travelling troupe of actors arrives at a Duke's demesne and stages a play for the entertainment of the feudal lord and his entourage. The actors are five of the seven rebels. Their play is done as a Commedia dell'arte rendition of *The Bacchae* by Euripides, with Jack and Joey in the leads as Harlequin and Pierrot. The plot mirrors at an abstract plane the overarching rebellion and spells out the doom of the Duke's fiefdom. Gradually it is revealed that the Duke's consort is none other than Phreedom herself. She is now known as Princess Anaesthesia and suffers from a self-induced amnesia due to the traumatic events at the end of the first novel. Phreedom and the Duke are both lured on-stage to take part in the play, which puts them within the scope of double vision. While Phreedom regains her memories in the process, the Duke, eventually exposed as the angel Gabriel, is ripped apart by the *bacchae*, in this case Phreedom/Ana/Anaesthesia. This hybrid between a psychic transformation and a trap is made out of a layering of narratives and fictional worlds navigated by the actors. It is held together by the shared dramatic domains constituted by the ensemble of characters – the reverberation between the fictional worlds is heightened to a point where the whole metanarrative is activated and the meta-arcs are recovered from amnesia.

Pavel writes that nontrivial salient structures, specifically such that are not mere mappings between worlds but present a dynamic development of the relations between them, arise out of "a thematization of ontological complexities" (63). The play-within-the-play is a typical device for renegotiating the boundaries of existing ontologies. The secondary universe is used as an alternative model, a scaffolding to complicate the currently operative ontology, and the new, hybrid model is gradually brought to the fore and validated. The compatibility between worlds can be measured in terms of the ontological distance between the universes: "If the test of distance is impersonation, its measure must be the impersonating *effort*, the tension needed for the ego to project its fictional surrogate" (92, original emphasis). While the ego in question here is that of the reader who projects into fictional worlds, the same principle applies to the unkin characters. Fiction, argues Pavel, is

made possible by *conventions of fictionality* which require from the reading community “a maximal participation oriented toward the optimal exploitation of textual resources” (123). By framing such conventions for understanding fiction as “complex coordination game[s],” we can model the transformations that occur in *Hours* (124). The multi-layered play is in effect an effort to bring the actants of the narrative domains into alignment with their multiple versions; the contract of the rag-and-bone man in Endhaven can too be thought of as a narrative convention that is maintained operative only through the complicity of a community. The unkin gain access to the technology of fictional semantics; they are “ontological founders,” as Pavel calls such literary heroes who “strive to modify the very basis of the world” (110).

*Hours* articulates in its cubist language a theory of identity that is radically non-essentialist, rooted both “in the commonalities [and] in the deeper patterns suggested by discrepancies” (Vellum 287). The narratives of time, space, myth, history, and genre are analysed in an implicit modal framework of fiction; the Vellum is “the free fusion of flowing forms” (Ink 390). Ontological boundaries are erased in an act of metalepsis, of mixing entities of different ontological orders (Doležel 164). The larger world-constructing framework is transformed into a *dynamic ontology* – a field of struggle between forces where nothing is natural and everything could be true, as long as it is not banned. The self becomes only the interplay between vellum and ink, a product of world creation and of the interpretation of the cultural codes of the fictional and the actual.

This view, albeit stemming from a markedly anthropocentric text such as *Hours*, is compatible with the current ontological turn in various disciplines within the humanities. Duncan’s attack on ossified notions of normalcy and schemas for narrating the world can be seen as convergent with multiple manifestations of this ontological trend, which seek to question the default theoretical separations of nature and culture. Such strands of thought can be identified across disciplines, with varying degrees of overlap and/or incompatibility between them: Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in philosophy (see for instance Graham Harman’s *Object-Oriented Ontology* (2018) and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* (2013)); Actor-Network Theory in sociology (Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005) present, respectively, an important case study and a more general introduction); agential realism in science and technology studies (Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) being the central text); anthropology of life in anthropology (as in the fascinating study of human-nonhuman communicative systems in Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013)).

OOO, for instance, claims that objects do have an essence, but such that is never accessible to other objects, or to the self-same ones for that matter. Objects are only indirectly accessible via their sensual qualities – they always present a different appearance to the rest of the world. This means that causation is reframed as an aesthetic property – it is made possible by the capacity of objects to affect or be affected by other objects. Objects can thus view and interact with reality in infinitely rich ways. They construct their own worlds, in the sense that humans cannot exhaustively access objects’ relations with reality.<sup>7</sup> Objects have their own modalities, even though radically different from human ones, and are open to new attunements and assemblages. OOO elaborates

on Martin Heidegger's tool analysis in *Being and Time* (1927): the broken hammer is no longer seen as ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*), but as present-at-hand (*vorhanden*); that is, strictly functional access to the object is curtailed and the tool-user is forced to confront its excess of obliquely knowable real qualities (69-70).

If narrative actants and fictional worlds are thought of as objects, then non-typical modalisations – arguably the bread and butter of SF – involve the straining and even breaking of these narrative instruments, so that they can be reassembled to newer purposes. This 'disruptive' method is not aimed at the actual destruction of narrative objects; rather it aims to expose previously hidden capacities for interaction with them, which, as has been demonstrated, is a process governed to a great extent by modal categories. Such a view is reminiscent of 'Salvagepunk,' a generic and theoretical practice put forward by Evan Calder Williams in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011). On the surface, projects such as OOO and Salvagepunk have little in common – the first deals with fundamental ontological issues and emancipates them from the subject-object (and human-nonhuman) divide, while the latter seeks to dismantle concrete human-made systems, more specifically those related to value attribution under capitalism. One of the core operations of Salvagepunk is the removal of "the veil of abstraction – the designation of an object in terms of its exchange value – in order to find [its innate] venom" (38-39). If, however, modal categories are rethought as aesthetic (namely concerning the capacities for attunement of objects), they can be applied in analytical readings that are compatible with OOO and with Salvagepunk, among other approaches. One can think with the modalities which structure nonhuman worlds as productively as thinking with those that produce capitalist relations and in this way obfuscate the hidden depths of everyday life (and why not think with the modalities of capitalism as an entity itself?). The event of Evenfall is true to the etymology of the word 'apocalypse' – it ultimately serves to *uncover* such hidden values, launching simultaneous attacks on metaphysics, culture, and imperialism. The characters in *Hours* in this sense perform a wide and deep search across the phase space of the Vellum, in order to dredge up the "innate venom" of narrative objects, including the ones lost and forgotten in residual time.

Turning the mechanisms of fictional semantics into a readily accessible science-fictional tool for liberating the infinity of worlds is, I argue, the central contribution of *Hours*. The texts provide multiple permutations of human modal systems and in this process democratise the creation of worldviews. The name unkin is related in the books, through its form and content, to a popular concept that is very important for OOO: the uncanny, or *das Unheimliche*, a term sometimes translated in Slavic languages as literally "without kin."<sup>8</sup> Duncan's characters are truly without kin – because they are kin with everybody, in the infinite variations of reality. But they are also kinless because objects cannot be reduced to constitutive or functional definitions, their inter-actions are always in flux and in this sense they do not belong exclusively to a particular kin. Such a project for the liberation of narrative technology – for recasting time, space, society, and psyche as modal constructs – could be extended beyond the human, which is arguably the sole province of *Hours*. Fantastika media has in recent years been intensifying its inquiry into nonhuman modalities.<sup>9</sup> Even though Duncan's texts are almost exclusively focused on human systems, they do provide a template for a broader analysis beyond the anthropocentric.

Donna Haraway's insistence in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) on making kin through sym-poetic, tentacular practices calls implicitly for a rethinking and an expansion of how we structure our subjective experience of the world, of how things and phenomena fit in a world – namely how we modalise it. Taking our cue from fictional semantics, we might “localize fiction as a peripheral region used for ludic and instructional purposes” (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* 143). SF, then, or the broader genre of Fantastika into which *Hours* arguably fits in a more comfortable manner, is often taken up with the investigation of how worlds are made, by who and for whom. This can only be achieved if the concept of what is human is first enlarged and decoupled from social constructions that are implicitly imbued with ontological status. *Hours* provides the reader with powerful analytical tools in dramatised form that can be used to this purpose. Its unkin characters break off their ties to locally powerful modal forces, in order to gain authorship over the material-semiotic work-in-progress that is reality:

Taking chaos as its starting point, the Orphean Cosmogony sees the generation(s) of the Book not as a singular event, a scribing by an individual author, but as a process of conjunction and differentiation, of evolution. There is no unwritten book in the Orphean Cosmogony, no prior and perfect metaphysical state of absolute certainty. Instead the Orphean Cosmogony looks for the origins of the determinate in the indeterminate—something out of anything rather than everything or nothing. Before the Book, it tells us, there were a myriad of books, countless artifices of vellum and ink, and clay and reed, of wood and ocher, stone and blood. (*Ink* 284, original emphasis)

*Vellum* and *Ink* expand the combinatorial capacity of human modal systems to give shape to fictional, and by extension, actual worlds, to coordinate reading and social communities in new ways. Such ontological texts of Fantastika give us “[f]ictional colonies established for traveling back and forth to the actual world [...], as] distinguished from fictional settlements for the sake of adventure and investigation” (Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* 84). And if we can hope that “after their return from travel in the realms of art, fictional egos would effectively melt back into the actual egos, sharing with them their fictional growth,” then we should be prepared to expand those spaces for growth into more-than-human territories (Pavel, 85). Having opened a fictional portal into the theory of fiction, *Hours* and its theoretical and affective challenges could help us hold the gate open for other theories and disciplines to enter, such as Haraway's practices of *diffraction*, *string figures*, and *reading-with* or Karen Barad's theory of *agential realism*, in which phenomena pass through and mutually configure each other, somewhat akin to the way worlds, character iterations and genres pass through each other in *Hours*.<sup>10</sup> Duncan focuses readerly attention on the inner workings of storytelling apparatuses and the effects of liberating these objects (or rather phenomena, in the parlance of agential realism); sustained engagement of this kind can have potentially universal consequences for the acts of reading and storytelling.<sup>11</sup>

*Hours* hints at these larger, more-than-human vistas located in residual time. Such are the ontological ruins of other worlds that Reynard Carter travels through. Such are also the hyperobjects of history, entities so vast and distributed over time and space as to seem mythical and even alien: "A burning map of time instead of space: countries are actions, cities dates" (*Ink* 167).<sup>12</sup> And of course, the most prominent more-than-human element in the novels is the machine intelligence of the ink, the chorus of nanites that suffuses the text with authorial voice, struggling to make sense of the systems built by humans and to reshape them differently. Such a self-reflexive and self-replicating fictional machine as 3D time must also be open to its own transformations, as required by reading communities willing to use its search engines. It would necessarily have to start with rewriting traditional conceptions of literature and criticism – reprogramming them to view fiction as arising from a field of vectorised modal forces, always seeking new equilibria. This has the potential of pushing the practice of narration as cognition across a much wider spectrum of possibilities, eventually encountering a huge and pressing challenge: how do we adequately represent and interact with nonhuman modal systems? The theory of modality holds a significant promise in that regard: by understanding how human narratives evolve, break, and are reconfigured, we might be able to parse the subject-object binary in a way that allows us entry into multiple new worlds.

## NOTES

1. Subsequently abbreviated as *Hours* in this article.
2. Accessibility among worlds implies that the range of possible worlds defined within those realities are quantified in the same formal manner. What is defined as possible in a SF novel would not be so in a realist one – in other words, it would not be compossible across worlds. However, one could analyse such relations with regards to restricted domains within worlds which happen to overlap semantically.
3. In logic and semantics, an *intension* is a property that is connoted by a symbol. Such properties are part of world knowledge, of meaning definitions (for instance, "bachelor" carries the semantic features of being a man and being unmarried). In contrast, *extension* is simply the set of objects referred to by a symbol.
4. Duncan himself has illustrated the dynamics of narrative modalities in a blog post titled "[Modality and Hamlet](#)" (2010), where the narrative logic of the play is extrapolated on the basis of the interaction between different parameterisations of the modal systems. In his analysis, the state of rottenness in Denmark is to be found in the clash of competing social injunctions. That they originate from an impersonal and intransigent social system hurls Hamlet into horror and madness, as he negotiates them through the medium of his own affective reactions. Thus, the play can be read, in Doležel's terms, as a mythological reckoning with the individual subject's emerging new relations to premodern social structures.

5. This view is congruent with Northrop Frye's theory of modes presented in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957): fictional modes are determined by the status of the main characters relative to the rest of the narrative agents and to the environment. Thus, mythological characters are superior in kind to both humans and the environment; romantic characters are superior in degree; in the high mimetic mode characters are superior to other men only and in the low mimetic characters are equal with the rest (and presumably with the reader); the ironic mode uses characters who are actually inferior to the average person (and to the reader).

6. I take the term from Brian Willems' analysis of *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman in *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (2017 60-85).

7. Under some interpretations of this view, reality comes to be seen as an open set (or heap) of 'ragged' and only partially interacting worlds (see Timothy Morton's *Humankind* (2017)), instead of a unitary thing.

8. On the question of translation, see Kamelia Spassova and Maria Kalinova's article Преводчески безпокойства около das Unheimliche (2013). An example of the uncanny in the context of OOO is *the strange stranger* in Timothy Morton's ecological philosophy – beings and objects that are always comprehended differently and therefore are always uncanny, in the sense that they are neither familiar, nor unknown. In *The Ecological Thought* (2011), Morton argues that thinking ecologically requires from us to view everything as a strange stranger and to let go of rigid definitions in favour of a decentred, mesh-like aesthetic approach (38-50).

9. I provide a short indicative list of titles: the *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) and *Borne* (2017) by Jeff Vandermeer, *Embassytown* (2011) and *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015) by China Miéville, *Ka: Dar Oakley in the Ruin of Ymr* (2018) by John Crowley, *The Only Harmless Great Thing* (2018) by Brooke Bolander, *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers, *Under the Skin* (2013) directed by Jonathan Glazer and *Ex Machina* (2015) directed by Alex Garland. Other theoretical interventions associated with the ontological turn in the humanities focus precisely on these preoccupations with the nonhuman, such as for example Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), which deals with the modal and semiotic systems of forests and canines, or the critical collection *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. by Richard Grusin (2015).

10. See *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).

11. I use "apparatuses" here in the sense of Barad (2007): specific material-discursive arrangements that generate different histories and worlds.

12. For a treatment of hyperobjects, see Timothy Morton's OOO-inflected *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013).



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## **NON-FICTION REVIEWS**

## **SCIENCE FICTION CIRCUITS OF THE SOUTH AND EAST (2018) EDITED BY ANINDITA BANERJEE AND SONIA FRITZSCHE**

Review by Llew Watkins

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Banerjee, Anindita and Fritzsche, Sonia, editors. *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*. Peter Lang, 2018. 247 pp.

The introduction to *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East* (2018) opens quietly with a Bengali children's rhyme from the 1960s:

*"Did you know there were three moons in the sky?  
The first is the old one, the other two are Russian,  
Look up and you'll see all three speeding by" (1).*

The rhyme refers to *Sputnik 1* and *2*, the first satellites sent into outer space, launched a month apart by the Soviet Union in 1957. *Sputnik 1*, a tiny silver spherical object, twenty-three inches in diameter and weighing just eighty-four kilograms, is marked out in the introduction to this exceptional compilation of essays as one of the principal epicentres of Science Fictional distribution, causing later waves and aftershocks that would ripple out for decades to come.

It is an apt image, not just because *Sputnik* literally spun around the globe many times, but because in doing so it could be seen, or picked up on amateur radios, or caught in the imaginations of countless people at such a geographical remove. The Bengali rhyme encapsulates this, highlighting the many unexpected connections, lines of communication, and indeed the 'circuits' that Science Fiction sharing operates through. These evanescent routes of communication are what Anindita Banerjee and Sonia Fritzsche carefully suggest are vital to re-contextualising Science Fiction (SF) as a global phenomenon, and not one neatly divided into nations and states. The power of this study lies in the sensitive re-examining of history as a shifting nexus of pathways, rather than other approaches that more commonly reify a global understanding into something more bounded or solid.

Although this might seem like a fairly simple shift of focus, I cannot overemphasise how much it affects and resonates through the eight texts that follow the introduction and how with hindsight, having read the collection, I am convinced of the importance of this perspective adjustment. This is a study that is timely and needed. And one that could perhaps only happen at this strange juncture in history, as we begin to process the many threads of the twentieth century moving into the twenty-first. In general, my experience reading these texts was one of an uncanny relief: the sense that a problem – which I had not before been so consciously aware of – was being so skilfully addressed.

As might be expected, certain pivotal SF texts recur throughout the compilation. To name just three: Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* (1957), and Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* (1961). The continued references to these and other key works, gave me a deeper and more multivalent appreciation of these books as they become different objects in differing contexts. It also meant that, in my exploration through the collection, where the sheer weight of new material might otherwise have become overwhelming, I was able to return to reference points that had become familiar, which as a reader I found comforting.

Some of the textual analysis I found particularly impressive. For example, Banerjee's investigation of the character R-13 in *We*, which is the primary focus of the first essay, "T/Racing Revolution between Red October and the Black Atlantic." I initially felt uncertain at the connection that Banerjee proposes between *We*, completed in 1921 in the Soviet Union, and the contemporaneous Harlem Renaissance movement in New York as well as Afrofuturism more generally. However, Banerjee's argument is unexpected and profound, concerning itself both with the mathematical symbolism implicit in the novel, as well as correspondences between the Latin and Cyrillic characters in the original Russian text which are less explicit in the early and much more widely distributed English translation.

The collection covers a range of countries which become key focal points along the routes of exchange and transference, such as Mexico, India, Cuba, East Germany, and China. Part of me wished to expand even beyond this, to other unmentioned parts of the globe, however that is beyond the scope of one volume without the content becoming diluted, and this is rather the mission statement of the wider series – *World Science Fiction Studies* – of which this is the second volume. Not only am I looking forward to future volumes in the series, but I also have renewed inspiration to track down a copy of the first book – *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* (2017) by Iva Polak.

Mexico and in particular the Yucatán provide the landscape for the second essay, "Eugenia: Engineering New Citizens in Mexico's Laboratory of Socialism," by Miguel Garcia, which is a fascinating and terrifying look at eugenics in Eduardo Urzaiz's novel, *Eugenia: A Fictional Sketch of Future Customs* (1919). Although set in 2218, *Eugenia* is a book written in 1919, and Garcia thoroughly excavates the historical context of the global eugenics movement as well as its relationship to socialism in Mexico which are causes of Urzaiz's strange future projection. This essay clearly demonstrates the racism implicit in eugenics strategies, while also arguing that Urzaiz's intentions were not necessarily nationalistic. Garcia achieves this by contrasting Urzaiz's ideas with the Mexican politician and intellectual Jose Vasconcelos' concept of the "Cosmic Race," proposed just a few years after *Eugenia* was originally published.

The third essay, 'Between Moscow and Santa Clara: The Soviet-Cuban Imaginary in Agustín de Rojas' *Espiral*,' by Antonio Cordoba looks at the wealth of Soviet SF texts that "flowed from Moscow to Santa Clara," and in turn influenced the Cuban writer Agustín de Rojas (76). Cordoba focuses on Rojas' first novel *Espiral* (1980), which to date has not been translated into English. He

situates it at the intriguing confluence of two streams: the aforementioned Soviet SF, and the politics of Cuba at the time specifically expressed by Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s call for a ‘new man’ to take on American Imperialism.

Working through an academic collection with various contributors one is faced with the challenge – but also the richness – of readjusting to a variety of voices and styles. The scholarship is always rigorous, each contributor bringing their own specialised research area to bare on the texts they are studying. For example, Sibelan Forrester’s excellent and entertaining article on translating names in SF, or Carl Gelderloos’ exposition of biological evolution and dialectical materialism. This meant that, because of my personal predispositions, sometimes I was more at ease with the content, and at other times I had to work harder to keep up. However, because the writing was always well thought through and carefully constructed, it was worth me persevering and doing any extra reading that was required.

The fourth essay by Gelderloos, “Alien Evolution and Dialectical Materialism in Eastern European Science Fiction,” was one where, at times, I lamented my inability regarding the subject matter. Gelderloos investigates the relationship between biological evolution and dialectical materialism by looking at alien life in three texts: Efremov’s *Andromeda Nebula*, Lem’s *Solaris*, and Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller’s *Andymon* (1982). Explicating representations of the alien, Gelderloos draws out the political implications of alien representation as well as the understanding of the biological evolutionary processes upon which these are based. Demonstrating how the non-human is always experienced in relationship to the human, Gelderloos claims the alterity of the alien as being two-fold: firstly, embedded in the strangeness of our own evolutionary history, and secondly, as a physical entity contrasted to ourselves.

As pointed out in the introduction by Banerjee and Fritzsche, translation is a recurrent and crucial theme throughout the book, and in Forrester’s essay, “Naming the Future in Translations of Russian and East European Science Fiction,” (the sixth essay, forgive me for slipping slightly out of order here) it takes centre stage. Forrester considers works mostly “written during the great boom in Soviet and East European SF that began a few years after Stalin’s death” (165). Therefore, unlike others in the collection, her writing narrows its focus not to one or three texts but to the convention of translating names in a range. Forrester divides these in terms of the epoch with which the various novels are concerned: alternate present, near future, and distant future. Her study begins by revealing the ways in which the connotations of a multi-ethnic cosmopolitanism inherent in many of the works from this period can be lost when names are altered or else transferred from their original context. She continues by dissecting more inventive approaches that authors have devised when naming characters, especially regarding stories set in the far future, before concluding with a discussion of how gender is conveyed through names and again how this can be missed in translations.

Part of the remit of the *World Science Fiction Studies* series is to encourage study of the genre in both print and digital forms. The fifth essay in the collection, “A Natural and Artificial

Homeland: East German Science Fiction Film Responds to Kubrick and Tarkovsky” by Fritzsche, looks at two films produced in East Germany – Gottfried Kolditz’s *Signale - Ein Weltraumabenteuer* (1970), and Hermann Zschoche’s *Eolomea* (1972) – and their connection with Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1971) and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Fritzsche’s discourse is built upon an investigation of the complex concept *Heimat* – or homeland – and the bearing this has on these two films made in the German Democratic Republic. With reference to *Solaris* and *2001*, Fritzsche points out: “the continuing academic discourse on these films helps us better to understand the United States and the Soviet Union at the time of release” (135). This is true of any SF text: that it has the potential to help us better understand the milieu in which it was created. Certainly, as I moved through *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*, I felt a newly challenged sense of interconnecting world events throughout the twentieth century, which – perhaps my oversight – is not something I was expecting to gain!

Often there are deeper nuances and contradictory understandings to be gained by such an approach and I found this certainly to be the case in the seventh essay in the collection, “Ghana-da in Bandung: Race, Science, and Non-Alignment in Premendra Mitra’s Fiction” by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee. Mukherjee begins with a discussion of the 1955 Bandung Conference, in particular exploring the less remarked upon undercurrents of racist anti-colonialism that were present at the otherwise utopic intended meeting between leaders of African and Asian countries. Mukherjee proposes that the “contradictions of this racialized Bandung spirit” had been anticipated by the Indian writer Premendra Mitra in the Ghana-da stories, the first of which was written two years before India gained independence in 1945 (195). What stood out for me most was the complex discussion of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his relationship to science and scientific development. Mukherjee positions the first wave of modern Indian SF – including the Ghana-da stories – in critical dialogue with Nehru’s policy.

The eighth and final essay, “The Afterlife of the Post-Apocalypse: Dmitry Glukhovsky in China” by Jinyi Chu, seeks to trace the reception of Dmitry Glukhovsky’s *Metro 2033* (2005) in China. Beginning with personal reflections of Beijing in 2016, and incorporating research gathered from online forums, this is an essay refreshingly rooted in the twenty-first century, while simultaneously drawing on the complex history between China and Russia in order to contextualise the Chinese reception of Glukhovsky’s work. To the overall collection, which is roughly grouped according to geography into three sections, and which began with discussion of texts from the early twentieth century, this adds a sense of chronology and simultaneously completes that chronology. Banerjee and Fritzsche observe in their introduction that, “[w]hile we refer to the Internet as a global system, in many ways there are many Internets (Spanish, English, Chinese, Bengali, etc.)” (18). Global and many, the internet is obviously a technology that has utterly changed the lines and circuits of SF communication, therefore the decision to finish with Chu’s essay is a crucial one and without it the collection would have felt strangely disconnected from our present age.

Banerjee and Fritzsche have done a remarkable job in bringing these various strands into a cohesive and yet simultaneously pluralistic whole. The collection is colourful, polyphonic, and

sensory. I feel breathless and sated by exposure to so many different writers, cultures, and ideas, both from the real world as well as the fantastical. I am grateful to both the editors and the contributing authors.

#### **BIONOTE**

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## **THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION (2018) EDITED BY FRANCESCA T. BARBINI**

Review by Esthie Hugo

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Ed., Barbini, Francesca T. *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Luna Press Publishing, 2018. 116 pp.

Tracing the genealogy of African genre writing has become a popular task in recent years. Since the rise in the production of African Science-Fiction (Afro Sci-Fi) and Fantasy novels in the late 2000s, many critics have speculated on the reasons for the evolution of African genre fiction and its subsequent popularity in the global imaginary. Nnedi Okorofor's 2009 conversation with Tchidi Chikere, published as the blogpost "[Is Africa Ready for Science Fiction?](#)," has been crucial in sparking this debate. In answering this question, Chikere argues that Science Fiction has historically fared poorly in Africa; its "themes aren't taken seriously," he responds, because "Africans are bothered about food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine...not spacecrafts and spaceships" (n.p.). Chikere's remarks have since lost much of their purchase. The demand for African genre writing has grown at outstanding speed: in the last ten years alone, publishers, micro-presses, and websites have launched a series of magazines and journals dedicated to publishing speculative fiction from across the African continent. Key among these are South Africa's *Something Wicked*, *Wordsmack*, and the IsiZulu *Kwasukela*, Nigeria's *Omenana*, Kenya's *Jalada*, Ghana's *Afrocyberpunk*, and Zimbabwe's *Storytime*. Such is the rising tide that publishers are finding it difficult to keep apace: according to Mazi Nwonwu, editor of the first issue of *Omenana*, in 2010 the magazine "could barely find 10 people to contribute" but now "there are ... hundreds of writers who will readily try their hand at the genre" (n.p.). Clearly, despite Chikere's comments, the attraction that African writers and readers have to Science Fiction is far from frivolous and looks set to stay that way for some years to come.

*The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2018) is one of the more recent edited collections to consider this upswing in emergent African genre writing. The collection is edited by Francesca T. Barbini, and comprises five essays by authors Peter J. Maurits, Nick Wood, Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso, Polina Levontin, and Robert S. Malan. At only five chapters, the collection is very slight. It also does not contain an introduction, raising the question as to why the book was published as an edited anthology of essays. This is one of the book's central weaknesses, as the essays neither speak to one another directly nor fully engage with the arguments made in the other chapters. As such, the book lacks the roundtable, collaborative feeling one expects from a robust edited volume. This is perhaps a weakness that could have been rectified by a stronger editorial hand, but I wonder if the chapters would have worked better if they had been published as separate

articles and not as a collected unit. The chapters do manage to cover a lot of ground, however, and Maurits' essay certainly provides future scholars with a valuable and inventive reading on Afro Sci-Fi and genre fiction.

Maurits' essay analyses the origins of Afro Sci-Fi from an historical materialist perspective. This is a refreshing angle, as it departs from the question – so common to this debate – of whether Science Fiction is, in fact, 'new' to the African continent. The trouble with pursuing this line of inquiry, as Maurits – citing Ugandan writer Dilma Dila – points out, is that it implies African writers should be performing a particular kind of literary "Africanness" (2). These connotations can certainly be seen in Chikere's comments, from which it can be inferred that African writing simply serves the function, as Dila puts it, of "tackling the problems of their societies" (1). Maurits suggests displacing this question and its attendant expectations, espousing a world-systems approach instead in order to make sense of Afro Sci-Fi as part of the world-literary canon. To do this, Maurits borrows from Franco Moretti (*"Conjectures"* 2000), who calls for the adoption of economic models as a means of tracing the development of literary genres because these models allow for the mapping of a 'singular' system that is uniform by unequal. This model, argues Maurits, provides a fruitful scaffolding for analysing Afro Sci-Fi's origins as it illustrates how a genre "emerges for specific historical reasons" and must thus be understood as a function of historical economic operations (2).

Using this approach, Maurits identifies three strong reasons that provide the condition of possibility for Afro Sci-Fi's development. The first of these concerns the African publishing field and the increase in mobile phone ownership after the year 2000, which provided consumers with "off-the-grid" access to the websites, blogs and webzines where African genre narratives were originally published and circulated (23). The second reason Maurits offers is the possibilities presented by the post-colonial context. Many of these narratives perform a certain 'temporal distance' from colonialism because they have emerged so recently and therefore not directly in the aftermath of formal decolonisation and independence. Maurits argues that the time that has passed since independence, coupled with "SF's internal heterogeneity," has allowed African writers to turn to the genre in order to express "a variety of other concerns" such as the global issue of climate change (10-11). Maurits finally reads the 2008 global financial crisis as influencing a turn to utopia in Afro Sci-Fi. This last point is his most interesting and original. By drawing on the optimistic discourses that surrounded Africa in the wake of the global economic collapse, Maurits shows how the utopian turn in African Science Fiction, a feature that is notable in many recently produced African genre narratives, occurred, at least in part, as a result of the optimistic discursive space that was created around the future of the African economy as a result of the breakdown in the international market. This materialist reading allows Maurits to make the claim that Afro Sci-Fi can be considered as a reaction to the dystopian genre – a reading which makes an important contribution to the African speculative literary field (18-22).

The following chapters read weakly in light of Maurits' intervention. Wood's essay traces the swell in Afro Sci-Fi by contrasting the fiction produced during apartheid with the writing of the contemporary, post-apartheid era, illustrating how the country's changing socio-political

contexts have shaped the literary forms employed by South African writers. Wood shows how the new democratic dispensation enabled writers to produce writing that was free of previous “literary constraints” and endowed with a new “creative imagination [that] allows for alternative socio-political realities to be envisaged and striven for” (32, 38). This reading rehashes a familiar corpus of South African literary scholarship that is dedicated to analysing the arch and characteristics of experimental writing in the country since the end of apartheid; Michael Green’s chapter in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2011) provides a particularly adroit summary of the relation between literary forms and their socio-political contexts, albeit with reference to post-apartheid fiction in general and not South African Science Fiction, *per se*. Wood’s focus on short fiction, such as work published in *Jungle Jim* and *Probe*, is refreshing, however, as not much attention has been paid to these magazines in analyses of contemporary South African writing. Wood also usefully questions the assumption that South African speculative fiction is predominately produced by white writers, drawing attention to black writers such as Khaya Maseko, Unathi Magubeni, and Masimba Musodza to rectify the uneven emphasis that has been placed on white genre writing from Southern Africa.

Chukwunonso’s chapter, entitled “The Dangers of Expectation in African Speculative Fiction”, takes up, and elaborates on, Maurits’ argument regarding the influence of developments in publishing on Afro Sci-Fi. Chukwunonso reads the rise of speculative fiction in Africa as both a revolt against the expectation that “protest literature [would be] the default setting for African literature,” and as a response to the Caine Prize, the leading award for African writers of short stories (62). Since its inception in 2000, the Caine Prize has been dogged by controversy for its alleged canonisation of African literature; African writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina and Helon Habila have accused the Caine Prize, for example, of encouraging African writers to pander to a particular western vision of the African world in crisis. Chukwunonso’s argument around the influence of the prize on African writing is more nuanced than this. He claims that the debates surrounding the Caine Prize have birthed productive conversations about the expectations that are placed on African writers, which have in turn created an open space for African writers to produce “exuberant [and] distinctive kinds of stories,” many of which are speculative in nature (67).

Levontin’s chapter focuses on the representation of scientists in Nigerian Science Fiction. This chapter is the most unusual of all the essays, as it takes the form of a qualitative study into the discrepancy between representations of female and male scientists in African genre fiction. Levontin, a scientist herself, employs a number of graphs to graphically record how few female scientists exist in Nigerian writing, a format not commonly used in the study of literature. By taking the form of short paragraphs constructed around recurring representations of scientists in Nigerian Science Fiction, the chapter provides some insights into the attitudes of contemporary Africans towards science. Levontin’s analysis suffers as a result, however, as it is largely descriptive and fails to fully offer an engaged literary interpretation of the texts under scrutiny.

The final essay in the collection returns us once more to South African cultural production. Here Malan investigates how South Africans and Africans have been portrayed in popular entertainment, criticising, in particular, the poor impersonations of South African accents on screen

(I will happily give this one to Malan, as I, too, have yet to encounter a non-South African actor believably pull off a South African accent on screen that does not make me shake my head in shame). Malan celebrates *Black Panther* (2018) and its pioneering representation of "Africans at the forefront of technology" by contrasting this with the films of Neill Blomkamp, predominately *District 9* (2009), which is well-known for its problematic portrayal of Nigerians as cannibalistic criminals (107). Ending the collection with this chapter – the shortest of all the others – creates the impression of an uneven focus on South African writing, a drawback to an anthology that purports to investigate the rise of Fantasy and Science Fiction from the African continent.

This is understandable, perhaps, in light of the prominence of South African narratives in the international marketplace: Lauren Beukes and Henrietta Rose-Innes, for example, have both won awards for their writing, have international book agents, and have had many of their books translated into multiple languages. That being said, I would have liked the focus to be moved from these writers onto lesser-known authors and film-makers, as attention to other African writers, many of whom are writers of colour, is much needed in analyses that look to chart Afro Sci-Fi's evolution. After all, writers from Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda are currently producing inventive genre narratives, as the authors in this collection claim; at the same time, however, the collection fails to fully incorporate these writers into its plotting of Afro Sci-Fi's origins. If nothing else, *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* manages to reinforce the excitement that has surrounded Afro Sci-Fi, illustrating the prominence of the genre in current and future African literary debates.

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## BIONOTE

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## **WE DON'T GO BACK: A WATCHER'S GUIDE TO FOLK HORROR (2018) BY HOWARD DAVID INGHAM**

Review by Marita Arvaniti

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Ingham, Howard David. *We Don't Go Back: A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror*. Room207Press.com, 2018. 437 pp.

Howard David Ingham's *We Don't Go Back: A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror* (2018) is a collection of essays on selected Folk Horror films and television (TV). It is also, and that is my small disclaimer, a very difficult book to review without firstly talking about some of these movies in ways that include spoilers and, secondly, spending a lot of time on the book's paratextual elements, as well as Ingham's Introduction.

Ingham begins their collection with an Introduction that tries to explain what Folk Horror actually is. They initially seem to approach it by adopting a 'you will know it when you see it' mentality, treating it less as a genre and more as what Brian Attebery would term a "fuzzy set" in his *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992, 12-13). Ingham, using the words of Adam Scovell as a starting point, eventually presents a clear and comprehensive explanation of what is and is not Folk Horror. That definition acts as a summoning, not unlike the ones that we will read about in the following pages of the book. By creating a definition for Folk Horror, Ingham invites the spirit of it into the room; the isolation, the eeriness of a familiar landscape, the lack of an escape, the sense of inevitability, of determinism, and thusly serves as a rationale or justification for the inclusion of these works as archetypes of the genre.

To explain that strange summoning created by Ingham's writing, it is essential to take a step back and look at the paratext of *We Don't Go Back*. A Kickstarter project that has since been nominated for the Bram Stoker award, its contents belong in the gray area between critical essay and film review, with each having originally been published as a blog post on Room207Press.com. Ingham's pieces are still available at the webpage where one can also find essays about the book's two companion volumes *On a Thousand Walls* and *Cult Cinema*. That fact would be enough to make this physical copy feel superfluous, if it was not for the power of Ingham's initial summoning. Their Introduction, although fewer than ten pages long, ties the rest of the work together and creates a sense of cohesion and unity that reading the entries as simple blog posts completely fails to convey. Part of this effect stems from Ingham's decision to arrange the works thematically rather than chronologically, a move that emphasises the common themes between them, and best showcases the strong aesthetic that is so characteristic of the genre.

The movies are rated, not by age appropriateness or Ingham's attempts at objective quality –when dealing with a genre like Folk Horror either of those things would be difficult to define – but by a combination of six icons created by Steven Horry: if a film is deemed to be essential it receives a 'Standing Stones' icon, the films they find good can receive up to three 'Bony Thumbs,' and gory or "viscerally affecting" content earns a film a 'Bloody Knife.' This differs from the 'Spooky Skull' which denotes a film they found scary or disturbing, and from the 'Battered Stop Sign' which is reserved for films that have "content above and beyond simple horror" (12). The sixth icon is perhaps the most interesting of all and the only one that can appear more than once other than the 'Bony Thumb.' That is the 'Toad of Madness' which is earned if a film is "strange and wonderful and *fun*" and possessing of a "weird, creative brilliance" although it might not be objectively good (original emphasis, 12).

Throughout the book, those icons are used in various combinations: films can be given the mark of canonicity that the 'Standing Stones' imply without achieving even one 'Bony Thumb' to show Ingham's appreciation of them, while others (see *Psychomania*) might be given four 'Toads of Madness,' signifying what can only be described as a wild ride of a film. That creates a complexity that is often missing from ratings and reviews of films, but perhaps with good reason. I personally felt that the different icons affected my expectations and found myself taking note of films that earned the 'Toad of Madness' icon and almost skimming through the ones that were deemed 'essential' but had nothing else to recommend them: similar responses may therefore influence other readers in this way too. Whilst a novel system to employ, as with all reviews, caution should be urged as to how these subjective ratings may substantively impact on interpretation and engagement with a text even prior to reading.

With this text, Ingham explores numerous iterations of Folk Horror, spanning almost six decades of TV and cinema and covering content from Britain, America, Japan, and Europe. Each chapter includes at least one 'Standing Stones' film, that Ingham deems essential to the understanding of that specific sub-set of Folk Horror, with the exception of the third chapter "Secret Powers of Attraction: Folk Horror Variations," which focusses on Folk Horror films of the seventies. In many ways these films are lesser products of the same time, culture, and tradition as the ones featured in the first two chapters of the book, a fact that explains why Ingham does not consider any of them an essential watch. Sometimes the films that make it into this self-collected canon are obvious: for example, the essential film for Ingham's chapter on Asian Folk Horror is *Ringu* (1998), a hugely influential film that spawned sequels and American reboots alike and is well-known enough to make describing its plot feel almost obsolete: even Ingham introduces it by saying that it is "of course" the one about the cursed videotape (351). The 'Standing Stones' seem to signify Ingham's idea of canonicity, a slightly more objective version of the 'Bony Thumbs' that signify their personal preference.

The collection starts with an example of one of Ingham's additions to the canon, with a chapter appropriately called "The Unholy Trinity (Plus One)," describing the four pieces that Ingham considers to be at the heart of the Folk Horror fuzzy set: *Night of the Demon* (1957), *Witchfinder*

*General* (1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970), and, of course, *The Wicker Man* (1973). Of the four, the latter three are the films that make up what Mark Gatiss called "the central troika of ur-texts that define the genre," with *Night of the Demon* being Ingham's own addition to the canon (14). Despite their rating of the four movies as essential, Ingham argues that the films have more to do with each other than with the rest of the works that would attract the Folk Horror enthusiast, a claim supported by how similar these four films are, especially when compared to the vast variety of themes and nuances found in the rest of Ingham's selected Folk Horror texts.

Despite their importance, however, *We Don't Go Back* is more than just a collection of ratings. Depending on the source material and Ingham's connection to it, their essays range between being simple summaries and reviews, close readings of certain Folk Horror elements to be found in a film, or personal explorations of the deeper themes and questions posed by the narrative. This difference in depth and complexity can be frustrating for the reader, and makes parts of the book feel almost unfinished, like unpolished drafts of a more complex paper that Ingham could have delivered. The review copy also had a few printing errors: pages incorrectly numbered, citations that led to a different paper than the one mentioned, and similar issues that were not enough to make the work difficult or unpleasant to read, but were enough to draw notice. But just as there are weaker pieces there are also stronger ones: clear examples of Ingham's talent both as a writer and as a scholar. In many ways the essays are as varied as the movies they attempt to analyse, and Ingham cannot always escape their subjective opinion when working on a piece: they are at their best when intellectually challenged or emotionally affected by a film, and there is a distinct correlation between the number of 'Bony Thumbs' at the top of each page and the depth and complexity of the essay that follows.

The collection also includes some essays not written by Ingham but by friends and colleagues who helped them with the project: Jon Dear, Simeon Smith, Monique Lacoste, and Daniel Pietersen. Of them, the most prolific is Jon Dear, who pens four essays across the collection, and my personal favourite is Monique Lacoste - to my knowledge the only woman involved in the project - and author of the essay on *The Company of Wolves* (1984). Lacoste's addition is a welcome one, and her essay is well-structured and engaging, albeit lacking the personal investment found in the best of Ingham's own essays.

Slowly but surely the summoning that Ingham has cast comes to an end. Within its trappings we have traveled from isolation to isolation across a number of dreary landscapes and met with many people of skewed moral beliefs. Morality is a central theme in Folk Horror and remains so in Ingham's examination of the genre. Creating Folk Horror is a summoning in its own right, and Ingham is aware of the responsibilities of the artist and unforgiving when they feel these have not been adhered to. When a film starts gratuitously enjoying its own dark violence or when the morality of the filmmakers seems at odds with the morality of the work, Ingham is brutal. And that is good.

I will end this review by returning to the beginning, to Ingham's title. "We don't go back," a quote from the TV movie *Murrian* (1975), described by Ingham as a "wrong-headed statement that

is so true" (45). And they are right: if there is anything the popularity of Folk Horror has taught us is that people do go back, time and time again, in Britain and Asia, and America, through fairytales and children's shows, through documentaries, films, and TV. We turn to Folk Horror because it scares us, and because it allows us to go back to a past that might hold "fear and darkness" but it can also be used to help us move forward (45). For Ingham, the protagonists of Folk Horror films are lost because they refuse to go back, to arm themselves against the darkness. If that is true, then our acts of summoning when reading this book or watching those films are in their own way an opportunity for us to escape from facing the same fate. We go back, a little, in our own ways, and learn what can be taught, so we can then move forward, eyes open, and avoid the Wicker Man.

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## BIONOTE

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## **WITCHCRAFT THE BASICS (2018) BY MARION GIBSON**

Review by Fiona Wells-Lakeland

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**Gibson, Marion. *Witchcraft the Basics*. Routledge, 2018. 191pp.**

In *Witchcrafts the Basics* (2018), Marion Gibson writes a brief, straightforward history of the literature of witchcraft in Britain and America from the sixteenth century to the present, providing a basic overview of the field of study and the literary portrayal of witches. English Literature students would find this work valuable as a first resource to understand the context in which the witches of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), or Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953) were written. Likewise, History and Religion students will find this a good first reference to use when investigating witchcraft in their field. The book provides a concise overview of witchcraft studies, with detailed references to other academic work, which makes it a useful tool for accessing further research.

The format of Gibson's book is akin to a guide or student manual where each chapter starts with a simple overview and concludes with a basic summary, written with undergraduate scholars in mind. The inclusion of questions at the end of each chapter prompts the reader to form their own opinions based on the material presented. Gibson does an excellent job of bringing together the work of influential witchcraft studies scholars in an easily readable format. However, it is important to note from the outset that Gibson does not argue for any specific definition of witchcraft or witches. She carefully summarises the history and literature of witchcraft and its associated critical studies, but asks readers to consider the different attitudes to witchcraft and to do further research for themselves. Gibson is a perfect guide to this topic, a Professor of Renaissance and Magical Literature at the University of Exeter, UK, where she teaches Witchcraft and Magic in Literature as a specialist option. Her previous publications include *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture* (2007) and *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (1999).

As part of Routledge's "The Basics Series," the format and length of the book places limitations on the breadth of material that Gibson can use. She acknowledges that she cannot write a comprehensive summary of witchcraft history and literature within the given format. Therefore, she confines her work to an overview of witchcraft in Britain and America but recognises the importance of a wider world history. For those wanting a more in-depth history of witchcraft across Continental Europe and Britain I would recommend both Stuart Clark and Bengt Ankerloo's work *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* (1999-2002, Volumes 1-6) as a commendable starting point; indeed, Gibson references both authors in the book. Throughout the book Gibson devotes separate explanatory paragraphs to topics such as "Justice in America" or "Was Scot a Religious Dissenter" (48, 67). These

summarise critical material on the subject or distil what is known from original sources, allowing the reader to understand differing opinions. In keeping with a historical account of witchcraft, Gibson does not attempt to promote a particular argument as to why witches were hunted in the Early Modern Era. She provides a summary of various theories in her fourth chapter and continually challenges readers to undertake further research.

Each chapter temporally builds on the previous one to bring the reader to the twentieth century. Chapter One focuses on witchcraft in Early Modern England and Scotland. Gibson starts with a discussion of several demonologies of the era and their contribution to the definition of a witch in that period of history. She highlights the many ways that witches were portrayed in the literature of this period, for example, in Calvinist Scotland witches were “anti-Christian,” whereas in England those accused of witchcraft were often scapegoats; someone to blame for illness, death, or spoilt crops (18). Similar definitions also existed in seventeenth century America. Gibson shows how pamphlets detailing the pre-trial examinations and reporting of witch trials contains similar language to the demonologies when describing the witchcraft practises of the accused. She outlines the cultural climate of Early Modern Britain giving context to the witch-hunts and trials that occurred in that era, but does not provide a particular argument as to why witches were accused and tried in this period of history. Instead, she highlights the fact that much of the printed material about witches was considered entertainment or propaganda. I concur with this definition of the printed material, much of it appeals to the reader with its salacious descriptions of witches, and in many cases this material had a profound effect on how we think about witches, an aspect which Gibson builds upon in following chapters.

Chapter Two moves to seventeenth and early eighteenth-century America where Gibson discusses the demonologies of Increase & Cotton Maher and their influence on how the American colonies of Massachusetts understood witchcraft. Both father and son subscribed to the notion that witchcraft was the province of the devil and that the colonists were God-fearing Christians living in what “once were the Devil’s Territories” (45). Gibson details how colonies in Virginia and Connecticut applied the law in witchcraft trials and she discusses the Salem witch trials with the subsequent myths that arose from them, such as the description of Tituba as a “black slave from Barbados” (55). This misrepresentation of Tituba has informed works like *The Crucible* and other twentieth century witch depictions. Gibson discusses this further in Chapters Four and Six detailing the influence of myths in modern witch depictions. Her work identifies that much of what we understand witch to mean is founded on mythical witches such as Erictho or Hecate, combined with, in many cases, the male oriented view of witches in the Early Modern Era. Gibson’s analysis of witch representation and misrepresentation helps us to understand how the word ‘witch’ builds a particular set of images and ideas in our imagination.

Chapter Three turns to witch literature, starting with Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and his influence on the portrayal of witches in the theatre. From a literary perspective, this chapter provides an excellent base from which further study of the witch in Renaissance plays can be undertaken. She chooses *Macbeth* (1606), *The Mask of Queenes* (1609), *The Tempest* (1611), *The*

*Witch* (1613-15), and the *Witch of Edmonton* (1621) to discuss how playwrights envisage witches. These plays represent the various readings of witch as supernatural entities, servants of the devil, poor maligned old women, and mythical figures. Gibson analyses the way these witches are an amalgam of witch mythology and demonology and how they have influenced modern portrayal of witches. She concludes that witches in the plays often act as “metaphor or allegory [...] for different kinds of power”; indeed, Hecate in Thomas Middleton’s *The Witch* works as a repository for the immorality and evil deeds perpetuated by the gentry in the play (91). Gibson’s strength is her ability to combine her knowledge of witchcraft history and English literature, to provide an excellent analysis of the plays, for me this is one of the best chapters in the book.

Chapter Four details witchcraft studies from the eighteenth century onwards. The reader is chronologically led through the main ideas that informed witchcraft studies. Gibson starts with the Romantic era, when it was thought that witch trials were a manifestation of tyranny. She moves on to the work of Jules Michelet’s *La Sorcière* (1862) and Margaret Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), who both define a witch as someone who practises a pagan faith and is subsequently persecuted by the Christian clergy for their paganism. Their work was influential; however, it was based on opinion and not hard evidence. Michelet incorporated naturalist ideas, his belief that the demonologies recounted true events and his own “anticlerical views” into his work (123). Murray used her knowledge of Egyptian religious practices to suggest that “men and women” participated in “a pagan witch-cult” that mimicked or prefigured Christian ritual (131). Both blended their own assumptions and views with historical texts, creating definitions for witchcraft that said more about their own beliefs than providing sound evidence for their assumptions.

Later twentieth century witchcraft studies have suggested that witches were persecuted because of a perceived difference, such as outcast Jews, or heretics. Gibson covers a feminist approach to witchcraft studies, suggesting that women were primarily accused because of their gender. She deftly covers the main arguments for and against the gender specific accusations, summing up with “being a woman made one more likely to be accused of witchcraft” (107). In addition to gender, Gibson details academic work that shows how the culture of a particular historical era shapes the accusation of witchcraft; economics, politics, and war, coupled with a belief in witchcraft all had an impact on the accuser and the accused.

The last two chapters move on from historical representations of witches as victims of persecution or practitioners of evil and move to a focus on the redefining of witches within religious practice and framing the witch as ‘good.’ In Chapter Five Gibson provides a synopsis of the religious antecedents for witch “celebration or extermination” and details the varied ways that rediscovered religion, such as Paganism, and mainstream religion shape views about witchcraft (181). These are broadly separated into two opposing ideas; first, that witchcraft forms part of a revitalised pagan worship, where practitioners reclaim autonomy over their physicality, gender, and spirituality. The second is the continuing belief in witchcraft as an evil practice in non-Christian mainstream religions and the ensuing witch hunts. Of interest in this chapter is Gibson’s argument that witchcraft accusation is not necessarily misogynistic in origin, an opinion that I would have liked more discussion on,

unfortunately Gibson is constrained by the format of the book and the need to provide a concise synopsis of a nuanced topic.

Then in Chapter Six, in a similar vein to Chapter Three, she examines the portrayal of witches in twentieth century literature from *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) to *Harry Potter* (1997-2007). Films discussed include *I Married A Witch* (1942), and *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), the television series *Bewitched* (1964-72), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), and *American Horror Stories: Coven* (2013-14). Along with Miller's *The Crucible*, these texts redefine witches, they shape how the public think about witchcraft, and often cast the witch in opposition to evil. *American Horror* is the one exception. Gibson's reading of the third season, *Coven*, highlights the way in which the show subverts the conservative norms about domestic life and sexuality. The format of the series also subverts the format of traditional television series, by killing off main characters early and refusing to follow storylines or characters sequentially. More importantly the series challenges the domestication and goodness of the witches of previous television and film media. Gibson discusses the influence of these narratives on the public, changing the historical viewpoint from horror to acceptance. Therefore, "in a surprising turn of events, witches are thus popular and beloved figures in fiction today" (168).

The book works well as a basic guide. Gibson's ability to weave together the many historical accounts of witchcraft with academic studies is testament to her knowledge of the subject. It is a light read, and while Gibson works hard to cover as much material as possible, the format does not allow for in-depth analysis and I would not recommend it to those looking for a definition of witchcraft or a specific argument about witchcraft accusations. However, as a first introduction to the field, I recommend the work to undergraduate students of English, History, and Religion. My own undergraduate studies would have benefited from access to this work and the valuable reference material it contains.

## BIONOTE

**Fiona Wells-Lakeland** is an English Literature PhD candidate at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Her thesis investigates the effects of the English Renaissance on how immortal characters are portrayed in several English Renaissance plays, twenty-first Century Fantasy and Science Fiction. She is interested in the performative function of words and has presented papers on *What Word is Witch* and *Immortal Identity* at the ANZSA conferences in 2016 and 2018. She was invited to present her work for the Shakespeare Summer School at the University of Montpellier in 2018.

## **GAMING THE SYSTEM: DECONSTRUCTING VIDEO GAMES, GAME STUDIES, AND VIRTUAL WORLDS (2018) BY DAVID J. GUNKEL**

Review by Charlotte Gislam

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Gunkel, David J. *Gaming the system: Deconstructing Video Games, Game Studies, and Virtual Worlds*. Indiana University Press, 2018. 198 pp.

David J. Gunkel in his book of essays *Gaming the System* (2018) proposes to introduce a shift in perspective within game studies. As he sets out in the preface, his concern “is not *the argument in the game* but *the game in the argument*,” claiming that a shift in perspective can bring new answers to old philosophical questions such as: whether a social contract is required to stop humanity’s return to nature and what is the nature of reality (ix, original emphasis). Gunkel draws on Immanuel Kant as an example to follow, a philosopher famous for, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), reframing the argument surrounding metaphysics making him one of the most influential figures in modern philosophy. The thesis of *Gaming the System* therefore is ambitious – unfortunately one which does not always succeed. While Gunkel seeks to introduce the study of games to the questions of philosophy, he does not engage with other academic work on philosophy and games such as Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox’s 2009 book *Philosophy Through Video Games*, a notable game studies text. In addition, *Gaming the System* deliberately does not engage with current game studies debates, due to its database of sources including games and virtual environments. Consequently, *Gaming the System* feels rich in examples but unfocused due to both the breadth of different mediums that these examples are drawn from and its distance from the critical discourse surrounding studies of games.

In the introduction and conclusion Gunkel draws from Jacques Derrida to establish the theoretical framework of his argument. Derrida’s influence is reflected in the title; *Gaming the System*, as much like how Derrida’s deconstruction subsists within the system that it argues against and is therefore reliant on for its own continued existence, *Gaming the System* relies on subverting the traditional expectations of a book of essays. As such, Gunkel promises in his introduction to include a conclusion but then refuses to provide a satisfactory end. Gunkel writes:

Consequently, what results from this kind of effort is not a set of stand-alone, generalizable insights and outcomes that can be extracted and enumerated, but a necessarily incomplete and ongoing involvement with the systems in which and on which it operates. (26)

Gunkel applies deconstruction as a tool to identify how the medium of a book of essays attempts to hide its incompleteness by masquerading as a definitive product which once complete is removed from the system of criticism and change. By using Derrida as a key part of his framework he also examines how easily a text is affected by its context. In not providing a conclusion Gunkel attempts to position both the medium of 'a book of essays' and the subject of virtual worlds as texts without end, to be viewed in terms of a system which continually adds new context where a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn. Therefore, Gunkel's essays feel as though they are directing the reader to explore beyond the book and to create their own conclusion. The practical result is that *Gaming the System* can feel frustrating, as if it is holding back and missing the opportunity to make a final statement. Gunkel sticks to his Derridean ideas but as a result *Gaming the System* can feel like a gimmick; its very theoretical framework overshadowing the ideas that the essays explore.

The collection of essays begins with "Terra Nova 2.0," which examines the linguistic history of phrases such as 'New World' and 'Frontier' and what meanings are applied to virtual worlds through the use of these descriptors in their marketing. The argument is nuanced and covers how the limits of language enforce the boundaries of – in this case – the virtual world. Gunkel examines the historical context of the words, with 'New World' stemming from the European encounters with the Americas, and the 'Frontier' as the western movement of European settlers across America. Both words have a colonial history, which implies the virtual explorer as conqueror, continually moving and 'discovering' new territory. The chapter looks at games which purposefully explore the frontier such as *The Oregon Trail* (1974), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and other titles which emulate the feeling of new world exploration, such as *Second Life* (2003-current). The argument posits both 'New World' and 'Frontier' as terms utilised within American myth building to exorcise negative feelings surrounding that period of American history. Where, Gunkel asks, does this leave indigenous populations and non-Americans? However, he does not engage with the vibrant indigenous American game developer community, which could have provided an alternative, instead closing this chapter stating that it is a naïve reader who asks for critiques to provide solutions.

The second chapter, "The Real Problem," is concerned with the connection between avatars and the illusive 'Real' chased by philosophers from Plato to Slavoj Žižek. This is arguably the most abstract of all the chapters requiring the most out of its reader due to the complicated nature of its philosophical ideas. The chapter takes the stance that a player's avatar and their experience piloting them is no less real to the player and those around them within the virtual environment than their experience of the reality outside of the virtual space. This section and the following essay use fake Facebook profiles for philosophers as a way to explain their ideas and the positions they hold on how to conceptualise reality in relation to other philosophers. This sets philosophy up as a network which is continually in discussion with itself rather than a linear line of progress, convincingly reflecting the Derridean framework Gunkel is creating.

"Social Contract 2.0," the third chapter, cites a virtual world's Terms of Service (TOS) as, "the most influential and important political document of the twenty-first century" (25). This chapter's attention is almost exclusively on using Facebook as a case study to represent the current use of

these types of contracts in online spaces. This section focuses on consent, the practical use of the document by companies, and the history of this type of online contract, as well as an introduction to the philosophy of the social contract as outlined by Thomas Hobbs and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Social Contract theory is interested in the morality of humanity and whether we are, as Hobbs suggest, inherently evil and in need of governance, or, as Rousseau argued, a blank slate. This is used compellingly by Gunkel with the case study of LambdaMOO (1990), a virtual environment which deliberately declined to enforce a TOS until an avatar called Mr. Bungle violated avatars within the space. This section argues that a TOS requires a definitive decision by the user unlike the original social contracts discussed by Hobbs and Rousseau, which only requires tacit consent. However, this, I would argue, ignores the obscuration of information that these forms cause and does not question whether the act of clicking a button can count as informed consent.

In the final chapter, "In the Face of Others," Gunkel interrogates our relationship with Artificial Intelligence (AI), ranging from individual chat bots, public entities such as Microsoft's bigoted Tay-bot whose interactions with the public on Twitter resulted in it remixing racist and anti-Semitic remarks it received in its replies, and non-interactable AI such as those which operate self-driving cars. Considering these examples, Gunkel explores responsibility for the actions of an AI, and the consequences of such decisions on how we conceptualise our place in the world. This chapter feels like the most important due to the contemporary innovations within AI. Although it can feel at times like Science Fiction when discussing the possibility of being catfished by an AI, Gunkel is highlighting the questions we should be asking now to avoid potential disasters in the future. I felt as though this chapter could have been expanded to fully explore this area as a key question was missing to understand the ethics of who has responsibility of an AI's actions; namely, when does a human agent have the right to know when an AI agent is involved? As humans we like to believe that we can tell the difference between something that is human and something which is not; that we would be victorious in a Turing test. As programmers become smarter at developing AI which can, for instance, convincingly book a hairdresser's appointment or beat the world's best players at *StarCraft* (1998), when this information is disclosed needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, this chapter is too short to fully grapple with these questions; however, Gunkel has released another book, *Robot Rights* (2018), which appears to be an expansion on these ideas. Whether each chapter will be expanded into a later book is unknown, but if *Gaming the System* is a practice ground for ideas then readers with an interest in only one topic might wish to wait to see if Gunkel expands and builds a fuller argument in the future.

Each chapter is distinct, offering little overlap to the others; as a result the book feels like a tasting platter of individual pieces rather than a cohesive whole. Combined with Gunkel's Derridean framework, this set of essays feels like a mixture of ideas which do not build towards a satisfying conclusion or the furthering of any of the ideas found in each individual chapter. The structure of each essay provides the reader with an introduction to the philosophical argument being navigated. These introductions provide enough depth to stimulate interest, however, as each chapter is isolated from the rest, the reader will find themselves moving to sources outside the text. Whether this a purposeful result of the Derridean framework, or an unfortunate side effect of the bite-size nature of the collection is unclear.

Due to *Gaming the System* comprising of four separate essays which each cover wildly different topics, each chapter contains a breadth of different philosophers, which include; Kant, Derrida, Žižek, and Plato among others. A book which involves so many philosophers, within the relatively short space of 198 pages, runs the risk of becoming too dense for most, while also expecting the reader to approach the book already fluent in a wide range of philosophical ideas. *Gaming the System*, however, succeeds in being well-written enough to ask that its readers only have a base knowledge of the language used within philosophy, and failing that, a curiosity in the subject.

To conclude in a more definitive manner than Gunkel, *Gaming the System* is a set of essays where philosophy can be found everywhere, even within the structure chosen for the piece. Although this should, in theory, complicate the work, it is an easy to read explanation of different philosophical ideas which are reflected within the spaces of video games and virtual worlds. This would suit those who have an interest in game studies and virtual worlds who are interested in the application of philosophy but require a refresher on debates and concerns. Where *Gaming the System* struggles is continuing the momentum throughout all four of its essays, with each ending without an identifiable link between them and without the promise of each being drawn together to a defined conclusion. Overall, the book is made up of interesting individual parts which could have made a coherent whole but, by design of the author, is denied cohesiveness. A structural decision which I ultimately believe harms the individual chapters. *Gaming the System* is therefore a good place to start but readers will find themselves dissatisfied with the conclusion; a very Derridean result.

## BIONOTE

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## **TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME (2018) BY LINDSAY HALLAM**

Review by John Sharples

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Hallam, Lindsay. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me (Devil's Advocates)*. Auteur Publishing, 2018. 120pp.

Lindsay Hallam's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (2018) appears at a moment of increasing literary and academic interest in the *Twin Peaks* world. Franck Boulègue's *Twin Peaks: Unwrapping the Plastic* (2017); David Bushman and Arthur Smith's *Twin Peaks FAQ* (2016); and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Catherine Spooner's edited collection *Return to Twin Peaks: New Approaches to Materiality, Theory, and Genre on Television* (2016) have provided fresh insight and approaches to the world of damn fine coffee and ontologically uncertain owls. Accompanying this has been a resurgence of theoretical interest in the Horror genre, including Xavier Aldana Reyes's *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (2016), suggesting renewed approaches to works of genre cinema. Applying such approaches is the aim of the *Devil's Advocates* series, published by Auteur Publishing. Previous efforts include *The Blair Witch Project* (2017) by Peter Turner, *Don't Look Now* (2017) by Jessica Gildersleeve, and *Macbeth* (2017) by Rebekah Owens. Critically-minded without descending inescapably into the mountains of theory, the "fresh perspectives" of the series have been praised by Christian Fowler who also suggests the series "will perfectly complement the BFI archive volumes" (Hallam, 1). Hallam combines, analyses, and extends academic and journalistic commentary in their examination of David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* (1992), utilising modern theoretical tools which have developed or come-into-being since the film's release, particularly affect theory, employing these on "the ways in which human bodies are affected by those on the screen on three levels: representationally, emotionally and somatically" (Abstract).

Hallam begins by noting the initial negative reaction to the release of David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* (henceforth abbreviated to *FWWM*) and recent reassessments, driven in part by the attention given to the 2017 television series *Twin Peaks: The Return* which continues the story of Laura Palmer and the town of Twin Peaks. This can be seen as part of a wider reassessment of Lynch's oeuvre, including *Lost Highways* (1997) and *Blue Velvet* (1986). Twenty-fifth anniversary screenings of *FWWM* occurred in 2017 and "highly respected distribution label Criterion" released a "Director approved special edition" version of the film positioning *FWWM* "amongst other cinema classics" (112). Yet, upon release, critics accused Lynch of cashing-in on his creation, reusing his old tropes and techniques uncritically, or, more seriously, creating a spectacle of violence or sexual voyeurism, wrapped in a puritanical concept of victimhood. Lynch stated that "I was in love with the character of Laura Palmer and her contradictions" whilst creating a film centred on her suffering (11). Other criticisms focused on how *Twin Peaks* was portrayed as "a nightmare space controlled by oppressive

and abusive patriarchal structures" (23). The non-involvement of the television series' co-writer David Frost, the choice to focus on prequel material, and various production and actor-related occurrences also contributed to hostile reviews (14). Moreover, the way *FVWM* provoked "strong reactions" and shifted towards pure horror undoubtedly affected viewership. Hallam claims that assessments of the film have changed over time and that *FVWM* has become "an integral part of the *Twin Peaks* universe," although the film could still productively be viewed as an unsuccessful experiment (15). Keith Phipps, writing for AV Club in 2008, for example, still found it "pointless at best and sadistic at worst" (n.p.). Hallam, though, argues that "to follow Laura Palmer you must confront the true horror of her existence" (7). To this end, foregrounding emotion, feeling, and lived experience, Hallam's book is structured around different ways to view the film, including, as 1) a Horror film; 2) a film about trauma; 3) a David Lynch film; and 4) a film in a wider cinematic context. In this review I consider the first two perspectives since they constitute the most thought-provoking and consistently original sections of Hallam's work.

At the heart of the book is a rigorous consideration of *FVWM* as a Horror movie. Whilst the film's mythological elements such as the White Lodge and Owl Cave rings suggest a film where "there is a lot going on," Hallam starts with a straightforward move by viewing the film as a Horror movie (20). As Hallam states, *FVWM* was not intended to extend the television series "but to delve deeper into the mysteries surrounding Laura's death and the connection to a supernatural realm that lies just below the surface reality of the quaint American small town" (11). The central thesis of the book emerges here as the idea that "Laura is in fact the strongest of them all" (21). This optimistic interpretation is reinforced - perhaps it is only possible at all - by reference to *Twin Peaks: The Return* which has recontextualised all preceding narrative. In the new series, several scenes from *FVWM* play out differently, including Laura Palmer's last moments. Agent Cooper prevents Laura's murder, only for "negative forces" to take her back and the timeline to be restored (117). Cooper then finds Laura's tulpa or doppelgänger, returning her to Twin Peaks. Laura's piercing scream ends the series. Hallam suggests that, rather than a traumatic wound being reopened by her coming home, Laura's "scream is her realisation of her true identity, but also the realisation of her role as 'the one' to defeat [Evil]" (119). This interpretation is contested but is logically and engagingly argued.

Hallam's book works best where it considers the mechanics of the film, particularly in sections discussing how *FVWM* incorporates "elements associated with the horror genre in order to emphasise how Laura's experience of life in Twin Peaks has become a living hell" (27). These elements include use of the supernatural and the use of sound, as Laura's trauma manifests in the everyday experience (27). These can be thought of in terms of affect theory, defined here, according to Xavier Aldana Reyes, as "not just somatic responses, or 'body responses', but also emotions and moods" (29). The use of objects by Lynch to convey meaning is viewed in this same light. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes how things in Twin Peaks become "saturated with affect," and, as Hallam continues, "animate by being out of place, seemingly possessed or of threatening portent" (49). Items such as a roof fan, for example, are associated with Laura and her abuser Bob. It is one of Lynch's principal successes that he can convey such moods, often inaccessible to those not experiencing them, in this manner. The affective energy of the objects is frequently amplified by

sound and other cinematic techniques, as well as originating from sound itself. In one of the most interesting passages in the book, the importance of sound in Lynch's work is emphasised, either created by objects such as vehicles or through the musical score, which "is essential in creating mood, elevating tension and creating fear" (55). Think of Laura listening and crying to Julee Cruise's song at the Roadhouse, for example, conveying her emotions without words. Other scenes highlighted in this regard include the overwhelming noise of the cross-border party in Canada where Laura and Donna briefly escape and the grimly comedic use of subtitles onscreen to comprehend their speech. In another case, noisy vehicles, people, and animals represent "Laura's sadness, while also highlighting her attempts to drown out her feelings and deny her abuser's true identity" (55). In each instance, noise acts as what Michael Goddard, following Michel Serres, calls "an uninvited parasitic third party, the uneliminable noise operative in any communication channel" (n.p.). For Serres, a parasite, in the French language, contains three meanings, "a biological parasite, a social parasite, and static" (Translator's Preface, *The Parasite* i). The parasitic stranger is the stranger entering, it is the hum of a fan suggesting disturbance, it is musical background noise or a car's loud engine suddenly becoming overwhelming, representing an underlying tension and suppressed knowledge. Hallam is right to state that "For Lynch, the sound is of equal importance to the image" (58). The two are intertwined in their conveying of his message.

After considering *FWWM* as a Horror film, Hallam turns to the concept of a "trauma film," following Janet Walker, identifying the home as a central site in the film where this interpretation can most clearly be seen, remarking on a scene in particular where dinner is being eaten in the Palmer household. Leland appears as a controlling, abusive father, demanding Laura clean her hands before eating and driving her to tears. Such "a clear view of the dysfunctional situation in the Palmer home ... was never provided in the [television] series. To other residents of Twin Peaks, the Palmers are a model family, pillars of the community" (75). The use of the home "as a site of horror is a common genre trope" (75). *Insidious* (2010); *Rosemary's Baby* (1968); and *Poltergeist* (1982), for example, show the home invaded. Another genre trope employed by Lynch is the possession of a father figure "by malevolent forces, taking the figure of patriarchal authority to a violent extreme" (75). Yet, Hallam argues compellingly that *FWWM* resists a straightforward Oedipal narrative, not revealing unseen desire but exposing violence in a normally peaceful space. Instead, "the ultimate horror" is "not in some fantastical or outwardly Gothic ominous setting, but in a middle-class home" (76). This is at the heart of what makes *FWWM* an example of trauma cinema. Turning again to the mechanics of film-making, one particular feature of such cinema is the use of audio-visual techniques to distort reality, as an expression of trauma, rather than necessarily conveying realistic events. This, as mentioned above, can be seen in the scene where Leland picks up Laura and drives home. A van drives erratically behind the, sound grows from horns, engines, and a dog. Referring to her abuser, Mike, an other-worldly entity, shouts to Laura "It's your father!" Leland speeds away as Laura covers her ears in denial (77-78). This, as Hallam, astutely notes, is the "traumatic paradox," or "the tendency for trauma to be expressed, or remembered, not as it exactly occurred, but in symbolic or fantastical terms, or for significant elements of the trauma to be forgotten completely" (79). Lynch's "abstract, oblique, fragmented and bewildering" approach compliments his narrative intent (80).

Hallam concludes by restating the aim of the book is to “not only celebrate a film that was once unfairly maligned ... but in particular to celebrate Laura Palmer, who evolved from an image personifying the ‘beautiful dead girl’ ... to a character who is complex and flawed, yet powerful and strong, who never submits to the evil surrounding her” (121). Cherry pie, surrealist cinematics, and twisting narrative threads can often obscure this. As Hallam states, Lynch’s tale is one of despair, trauma, and the fragmentation of identity (121). It is a Horror story. With this in mind, Hallam’s *Fire Walk With Me* summarises a number of approaches to the film and to Horror cinema more generally. It employs modern theoretical approaches, notably affect theory, but remains resolutely attached to the story. Its weaving of contextual references to cinema help ground *FWM* within wider conventions of genre and film, as well as highlighting its divergence from these traditions. The consideration of different elements of the film, particularly sound and colour, is carried out thoughtfully. Re-watching the film with these small details being noted, one feels a greater sense of immersion and understanding regarding the way the film is constructed. This book is a worthy addition to Twin Peaks literature and a useful guide to a challenging work of cinema.

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## BIONOTE

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## **CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY (2018) BY AIDA HUDSON**

Review by Chris Hussey

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**Hudson, Aida. Editor. *Children's Literature and Imaginative Geography*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018. 357pp.**

With burgeoning interest in criticism on Children's Literature and surrounding concerns for place and the environment, Aida Hudson's collection on this aspect of the genre and its relationship to what has been termed 'imaginative geography' appears timely. Hudson ambitiously sets the scope for this edited collection of academic articles and other contributions within her introduction, noting "many of these chapters grew" from a symposium to form the basis of the publication's conceptual direction (ix). The notion of these chapters growing appears entirely apt for this text, given prevailing concerns about the environment and the organic that pervade the many pieces included, which centre on this concept of 'imaginative geography,' that encompasses how places might be brought to life through the written word to be interpreted and perceived by a reader. Hudson draws on the etymology of these words to help define the concept as being the "image or picture to oneself of earth writing" or alternatively "imaged earth writing," with the text fundamentally focusing on how writers portray the worlds or places within their works of fiction, to present fully-formed, believable locations for their characters to reside within, where the narrative can take place, and how readers might subsequently relate to them (1).

The book consists of four sections, interspersed with interludes by authors reflecting on the writing process. While these are not in the same academically critical vein as the rest of the chapters, 'interlude' feels appropriate, and it is on reflection that one sees their value in charting the authorial perspective on textual construction relating to imaginative geographies. These sections, "Geographical Imaginaries – The Old World and the New," "Gardens and Green Places," "Fantasy Worlds and Re-Enchantment," and "Space and Gender", cover a huge amount of content within their pages, with each focusing on a particular text or texts of the genre. Hudson notes the majority of texts concentrate on the "Northern Hemisphere," and are primarily set within "Canada, Britain, the United States, and Ireland," but contains the analysis of certain fantastical locales too, including Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* (1968-2001) series (13).

The first section is one of contrast, juxtaposing the old and the new through the medium of experience. Cory Sampson's chapter examines the world of Philip Pullman and Imperialism through *The Golden Compass*, published as *The Northern Lights* for UK readers (2001), drawing parallels with Late Victorian Britain and culture with regard to the portrayal of Lyra's universe. The evocation of this era, and its inevitable links to exploration, are seen as being portentous for Lyra's own journey

throughout the novel, in a way that channels British Imperialism while simultaneously offering this critique. Similarly, Colleen M. Franklin's following chapter highlights how writing focusing on the 'North' boom after 1818, indicating the "hunger for tales of northern exploration and northern landscapes," as a place that was previously seen as perilously inaccessible and relatively unknown, thus inculcating an appetite for conquest narratives (46). She outlines the childlike fascination with the North, evoked through nursery rhymes or the configuring of the expedition as being female, which draws on key aspects of Children's Literature, including dual readership – whereby many adults would be aware of the grim reality of this romanticised venture. The next chapter by Margot Hillel feels as though it could round this section off nicely, where the previous chapters encompassed exploration from the perspective of choice, this considers a retrospective of those who were forced to leave, focusing particularly on the Irish landscape from which many people have had to emigrate. Hillel implies that Ireland becomes as much a "character" as a place, encompassing a multitude of elements so fondly remembered: "love, hope, nostalgia, longing, and patriotism" (82). The strong feelings that the authors she draws on evoke simultaneously communicate their own longing, while resonating with the seemingly similar perspectives of other emigrants, that serve to perfectly illustrate the power of imaginative geographies within literature more generally, and which may take people back to places they remember fondly, just as effectively as it may take them forward to imagine new places too.

Shannon Murray then highlights how Frances Hodgson Burnett utilised John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) within her writing of her own novel, *Two Little Pilgrim's Progress* (1895), taking the allegory in this preceding text to be one that her own protagonists explore. Murray charts the interplay between the differing narratives and their portrayals, with Frances Hodgson Burnett's characters retracing the steps taken in Bunyan's work in a suitable meta-fantastical manner, that Murray believes may convey a potential "air of familiarity" for a reader (95). Such interweaving may be more common now, but the varying ways in which these landscapes might overlay and intersect makes for an intriguing exploration within this chapter, as well as for our consideration of how other texts might playfully engage with representations in this manner. It is therefore useful in comparison to consider the following articles by Linda Knowles and Petra Fachinger respectively – where each looks to examine how Canadian authors have drawn on the indigenous histories of the nation to inform their writing, noting their significant interplay with the natural world and landscape. Knowles points to "Canada's immense and unsettling geography" and how this was tied in by Catherine Anthony Clark with myths from the First Nations and survival narratives to bring about her own Fantasy lands, supplemented with "many other elements of European folk and fairy tales" (101, 111). It is this recognition that links well with the authorial interludes in the overall work, but also demonstrates how the creation of such mythologies may spread and be similarly informed by the stories of others. Thus, as others demonstrate within the text, Knowles too reflects on how this interplay between realism and fantasy – and the blurring of borders thereof – allows for a reader to imagine exactly where such stories may actually take place. Fachinger's analysis in her chapter draws on how Aaron Paquette in *Lightfinder* (2014) "situates" the novel more specifically, while still drawing on the mythology of Canada and Australia through "nation-specific traditional stories" (122). Fachinger argues this leads to an "Indigenous futurism" that plays with a more familiar dystopian narrative,

with the intention of making the text accessible for young readers of any background (136). In so doing, these representations suggest a reclamation of a genre seen as being typically European, yet perhaps is equally indicative of a particular coming of age for works that artfully explore rich cultural histories and traditions within this prosaic form, encouraging such an engagement with the natural world and environment through writing.

Hudson's 'conversation' with Janet Lunn as to her background and inspiration for her writing leads nicely into considerations of the more ecological side of Children's Literature. Melissa Li Sheung Ying's chapter within this chapter focuses on the garden within contemporary children's books as a space that is balanced "between life and death" (153). She suggests there is a seriousness to the garden which might otherwise be overlooked, but denotes it is representative of both "growth and decay" and a space that a child may be accessing regularly (153). In line with other ecocritical approaches, helping to develop an awareness of wider environmental concerns is important – as much as is fostering "environmental imagination, curiosity, and awareness" – and this chapter purposefully suggests useful ways such texts might be approached to help facilitate this (167). The next chapter by Alan West considers the environment further in his exploration of *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), examining the interplay between the natural and built environment to contrast this with the human and the animal in the anthropomorphised characters of the text. He notes the "paradoxical" nature of Grahame's work, by making them "animal in shape but human in habits," noting the "rural landscape" that is then "cancelled out" by the end of the book (182). West's analysis is particularly astute and engaging, offering a refreshing perspective of the setting and characters alike within the text, and how they influence one another.

Deirdre F. Baker's interlude focuses on how she looks to tie her writing into a specific locality and the language choices utilised to convey this. The next chapter goes further to consider worlds of Fantasy more explicitly, starting with Joanne Pindon's article on Kernaghan's *The Snow Queen* (2000), a reimagining of Andersen's classic within the Canadian North. Pindon indicates this usefully juxtaposes the extremes of the environment with that of "adolescence," suggesting this includes "heroic love, rebellion against parents and the single-minded questing for new identities and a place in the world" (198). As with other authors, and as indicated by other critics within this text, utilising the environment in such a way offers this useful symbolism that mirrors the narrative in an allegorical manner that remains suitably effective. Sarah Fiona Winters then explores the symbolism of what she terms the 'landscape of boredom' in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) by analysing the quest narrative undertaken by the protagonists to destroy the horcruxes, which contain the essence of Voldemort (215). She suggests the reflection of the landscape, both as portrayed within the film adaptations and novel, serve to showcase this boredom through the rugged, featureless vista to imply that "resistance to evil is often boring, and that the quest for a meaningful life involves large vistas of meaninglessness in time and space" (216, original emphasis). It is an interesting piece that goes against the traditionally perceived counter-narrative of this particular part of the series, drawing parallels to the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and Partisan Resistance that are equally illuminating.

Christine Bolus-Reichert addresses the re-enchantment of flight within works of Steampunk, exploring three recent texts in her contribution. She indicates the power of Fantasy might be linked to the capacity to “stimulate wonder,” and thus within such texts has the chance to renew this for readers, particular strengthened by a genre “straddling as it does the border between aesthetics and science” (240, 241). Monika Hilder’s next chapter takes this concept of re-enchantment further, but contrastingly to Bolus-Reichert, views the spiritual side of these imaginative geographies to contribute to the overall perspective that ties person to planet. It is, as Hilder notes, an invitation to consider the “emerging discourse of contemporary spirituality,” with this particular linkage to the world around us (259).

The final part includes two chapters on gender and place. First, Peter Hynes addresses the “Female Places in *Earthsea*,” by contrasting those places that are interpreted or read as being masculine or feminine within Le Guin’s work. Contemplating the gendering of space within the original trilogy makes for an intriguing interpretation of the imaginative geography depicted. Then, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey examines the power of dance in how it might “transform the tangible geography of the performance space” (282). The suggestion that it might be a communicative tool that may embody place represents a fascinating insight as to how we might both present and represent the world around us. It concludes with a postlude by Alan Cumyn, who indicates that much of his writing stems from his unconscious experiences of place – intimating that the interplay between those aspects of experience and memory in relation to place often become indivisible, and that these ultimately emerge through the writing process over time.

The overall impression of the edited collection is that it contains an excellent amount of content held together by the overarching theme in an appropriately imaginative way. The engagement with a wide range of fictional texts which may have previously had less critical attention helps draw the consideration of such issues to the fore, while also providing further useful ways for the material of multiple cultures and geographies to be explored. The application of theory is illuminating for awareness and future critical engagement with other texts, with the interspersed interludes adding authorial perspectives on textual construction that serve to complement the issues raised within the chapters effectively. This text represents a particularly useful way of considering imaginative geographies more generally, and the exploration of this within the context of Children’s Literature looks to expand a new, exciting area of scholarship in future.

## BIONOTE

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## ***SLEEPING WITH THE LIGHTS ON: AN UNSETTLING STORY OF HORROR (2018) BY DARRYL JONES***

Review by Charlotte Gough

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Jones, Darryl, *Sleeping with the Lights On: An Unsettling Story of Horror*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 208pp.

*Sleeping with the Lights On* (2018) begins by foregrounding Horror, and particularly the spectacle of violence, as “encoded in art from its very beginnings” and thus an essential part of our cultural identity, despite the many contentions, debates, and cultural distinctions surrounding taste, class, and form that the genre continues to contend with (2). Darryl Jones introduces this work with a succinct and comprehensive overview of these very contentions by cleverly establishing the similarities between biblical and classical literary imagery with that of ‘video nasties’ and the like from the very opening pages. Indeed, Jones’ ability to both define and dispel problematic critical definitions, frameworks, and terminology that have categorised and arguably confined Horror as a form – including Gothic Terror or Gothic Horror, Uncanny, Sublime *et cetera* – deftly and unpretentiously in so few words, and in a tone suitable for seasoned scholars and casual consumers alike, is a unique and commendable skill. This continues throughout, as the author stitches together case studies across the mediums of literature, film, television, and even comic books in apt Frankenstein fashion, everything from epoch-making classics like *Dracula* (1987) to more obscure pockets of brilliance like *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979–1988), to which abridged theoretical concepts are strategically applied, with remarkable ease and equal attention. Not allowing for any distinct gendered or historiographical readings is in fact the whole basis of the book, rather than its shortcoming, as such approaches have invariably been covered previously and in, at times a reductive, isolation and specificity. Whilst not covering any ‘new’ scholarly territory *per se*, such a work is so important because of its sheer breath of succinctly delivered and carefully consolidated knowledge. This passionate, encyclopaedic overview allows Jones to appropriately identify and demonstrate the distinct plurality and, in his words, “tentacular” nature of this much-discussed (and much-maligned) genre which indiscriminately “[spreads] everywhere” into vast and varied territories (139).

Horror, for Jones, is so crucial in art because it has the power to “reflect” and “shape” reality by both forming and informing cultural anxieties as an intrinsic part of, as well as a means of understanding, civilisation in the broadest sense of the word (original emphasis, 3). He maintains however, that whilst being ever-present, Horror’s key themes are not fixed but “mutable and contingent, [products] of historical context”; cyclical and familiar yet constantly adapting through the social issues and technologies of the increasingly modern world (21). This very indefinability and

contradiction in ideology is an integral part of the genre's popularity and ubiquity; as Jones observes, "the history of horror is also the history of outraged responses to horror" (13). The author continues to emphasise this anarchic and marginal power of Horror, which, at its best, is meant to "shock us out of our respectability or complacency" as a transgressive and political tool in form and content, occupying an exhilarating "dialogic relationship between radicalism [...] and conservatism" (15). Another well-sustained and sharp observation is the concept of ritual; those depicted in Horror texts as well as the ritualistic aspect of Horror audience participation, "based on the [repetitive] acting out of predetermined roles [and] on the precise fulfilment of expectations" (16). Jones' main arguments thus ultimately present the representation and experience of Horror, multi-layered and problematic as that may be, as a crucial means of articulating the simultaneously personal and universal nature of fear – and even wider human existence – through texts that are at once transgressive and traditionalist, experimental, and debt-owing to the thematic legacy of their predecessors.

This notion is reflected in the book's structure, which is organised thematically around specific yet historically-broad concepts including "Monsters," "The Occult and Supernatural," "Horror and the Body," "Horror and the Mind," and "Science and Horror." These are followed by the "Afterword" which reflects on the state of the genre since the millennium – how that, or even if that, can be defined – and points towards its possible future, all of which I shall elaborate upon. Firstly however, one cannot rightly discuss the book's content without acknowledging it as a homage-paying Horror artefact in itself. A small, black treasure for a true Horror fan: the pages are edged in black recalling great classical tomes and its front cover has a lightbulb cut-out to reveal the artwork on the inner pages. These have a blood-drenched background depicting various silhouetted motifs: the zombie, the werewolf, the ghost, et cetera – which, to illustrate the book's content, seamlessly overlap to present one complete, romantically-horrifying depiction of the genre's metamorphic, metaphoric mainstays throughout history.

The first chapter, "Monsters," continues from the introduction's concluding statement, that "it falls upon each generation [...] to create its own monsters" (27). Jones sets the tone for subsequent chapters by focusing on themes, at once specific and sweeping, seen at the very beginnings of civilisation, which act as conduits for comprehensive discussions that span historical periods and cultural formats. Here, he uses Vampires and Zombies to consider the 'Monster' as a physical and political category, as a "means of managing contemporary threats, crises and anxieties" surrounding race and capitalism, invasion, and infection (34). Furthermore, the use of Sigmund Freud's 'Totem and Taboo' framework is an especially fascinating elucidation of our simultaneous 'attraction' and 'disgust' in response to the monster and indeed the genre itself more broadly. This reviewer particularly enjoyed the idea of monsters being crucial to the development and "spectral" viewing-experience of early cinema (45). Jones ends the majority of his chapters by helpfully pointing towards contemporary examples – in this case, the proliferation of Zombie texts since the financial crash of 2007 – acknowledging the interest in Horror's modernity and progression. This makes *Sleeping* a text which speaks to, as well as beyond, its own time period in the spirit of its case study texts.

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The following chapter on “The Occult and the Supernatural” includes subheadings on The Devil as well as Ghosts, covering issues surrounding religion, existential meaning, and evil in context of the spirit and spiritualism as concepts. A particularly ingenious feature of this chapter was Jones’ comparison of Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796) with contemporary traces of ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse’ in ‘Pizzagate’ (2016); Jones notes Horror’s cyclical affiliation with moral panics, censorship, and conspiracies as popular culture continues to inform and is “implicated in [...] social and political discourse” (69). “Ghosts and Spirits” seemed however to be the most lacking section of the book; to link the thematic issues around ghosts with discussion of occult beliefs and practices covered elsewhere in the chapter would have perhaps made it more cohesive. This would have benefitted from an (albeit brief) exploration of the ghost in terms of modern technology, with the contemporary phenomenon, widespread impact, and publically-shared experience of television parapsychology and broadcast live-séances, for example; seen in such texts as the *Most Haunted* series (2002-2010) and the parodic TV-event *Ghostwatch* (1992).

Chapters Three and Four, “Horror and the Body” and “Horror and the Mind,” provide well-organised and complimentary mediations on the genre’s continued exploration of the symbolic mind and body ‘dualism’ myth. This relates to the societal identity-politics reading which Jones efficiently illustrates using John Carpenter’s concept of ‘left-wing’ (the enemy ‘within’) versus ‘right-wing’ Horror (the ‘outside’ other). In terms of ‘the Body,’ the focus on the Werewolf motif to anchor the theme of ‘Metamorphosis’ was a particular strength of the book. Here, 1980s Body-Horror, consumer-capitalist exploitation, and cannibalism are utilised for an expertly interwoven analysis. Indeed, the wolf, read cross-textually as a potent symbol of female sexual maturity, was also a highlight. “Horror and the Mind” then covered the topics of madness, the double, and serial killers, noting the genre’s continual destabilisation of our sense of individuality and unified self. This section would have benefitted from further discussion of subjective mental illness and trauma representation – through the language of narrative ruptures or fragmentations, for example – in these visual and literary psychological Horror texts. To conclude the ‘Mind’ chapter with suburbia in slasher films made it seem rather incomplete, but this reviewer of course acknowledges that the book’s length and tone did not permit much further detail in any specific direction.

Chapter Five, “Science and Horror”, returned, as the book does throughout, to key classical texts that heavily influenced the development of Horror as we know it and in its many forms, such as Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). This arguably originated and encapsulated the crises of faith and debates surrounding the nature and fallibility of humanity which characterise so many texts of the genre. One of Jones’ most interesting observations here is the comparison between the mad Promethean intellectual and Enlightenment distrust of science, with the maniacal modern-day computer geek and millennial technophobia.

Chapter Six’s afterword nicely concludes the book with an attempt to define Horror since the millennium and tentatively predict the future of the genre in light of recent political, environmental, and technological changes. Here, the idea of Horror’s anti-mainstream qualities is further stressed as the source of its true potency and cultural influence: “recognition means respectability, and

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respectability is the very thing which horror exists to confront" (141). Jones uses this as an opportunity to celebrate the 1970s as a key, dangerous decade for Horror, and, by comparison, identifies his own term "Unhorror" drawing upon Michel Foucault's critique of the culture industry (141). Unhorror, he observes, is the "disparate" state of contemporary Horror with its "endless (re)cycle of sequels, remakes and reboots" (143). Citing the *Twilight* franchise (2008–2012) as an example, Jones laments the "marginal identities [and horror tropes] [...] totally incorporated within capitalism," since the millennium, "as a vehicle for [mass] marketing" which ultimately threatens the genre's ability to suitably scare modern audiences (141). With this however comes the recognition of the previously-established basis of *Sleeping*, which is that Horror - as "complex, multifaceted [...]" and at its best troubling" – does not "attract the same audience" (142). Indeed, Catherine Spooner's concept of 'Happy Gothic' is identified as a potential counter-narrative to Horror's supposed commodification, appealing to subcultural and underrepresented communities (142). Jones then identifies the most recent trends of post-millennial Horror material which reflect such contemporary issues as climate change, "racist justice," national identity – shown in "Arctic/Antarctic Horror," the British 'return' to Folk Horror, and the boom of Asian Horror, for example (148-151). Finally, it is suggested that the location of Horror is now "moving, with geopolitics away from an American axis" (158) and exemplary work is to be found outside of the traditional literary and cinematic realms. Jones attests, not since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) has Horror enjoyed such quality and saturation on television, which now offers such texts as *American Horror Story* (2011–current) and *True Detective* (2014–current) (160). Even beyond that, the advancement of the internet, podcasts, and 'meme culture' have provided some of the most startling examples of modern Horror to date which, as Jones admits in the final lines, may point towards the ultimate future of the genre.

## BIONOTE

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## **POSTHUMANISM IN FANTASTIC FICTION (2018) EDITED BY ANNA KÉRCHY**

Review by Beáta Gubacsi

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Kérchy, Anna. ed. *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*. Americana eBooks, 2018.

Posthumanism, an emerging philosophical trend, has been making an impact on approaches to the humanities since its early formulation in the 1950s, mostly reflecting on the Cyberpunk fantasies of rapid scientific and technological advances to enhance the human body and expand consciousness. The later manifestations of posthumanism in the 1980s mostly overlap with postmodernism and Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1984), taking a radical, anti-humanist stance, challenging linguistic and cultural bias leading to political oppression. The most contemporary strand, critical posthumanism, is predominantly informed by climate and animal studies to understand the underlying causes of anthropogenic climate change and establishing a sustainable onto-epistemological framework. In her "Introduction" Anna Kérchy describes the focus of this interdisciplinary collection: "the human subject's place in the world, with a focus on fantasies which challenge anthropocentric epistemology and Cartesian dualism to redraw the boundaries between the human, the animal, the technological, the natural environment, and the 'inanimate' object world" (n.p.). It is significant that the featured chapters engage with the fantastic in a wider context since posthumanism's most readily available connotations, such as the cyborg, Artificial Intelligence (AI) or alien, are all linked to technology and, hence, Science or Speculative Fiction. With the emergence of critical posthumanism – challenging even the early formulations of posthumanism itself – genres like the New/Weird or Ecohorror, alongside other previously overlooked areas, become instrumental in facilitating discussions of subjectivity and agency.

Since the chapters are not organised chronologically or thematically, the reader is challenged to recognise connections between them. Considering this, arguably, Enikő Bollobás' piece, "The Fantastic as Performative: Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce Performing the Unreal" defines the 'fantastic,' and puts the other chapters into perspective, setting up a framework by which to understand the collection. The juxtaposition of Twain's *A Mysterious Stranger* (1916) and Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890) yields insight into the rhetoric of the fantastic which creates and maintains a tension between the real and the imagined through the characters' metafictional awareness and engagement with worldbuilding.

Kendra Reynolds' "'We're all the same, *Under the Skin*': Michel Faber's Ecofeminist Web of Equality" and Éva Federmayer's "The Genesis of the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" are a great overall introduction to some of the most important discussions within critical posthumanism. While Reynolds' paper provides an informative overview of ecofeminism from its beginning to its most recent developments, Federmayer offers the same for the term

'Anthropocene.' Both studies draw parallels between human authority over the environment and animal bodies, gender dynamics, and colonialism through the struggle of *Under the Skin's* (2000) central non-human character, Isserley, who was genetically modified to look like a woman and serve as a live bait for capturing vodsels, "animals to her but human to us," for an alien meat factory (n.p.). This is also reflected in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) through Florens, a black slave girl, and Lina, Native American servant, who adapt to the white appropriation of the land but cherish their genuine union with the American pastoral landscape surrounding them. All of these portrayals of women show a spiritual closeness to nature: Isserley in her final revelation becomes one with her environment, and Florens is described as 'wild' for her unruliness. The convincing argument of these chapters is that these women discover a powerful ally in their environment through which they gain acceptance and knowledge in opposition to the arbitrary patriarchal narratives that shun them from the assumed connection to wilderness.

Gergely Nagy analyses a different kind of colonialism, and internalisation or embodiment of wilderness in his "A God Like the Animals: The Mythological Subject in Frank Herbert's *Emperor of Dune*" through the figure of Leto Atreides II. Nagy argues that Leto does not only drastically transform his own body by initiating a symbiotic relationship with the 'sandtrouts' but also his own cultural and religious position as emperor alongside the meaning and impact of the sandworms on Arrakis. The chapter evidences the significance of the *Dune* series (1965-2016) as a nuanced depiction of humanimal futures, and an illustration of the posthumanist scrutiny of anthropocentric history and metaphysics which tend to privilege a certain embodiment and subjectivity. Similarly, Daniel Nyikos' chapter, "'Growing Grey and Brittle': The Horror of Abjection in H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Colour out of Space,'" focuses on the depiction of epistemological crisis, and the deconstruction of meaning and categories. Nyikos builds his analysis on Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* and Julia Kristeva's abject, as well as recent studies on Lovecraft. He argues that the grey matter destroying the Garner's farmland "literally deconstructs the body of the self itself, as bodies of those afflicted by this designifying entity from beyond our world literally disintegrate, while readers' conventional strategies of meaning formation are shattered" (n.p.). While I believe it could be problematic to call Lovecraft a posthumanist author, the article emphasises that the short story's cosmic horror is also a metaphor for "the threat of modernity" alongside the author's personal losses, the engagement with modernism, and the destabilisation of the self which definitely elevates Lovecraft as a relevant forerunner to the field (n.p.).

Péter Kristóf Makai brings in a more hopeful approach "'One Sentence Disguising a Multitude of Horrors': Humankind Sentenced to Life in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy" by contextualising the border crossing of the inherently uncanny decay aesthetics of Gothic and the Weird tradition in terms of Timothy Morton's 'dark ecology' involving his concept of the 'mesh' – the principle of interconnectedness of human and non-human, living and non-living beings. Their analysis revolves around the descriptions of Area X as a living entity with considerable agency within and outside of its own porous borders and the complex micro-ecology free of ontological constraints. The interactions with Area X gradually decrease alleged human control over the natural world, enmeshing them with the intricate environmental systems of the Southern Reach. The paper

emphasises that the outcome of the novel is positive: survival is possible but not without “radically reshuffling our notions of temporality, agency and the biosphere” (n.p.).

András Molnár in “‘Everything Was Crawling Within Itself’: Posthumanism in the New Weird Stuff of Thomas Ligotti’s Short Fiction” advocates expanding the study of the Weird canon, drawing academic attention to Ligotti’s connection with contemporary authors and posthumanist thinking. While the first half of the chapter provides an overview of Lovecraft’s influence over the field, establishing differences in Ligotti’s philosophical and aesthetic practice compared to that of the former, the second half focuses on the figure of the puppet in Ligotti’s “The Bells Will Sound Forever” (1997) and “Nethescurial” (1991) through Jane Bennett’s ‘vital materialism’ and Spinozian concept of *conatus*, “the blending of the living and non-living, as well as the human and nonhuman” (n.p.). András Fodor discusses the fusion of physical borders in his article “Space or Place? Posthumanist Revisions of Absence and Presence in China Mieville’s *The City and the City*.” In a well-structured chapter he argues, drawing on Michel Foucault’s heterotopia and going beyond Henri Lefebvre’s urban spatiality, that Tyador Borlú becomes posthuman by entering a no-space at the intersection of Beszel and Ul Qoma: two dystopian rivalling cities with seemingly strict, but also confusingly porous, borders where the citizens have to constantly ‘unsee’ each other. Borlú becomes Tye, an avatar of Breach, and an embodiment of the intersectionality of the two dystopian cities, ‘tying’ them together, ideologically, linguistically, and culturally.

The second half of the collection expands the discussion to children’s literature, films, and theatre. I especially enjoyed two articles engaging with picture books as an important but often dismissed scene for posthumanist discussions. Florian Zitzelsberger’s “‘No One Can Sing with Smog in His Throat’: Voices of Environmentalism and Ecological Awareness in Dr Seuss’ *The Lorax*” is a brilliant analysis of “the themes of preservation vs. destruction, responsibility and activism” through the conflict of Lorax who lives in harmony with his surroundings and the Once-ler who cuts down the Truffula trees to support his obsessive capitalist business venture, making “Thneed” that apparently everyone needs (n.p.). He argues that the narrative features of the text seeks to implement ecological awareness in children and reinforce social change. As he puts it: “Dr Seuss writes the narrator and narratee into this story, he simultaneously writes about authors and readers – in this case concerned adults and children, whom he renders responsible for taking environmental action” (n.p.).

Chengcheng You’s paper, “Picturing a Posthuman Identity: Personhood, Affect and Companionship Ethics in Mary Liddell’s *Little Machinery* and Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing*,” picks up the matter of addressing future generations. She argues the necessity of studying how posthumanism is communicated to children since their relationship to technology and interactions with media are different; consequently, their notions of body and embodiment are also varied, noting that children’s literature is significantly less technophobic than Young Adult or other forms of the fantastic typically consumed by adults. For this reason, she focuses at “the representation of technologically enhanced embodiments” and “manifestations of machines, cyborgs, and hybrids” (n.p.). The analysis of the two object narratives/it-narratives is built on Bennett’s coinage of the ‘thing-power’ emphasising the materiality of human existence and the emotive effect of animating objects and Masahiro Mori’s

'uncanny valley' describing reaction to objects from dolls to robots bearing various levels of human likeness.

Korinna Csetényi and Edit Újvári's articles provide a detailed analysis of the most infamous monsters of film history, building on the premise that the monstrous defies civilizational categories by depicting humans small, vulnerable, and endangered. Csetényi in her "'The Monsters Are Us': Mad Scientists and Mutated Beasts in Contemporary Natural Horror Fictions" defines natural Horror or Ecohorror as "a specific subgenre of horror fiction that features natural forces – animals, plants and environmental phenomena – that poses a threat to human characters" (n.p.). She emphasises the 'cautionary tale' aspect of such narratives in which scientific hubris is primarily responsible for major anthropogenic catastrophes – executed by monsters. After theorising the different embodiments of the monster and their effect, such as "fission, magnification and massification," she moves on to discuss Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1823); H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896); Stephen King's "The Mist" (1980) and *Pet Sematary* (1983); and *Godzilla* in more details (n.p.). Újvári's article "The Iconographic Motif of Hellmouth, the Man-eating Beast and Giger's Alien Figure" seeks to dissect a different type of hubris, the alien's predatory appetite for humans. The chapter invites the reader to an intellectual deep dive into "primal instincts and archetypical fears," following the trace of Giger's alien which "recycles mythical and iconographic traditions, such as the monster from hell, and the figure of the devil in Christianity" (n.p.).

Speaking of the devil, Alina Gabriela Mihalache proves in her paper "Rhinos Go on Stage: Animal Allegory Behind and Beyond the Iron Curtain" that the devil is in the details describing the different theatrical adaptations of Eugene Ionesco's short story "Rhinoceros" (1959). Bernáth András's "The Challenge of the Old Mole: A Key Problem in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its Reception" discusses whether the ghostly apparition of Hamlet's father is a mischievous spirit from hell. Both chapters tackle the problem of animal bodies as metaphors of political turmoil and paradigm shifts. Mihalache does so by comparing the dramaturgy of Broadway and Romanian productions of Ionesco's play where the transformation into a stampeding beast is inherently more dramatic and frustrating behind the Iron Curtain than the more comedic Western adaptation. Bernáth discusses the linguistic features and cultural context of the old mole in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1609) as the metaphor of the ghost/spirit by arguing whether to accept a limiting or broader meaning for ghost/spirit by analysing various interpretations from New Historicist readings to Derrida's 'hauntology.'

To conclude, the collection showcases current research within the intersections of posthumanism and fantastic literatures, focusing on the necessity of rewriting history and re-imagine futures in relation to the Anthropocene, and expanding not only the meaning of 'posthuman' but also that of genre. This eclectic assemblage provides a plethora of resources concerning imagined and re-imagined histories and futures – from the dawn of the Weird and the golden age of Science Fiction and Horror to recent iterations of children's literature, film, and theatre – for researchers to broaden their horizons beyond Anglo-American nodes of study. The range and quality of the research designates the book as a must-have: it is available through Amazon print for a very affordable price, and the Kindle version is even more economical but, unfortunately, this format does not support pagination.



**BIONOTE**

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## **OLD FUTURES: SPECULATIVE FICTION AND QUEER POSSIBILITY (2018) BY ALEXIS LOTHIAN**

Review by Chase Ledin

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Lothian, Alexis. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York University Press, 2018. 333pp.

Alexis Lothian's *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (2018) returns to an archive of utopian, dystopian, and speculative artefacts to reflect on the insurgence of 'futures' in the contemporary mediascape. Asserting the predominance of certain gendered, racialised, and reproductive visions of the future, Lothian looks closely at the uneven distribution of futures in the past and present. She argues that returning to "old futures" created in the past may enable her readers to navigate alternative futurities in the present to deepen their imaginative capabilities of the future. For Lothian, such notions look especially queer and resist the tantalising investments of neoliberalism, financial speculation, and capitalism's foreclosures of risks yet to come.

The book is divided into three parts: 1) feminism, eugenics, and reproductive imaginaries; 2) queerness and pleasure in black Science Fiction; and 3) queer speculations on media time. The book demonstrates a deep understanding of the flows of time, and its social, cultural, and economic asynchronies. It provides critical engagement with contemporary cultural studies by scrutinising the trends of futurity, no-future, utopia, and dystopia in queer studies since the 1990s. Additionally, the book provides a thoughtful and provocative intervention by pressing on the intersections of racial dynamics that are threaded through the urgencies of queer temporal critiques, citing concerns about the racialised present in the United States and its legacy in the texts it examines. The book carefully weaves together old futures to elicit the "common sense" sensations of Elizabeth Freeman's "chrononormativity" while extending an incisive vision of how to employ past futures to disavow the seemingly calcifying dystopias depicted in popular mass media.

Lothian begins with a critique of Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future* (2004). She contends that, on the one hand, the centrality of the child in mainstream American politics has served the reproduction of particular hetero-normative and state-sanctioned visions of future that, as Edelman attests, are difficult to resist in the name of queer politics. On the other hand, Lothian pushes back against Edelman's vision of "no future" by locating how reproductive futurity functions for queer and racialised bodies. To shirk the future as a political arena, she attests, opposes the "(re)generation" of heterosexual society but it "ignores the bodies from which queer and other subjects literally emerge" (35). It risks "participating in racialised and classed dynamics that elide the question of

who disproportionately carries out reproductive labor" (35). Lothian returns to past visions of the future to explore how such reproductive labour, through non-normative, gendered, racialised, and queer bodies, might conspire with and scramble the wavelengths of possible futures that end in the popular image of the child.

In part one, Lothian returns to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to examine feminist utopias and dystopias. Her concern, here, is how feminist writers employ logics of reproduction and eugenics to populate feminist non/futures. Looking at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), for example, Lothian points out how conceptions of empire and eugenics manifest in white femininities arguably "central to the achievement of [a women governed] utopia" (44). She wonders how Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889) shapes the "future" of reproductive power as the narrative's women "breed" an "imperial logic" by which no less-able, racialised, or malformed bodies are permitted to enter into a new society (54-55). Turning to Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1926), Lothian situates how feminist dystopias enact a "post-national world" in which "bodies of color appear exclusively as part of the material on which scientific experimentation is carried out" (66-67). In Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), she scrutinises how marital heterosexuality is mandated in order to "guarantee a future for an all-powerful state" and industrialises motherhood to imagine the extremes of patriarchal dominance and its potential grasp of the world order (74). In both these utopian and dystopian "impulses," Lothian argues, feminist futures have the potential to imagine worlds without *and* in abundance of patriarchal dominance. They simultaneously ground their future-visions in imperialism, racism, and eugenics, featuring the (re)-population of white, middle-class society as the limit(ation) of the ideal future, which Edelman describes as "no future" (34).

In part two, Lothian widens the scope from white futurities to look at how Afrofuturist writers have resisted white-dominated futures by speculating about pleasure. The "frameworks of futurity" composed within black Science Fiction are "sites of unpredictability and risk within capitalist markets" which deny racialised and colonised bodies access to normative frameworks (103). She is interested, for example, in how "queers reproduce our cultures and identities by recruiting," here in the form of Octavia E. Butler's queer vampire (116). In *Fledgling* (2005), the main character is a parasitic vampire that exchanges addiction for intense sexual pleasure. She creates a queer connection between the (white) human body who sustains her and the (black) queer body that derives powerful pleasure from *enlivening* bloodsucking. In Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), the queer-and-racialised vampire "bites back as she 'turns the structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism in classical vampire narratives against themselves'" (120). She derives power and pleasure from the return of oppression, literally by returning the vampirical favour. Spending a fascinating chapter on Samuel R. Delany, Lothian illuminates how queer worlds are designed and read in Delany's futuristic fictions. She unpacks Delany's resistance to normative modes of sex and desire through world-building societies in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984), where sexual, gendered, and racialised encounters emerge as an afterthought, following intensive acts of desire. In general, Lothian argues that these writers provide speculative practices where other futures and societal configurations become possible through the *pleasureful* imaginaries of gendered, racialised, and

sexualised bodies. These bodies resist, or ignore, the dominant modes of hetero-reproductive progress. They open up futures which contain politics of the present *and* creative worlds that are habitable, and desirable, for non-normative subjects.

In part three, Lothian turns her attention to queer speculations and futures in contemporary media. Shifting from print media to visual cultures, Lothian sets out to understand how futures are shaped by the markets of the moving image, and how technological possibility and imagined disaster is shaped in speculative film (178-179). Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* (1978), she writes, "responds to the depressing present, oppressive past, and unpromising future of the Queens' Jubilee by charting a devastatingly negative tomorrow, completing the exclusionary work of empire by eliding the presence of the colonised even as it leaves open a small radical space for the potentiality of art" (198). Equally compelling, Lothian looks at Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), which targets the "limitations of leftist movements that default to straight masculinity" and "insists that a revolution achieved by single-issue class struggle can look like oppressive stasis when it is approached through an emerging collective consciousness led by queer women of colour" (198-199). Both employ forms of violence, which threaten the coherence of the hetero-reproductive future through the destruction of the hetero-coupled end in *Jubilee* and the explosion of the broadcast transmitters in *Born in Flames*. Interestingly, Lothian's reflection on these queer speculative films centres on the relevance, and the chronicity, of "old futures," particularly clear in an example of her students who viewed *Born in Flames'* explosion atop the New York Twin Towers in a post-9/11 context. These close-to-present futures do not create other futures in the world-making style of Delaney's fantastic futures, but importantly, they provide "raw material in the form of images, sounds, and icons that have been easy for viewers to take up, translate, and transform into other alchemical possibilities, other imagined futures" (213).

*Old Futures* is more than an attempt to reflect upon failed utopian ideations or speculative realisms in literature and visual media. Indeed, what is most provocative about Lothian's book is her capacity to incorporate creative practice into her discovery and analysis of these old futures. Having learned about the gendered, racialised, sexualised, and other oppressions of futures past, Lothian employs her own tactics in a final section on "vidding" (creating music videos from the footage of one or more visual media sources) narratives to bring out alternative voices, life-worlds, and queer experiences submerged in mainstream media. For Lothian, vidding draws out "the queer and perverse pleasures hidden in plain sight within mainstream media. Exchanging these technologies among networks on- and offline has been a form of queer world-making that does more than make visual unspoken media narratives of same sex romance" (223). She argues that vidding is a queer methodology that allows certain themes about race, gender, and sexuality to take priority over the dominant frames of mainstream media because they elaborate upon the undercurrents of desire, pleasure, and futurity that emerge for subjects and viewers who experience (and are often displaced by) the normative messages of media cultures (250). In this way, returning to old futures, through the re-mixing and re-making of futures in video editing, might have the capacity to (re)imagine the limitations and foreground the possibilities of other social and cultural experiences of desire and pleasure in the present.

Readers interested in queer theory, Science Fiction studies, future studies, and feminist theory will find this book no less compelling. Lothian's academic voice is rigorous and full of life, lending a familiar *queer* inclination to her investments in future-imagining projects. Her illuminating vision will excite readers of futures, past, and present, with its lures of desire.

#### BIONOTE

**Chase Ledin** is a PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh, UK. His research explores the intersections of biomedicine, queer theory, and speculative futures in HIV/AIDS archives. He is also interested in speculative praxis, hauntology, and queer world-making in Science Fiction and the graphic novel.

## **THE THEOLOGICAL TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC FICTION (2018) BY SIMON MARSDEN**

Review by Eleanor Beal

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*The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 210 pp.

Simon Marsden is a well-known commentator on the theological in early Gothic Romances, principally the works of Emily Brontë, on which he wrote his book *Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination* (2014). In this, his most recent book, *The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (2018), he continues his attempt to re-draw the contemporary literary map and the materialist trend in Gothic scholarship by turning to Christian theology in the contemporary Gothic. As the front cover of the book suggests – with its twilight cast over a ruined church in the background, a gravestone in the forefront and the subtitle, “Holy Ghosts” – the reader of contemporary Gothic fiction enters an uncertain world “haunted by Christianity” (1). Recurring themes include the spectral and ghostly, the residue and stain of past sins, and, most prevalently, the awareness of an absent, missing, or silent saviour. Marsden interprets these echoes of Christianity as symptomatic both of the decline in religious belief and of the Gothic’s ongoing attempt to represent specifically theological concerns by imagining the religious “as a source and site of horror,” a “nostalgic yearning,” and “tentative glimpses of redemptive possibility” (3).

In his book, Marsden takes a generically Christian perspective, rather than speaking from any particular orthodoxy. He does, however, imaginatively seek to “reveal not only the theological threads in contemporary Gothic,” but, perhaps more radically, also “the Gothic threads in contemporary theology” (2). Marsden thus sets out his book as a dual project that gives equal space to both the Gothic, as a theologically engaged discourse, and theology as a discourse engaged in dark conflicts. This duality is illuminated in Marsden’s writing, which deftly moves between theological traditions, radical repositionings, and postmodern theories that re-evaluate theology and narrative in the contemporary moment. What becomes increasingly obvious, throughout of the book, is that, just as the Gothic challenges conventions and pushes the boundaries of orthodoxy, theology is not a static or stagnant thing, but offers innumerable approaches to reading the impulses and crises depicted in Gothic texts.

The chapters featured here are both complex and diverse in their dealing with contemporary theological ideas. Marsden’s book begins with the chapter “Gothic Heresies,” establishing the relationship between religious orthodoxy and heresy as “one of both dialogue and exclusion,” and arguing that, traditionally, the Gothic participates in both (23). Theological heresy, Marsden

points out, “is as old as the genre itself,” but so has the Gothic’s “exploration of the transgressive [...] often been employed as a way of reaffirming the limits of orthodox belief and practice” (23). After establishing the Gothic as anti-fundamentalist and heretical, rather than radically opposed to religion, Marsden then launches into an analysis of Marlon James’s *The Devil and John Crow* (2005), Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Accursed* (2013), and Andrew Michael Hurley’s *The Loney* (2014), three contemporary texts that theologically and heretically challenge the limits and boundaries of orthodox faith.

Chapters Three and Four, focus more closely on the specific theological issue of evil, each chapter presenting a close reading of a single Gothic author connected by their interest in material and ontological questions in this regard. The analysis that follows in these two chapters stipulates the pressing social and ethical issues shared by theology and the Gothic. Chapter Three, “There Were Some Stains That Could Not Be Removed,” explores the unbounded place of the theological and the material in the works of Adam Nevill, and what Marsden argues is Nevill’s dramatisation of “the struggle of individuals to free themselves both from their own capacities for (self) destructive behaviour and from the histories of transgression that continue to taint the communities in which they participate” (47). Chapter Four, “Much Ado About Nothing,” introduces for Gothic readers and scholars the theological term ‘privation,’ which Marsden defines as “quite literally nothing; it is an absence where there should be a thing” and “a distortion of a specific good.” (7) His discussion focuses on connecting this term to the use of spectral evil in the works of Peter Straub.

Chapter Five turns from evil as lack or absence to some of the ways that Gothic writers have responded to the death, absence, or silence of God in 1970s. While some of Marsden’s earlier readings explore the use of theology in the work of unbelieving Gothic writers, this particularly lucid chapter examines the orthodox Catholic writer, William Peter Blatty, and the often-overlooked priest characters in his most famous novel, *The Exorcist* (1971), his long-neglected sequel *Legion* (1983), and *The Ninth Configuration* (1978). The beauty of this chapter is not just Marsden’s location of the religious anxieties of Blatty’s texts in relation to the earlier decade’s reprisal of Nietzsche’s philosophies, or his argument that Blatty is in “‘dispute’ with a Fallen world” (91). It lies also in his identification of radical theological echoes within the orthodox concerns of the novels. While this move certainly enables Marsden to explore Blatty’s redemptive response to the religious crisis of the age, as well as supporting his claim that the Gothic is haunted literature engaged in both orthodoxy and heresy, it also covertly engages with the boundaries between the radical and orthodox theologies currently being debated more widely in contemporary philosophy.

Continuing the theme of absence and silence in Chapter Six, Marsden takes us from a dead or missing Christian God, to the invisible or absent Christ in vampire fiction. The chapter sets the groundwork by arguing that, over time, the reduction of Christ to certain identifiable and empirical features, a strategy underscored by the fixation on Jesus as a historical figure, has led to a similarly fixed and stultified image of Christ in discourse. But, asks Marsden, “in what ways might the imaginative resources of Gothic fiction serve to make this Christ strange again?” (117). Noting how vampire fiction has often been fascinated with strange, ambiguous, and transgressive

figures of atonement, Marsden pursues an answer to this question in his analysis of Justin Cronin's vampire trilogy: *The Passage* (2010), *The Twelve* (2012), and *The City of Mirrors* (2016). This series' contemporary take on narratives of vampirism and contagion, Marsden argues, is full of strange Christological allusions that engage the theological and political, along with hailing newness and change through its ambiguous messiah figure, Amy.

No study of the theological Gothic would be complete without an exploration of one of the most popular and prevalent Biblical figures, the Devil. However, as Marsden questions: what "has become of Satan in contemporary Gothic fictions?" (143). This once polysemous theological character, previously embodied in imagination and art as fallen angel, corruptor, and significant symbol of revolution and rebellion has become, in the twenty-first century, a figure of "alienation and isolation in a fragmented and superficial culture," and "the embodiment of the structural failures of twenty-first century society" (144). In his chapter, "Sympathy for the Devil," Marsden turns to a number of satanic characters in contemporary Gothic texts, including Glen Duncan's *I Lucifer* (2002), Chuck Palahniuk's *Damned* (2011) and *Doomed* (2013), and Joe Hill's *Horns* (2010), arguing that, while the devil is no longer "exclusively Christian," Christian theology is useful in tracing how the Devil has developed a disenchanted, disillusioned sensibility in contemporary Gothic texts that reflects our own hyper-postmodern experience of the world.

"Few novelists have taken their readers and characters 'back to the start' quite as often as Stephen King" announces Marsden, before turning to the fitting topic of apocalypse in his final chapter (163). Recognising both the mutable, polysemous character of the apocalyptic discourse and the complicated relationship that Gothic authors and readers have with endings, Marsden attempts to trace Gothic's development and departures from traditional Christian eschatology to its concurrent existence with secularism and modern crisis, acknowledging that "the end, rather than ushering a longed for new world as it does in biblical apocalypse, has become a calamity to be averted or survived" (165). For Marsden, King's fiction conveys an understanding of contemporary apocalypse as a narrative that opens out into renewed crises rather than cathartic endings, and in which characters cling to a notion of hope rather than certainty.

Reverting to his earlier analysis of the Gothic as a fiction haunted by Christianity in his conclusory chapter, Marsden emphasises that there is no homogenous theology to the Gothic but that the turn to theology imaginatively challenges the familiarity of Gothic convention, enabling novelists, critics, and readers to go beyond the inherited religious symbols and aesthetics of Gothic writing. He ends his discussion with a call for consideration of how the turn to theology in contemporary culture promotes a greater understanding of some of the complexities of Gothic writing that engages with religion.

One of the biggest strengths of Marsden's book is its intelligent and lucid handling of complex theological idea that does not shy away from the political and historical, nor is it afraid to deal with religion's frequently dark and violent past. Those who share Marsden's view that the anxieties of the Gothic are associated with the religious and theological will find an engaging challenge in Marsden's



*The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction*. Without rejecting the Gothic as a species of writing often negatively haunted by its Christian ghosts, Marsden encourages us to look not just to the past for meaning, but to the contemporary Gothic as a focal point of theological anxiety and redemptive relief engaged in questioning aspects of modern society. The book is also a useful introduction to students and scholars new to theology and looking to engage with these overlooked aspects of the contemporary Gothic. In particular, the book serves as a helpful pointer towards key moments in current history, such as the rise of radical theology and the introduction of the Death of God movement in the 1960s, as well as situating key theological themes such as evil, original sin, fallenness, the Devil, and apocalypse in the contexts of postmodernism, consumerism, and atheist writing.

Marsden organises his book as a series of more or less independent essays, each of which explores an aspect of Christian theology in relation to a specific author's work and in context of the Gothic fiction. Yet these chapters are also deftly interlinked and carefully cross referenced so that they bring together seldom-related ideas, themes, and images in the novels, revealing conjunctions between some prevalent Gothic themes, characters, and critical forms of theological thinking. Several key contemporary theological thinkers are profiled, discussed, and engaged through the Gothic in Marsden's work, and he uses an interesting and intelligent medley of contemporary Gothic authors to highlight the connection between Christian theology and the Gothic's "struggles with human failure, transgression and guilt," its preoccupations with "the flaws of human power structures," and its heretical outpouring of "voices of protest against the divine" (191). In doing so, he offers fresh perspective and raises rich awareness of the possibilities opened up by a turn to the theological in Gothic Studies, all the while asserting theology's importance in understanding the Gothic's engagement with contemporary culture.

#### BIONOTE

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## **REIFIED LIFE: SPECULATIVE CAPITAL AND THE AHUMAN CONDITION (2018) BY PAUL J. NARKUNAS**

Review by Peter Cullen Bryan

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Narkunas, J. Paul. *Reified Life: Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition*. Fordam University Press, 2018, 304 pp.

The past decade has seen the rise of populist movements across the world, a widening gap between the rich and poor even as the Great Recession has slowly wound down, and an uncertainty informing human civilization to a degree that once seemed long-since past. J. Paul Narkunas makes the case that the problem of the twenty-first century is economic inequality, much in the same fashion that W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) proclaimed “the problem of the twentieth century is the color-line” (19). It is an issue that impacts all strata of society, with its greatest weight upon those at the bottom. Their approach is couched in contemporary concerns; Donald Trump looms large throughout, more as a symptom than a cause of the larger problems of human capital. Narkunas locates these present-day economic inequalities within a system that commodifies the human element with reliance on algorithms and speculation, to the detriment of the value of humanity at large (not to mention the looming threat of financial collapse). Their approach is interdisciplinary, exploring the concepts through the lens of a variety of thinkers – ranging from Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci to Michel Foucault and Gilbert Simondon – and the argument itself encompasses threads of economic, political, and philosophical theory. They begin with a deeper exploration of the Americanist tradition, positing the practices of Henry Ford and Fredrick Winslow Taylor as the start of our modern condition. The centrepiece of the book are its explorations of speculative fiction, with chapters devoted to examining work by Gary Shteyngart, Margaret Atwood, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Of particular note is Narkunas’ exploration of the concept of *homo oeconomicus*, which are humans reconfigured as capital as part of the larger entrepreneurial system the overlays the modern neoliberal system. This is not an in-depth historical exploration of how this system arose, but rather an effort to comprehend how these forces combined in this moment to create such a condition.

Much of the writing echoes other philosophers of the twenty-first century condition. The most obvious antecedent for Narkunas’ text is Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), which similarly approaches contemporary culture through a post-modern perspective. Where Fukuyama finds the problem in the potential of genetic engineering, Narkunas posits capitalism and its instruments (particularly algorithm-driven high-frequency trading) as the cause of the inequality that is bringing harm to humanity at large and driving a deeper wedge between the strata of society. The idea of a quiet apocalypse, in which humanity is undone not through robotic uprising or oil

shortages, has become more commonplace within present-day speculative non-fiction, much in the same fashion that atomic fears influenced Science Fiction authors of the mid-century. Crucial to the process is dehumanisation: Fukuyama posits a future in which a small class of society are more human than human beings (essentially permanently entrenching economic classes through genetic engineering); while Narkunas considers the possibility that humanity will be reduced to strings of numbers, and eventually rendered obsolete by the process. Both have an undercurrent of pessimism throughout (though neither are alarmist) and the focus is on pondering actions to set right what has gone wrong.

Their discussion of utilitarianism breaks new ground, exploring the dichotomy between the ideals of doing “the most good for the most people,” and the modern practice of redefining “good” and “people.” Narkunas argues that the original visions of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill has shifted in the modern moment, although reckons that Marx offered a warning about the philosophy in *Das Kapital* (1867). They frame the problem as one of economy, that the modern capitalist system has evolved in such a way that human worth is charted by generating sufficient market value: “conceiving human life ontologically through utilitarian mechanisms of usefulness and by maximizing happiness for market humans” (Narkunas 82). Utility is shifted to suit the needs of the base human, which naturally means those with a degree of economic and cultural power, away from traditional utilitarian theory, which emphasises maximising overall good within society. This locates the way that capitalism warps traditional philosophical theory to suit the needs of economic producers; what is best for the upper echelons becomes what is best for society at large. Narkunas continues on to explain that “while commodities were once objects of utility deployed by humans, now human practices and traditions offer a similar scale of use for humans as commodities (both as subjects and objects) to ‘sustain development’” (83). The greatest “good,” in their estimation of the modern era, increasingly becomes the larger economic system, with happiness quantified as capital. This further creates cultural divisions; dominant cultures (namely, nation-states) assert themselves in ways that protect their human resources. Narkunas further explores the issues through the United Nations, specifically the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), wherein certain cultures and expressions thereof are considered significant, as well as the work of Samuel Huntington, particularly *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and *Who Are We?* (2004). The Western-centric perspective of both UNESCO and Huntington is a key element of the problem of utilitarianism presented here: the gravity of this perspective frames human endeavour as a resource to be exploited. A key point of relation is Huntington’s Davos Man, outlined in their article “Dead Souls: The Decolonization of the American Elite” (2004): a post-nationalist elite, owing no fealty to any particular country of origin. Narkunas uses this framework to build their conception of *homo oeconomicus* as the next step of evolution for this figure, one who embodies a post-human elite.

This issue is explored deeper within an examination of human rights worldwide. Narkunas surmises that our understanding of “human rights” reflects Western culture and Judeo-Christian beliefs that are often at odds with the cultures of colonised nations. Human rights become another commodity: “rights are a floating signifier that gets fixed by those able to exercise power and control [...] human rights become, for example, the way to establish how some particularist

humans connected to power exercise more rights than others" (128). This framework allows non-governmental organisations, often at least notionally serving the greater social good, to extract value from human populations in much the same fashion that multinational corporations do. Furthermore, it exacerbates problems with intellectual property, favouring the entrenched interests over the needs of the many, resulting in a situation wherein "the rights of things trump the rights of workers who make them, regardless of the extension of the human rights system" (134). They locate frictions between libertarian economics and traditional forms of nationalistic politics, with the (re)creation of the concept of "Fortress Europe," now translated into "Fortress America," as embodied by the policies of Donald Trump. It is a firm indictment of modernism and the capitalist system, in the same vein as Thomas Friedman or Thomas Piketty, albeit one utilising a wide-ranging interdisciplinary framework.

*Reified Life* (2018) stands out from other similar texts when it engages with popular culture. Narkunas selects three texts as case studies for exploring their theories on the page: Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), Margret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Each allows a deeper, more nuanced exploration of theories outlined throughout the first half of the book, as well as making the overall work more accessible to a less academically-minded audience. Narkunas's reading of Shteyngart's work explores the inherent disconnect between humanity that occurs within the capitalistic setting, despite society becoming more "connected." Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy is used to explore the larger thrusts of Narkunas's arguments: its criticism of the Kurzweilian singularity and exploration of the definitions of life loom large, and the work reinvigorates debates over humanism. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* allows Narkunas to examine the dehumanising aspects outlined in the earlier chapters in greater detail, particularly the effects of economic stratification endemic to capitalist systems.

These works become compelling echoes within Narkunas's larger framework, and explore the possible outcomes for the current course of human civilization; Narkunas explains that "the authors I engage with are enunciating realities that coexist in inchoate form right now, but which remain marginal or latent within the consensual reality of financial and economics instrumentality" (183). This approach to popular culture allows them to better illustrate their arguments, and explore ideas in a space that might be otherwise off-limits; in this manner, it recalls work like Joel Garreau's *Radical Evolution* (2005) or Henry Jenkins's *Spreadable Media* (2013). One imagines that *Reified Life* might be paired with one or more of the novels discussed in a classroom setting. Narkunas goes further still, making the case for the use of popular texts within their framework. They explain "speculative literatures exhibit modes of existence, tendencies, and capacities that may or may not emerge, but which nevertheless proliferate figurative, analogical images that enable us to think of processes as they emerge" (184). By relating these speculative fiction texts to their larger process, Narkunas paints a fuller picture of the long-term consequences of the modern Western capitalist economic system. The choice to not only utilise these texts within the book itself but to devote considerable space to exploring each is noteworthy, and unconventional, and they take pains to defend the decision throughout. This choice echoes a larger, key point:

both speculative fictions and speculative capital project material formations through connections of often disparate and contradictory variables. Yet the derivatives are algorithms considered more real or more truthful than the fictional musing of novelists, due to the economic organization of social power (203).

Narkunas makes a case of the exploration of popular culture at large, framing it as akin to the same processes that they spent their earlier chapters exploring. In this respect, they extoll the value of art, not just simply as a creative pursuit, but as a framework for comprehending human existence, as valuable as (and perhaps more so than) the financial trades that drive the modern economy. The arguments build outward, each point connects to a larger theme, each is woven into the larger examination of the current state of humans and the humanities, while charting potential courses forward.

Narkunas concludes with a consideration of the current political moment and the possibilities offered within it. They offer a degree of hope, of creating a future that avoids the pitfalls located in the speculative fiction they discuss, considering whether dystopia might be avoided. The book is at points dense and theoretical, particularly in the early chapters, and it develops these ideas into an interpretative framework for exploring some of the most complex aspects of modern life. There is a great deal of interest here for the academic; this volume fits clearly in the canon of posthuman theory, along with Fukuyama, Garreau, and others. There is value for the non-academic as well, particularly his reading of speculative fiction texts and his engagement with the contemporary political environment. Narkunas's ideas are couched in action to reclaim those aspects of humanity lost or traded away. Although their approach remains largely theoretical, *Reified Life* is an ambitious effort, and they largely achieve their goals. This is a valiant defence of the humanities at large, of the study of popular culture, of the future of humanity itself.

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**BIONOTE**

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# **MIND STYLE AND COGNITIVE GRAMMAR: LANGUAGE AND WORLDVIEW IN SPECULATIVE FICTION (2018) BY LOUISE NUTTALL**

Review by Rahel Oppliger

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**Nuttall, Louise. *Mind Style and Cognitive Grammar: Language and Worldview in Speculative Fiction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 213 pp.**

In an impressive addition to the field of cognitive stylistics, Louise Nuttall detects and harnesses the explanatory potential that Cognitive Grammar (CG) offers for an analysis of mind style in Speculative Fiction. Her focus on mind style, the representation of a character's inner workings – their “values and beliefs” – through linguistic expression, offers novel insights both on the texts and on readers' experiences of them (17). Through a series of four case studies of Speculative Fiction texts, Nuttall makes a strong argument for what analyses of mind style in this genre may offer to cognitive stylistics. Mind style has often been explored in characters that are in some way deviant from a default, such as individuals with a cognitive impairment, or criminals who exhibit extreme, psychologically deviant personality traits (18-23). Identifying deviation as being abundant in characters in Speculative Fiction, Nuttall argues that within the “strange worlds” explored in this genre, rather than being the result of cognitive impairments or criminal aberration, deviations in mind styles are a result of “the characters' physical and social environment and their individual personality traits” (20).

Nuttall approaches her analysis of mind style from the perspective of CG, which offers a principled methodology for the study of the linguistic choices through which mind style is represented in the text. The present approach thereby escapes a frequently voiced criticism towards cognitive stylistics – that it is focused on reader interpretations rather than driven by textual analysis – by looking at the texts through the lens of an independent, systematic framework. As a subdiscipline of Cognitive Linguistics, CG facilitates “fine-grained analysis of the cognitive structures and processes suggested by particular linguistic choices” and focuses on the connection between language, cognition, and readers' experiences of a text (32). Nuttall shows how CG can offer the best of both worlds: an inclusion of cognitive perspectives (catering to the ‘cognitive turn’ in stylistics) without “losing light of the linguistic grounding of stylistic analysis” (27).

Another aspect in which the book takes a best-of-both-worlds approach is in its assumed readership: readers are ideally familiar with both linguistic and literary analysis. In the two chapters introducing the concepts of ‘mind style’ (Chapter Two) and ‘cognitive grammar’ (Chapter Three), Nuttall skilfully unpacks a range of definitions of mind style for the reader and provides a broad

overview on the CG enterprise for those unacquainted with the approach. At the same time, she makes throwaway references to the Bakhtinian concepts of “*heteroglossia*” and “*dialogism*” as well as George Lakoff’s “*idealized cognitive models*” that a reader without extensive background in either field cannot follow (17, original emphasis; 34, original emphasis). I would not go as far as to say that a reader must possess expertise in literary and linguistic analysis, but throughout my reading of this book, I found it very useful to have a degree in both fields, as well as a special focus in Cognitive Linguistics; readers who do not might need to be willing to have Google at the ready to be able to follow some of the more advanced theoretical concepts Nuttall discusses.

Where Nuttall’s book really shines is in its application of the CG framework in an analysis of mind style in four selected novels: how syntactic structures contribute to the ‘stream of consciousness’ style narration of Offred in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) (Chapter Four); how lexical choices contribute to readers’ conceptualisation and knowledge of the fictional world in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) (Chapter Five); how transitivity effects impact reader’s attribution of agency and responsibility in Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) (Chapter Six); and how conventional metaphors and novel similes create the dichotomy of the immersive and defamiliarizing reader experience in J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) (Chapter Seven). In exploring different aspects of CG analysis in these works of Speculative Fiction, Nuttall shows the impressive potential of her approach, not least in the fact that she is merely able to scratch the surface of the explanatory potential CG might harbour for Speculative Fiction and the analysis of mind style in fiction in general.

The almost overwhelming wealth of (syntactic) structures that could serve a cognitive stylistic analysis becomes apparent in the chapter on Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Nuttall introduces the CG concept of dynamicity, “the manner in which prominent components are processed, or scanned, by readers” (64). This concept distinguishes between sequential and summary scanning, inviting readers to immersively enact either a one-by-one or a holistic access to events of the novel. Linguistic choices – for instance Atwood’s frequent uses of lists – prompt sequential scanning and cause readers to enact the unavailability of a holistic understanding of the dystopian society of Gilead in a reading empathetic of Offred’s own focus on the “immediate circumstances” of her existence as a handmaid and her fragmented account of her own past (75). While Nuttall’s account of summary versus sequential scanning is compelling, she is tempted by the sheer volume of linguistic structures that support her interpretation. By including analyses of epistemic modality (a feature at the crossroads of morpho-syntax and semantics) and conceptual metaphors (a semantic feature), she strengthens her account of Offred’s mind style, but also – in straying away from purely syntactic analysis – loses some of the empirical rigor and focus that a CG analysis of stylistic structures benefits from.

The subsequent chapters on lexis, transitivity, and metaphor continue to offer excellent textual analysis and do a better job focusing on individual linguistic elements. By concentrating on a single stylistic aspect of the texts in those chapters, Nuttall succeeds not only in presenting compelling analysis, but her book also acts as something of a manual for cognitive stylistic analysis



using CG to illuminate various facets of individual features. In her treatment of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, she focuses on lexical choice and how foregrounding and backgrounding of information contributes to readers' knowledge or lack thereof. Particularly compelling is her account of how the novel's "highly cohesive," and therefore foregrounded, description of Hailsham – the English boarding school where students, who are in fact human clones, are reared to be later used for medical purposes – backgrounds or even buries the connection between carer and donor that drives the novel's narrative, essentially obstructing the reader's "understanding of the adult future that awaits these children" (109, 106). Nuttall demonstrates the lack of description of the donor and carer roles, contrasting it with the novel's lexically rich treatment of Hailsham; the reader's attention is guided towards the more lexically rich Hailsham reference chain, whilst their knowledge of carers and donors is occluded by a lack of lexical specificity. These structures contribute to readers' impressions of the narrator's mind style: readers develop "empathetic engagement" as well as a "sense of estrangement" towards a narrator who is both a victim of and complicit in the occlusion of information (116).

Focussing on transitivity structures – or action chains, to use CG terminology – Nuttall provides a systematic break-down of what (groups of) characters in *I Am Legend* are associated with what kind of role in action chains. For instance, the vampires in Matheson's post-apocalyptic horror novel "are most frequently profiled as a *mover* in relation to a spatial location or entity," or they are described in terms of their body parts, rather than themselves, acting as agents or movers, inviting a "diminished appreciation of [their] mental states" (138, original emphasis; 140). The argument Nuttall makes here is particularly convincing because of the scientific rigor with which she approaches it: clauses are classified and listed according to the type of action chain they construe, and the reader is shown at a glance the textual evidence foregrounding a type of construal. The book's treatment of transitivity structures thus hints at the kind of empirical objectivity possible through the meticulous application of well-defined CG concepts in cognitive stylistic analysis, and offers some guidance on how to conduct such an analysis.

The final case study on 'metaphor and mind' is concerned with the aspect of cognitive linguistics that has perhaps been most widely applied in stylistic analysis: conceptual metaphor theory. In her application of this well-explored concept to Speculative Fiction, Nuttall nevertheless provides a new perspective. By analysing conceptual metaphors in the post-apocalyptic world of Ballard's *The Drowned World*, she argues that because readers are aware of the text's nature as Speculative Fiction, their interpretation of metaphors becomes ambiguous: are they to be read metaphorically or literally as a part of the fantastical elements ubiquitous in the text? This "breakdown of the distinction between what is factive and fictive within the world described" is further explored by Nuttall's most innovative contribution here, namely her examination of novel similes (174). Similes, unlike metaphors, "[draw] attention to their metaphorical nature," and therefore in their very nature contribute to the reader's uncertainty of what is part of reality, and their impression of the novel as a "'hallucinatory' or 'dream-like' experience" (170, 174). This chapter then illustrates what can be gained from CG in cognitive stylistic analyses of Speculative Fiction specifically: the deviation underlying mind styles being ubiquitous in the 'physical and social environment' of these

novels means it offers a great playground for the application of even well-explored CG concepts like conceptual metaphors.

Nuttall's exploration of CG and mind style in Speculative Fiction points towards plenty of future avenues of application: the present study focuses on a group of novels that share certain characteristics in that they describe post-apocalyptic and/or dystopian worlds, but Nuttall's approach might also contribute usefully to analyses of other types of Speculative Fiction such as Fantasy or Utopian Fiction. The book's contribution to cognitive stylistics is undeniable, and it works wonderfully as a manual for future applications. In terms of its claim that the advantageous relation of CG and its application to Speculative Fiction works both ways, the current study has not quite managed to convince me. Nuttall certainly cannot be faulted for not recognising the potential: throughout her analyses, reader responses sourced from Goodreads.com are taken into consideration to help forge connections between stylistic features at the text-level – the 'bottom-up' perspective – and "readers' experiences of the texts" and the mind styles represented within them – the top-down' perspective (180). In the end, she does not quite succeed at having the two perspectives meet in the middle – and many before her have failed in this endeavour – as reader reviews in their holistic viewpoint lack the necessary internal validity to act as a piece of evidence for a connection to the specific stylistic features explored in the analyses. Nevertheless, Nuttall's approach to the 'bottom-up' perspective is a welcome and empirically sound contribution to the cognitive stylistic enterprise.

#### BIONOTE

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## **NONE OF THIS IS NORMAL: THE FICTION OF JEFF VANDERMEER (2018) BY BENJAMIN J. ROBERTSON**

Review by Kerry Dodd

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Robertson, Benjamin J. *None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 208 pp.

In our era of cataclysmic climate shifts, wide-spread species extinction, and such problematic terms as 'post-truth' entering current usage, the very suggestion of a 'normality' would seem so estranged from contemporary existence that its very definition has been fractured at the foundations. For many humans, the disruption of personal, cultural, and political norms – or that which has been accepted as a consistent reality – is a moment of shock, one which causes them to re-calibrate their perception and realise a far more alien 'real' than the one they were previously cognisant of. Such moments are not only ones of confusion, but can equally incite ontological terror; a concept perfectly encapsulated by Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman in *Global Weirding* (2016) who suggest that the apparent weirdness of the current ecological moment causes a situation in which we

"are now, all of us, in the dark about the precise nature of the world in which we live, still waiting for the empirical data, charts, and statistical trend-lines to confirm what we all know, that things just aren't the way they used to be, something has gone *wrong*" (10, original emphasis).

It is in precisely this aperture that Benjamin J. Robertson positions *Weird Fiction* as a strand of Fantastika that engages and challenges the very notions of normality. Indeed, it is not any natural or ecological measure that has been transgressed here but rather human perception that is undermined. Robertson suggests that the *Weird* is almost predisposed to such an inquiry, that its "defining feature may well be its refusal to assume any norm" (1). To elucidate and explain this proposition, the author turns to the work of Jeff VanderMeer as a mediation of all that is strange, weird, and uncanny. Given VanderMeer's escalating status as a prime auteur of the *Weird* – not only due to the commercial success of *The Southern Reach* (2014) trilogy but also the popularity of the Netflix adaptation of *Annihilation* (2014) – and as an author who is distinctly interested in engaging with non-human incommensurability, it would seem a crime that there has, until now, been no extended study of his fiction. It is precisely into this void that Robertson steps, offering a critical, considered, and generally well-balanced discussion of each of VanderMeer's milieus. *None of this is Normal* (2018) highlights not only the salience of the author to the *Weird*, but also the vital urgency of challenging what humanity even considers to be 'normal.'

Although this is a commendable study of VanderMeer's fiction, it is worth noting that this is not an exhaustive discussion of his work and its critical relevance. Rather, Robertson's focus is all the stronger for picking a particular lens through which to reflect upon such a wide corpus of literature, one that he defines in relation to "fantastic materiality" (4). Although briefly alluded to in the introduction, the interrogation of this terminology forms the main component of the first substantial chapter: "Ambergris Rules: Genre and Materiality in the Anthropocene." Opening with a brief literature review of the Weird, Robertson highlights an engagement with "a materiality that manifests by way of weird fiction, fantasy, and horror rather than one assumed to be represented or representable in fiction of realist or mimetic leanings" (4). This definition guides Robertson's interrogation and is applied to VanderMeer's milieus through ruminations on the Anthropocene, the genre hybridity of the Weird and New Weird, and speculative realist or new materialist thought, where each attempts to challenge anthropocentric dominance. While a compelling argument overall towards both VanderMeer and the Weird, this is a particularly impressive range of topics to discuss alongside the fiction itself and sadly, at times, their very capaciousness outstrips sufficient discussion. For while Robertson does provide a compelling contextual introduction, the reading of the New Weird as a form of Anthropocene fiction risks a blinkered view. Certainly, there is a particular resonance between an ecological concern and such fiction that proposes many insightful suggestions, yet such an approach should not be afraid to appreciate that there are many other multivalent and vibrant engagements with such texts. Finally, while the terming of "fantastic materiality" is undeniably a cogent rumination on VanderMeer's fiction, there is little consideration of material culture or object ontology studies and, consequently, the overt anthropocentric critique here feels divorced from wider materialist studies. Despite this, Robertson's introduction is an engaging reflection on the legacy and impact of the Weird and one which helps provide a rigid guide to the upcoming negotiation of VanderMeer's work. The prime intent here is to propose other ways of thinking; this is not an all-encompassing discussion of VanderMeer but rather one which is chiefly interested in how "VanderMeer's fiction suggests that there may be other ways to proceed" (11).

This paradigm is put to the test in the second chapter – "Let me tell you about the City: The Veniss Milieu and the Problem of Setting" – where Robertson engages with VanderMeer's first major fictional creation, Veniss. Robertson praises the heterogeneity of this work that "resists setting and the critical and historicist assumptions on which setting depends" in order to encourage the reader to composite an overarching comprehension by actively reading between the texts and the structural order in which they are situated (43). Focusing on a far-future city or region, topographies which are concurrent throughout VanderMeer's work, any concrete understanding of setting is riddled with discontinuities – moments of dissonance which "resists ordering weirdly" (50). Given the longer anthropocentric critique at the heart of Robertson's response, this engagement with the fluidity or non-human incommensurability of setting is a fitting negotiation that does not seek to impose a static interpretation of Veniss but rather highlights how "[the city] only recedes, leaving in its wake the formerly marginalized and forgotten material world that previously existed beyond human concern even as it conditioned humanity's every action and thought" (69). A powerful rumination on non-human engagement indeed, but one where, due to the absence of a more protracted materialist critique, the chapter fails to offer an interrogative discussion of the after-effects of such contact.

The third chapter – “No one makes it out, there may be a way: Ambergris as Words and Worlds” – may from the outset seem like a confusing backtrack to the texts discussed in the first chapter, but rather provides a more protracted analysis of the Ambergris setting through materiality and textuality. Focusing on the chasm between material and textual representation, Robertson proposes that the Ambergris milieu offers “a materiality not opposed to textuality but one based on it, a materiality and textuality that are one and the same thing” (74). Authorship thus emerges as a core tenant to this series, particularly as it is only the final novel – *Finch* (2009) – that is notionally authored by VanderMeer and equally framed through the diegetic inference that the Grey Caps – fungoid creatures that used to inhabit Ambergris – are influencing human action from the subterranean depths. Robertson argues that such inferences outline the negation of human questioning – a topic that returns in *The Southern Reach* trilogy – and that “Ambergris undermines the humanist assumption that questions can be asked and answered” and that “any question presupposes a materiality conditioning a subject who asks a question” (85). The overt textuality of the Ambergris series thus becomes a form of materiality, one which Robertson reads against the supposed “naivety” of characters such as Sam in *The Lords of the Rings* (1952) – who self-consciously voices his own position in a much longer story as a recognition of Fantasy’s grammatical construction (81). The postmodern juxtaposition of the title – of there being simultaneously no way and a possible way out of textuality – is thus an appropriate conclusion to appreciating the challenge of thinking outside anthropocentrism without retreating from confronting such practice.

The final chapter – “There is nothing but border, there is no border: Area X and the Weird Planet” – from the very outset extends such a call to the influential *Southern Reach* trilogy, which is centred on ‘Area X’: a voracious topography that appears on Earth and slowly subsumes anything it encompasses into “pristine wilderness” (*Acceptance*, 95). The *Southern Reach* organisation epitomises the redundancy of understanding such a phenomenon through anthropocentric framing. Indeed, the repeated dispatching of expeditions into this space results in far more questions than answers. Robertson reads such a failure alongside Area X’s ‘defeat’ of delineating borders between ‘this’ and ‘that,’ of being “an adifference or abdifference,” of “an uncontainable space that is nothing but a bordering without border, a limiting that cannot be limited” (116, 117). As compelling a reading of Anthropocene anxieties as this is, Robertson’s analysis feels limited in scope and fails to either engage with such features as the prominent ‘tower/tunnel’ or how such aforementioned conceptual beyondness may be sufficiently engaged. Certainly, the latter is not a failure on Robertson’s behalf *per se*, but rather one embedded in the very anthropocentrism of representative systems. The omission of discussing wider materialist or object-orientated theories alongside Robertson’s “fantastic materiality” however again re-surfaces and becomes a noticeable absence.

VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017), and its accompanying novella *The Strange Bird: A Borne Story* (2017) are thus left to be discussed in Robertson’s reflective conclusion. Both take place in a future in which humanity has already been defeated; a moment which, for Robertson, represents a “human disappointment” encapsulated by the non-human dethroning the human as “the ruler of the earth” and “the disappointment of ever being humans at all” (144). What is arguably the most political of VanderMeer’s fiction responds to the very crisis of climate change deniers and the consequences

of such a world view. As Robertson cogently suggests, “they tell the story of what happens after aftermath, after the loss of solution no longer poses a problem because the form of life for whom such a loss represents a problem has become impossible” (157). Amongst such a landscape it is rather the non-human that takes centre stage. This section is, however, noticeably the shortest and thus – while punctuated with such rewarding insights – noticeably struggles to both negotiate the complexities of *Borne* and *A Strange Bird* while sufficiently reflecting on the critical development of “fantastic materiality” thus far.

*None of this is Normal* is aptly closed with an “Afterword” by VanderMeer himself. The Weird has a long history of authors critiquing the very field they operate within, from H. P. Lovecraft’s “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927) to China Miéville’s copious reflective essays. VanderMeer himself is no stranger to this process, particularly given that he co-edited two salient Weird anthologies – *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2011) and *The New Weird* (2008) – with his partner, Ann VanderMeer. Including an authorial reflection at the end of such a text is surely a brave move but offers an apposite reflection upon “fantastic materiality.” VanderMeer has hardly been silent to literary criticism, however, and such assertions that “literary criticism is not for the author, but at the same time the author cannot be faulted for rebelling against a clear mis-reading,” cannot help but feel somewhat provocative (160). Yet, in agreement with VanderMeer, certainly “I find much here that fascinates me” (161). Robertson provides an insightful, well-considered, and compelling reflection upon VanderMeer’s work and his notion of “fantastic materiality” is sure to germinate productive critical debate. It is comforting to hear that such reading is central to VanderMeer’s own writing practice and will go on to fuel his subsequent work as well. Yet the omission of connecting this discussion with material culture studies or object-ontology, alongside some rather egregious generalisations regarding Fantastika, meant that while indeed there is “much here that fascinates me,” these are, sadly, brilliant shards in an otherwise fragmented argument.

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## BIONOTE

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## **THE LAST UTOPIANS: FOUR LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY VISIONARIES AND THEIR LEGACY (2018) BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON**

Review by Peter J. Maurits

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Robertson, Michael. *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth Century Visionaries and their Legacy*. Princeton University Press, 2018, 336 pp.

"In the nearly-500 years since its publication, Thomas More's *Utopia* has influenced everything from the thinking of Gandhi to the tech giants of Silicon Valley" (BBC October 6, 2016). This is how articles and books on utopias, journalistic or academic, start these days, especially in light of the 500<sup>th</sup> birthday of More's 1516 *Utopia*, which was coming, was there, or had just passed. Another variation: "In 2016 we celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia* [marking] the birth of a neologism and a literary genre" (Cziganyik 2017, 1).

One would almost feel relief that these beginnings substitute the eternal dissections of utopia's etymology, had they not become the second step of such works. And it is fascinating that the discipline of Utopian Studies that supposedly thinks about alternatives contains so few of them. Lack of alternatives also marks motivations ('utopia is still relevant') and materials used: lucky readers get a parade of hyper-canonised authors including More and Plato, Marx/Engels and their contemporaries (St. Simon, Fourier, Owen), critical theorists (Bloch, Manheim, Marcuse, but seldom Adorno), cultural theorists (Williams, Jameson), and contemporary 'utopian scholars' (Levitas, Sargent, Sargisson, Moylan). On the side of literature, lucky readers may get More, Bellamy and Morris, Orwell, Huxley, and Zamyatin, Atwood, Piercy, and Le Guin, Gilman and (Rokeya Sakhawat) Hossain; and maybe, just maybe, Ngugi or Okri. Unlucky readers get persistent misconceptions of Utopia as perfection, as totalitarianism, or neoliberal ballyhoo. Indeed, it is hard not to feel the "boredom" with the discipline that some readers feel with the utopian text, and if Utopia has been declared dead or socially irrelevant, the state of its scholarship may as well be read as its eulogy (Jameson 39–40).

On this stage, Michael Robertson publishes his *The Last Utopians*. *Last Utopians* (2018) is well-written and contains interesting facts – Edward Carpenter "may" have been Walt Whitman's lover and preferred "homogenic" over "homosexual" because the latter had both Greek and Latin roots (140, 162). Yet it hardly escapes Utopian Studies' numbing grip – a discipline that Robertson astonishingly characterises for its "vibrancy" and as "burgeoning" (13, 305) – as the formulaic "Introduction" and "Chapter One" show well. The former introduces *Last Utopian's* focus on

"utopian literature and social thought in the United States and Great Britain from the mid-1880s until 1915," and "Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman" as the main "subjects" (6). It justifies that for "progressive" politics their Utopian thought is still "relevant to our current political moment" (6–7) and explains More's supposed pun – "*ou-topos*, no place, but also [...] *eu-topos*, good place" (6). The latter rehearses the argument that, at the end of the nineteenth century, "poverty" led people to believe that a revolution was imminent, providing fertile ground for utopianism (18–20). It then glosses over a familiar history of Utopian writing (More, Bacon, Mercier, Owen, Fourier). The only surprise is Robertson's methodological commitment to "biography and literary analysis" in the post-death-of-the-author era (14).

The four single-author chapters that follow roughly have a three-stage structure: First, a biography supposedly explaining why these authors wrote utopian works. Second, a superficial discussion of the authors' earlier works as backdrop for, third, a discussion of hyper-canonised utopian works – Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* (1905), and Gilman's *Herland* (1915). Bellamy's belief in solidarity and the necessity of a work/leisure balance is emphasised and his involvement with politics is elaborated. Morris is argued to have been "journeying towards utopia his entire life" because he had "devoured the romances of Walter Scott" in his childhood and later joined the socialist party (79). He, too, valued different perceptions of work. Carpenter thought that "homosexuals are less sensual and more spiritual [...]" and have been responsible for the origins and furtherance of art, science, and religion," and thus for utopianism (159). Gilman rejected patriarchy in favor of work and sympathised with the eugenics movement.

There is no doubt that Robertson is a talented writer. And even if the almost pre-'new critics' valuation of biography is questionable, his mastery of that genre makes *Last Utopians* pleasantly readable. Yet selecting some of the most canonised utopian periods/authors and prioritising brief discussions over thorough "literary analysis" (it is unclear what that term means for Robertson), the book has little novelty to offer. *Last Utopians* may even be a step back. Attempts to "provincialize" Utopian Studies (cf. Ashcroft 2007; Dutton 2010) may as well not have occurred, and we may ask in this context why the hyper-canonisation of Gilman's work, and the well-documented white superiority beliefs in it, must be reproduced by incorporating it in studies such as *Last Utopians*. Robertson also ignores recent attempts to think outside of the discipline and offer analyses of the structural and systematic ways in which oppression operates and can be overcome (cf. Kunkel 2014; Srnicek and Williams 2015).

The most aggravating aspect of *Last Utopians* is the seeming opposition to "class warfare," "revolutionary violence of class warfare," "workers revolution," "educating workers about class struggle," and "violent labor struggles" (69, 75, 83, 153, 217). This is drearily framed as an opposition to Marx (yet another commonplace theme) that recurs throughout *Last Utopians* with the violence of a pop song refrain and is initially ascribed to the four authors. But in the last chapter Robertson makes that opposition his: Moving beyond his chosen period, he employs more stock texts (Orwell, Huxley, Zamyatin, Le Guin, Atwood, Piercy) to rehearse that World War One meant a shift from



utopia to anti-utopia/dystopia. Robertson then places himself in his narrative to “investigate” contemporary “everyday utopias” (242). He literally finds and visits them in a “rural commune,” a “private school,” Rudolf Steiner’s legacy (whose uncomfortable connection to antisemitism he ignores), and “a nearby farmers’ market,” among others. These, he maintains, are peaceful and “more modest” utopianisms, characterised by a “wariness of totalizing visions,” and are “crucial” for creating a “better future.” Without them, he says, “we’re reduced to resigned acceptance of a morally intolerable status quo” (267-71).

What Robertson seemingly fails to understand is that class struggle takes place in a global world-system and involves a dialectical antagonism between the exploiters and the exploited within that system – meriting a “totalizing” response. First, violent class warfare is not just workers rising up but also capitalists oppressing workers – Structural Adjustment in Africa, Troika in Europe, regime changes in the Americas, debt imperialism in Asia, the global unequal distribution of value, health, education, environmental catastrophe, not to mention flat out war. Violent class struggle is ongoing and is not a moral problem as Robertson suggests but an existential one. Second, the liberal individualist belief in isolated instances as loci for social change ignores the structural totality of capitalist modernity in which they exist. If the globality of ongoing violent class warfare does not convince Robertson of the reality of that social totality and the “totalizing vision” it necessitates, the environmental emergency under which humanity lives as a whole, but which it suffers unequally, should leave no question. Far from “progressive,” as Robertson sees it, the politics of moderate or small-scale change that *Last Utopians* advocates is, at best, insufficient. *Last Utopians*, in short, is old wine in new bottles.

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## BIONOTE

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# **ONCE AND FUTURE ANTIQUITIES IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY (2019) EDITED BY BRETT M. ROGERS AND BENJAMIN ELDON STEVENS**

Review by Juliette Harrisson

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Rogers, Brett M., and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, editors. *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. 2019. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 233 pp.

Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Stevens have been at the forefront of the fast-growing area of reception studies in Fantastika fiction, previously editing the first major English-language volume on Science Fiction and the ancient world (*Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, 2015), as well as a volume on Fantasy and the ancient world (*Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, 2017). This new volume brings together articles on a wide range of Fantastika fiction, gathered around the theme of "displacement." A brief Introduction ("Introduction: Displacing Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy") from Rogers and Stevens explains how the term is to be understood throughout the volume as a reference to "the many senses of distance and difference" receivers may experience in responding to both the ancient world and the worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy (2). Four main sections follow which explore elements of Classical reception that are orientated around displacements of origin points, space, time, and genre, with a following Epilogue by Catherynne M. Valente.

The first chapter, "More 'T' Vicar? Revisiting Models and Methodologies for Classical Receptions in Science Fiction" by Tony Keen, provides a reflection on theories and methodologies for Classical Reception studies, particularly within Science Fiction. This article revisits and revises Keen's influential 2006 blog post "The 'T' stands for Tiberius: Models and Methodologies of Classical Reception in Science Fiction" (published on his [Memorabilia Antonina](#) blog) and considers current thinking on how to theorise Classical Reception studies in Science Fiction in light of the significant amount of work done in the area over the last decade and more. Keen sets out a vocabulary for discussing various types of reception in Science Fiction and Fantasy, directly comparing his own schema with a 2016 model developed by C. W. Marshall. He also makes a passionate argument for the need for Classical Reception scholars to be Science Fiction scholars as much as they are Classicists. This chapter will be especially helpful for anyone working in the field, whether new to reception studies in Fantastika or not, as a template for thinking about how we engage with the field and how labelling different types of reception may affect the conclusions we draw.

The rest of the volume offers a series of case studies. Most explore examples of direct reception, in which incidents, characters, or sources from the ancient world are reworked and incorporated into Science Fiction and Fantasy worlds. Jennifer C. Ranck's "Finding Cassandra in Science Fiction: The Seer of *Agamemnon* and the Time-Travelling Protector of *Continuum*," however, explores an example of a 'parallel' between two similar characters rather than a direct reception. Ranck compares Kiera Cameron, the protagonist of the television series *Continuum* (2012-15), with the character of Cassandra as presented in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. As the article explains, there is no evidence of "direct or intentional reception of the Cassandra figure" here, and the two characters play significantly different roles in different worlds (136-7). However, Ranck adopts Paula James' term "cultural companion" to produce a "comparative dialogue" in which the analysis of each character enriches the study of the others (135). Similarities are drawn between the two as "recipients and revealers of unseen or unknown truth or facts," finding that both present empowered but suffering female characters who attract the attention of "male or divine power players" (137, 143).

Laura Zientek explores a more deliberate parallel, and one particular to Fantastika fiction, in "Monuments and Tradition in Jack McDevitt's *The Engines of God*." The text under consideration is a story of the study of an ancient alien civilization that deliberately parallels ancient Greece and Rome, both in their own history and mythology alongside the history of their discovery or excavation by famous figures, such as Heinrich Schliemann. As in other modern franchises including *Stargate* (1994), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), and *Prometheus* (2012), she finds the "ancient astronaut myth" combined with "the fantastic archaeological quest" follow familiar narrative patterns that can be "grand and monolithic" (57). The focus on a trope so specific to Fantastika fiction makes this a compelling and welcome addition to the volume.

One of the strengths of the book is that it covers a relatively broad range of Science Fiction and Fantasy media. Two chapters exploring the role of Classical reception in tabletop role-playing games are especially welcome. C. W. Marshall's "Classical Reception and the Half-Elf Cleric" offers a starting-point for the study of Greek and Roman reception in *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*, 1974), suggesting a methodology focused largely on published materials by offering a study of Classical monsters across *D&D* manuals since the 1970s. Alex McAuley, meanwhile, looks at the reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* in the *Warhammer 40K* universe ("The Divine Emperor in Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Warhammer 40K* Universe"), finding echoes of the ancient text in the novels, which were written to expand the universe of the tabletop game. They also explore the background of the writers, including how and why they may have been influenced by Virgil (which involves communications with some of the writers themselves). McAuley suggests methodologies and approaches for moving forwards with similar material – in this case, as an expanded universe prominently featuring a series of novels, recommending that his methods could in future be applied to the study of similar materials such as the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises.

Claire Kenward compares a television and comic book serial in "Time Travel and Self-Reflexivity in Receptions of Homer's *Iliad*," looking at the lost 1965 *Doctor Who* serial "The Myth Makers" (using audio recordings and images taken on set, alongside contemporary descriptions and

reviews, as records of the lost episodes) and Marvel's 1979 comic series *Thor Annual #8: Thunder Over Troy*. She argues that Science Fiction interactions with the Classical past are inherently also "an engagement with fantasy," due to the presence of "a strain of fantasy" in ancient Classical texts (45). Stephen B. Moses and Brett M. Rogers, meanwhile, offer a fascinating look at receptions of Atlas in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) – "Dynamic Tensions: The Figure(s) of Atlas in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*" – both directly and via the figure of bodybuilder Charles Atlas, to explore the role (or lack thereof) of suffering in receptions of the ancient figure. They suggest that *Rocky Horror's* "science-fictive figure of Charles Atlas" is, like his classical counterpart, suffering under a weight, as queer masculinity and sexuality have been oppressed by historical forces (120).

Suzanne Lye's "Displacing Nostos and the Ancient Greek Hero in Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*" is one of two examinations of 'displaced' Odysseus narratives in which facets of the trickster hero are incorporated into the character of a young girl embarking on a dangerous journey; the other is Ortwin Knorr's "Lyra's Odyssey in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy." Lye suggests that the appeal of *Spirited Away* (2001) "is rooted to a large extent in its incorporation of Greek myths" while Knorr suggests that in responding to Homer's *Odyssey* as well as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) is "even more complex and multi-layered than scholars have realized so far" (87, 74). How compelling readers find these arguments will depend largely on how convinced they are that the texts are genuinely rooted in the *Odyssey*, consciously or unconsciously. It is always possible that knowledge of familiar texts has seeped in to the creation of other stories, but when the links are less obvious or the author has not discussed the issue, such conclusions will always be open to interpretation. The *Odyssey* and the concerns of young girls are also central to the work studied in Frances Foster's "Drinking Blood and Talking Ghosts in Diana Wynne Jones's *The Time of the Ghost*." Foster offers a fascinating example of a subtly different form of reception, in which characters in Jones' story (1981) imperfectly remember a Classical text – one with which, of course, the author is entirely familiar. This produces two levels of Classical reception, as the new story reworks elements of the original, while the attitudes of the characters towards the source represent popular attitudes towards, and hazy memories of, Classical works.

The Fantastika fiction examined throughout the volume also covers a wide range in terms of date, style, and focus. Two chapters focus on Children's and Young Adult literature (Knorr and Foster) and one on graphic literature (Kenward). The volume includes older works from the early twentieth century (Jesse Weiner's "*Saxa loquuntur?* Archaeological Fantasies in Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*," focusing on a novel from 1903) through to current ongoing series (Marshall and McAuley) and currently working authors. Benjamin Eldon Stevens additionally offers an overview of Classical reception in the works of Helen Oyeyemi ("The Nearest Technically Impossible Thing: Classical Receptions in Helen Oyeyemi"). Receptions from across this period of more than a hundred years are found to embrace the many possibilities of fantastical literature that engages with the Classical world. Weiner argues that *Gradiva* (1902) "suggests fantasy as a path for exploring the voids of history," while Stevens suggests that Oyeyemi's novels "vividly illustrate the politically and ideologically liberating potential of classical receptions" (29; 100).

One theme which recurs throughout the volume is the nature of fantasy – not just the genre of Fantasy but also the reception of the ancient fantastical in modern works. This is touched on by, among others, Weiner, Kenward, and Stevens. Particularly interesting is Vincent Tomasso's discussion of the use of the gods in Fantastika fiction in his chapter "The Gods Problem in Gene Wolfe's *Soldier of the Mist*." Tomasso identifies two primary modes of reception of the ancient gods, the "rationalizing" of Historical Fiction and the "mythologizing" of Fantasy, and examines an example of reception that falls somewhere between the two, as Wolfe's gods are both "mythologized" and, to an extent, "rationalized." The relationship between ancient literature, with its very different formulations of genre, and modern generic expectations, is always a fruitful one and it is well explored here.

The volume concludes with an Epilogue, "Just Your Average Tuesday-Morning Minotaur," written by Catherynne M. Valente, in which she talks about her own love of Classics and some of the ways it has been incorporated into her work. The chapter itself is a beautifully written tribute to the abiding power and appeal of the ancient world and Valente's passion for ancient languages and ancient poetry shines through. It is also rewarding to see authors and their voices represented in the volume (McAuley's article also features authors' contributions via emails). While it is impossible to talk to the authors we study from the ancient world, contemporary Fantastika fiction is a living, breathing form of fiction that is constantly changing and evolving, so it is satisfying to see academics communicating with the authors of the material they study.

The volume is clearly written throughout with each author explaining both the works under study and their Classical sources for non-specialists, and terms or quotations from ancient Greek and Latin are translated. As such, the volume should appeal to scholars of both Classical Reception studies and Science Fiction and Fantasy; indeed, Keen's opening chapter emphasises the importance of communication between both areas of research in work of this kind. Research in this area has been steadily growing over the past twenty years, but it is still relatively new and the emphasis on theory, method, and approach in several chapters here will be very useful moving forwards. As such, this volume will join Rogers and Stevens' earlier volumes as an essential reference point for anyone working on the reception of the Greek and Roman worlds in any area of Fantastika fiction.

## BIONOTE

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## **BODYMINDS REIMAGINED: (DIS)ABILITY, RACE, AND GENDER IN BLACK WOMEN'S SPECULATIVE FICTION (2018) BY SAMI SCHALK**

Review by Polly Atkin

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Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke University Press, 2018.

In the prologue and introduction to *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) Sami Schalk explains how she came to the subject matter of this, her first monograph. She knew when she started her postgraduate studies that she wanted to focus on "representations at the intersection of black feminism and disability studies" (vii). It was only at others' suggestions that she added a third field of study – Speculative Fiction – and that it became the core of her doctoral research. *Bodyminds Reimagined* has grown out of that doctoral research.

In *Bodyminds Reimagined* Schalk makes a strong case for the unique ability of Speculative Fiction to produce: "representations of (dis)ability [...] not found elsewhere, representations that included race and gender politics and clear expressions of sexuality, representations that spoke to important realist political concerns whilst still being set in non-realist worlds" (145). Importantly, she ends the book with a reassertion of the importance of pleasure in reading, as, she argues, "pleasure is also political" (145). In making her case for the importance of black women's Speculative Fiction, she is not only making an intellectual case, but a deeply political and deeply emotional one.

*Bodyminds Reimagined* combines Schalk's original intention to research under-studied work by black women writers, with the equally under-studied intersections of Disability Studies and Speculative Fiction. In drawing together gender, race, and disability – areas which have been so underrepresented in critical studies – Schalk's work is genuinely original. It would have been original enough had she focused on realistic literature, which, as she notes, has generally been the mainstay of both Disability Studies and Black Writing. In turning her critical attention to Speculative Fiction, she has made a unique study. The four chapters are organised around thematic tropes and structural inequalities, in turn addressing disability in neo-slave narratives, able-mindedness in Science Fiction, how futuristic fiction might erase or include disabilities, and finally, how race, gender, sexuality, and disability have been defamiliarised in interspecies Fantasy fiction.

The first chapter, "Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives" seeks to unpick how "the collusion of oppressions pays out in various historical and cultural moments"

arguing that “within the historical and cultural context of American slavery, ableism worked for racist ends against all black people, not merely the ones disabled in ways we would now consider disability” (34). In this first chapter, Schalk also explains why she takes a critical stance that might seem antithetical to some Disability scholars: that “disability can take on both metaphorical and material meaning in a text” (34). Disabled activists and critics often reject the attachment of disability to metaphor, but Schalk suggests that this elides black women’s experience and scholarship, claiming that “refusing to read disability as metaphor ignores the mutual constitution of (dis)ability, race, and gender as social categories and cultural discourses which have material effects on people’s lives” (34). Through her reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) she makes a compelling case “that neo-slave narratives allow for an understanding of the representation of disability as simultaneously material experience and as metaphor for other mutually constitutive and intersectional experiences of oppression, both in the past and today” (35). Schalk’s acknowledgement of that which is embodied can also have other meanings allows for a complex reading of disability in the texts, on both literal and metaphorical levels.

Schalk builds on her unpacking of *Kindred* to discuss Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novel *Stigmata* (1998), via the 2013 reboot of *The Tomorrow People*. In a second chapter titled “Whose Reality Is It Anyway? Deconstructing Able-Mindedness,” Schalk does a good job of toeing a line between the medical models and social models of disability, accepting that “for some people psychiatric labels and treatments are useful” and acknowledging “the realities of people with mental disabilities,” whilst also dissecting the social construction of mental illness (62). Through evidencing “how deviance from social norms, especially norms of race and gender, has historically been construed as mental disability” she demonstrates how “the line between able-mindedness and mental disability is not stable” (64, 65). This becomes particularly interesting in relation to *Stigmata*, and the other examples Schalk alludes to, reminding me also of Marge Piercy’s novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In these narratives, rememory, multiple-selves, and time-travel embody the notion that “the experience and interpretation of reality by a racial, gender, sexual, or (dis)ability minority may dramatically differ from those in the majority” (*Bodyminds* 65). In attending to mental disability within *Stigmata*, Schalk recognises that the protagonists are not just oppressed by racism, but also ableism and sexism. In the conclusion to the chapter, she ties the lessons of the novel – that “experiences of reality are impacted by (dis)ability, race and gender and [...] how discourses of able-mindedness are used to discount disabled, racialized, gendered experiences of the world” – to contemporary politics, and to the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner (79). This is a bold turn in a book of literary criticism, but the material demands it. As Schalk states: “ableism and the social construction of able-mindedness have been and continue to be used as weapons of racist violence” (82). Statements like these link the speculative worlds of the novels Schalk deconstructs in this book directly with our current realities, repeatedly reminding the reader that this is not just an intellectual exercise.

The third chapter, “The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future” brings this to bear on utopian and dystopian fictions, critiquing the tendency of utopias to erase disability. Schalk offers a reading of Butler’s *Parable* series (1993-1998) and its “non-realist disability” as presenting a future

that includes disability as par for the course; summed up in Alison Kafer's term a "crip vision of the future" (5, 102). Schalk turns to Butler's essays to draw her experience of disability together with her depictions of it in her fiction: "Butler's published and unpublished writings argue that technology guarantees neither a disability-free future nor any other supposedly desired outcomes" (107). Again, Schalk ties these theoretical futures to current, realworld consequences, arguing for the vital importance of positive representations of disability in futuristic writings:

As authors and activists imagine better futures, they create representations of that future – in worlds, in text, in images – which influence people to not merely hope for and believe in such futures, but work for them as well. They open up for us new ways of being in the world that may not yet exist, but could. (110)

This is a vital argument made by many disability activists and scholars but has yet to make much impact on mainstream cultural representations of the future. Ace Ratcliff's recent essay "Staircases in Space"(2018) documents the extent to which Science Fiction tropes remain caught in ableist paradigms, and why better representation such as that offered by Butler is so important.

The fourth chapter turns to Fantasy novels, and particularly interspecies Fantasy in the novels of N.K. Jemisin, Shawntelle Madison, and Nalo Hopkinson. In contrast to the non-realist disability in Butler's dystopia, these books represent "realist disabilities in non-realist contexts," which Schalk argues "push readers to understand disability from the perspectives of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes" (119). The notion of time as non-linear appears here again. Like many of the narratives discussed, the arguments of the book loop back on themselves, returning to the same points with different characters, or different points with the same characters. Such looping neatly ties together what could be quite disparate chapters, and creates a sense of organic development to the book's theses.

This is an important book. I want to call it timely, but I am reminded of several essays I have read in the last year in which writers unpacked the use of 'timely' to describe their work about marginalisation and oppression, arguing 'timely' becomes shorthand for a kind of literary wokeness. That use of 'timely' erases the history of marginalisation, and of writing about marginalisation. The truth is that this study is not timely at all, but long overdue, and the failure of critical studies to take into account the intersecting factors Schalk attends to in her work is a sign of lingering pasts, not of present change. I am also reminded, of course, of the narratives analysed in the book, of the folding of time, of repeating experience, of the way the book reveals time-travel as a by-product of trauma, of oppression.

Underneath this excellent critical study is an autoethnography that traces how scholars and writers can positively influence each other's work. As with so many cases, it was a supervisor's reading recommendation that alerted Schalk to the particular role Speculative Fiction can play in



depicting disability, and in changing the narrative around disability. Professor LaMonda Horton-Stallings pointed Schalk towards Octavia E. Butler, and her depiction of 'non-realist disability,' but it was a chance conversation with Disability Studies scholar Professor Rosemarie Garland-Thomson that encouraged her to direct her focus solely on the possibilities of Speculative Fiction. In including these back-stories, and mentioning the "multiple intellectual, artistic and activist communities" that underpin her work, Schalk allows the reader to see this distinctive project as part of a much wider network of study and activism (viii). As Sara Ahmed has famously written, "citation is feminist memory" (*Living a Feminist Life* 15). Schalk makes sure to "acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (*Living a Feminist Life* 16).

In combining three areas of critical thinking, Schalk has a lot of theory to explain and unpack in order to do the deconstructive, and reconstructive work she needs to do, yet her writing remains clear and comprehensible at all times. Her explanations of terms are exemplary, and work both for those embedded in one or more of the critical areas, and for newcomers to the theories she is deploying. At times, the incredibly diligent signposting may feel a little overly explanatory: I began to find it a little repetitive in places. If it makes these important arguments comprehensible to a variety of readers, however, it seems worth it. I hope this will be the first of many studies to address this potent area, and that many other scholars will follow in Schalk's wake.

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## BIONOTE

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Her debut poetry collection *Basic Nest Architecture* (2017) is followed by a third pamphlet, *With Invisible Rain* (2018), which draws on Dorothy Wordsworth's late journals to articulate pain. She is a Penguin Random House *WriteNow* mentee for a nonfiction book on place, belonging, and chronic illness.

## **MODERN DYSTOPIAN FICTION AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: NARRATIVES OF WORLD POLITICS (2018) BY ADAM STOCK**

Review by Ben Horn

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Stock, Adam, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics*, Routledge, 2018.

As a literary form, utopia seems to survive in Western narrative as its negative image, dystopia, as attested to by its use in public and political discourses. While previous works within the Western dystopian field often dealt with the catastrophe of alternative ways of living, contemporary neoliberal politics appear to increasingly resemble fictional dystopia. Rising economic uncertainty, populism, cultural trauma, and most pressingly, ecological catastrophe all characterise the dystopian nature of what Hegelian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has called “the topsy-turvy world of global capitalism” (*Like a Thief in Broad Daylight*, 18). Against this background, Adam Stock makes the realistic claim that we live in dystopian times. Less supported, however, is his argument that dystopia has, since the 1980s, become the dominant literary mode of critical engagement with contemporary politics, at least in the Anglophone West.

Literary narration, Stock argues, enables us to order the present into a coherent shape by historicising events still *in process*. Adam Stock’s *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought* (2018) argues against the notion that the prevalence of dystopia signifies a lack of confidence in utopian political change. Instead, dystopian fiction is a powerful literary hermeneutic. Rather than engaging critically with the issues of the political present in light of a transformed future, dystopia shows that current political ills are temporary via a form of negation. To account for this, as well as how and why this diffusion has occurred, Stock formulates a critical apparatus for locating dystopian fiction within a series of political and intellectual histories. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope and Brian Attebury’s ‘fuzzy set,’ Stock investigates the history of dystopian fiction by examples, rather than boundaries. It is an analysis of characteristics, but is not definitive. Furthermore, the production of literary space-time, generic conventions, and narrative forms, Stock argues, are grounded in the material conditions of the period in which these texts were produced. By recontextualising the works of early to mid-twentieth century dystopia (1909-1950), Stock outlines an effective interdisciplinary approach to the construction of narrative and literary worlds in dystopia, drawing on history, art, philosophy, and politics, and how these constructions frame political debate. Rather than re-capitulating what has come before, Stock draws on existing criticism of the dystopian field in order to pursue new horizons in scholarship of the genre.

Crucial to Stock's thesis is the relationship between these interdisciplinary approaches to narrative and utopia as a literary form. Both late Victorian utopia and H. G. Wells' Scientific Romances were characterised by a resistance to narrative closure. This resistance also appears in the partial, fragmented nature of contested 'historical' narratives that frequently appear in dystopian literature. This partial perspective, which Stock terms "*future-history*" enables the reader to extrapolate broader political concerns from the narrative ("Further Considerations," 2, original emphasis). This has two functions. Firstly, to address the ideological underpinnings of storytelling as a practice. And secondly, to understand dystopian narratives as threads of emerging political consciousness, engaging with the political debates of their era, rather than simply responding to them. In Stock's phrase, such narratives conform to Raymond Williams' terming of 'structures of feeling,' a means of ordering social experience still *in process*. Against charges of conservatism, Stock argues that dystopia carries on the critical project of utopia in a negative fashion. Following Theodor W. Adorno and Fredric Jameson's reading of utopia as a negative dialectic, dystopia aligns with utopia as it affirms the value of a transformed world, while negating the oppressive reality of the present.

The viability of this dialectical criticism, however, must be appreciated in the context of, as Kodwo Eshun has termed it in 'Further considerations on Afrofuturism', the way that SF is becoming the research and development department of a futures industry (Eshun, 2003, 291). Dystopia, in this way, may be viewed as an obstacle to change, rather than a call to arms in the capitalist West. In ecological thought particularly, dystopia may illustrate a feedback loop, reminiscent of forest die-back, inserting a teleology into the present whose result is a hostile future, while warding off threats to the market. In this method of control through prediction, Western capitalist modernity becomes a science-fictional novum, pre-programming the present to ensure its longevity. In Stock's refreshingly radical formulation, however, dystopia becomes a mode of immanent critique rather than a cautionary tale of the dangers of alternatives. The combination of the negative hermeneutic of ideology critique with the positive hermeneutic of a utopian-transformation-to-come can be used against the catastrophe of the status-quo. The negative image of the present can thus be seen in the light of a transfigured future, short-circuiting its logic. Dystopian texts, thus, express negativity without hopelessness.

The book's first section analyses relationships between politics and aesthetics. Texts such as E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) and Yvegeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) implicitly critique the possibility of closure within the societies from which they emerged; the former by situating the text within fin-de-siècle anxieties about empire and masculinity; the latter in the tumult of post-revolutionary Russia. Stock reads Zamyatin's *We* as deferring a final synthesis of totalised human experience, which was associated with high modernism. Zamyatin's use of aesthetic opacity undermines the instrumental, rationalist society of his text. Drawing on Hegelian and Kantian aesthetic theories, and literary cinematic techniques such as the close-up, given the novel's diary structure, Stock argues that the form and content of Zamyatin's novel stimulates debate about contingency and revolutionary action. Situated in Zamyatin's historical and aesthetic contexts, Stock convincingly aligns dystopian fiction with revolutionary critique.

Contingency, deferral, and the refusal of closure inform Stock's thesis throughout this section, particularly in his analysis of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In Huxley's use of modernist formal experimentation and 'Scattergun' approach to satire, Stock sees exposure of immanent social contradictions. Drawing on Adorno and Williams' critique of Huxley's 'dystopia of the masses,' Stock rejects the vision of Huxley's future state as monolithic. Huxley's use of the 'counterpoint' technique to highlight elements of the novel's *future history* enhances Stock's argument, undercutting the teleological readings of both dystopia and history at large. Thus, even in texts such as *Brave New World*, in which the World State mass produces ideology through reproduction, conditioning needs, and their remedy through mandatory consumption, such negativity does not imply hopelessness.

Section two of the book follows the shift in the genre's form towards a more politically committed art during the 1930s. This period marked a turning point in the development of the genre away from contemplating existing discourses to allegorical criticism of specific targets. To this end, Stock argues that dystopia constitutes a dialectical link between meaning, allegory, and symbolic determination. As for Jameson, they articulate the central contradictions of their era through a representation of what might be. Coupling this with his argument surrounding historical impasses, Stock analyses the response of writers of the British independent Left to the rise of fascism, through readings of Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) and *The Professor* (1986), alongside Katherine Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936). This 'fuzzy set' of fiction not only draws together a series of texts from dystopia's hinterlands but also reveals a formal ambiguity that problematises formal and historical periodisation. Stock argues that during the 1930s, dystopia mediates not only the relationship between past, present, and future, but also the relationship between allegory, myth, and the pastoral. This argument remains pertinent, in the sense that many works of Western dystopia draw on fascist states and ideologies as templates. Likewise, Stock's focus is on the historical and literary developments of dystopian fiction, rather than their contemporary critical power. As such, he does not reflect on how contemporary dystopia may engage with contemporary global capitalism, in which monolithic regimes give way to decentralised networks of control, that are no less totalising, though not as transparently authoritarian. Likewise, the role of allegory, myth, and the pastoral are arguably diminished, and can easily be co-opted to serve political reaction, as Stock is careful to argue. The pastoral is a complex and ideologically fraught term, yet Stock's tact and honesty about this fact is much welcomed.

The final section of Stock's book re-examines the relationship between historical change and the individual subject through an analysis of George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1948) and selected works by John Wyndham. The former, Stock argues, renegotiates the temporality of dystopia by projecting the narrative into the (then) future and reflexively emphasising the question, 'how did we get here?' The protagonist, Winston Smith's memories follow then from real historical events before exploring memories of the future history such as a nuclear explosion in Colchester. By inviting the reader to reconstruct the past based on fragments of memory, Stock argues that Orwell introduces uncertainty through a strategy of "*future-as-past*" (Stock 10, original emphasis). As such, Orwell examines both current socio-political questions and their immanent futures. Rather than arguing that Orwell's Oceania allegorically represents twentieth century atrocities, Stock's argument

returns to how the text articulates existing political contradictions. Equally, this analysis is not confined to one perspective. As well as Orwell's relation to history and politics, Stock situates him within the European traditions of empiricism and rationalism. Additionally, he focusses on the neglected formal innovations of Orwell's dystopian ur-text. Specifically, his treatment of the dialectical relationship between historical tumult and lived experience, and the production of both space and nature within the novel. Similar to Zamyatin's *We*, Stock identifies a dualistic motif in Orwell's work: nature and the human body are detested, save as sites of future disciplinary punishment, or colonisation.

Finally, Stock examines Wyndham's use of dystopia, fantastic fiction, and literary style as characterised by the Cold War. What Stock calls Wyndham's "pessimistic liberal utopianism" is his attempt to resolve contradictions of the Cold War era (175). Specifically, the opposition between East and West, Soviet totalitarianism, the paranoid McCarthyist reaction, and the symbol of the atomic bomb. Wyndham's works *The Chrysalids* (1955), *Day of the Triffids* (1951), and *The Outward Urge* (1959), aid Stock's argument by indirectly engaging with both the Cold War and the science-fictional imagination of apocalypse and of expansive military apparatuses. The analysis of Wyndham's work implies that these contradictions are irresolvable, save through external impositions. In *The Outward Urge*, this manifests as a Hobbesian capitalist elite who maintain order at the cost of establishing new contradictions. As well as suggesting the textual future is not foreclosed, Wyndham's commitment to liberal humanism thus troubles any ultimate reconciliation. In Stock's careful analyses, the surplus elements of the texts are bolstered by a dialectical tension between hope and pessimism, or between utopia and apocalypse, which implies a further negation of the narrative present. Stock draws on their respective merits, while also drawing attention to the contradictions of liberal humanism that remain unresolved throughout Wyndham's novels. Such practices likewise resist a closure of argument, providing an open space for further understanding.

Stock concludes by briefly restating his arguments and areas of future study based on awareness of the limitations of his research. Among these are the necessarily brief analysis of certain literature, but also the omission of non-European dystopias, or those of other art media. The diffusion of dystopia to Young Adult fiction and its ideological commitments are likewise referenced as worryingly ignoring the nuances of social ills, or even legitimising the status quo. Yet this is countered with the knowledge that the generic blending and disruption of cultural hegemony may produce new, innovative forms of dystopian critique. Such literature, Stock hopes, may help explode oppressive structures of class, gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism. Moreover, with ecological or technological catastrophe becoming more present in the public imagination, the apocalyptic as the counter-pole to Stock's argument provides fertile ground for future readings. Despite only hinting at these later possibilities, Stock's book refutes the charges of conservatism and boredom some accuse dystopia of tending towards. Rather than pre-programming the future for disaster, dystopia prizes it open and keeps utopia on the horizon of critical thought.

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**BIONOTE**

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## **CONFERENCE AND EVENT REPORTS**

## REIMAGINING THE GOTHIC 2018 (OCTOBER 26-28, 2018)

Conference Report by Luke Turley

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***Reimagining the Gothic 2018: Aesthetics and Archetypes.* University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, 26<sup>th</sup> to 28 October 2018.**

On the last weekend of October 2018, with a chill in the air, the University of Sheffield hosted its fourth 'Reimagining the Gothic' conference, bringing together for three days a collection of speakers from across both the UK and the globe. The conference attracted a variety of attendees with a mix of Literature and Media scholars as well as others from outside the Arts and Humanities. This year's conference focused on "Aesthetics and Archetypes" within the Gothic, considering how representations of the Gothic have evolved, developed, and changed since the genre's inception.

The first panel I attended, entitled "Personifications, Symbols and Personas," began with Helen Black's (St. Mary's University, UK) paper on the various cultural meanings of ravens, crows, and other corvids – for example, as an omen of death or as a servant of a god. This was a very fitting way to begin a conference focusing on Gothic archetypes by looking at one of its oldest familiars. Following Black was Thomas Wilson (University of Wolverhampton, UK) and their paper on Horror anthology television hosts. They mainly focused on Frank Gallop and their appearances in *Lights Out* (1946), which served as a way of American viewers welcoming the Gothic into their homes and they argued this contributed to the increased consumption of the Gothic as well as Horror in the middle of the twentieth century. The papers were well linked as they both dealt with popular figures and archetypes and how they impacted our perceptions of the Gothic.

The second panel I attended served in part as a continuation of a previous Sheffield Gothic conference, "Gaming the Gothic." Up first was Stephen Curtis (Lancaster University, UK) who considered the aesthetics of death in video games. Stephen moved through a variety of video games, considered the trope of Death as an end-game boss and also asked how Death manifests culturally in contemporary contexts. The second speaker, Richard Gough Thomas (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) delivered a paper on *Ravenloft* (1983). They considered the influence of the Gothic on this role-play game (RPG) and on *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) as a whole, particularly their marketing and franchising. Finally, they asked whether the Gothic and the teamwork required for the RPG are compatible. Daniel Pietersen's (Independent, Edinburgh, UK) paper used Play Dead's recent video game, *INSIDE* (2017), to establish what they called stages of aversion: dread, fear, horror, and terror. Pietersen, by using the successive levels of *INSIDE*, explained that these stages were indicators of change and that aversion increased as the possibility and scope of what was changing grew eventually leading into terror, where change dismantled all known meaning. All the papers



linked well together especially as they not only highlighted in-game Gothic elements but how these games created a Gothic feeling for the player.

We wrapped up Friday with a keynote delivered by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK). Spooner's keynote "'Baby, the Stars Shine Bright': Happy Gothic in Japan" applied their concept of Happy Gothic – established in their most recent work, *Post-Millennial Gothic* (2017) – to Japanese manga after being inspired by their recent keynote at a conference in Japan. Spooner began by addressing the different cultural exchanges between Western Gothic and Japanese Horror, looking at Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) and the American remake. Spooner then discussed the popular manga, *Black Butler* (*Kuroshitsuji*) (2006), using it as their key text and highlighting its style based on the British aristocracy and the butlers that served them, chosen in part as a way to appeal to British and western audiences. Spooner argued that examples of Japanese Gothic employ a form of reverse Orientalism; *Black Butler*, for example, uses the aesthetics of the British Victorian period as a consumable for Japanese readers. Overall, Spooner suggested that Japanese Gothic challenges Western perceptions and can actually open up our readings of Western Gothic.

On Saturday the first panel I attended focused on "Space and Place" and opened with my own paper on instances of the "Island Gothic" within the video game *Tomb Raider* (2013) and the film *The Wicker Man* (1973). I argued how the Gothic could utilise the enclosed space of an island to create heightened levels of claustrophobia and terror. Following on was Kenneth Lymer (Independent, UK) whose paper, "A Warning to the Curious," focused on the creation of digital portfolios through 3D images of antiquities. Lymer argued that such collections are in fact uncanny as they are divorced from any context with no background or setting for the items they display. Overall, the panel made some curious suggestions about how the Gothic engages with space and what this means for how the audience experiences both horror and the uncanny.

The panel "Gothic Television" began with Carly Stevenson (Sheffield University, UK) who considered male father figures in *Riverdale* (2017) as well as highlighting the repeated Gothic tropes within the series of murderous fathers, incest, doubles, gothic mansions, and family rivalries. Emma Nagouse (Sheffield University, UK) also considered *Riverdale*, comparing the character of Cheryl Blossom and their near-rape at the hands of Nick St. Claire with the biblical figure of Susannah. They highlighted the significance of such storylines in the 'MeToo' era especially on television which as Nagouse explains has a long history of reinforcing rape myths and stereotypes. Samuel Nash's (Sheffield University, UK) paper on *Twin Peaks* (1990) highlighted the uncanny nature of the television series, looking at the repeated doppelgangers of Laura Palmer. They further argued that the show found the uncanny hidden beneath the polished surface of small towns, demonstrating *Twin Peaks'* clear influence on *Riverdale* as well as on many contemporary Gothic television series.

The final panel focused on "Gothic Performances" and began with Hayley Louise Charlesworth (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) analysing the ever-unexplainable Eurovision Song Contest under a Gothic lens. Charlesworth considered the spectacle and excess of the contest and looked at three winners of recent years: Lordi, who performed as monstrous demons; Conchita

Whurst whose costuming was inspired by bearded ladies; and Netta, the most recent winner, whose performance was controversial given both its culturally appropriative nature as well as Israel's, whom they represented, ongoing campaign against Palestine. Evan Hayles Gledhill (University of Reading, UK) paper looked at music videos of the 90s and their influence on Gothic aesthetics, namely Brad Pitt, who Hayles argued typified white masculinity at the time, and their performance in *Interview with a Vampire* (1994). Finally, Collette Balmain (Kingston University, UK) considered performance of BTS, a K-Pop band, and how they challenge concepts of masculinity through the story telling and characterisation in their music videos. Balmain argued that BTS' story world utilised the Gothic to highlight what in Korean culture was unstable and unreliable, particularly ideas surrounding masculinity and gender. All the papers made fun work of different forms of spectacle and all highlighted the Gothic's ability to destabilise conventions.

I began the final day of the conference by attending a really compelling panel on "Female Bodies and Storytelling," beginning with Karen Graham's (University of Strathclyde, UK) paper on the "Ballet Gothic." Graham argued that ballet movies – a subgenre of dance movies – existed as a form of the Gothic and used *Red Shoes* (1948) and *Centre Stage* (2000) as examples. They used the depiction of ballet injuries, particularly the bleeding and distorted feet of a dancer, as instances of "Body Gothic." Charlotte Gough's (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) paper also focused on ballet and the Gothic, with a focus on Horror this time. Gough considered how ballerinas as an overtly idealised image can also be used to disrupt patriarchy. They used the film *Suspiria* (1977) as an example of how renouncement of such ideas can both destabilise the male gaze and be transformed into an example of female independence. Finally, Jo Ormond (Lancaster University, UK) considered the film, *Red Riding Hood* (2011) as an example of feminist retelling. Ormond began by considering the radical feminist re-appropriation of the witch figure, referring to Diane Purkiss' *The Witch in History* (1996). This analysis was then applied to *Red Riding Hood*, specifically considering the independence of characters such as the Grandmother who lives in the woods rather than the village, and her granddaughter – Valerie – the film's version of Red Riding. While Ormond's paper may seem out of place next to two ballet focused papers, the emphasis on female self-hood and the dismantling of both patriarchal ideals and normativity could be felt across the entire panel.

The conference concluded with a panel on "Queering the Gothic" with two excellent papers from Emily Marlow (Sheffield University, UK) and Ffion Davies (Bath Spa University, UK). Marlow considered Edward Nygma, also known as The Riddler, as a Jekyll and Hyde figure in the television series *Gotham* (2014-2019) and considered the depiction and significance of the Penguin's – another famous villain from the *Batman* comics – romantic attraction to Nygma. Davies' paper revisited Carol J. Clover's notion of the "final girl" (the survivor of attacks within Horror and slasher films) adapting it into "the final boy," reviewing a series of both twentieth century and contemporary Horror films. Davies argued that "final boys" existed only where they could be depicted as being in a lower societal importance than the normally white, virginal, female victims of horror; in this case they were most often either non-white, queer, non-sexually active, or a combination of all three.

Many other events took place during the conference which are worthy of note including numerous exciting panels, all of which were undoubtedly excellent with many of my fellow delegates singing their colleagues' praises; it was a shame I could not see more of them. On Saturday evening, there was a ticketed creative showcase open to the public which was accompanied by a lecture from comic writer, Kieron Gillen (Independent, London, UK) of *The Wicked + The Divine* (2014) fame. The amazing organisers of the conference, Lauren Nixon (Sheffield University, UK) and Mary Going (Sheffield University, UK), also ran both a roundtable and their own panel. Their panel focused on their own – and I quote them here – “indulgent” side-interests: Going delivered a paper on the long running television series, *Supernatural* (2005-current), and Nixon discussed gender and the female gaze within K-Pop. The roundtable served as a Question & Answer on a number of issues and drew on Nixon and Going's knowledge as conference organisers as well as their experiences as PhD students. The enquiries ranged from arranging your own events to dealing with the stress of study, writing on challenging topics, and finding mental health resources; all of which Going and Nixon answered well. As a then first-year PhD student, this was I felt an important demonstration of solidarity amongst academics in a profession which can be difficult at the best of times and highlighted the necessity of support networks which are still not available across all universities. Overall, the conference was an incredibly enjoyable experience and a credit to its organisers; I thoroughly look forward to their next event.

#### BIONOTE

**Luke Turley** is a second year PhD student at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis focuses on post-millennial Speculative Fiction and the Anthropocene. His wider research interests include the Gothic, Fantasy, ecocriticism, and television studies and he recently co-organised the *Gothflix* conference which explored representations of the Gothic and Horror in Netflix programming.

## TRANSITIONS 8 (NOVEMBER 10, 2018)

Conference Report by Paul Fisher Davies

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***Transitions 8: New Directions in Comics Studies.* Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK, 10 November 2018.**

The long-running, free, one-day symposium for rising comics scholars returned in 2018 after a year's break. *Transitions: New Directions in Comics Studies* was inaugurated in 2010 by Tony Venezia (Birkbeck, UK) as a forum for PhD students and early-career researchers to share their developing work in a collegiate and supportive environment. Its timing at the weekend, its annual regularity, and its accessibility have meant that *Transitions* has been a staple of the comics scholarship community since its inception. Its return this year was welcome and it promises to resume its regular schedule. This year, with the inevitable tweaks to schedule ahead of the conference day, only two panels ran in parallel – but this still meant I missed some excellent sessions, in particular Nicola Streeten and Sarah Lightman's panel bringing together a range of comics creators and scholars who shared an interest in how comics express the experience of maternity. The sketches made of the papers I did see can only reflect some of the key ideas that caught my attention and interests; any misrepresentation is my own.

After a welcome by Joe Brooker (Birkbeck, UK) and *Transitions'* Hallvard Haug (Birkbeck, UK), Maggie Gray (Kingston, UK) gave a powerful and provocative keynote which did its job admirably in setting the tone and theme for the day. She built on her recently published monograph on the work of Alan Moore to present some provocations about the nature of comics creation and comics studies. The supportive nature of *Transitions* and other comics studies forums presents a risk: are we being too polite to each other and not challenging one another's approaches? In particular, Gray suggested that comics studies should not be merely structuralist or formalist in its approach (a declaration which led to a number of us formalists in the audience to add disclaimers at the head of our own papers later in the day). Rather, comics studies should consider historical contexts of production, including comics-making practice and the conditions in which comics can be made, instead of treating them as ahistorical texts.



Figure 1: Keynote sketchnotes

Panel 1A, "Storytelling" turned to comics as tools of storytelling and brought together a range of papers necessitated by a change-around in schedule, incorporating from the former Panel 4A Daniel Goodbrey and Simona Spinelli on digital comics and hybridity. Barbara Chamberlin's (University of Brighton, UK) paper on the witch in comics pursued "haunting" as a metaphor for comics' form and history: suggesting that the gaps and spaces in comics which are occupied by elements elsewhere in the text, along the cohesive lines suggested by Thierry Groensteen's "braiding," make the gutter seem a "haunted" space. Likewise, comics are haunted by their own history: by nostalgia for past creations and echoing forerunners in production. Finally, the reader's own involvement in the production of the comic's text acts as a kind of haunting: the reader occupies the spaces the comic leaves, and enriches the text with active engagement in creating meaning.

Daniel Goodbrey (University of Hertfordshire, UK) was the first of several to confess upfront his interest in form – but one which was firmly embedded in the attention to material concerns for which Maggie Gray had called. Goodbrey appealed for a renewed attention to the word in comics studies, noting the importance of a script in the process of much production. However, digital comics especially trouble the usual view of the relationship between word and image (so often viewed as 'tracks' parallel to film visual and audio tracks), since they bring in other possibilities to that relationship. Word and image may be composed dynamically in digital comics; audible sound, with or without spoken words, may combine with visual text and visual images. The 'font' used to present text may change as a digital comic is viewed in different browsers or other presentation software. I am always troubled by 'blend' and 'hybrid' as metaphors for the relationships between word and image – they strike me as being metaphorical like Chamberlin's "hauntings." This makes them likewise productive, but often taken at face value, and Goodbrey's re-analysis challenged this.

Simona Spinelli's (King's College London, UK) discussion of Madefire software also explored hybridity, in a discussion of this digital tool which enables comics to be presented as a motion comic, representing "multidimensional storytelling" (MDS) as described in Spinelli's doctoral research. These comics forms, which resemble animation and film, present challenges for existing approaches to the analysis of comics. At the far end of such innovation is the possibility of virtual reality comics. What would such texts look like and how would we interact with them? These questions led to spirited discussion in the Questions and Answers.





Figure 2: Panel 1A and Panel 2 sketchnotes

Panel 2, "Power and Politics of Representation," was just two papers on the day. My own paper, not drawn here (since I was presenting and not sketching!), described the linguistic discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aims to use textual analysis tools to uncover power relationships inscribed in texts, using functional categories of language use derived from the work of M. A. K. Halliday. I proposed a way that this framework might be adapted to comics, with a bridging description of comics' visual resources which serve the same functions that language does. This led to enacting a CDA of comics on a sample text in which political viewpoints and power relations are traceable – "Spider-Woman #1" (2015) – as well as exploring the ways in which power may be wielded through the drawing of comics and their images, recounting the controversy surrounding Milo Manara's variant cover for that issue, which led to commentators' re-drawing of the image as a way of engaging in political discussion.

Sara Gancedo Lesmes' (Complutense University, Madrid, Spain) paper also explored image-making as the production of opinion, in the explicitly political work of "El Roto," critiquing the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008. The strips use primarily visual means to present the paradoxes arising from the financial crisis, presented in a format which would view them as 'humorous,' but with a vivid edge that transforms the humour into a politically-mobilising critique. Here, comics production consciously uses its form and affordances to bring about political change. This was another among many panels which started with an apologia about the focus on form, but nonetheless demonstrated that there are approaches to formal discussion of comics that engage with the concerns about material and social context raised in the keynote.

Panel 3 returned to the parallel format. In Panel 3A, "Autographics, Truths and Conceits," Eszter Szép (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) opened with a paper which focused on bringing the materiality of comics to the foreground as a site of engagement between the author and the text in relation to the line with which the creator marks the page. Rather than focusing on storytelling, Szép wishes to foreground the line as a mark of the maker which lends the text authenticity, but an authenticity which can nonetheless be learned. The subjectivity of comics was similarly a concern for Chantal Cointot (Nottingham Trent University, UK), who presented the work of 'Judith Forest,' who turned out to be an ('inauthentic') construction of male comics creators riding a wave of interest in autobiographical comics. Cointot identified, in a reading of the images in the work of 'Forest,' evidence of male preoccupations and a gendered gaze. Its mark-making is engineered to suggest an authenticity which is supported by photographic 'evidence' (actually posed by a model); but the enacted embodiment in the work, purportedly of self-observation and self-absorption, gives away the actual embodiment of the creators and their desires for the protagonist/author's body and private life in the final assessment.





Figure 3: Panel 3A and Panel 4 sketchnotes

Finally, Panel 4 “Microhistories” returned us to broader histories of production, from a material and then an intertextual perspective. Guy Lawley’s (University of the Arts, London, UK) account of the materiality of early comic book production, with his signature attention to the details of colour processing using Ben Day dots, gave a lively view of production practicalities, illustrated with physical artefacts: original comics the audience could interact with. Lawley explained how financial and physical constraints on comics production influenced the type and format of the stories these strips could tell, as well as the format’s iconic stylistic features. In an entertaining closing romp through Marvel comics history, Mark Hibbett (University of the Arts, London, UK) gave a thorough and quantified account of the use of Doctor Doom as a villain figure in the self-parodying series *Not Brand Echh* (1967-1969), a counter-spoof of *Mad* magazine’s superhero satire. The creators of original superheroes and villains also made the *NBE* comics, spoofing their own work with inevitable authenticity. These are comics that are aware of their own history as well as the audience’s responses to them and competing productions’ commentary upon them.

The day closed with responses from senior comics studies figures, Roger Sabin (University of the Arts, London, UK) joining Ian Hague (University of the Arts, London, UK), Nicola Streeten (University of Sussex, UK), and Joan Ormrod (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) in conversation with Transitions’ Nina Mickwitz (University of the Arts, London, UK). The panel reflected on Maggie Gray’s “beefs” with comics and suggested that comics scholars should engage with and challenge one another’s positions and assumptions. The idea of staged debates intended to explicitly bring into conversation opposing viewpoints on comics was mooted, and this was met with acknowledgement of the challenge of organising panels – which so often tended to bring together certain related interests in comics, thus risking isolating the ‘schools’ of interest in comics scholarship from one another, devolving into more insular interest groups. Far from being austere formalist, the papers at the symposium seemed to be converging towards the sort of acknowledgement of material forces and political contexts for which Gray appealed in her keynote.

## BIONOTE

**Paul Fisher Davies** gained his Ph.D. in 2017 at University of Sussex, UK. He has published in *Studies in Comics*, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *The Comics Grid* amongst others, including academic work in comics form, encompassing sketchnoting of conferences, graphic articles, and book cover illustration. He teaches English Language and Literature at East Sussex College in Lewes, UK. His monograph *Comics as Communication: A Functional Approach* was published by Palgrave in December 2019.



Figure 4: Responses sketchnotes

## LOOKING INTO THE UPSIDE DOWN: INVESTIGATING STRANGER THINGS (DECEMBER, 14, 2018)

Conference Report by Rose Butler

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**Looking into the Upside Down: Investigating Stranger Things Symposium. University of Leeds, Leeds, UK, 14 December 2018.**

Since its release on Netflix in the Summer of 2016, *Stranger Things* has proven ripe for scholarly interpretation; in the years since its debut on the streaming platform, the series has been the focus of several academic works, including the edited collection *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series* (2018) and, most recently, a special issue of *Refractory Journal* dedicated to the show.

This one day symposium organised by Tracey Mollet (University of Leeds, UK) brought together scholars to discuss the most recent debates in the study and criticism of *Stranger Things*. Across several papers and two keynote addresses, numerous approaches to the series were discussed, ranging from gender to space, fan studies, and politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an overarching theme revisited throughout the day was the series' complex and often problematic relationship with nostalgia for the 1980s, alongside its plethora of intertextual references and homage to countless cultural touchstones from the decade.

The first keynote lecture, delivered by Sorchá Ní Fhlainn (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) focused on *Stranger Things* and its often problematic engagement with the 1980s. Ní Fhlainn proposed that the 1980s exist as a "ReDecade," suggesting that the era is a displaced time in our recollection; as such, *Stranger Things* plays one part in a broader cultural preoccupation with fetishising the 1980s that is symptomatic of a desire to 're-do' or replay a decade during which society apparently found itself on a precipice. Ní Fhlainn's keynote provided a fascinating introduction for the symposium, establishing several lines of enquiry that would be referred back to throughout the day and were addressed at her own symposium 'The Gothic 1980s' in 2019.

Investigating *Stranger Things* and gendered narratives, Tracey Mollet and Karen Dodsworth (Teesside University, UK) delivered engaging papers on the first panel of the day. Mollet interrogated the series thus far in relation to masculinity and geek culture, highlighting that the series engages with Reaganite notions of masculinity while also offering alternatives to the series' 'Bad Men' in the shape of Bob (Sean Astin) and Steve (Joe Keery). In a discussion of *Stranger Things* and Carol Clover's 'Final Girl,' Dodsworth argued that while the series is often deemed as progressive in its depiction



of agentive women and girls, the Duffer brothers' portrayal of this character trope is confused and problematic. Dodsworth's paper included some particularly relevant discussion of fan-favourite Barb (Shannon Purser) as the show's most compelling manifestation of the Final Girl archetype.

In the second panel of the day, Kerry Dodd (Lancaster University, UK) and Isabel Vincent (Bangor University, UK) investigated the networks, spaces, and places of *Stranger Things*. Dodd's paper, on digital aesthetics and the re-conceptualisation of non-human ontology, highlighted some lesser-discussed elements of the series and particularly its part in a wider cultural fascination with non-human phenomena. In a discussion of the Upside Down, Dodd noted the convergence of the organic and the technical and observed that through its 1980s aesthetic of disruption and glitches, the series attempts to reconceptualise networked existence. Vincent's paper positioned the series as an example of transmedia storytelling, suggesting that the online presence of *Stranger Things* and the series' fandom has encouraged narrative growth beyond the episodes available via Netflix. Vincent proposed that transmedia storytelling can often function as religious experience, suggesting that the spread of fan fiction and speculation is comparable to the oral storytelling of parables and spiritual teaching. Though *Stranger Things'* online fandom is less vocal in terms of narrative speculation and fan fiction than more established series – such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) – it will be interesting to observe how this fandom develops and expands as the series continues.

The third panel added to the debate surrounding *Stranger Things* and notions of nostalgia (or anti-nostalgia) with a focus on the cultural context of the series. While countless journalistic articles have observed that the show is apparently 'nostalgic' for a simpler time, the growing body of scholarship on *Stranger Things* is frequently challenging this interpretation. Rose Butler's (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) paper interrogated the connection between the series and one of its most hallowed intertextual references, *Stand by Me* (1986), in an effort to complicate the assumption that either text is an exercise in wistful nostalgia. In a paper written by Lucy Burke and Thomas Rudman (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) Rudman explored *Stranger Things* in relation to nostalgia aesthetics following the Great Recession. Suggesting that the series is a mass of complex contradictions, Rudman summarised that the show may lack the ability to fully combat and address the very sources of its own horror. An excellent paper by Lindsey Scott (University of Suffolk, UK) closed the final panel with a discussion of *Stranger Things* and perceptions of childhood. Scott interrogated the series' subversive combination of recycled horror and coming-of-age narratives to determine how *Stranger Things'* intertextual references – specifically those which feature adolescent protagonists on BMX-riding adventures – can be read as a re-evaluation of broader sociocultural perceptions of childhood.

The closing keynote address was delivered by Matt Hills (University of Huddersfield, UK). Hills shifted the focus from intertextuality to inter-textuality, suggesting that links between texts are forged by audiences and therefore require fan study by its very definition. As such, Hills' address paid particular attention to the fan response of the much-maligned episode 'The Lost Sister.' At this point of the second season, Hills argued, fans became "anti-fans," heavily critiquing and vocalising

their disappointment with an episode that they felt disrupted the progression of the second season. Hills' presentation closed the conference by addressing the convergence of several approaches discussed throughout the symposium: nostalgia, intertextuality, and fan studies.

This research event – the first to be dedicated solely to the critical analysis of *Stranger Things* – was a stimulating symposium expertly organised by Mollet, one that engaged with several new approaches to the series. While debates will certainly continue regarding the show's exact relationship to the many 1980s texts it explicitly references and to its 1980s setting (particularly as future seasons continue to unfold), scholars are increasingly questioning to what degree the series can be considered 'nostalgic.' Similarly, as the show's popularity increases with each new season, fan engagement and speculation is becoming a key point of interest for scholars; Hills' fascinating keynote highlighted the fact that audiences clearly already have a distinct expectation of what an episode of *Stranger Things* should be. The papers presented at this symposium will be published in a future edited collection that will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to scholarship on what is quickly becoming one of our most popular television shows, and several of the scholars present at this event are likely to play a part in shaping our critical understanding of its cultural importance.

#### BIONOTE

**Rose Butler** is an Associate Lecturer in film and television studies at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, where she is completing a thesis on masked killers in cinema. Her wider research interests are in genre film and television; she has written on the slasher movie, *American Horror Story*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Stranger Things*. She is the co-organiser of Fear 2000, a conference series dedicated to contemporary Horror media.

## TALES OF TERROR (MARCH 21-22, 2019)

Conference Report by Oliver Rendle

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***Tales of Terror: Gothic, Horror, and Weird Short Fiction, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 21-22 March 2019.***

On March 21st 2019 a coven of Gothic and Horror enthusiasts assembled outside Coventry for the inaugural Tales of Terror conference at the University of Warwick — the ‘Campus Out of Place,’ one might call it. What followed were two days of scholars, writers, and dramaturges interacting with the topic of short and scary forms in a surprising number of weird and wonderful ways. Though this relatively small conference was allegedly focusing on under-appreciated short forms – age-old yarns, lost stories, forgotten excerpts, fragments, and snippets – I was gratified to find that Tales of Terror actually covered a wide array of niche mediums without neglecting the various giants in the field.

The first panel I attended explored dualities within the topic of “Periodicals, Publishing and the Gothic Market.” Sarah Sharpe (University College Dublin, Ireland) demonstrated how the infamously-morbid execution narratives in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1817-1980) both satisfied and satirised their own readership by implicitly condoning while explicitly condemning the nineteenth century ‘connoisseur of violence.’ A similar contrariness also became clear through the next paper by Manon Labrande (University of Vienna, Austria). This multimodal analysis of the massively popular and massively derided Penny Blood series from the mid-nineteenth century revealed how exploitative their production and subject-matters were, while also pointing out their revolutionary significance among the newly-literate working classes. The inherent duality of the short form was then explicitly highlighted by James Machin (Royal College of Art, UK) whose discussion of the Decadent roots of twentieth century Weird fiction ended with a bold assertion that short forms will always draw the reader’s attention to both the profound significance of the subject-matter and the absence of meaning or satisfactory explanation.

From a panel promoting overlooked forms I proceeded to an insightful re-evaluation of a writer who receives far more critical attention than most in the twenty-first century – perhaps more than he deserves or even wanted. This panel consisted of an informal discussion with Simon Maeder and Dominic Allen, the masterminds behind and performers of the theatrical anthology/biopic *Providence: The Shadow Over Lovecraft* (2018). This panel was a surprise favourite for me, and, after my scepticism over the theatrical effectiveness of Weird horror was dispelled in the first few minutes, what followed was a far more nuanced portrayal of H. P. Lovecraft himself than I had ever previously encountered. Far from relying on familiar portrayals of Lovecraft as a two-dimensional, white-supremacist, Maeder and Allen’s research led them to depict him as a living contradiction; a xenophobic, poison-spitting, hypocritical font of generosity and paranoid vulnerability – the

playwrights using this to neither excuse their subject's views nor shy away from them. With such profoundly ridiculous and laughably morbid themes, this Horror/Comedy presentation of Lovecraft's life seemed to perfectly depict the duality inherent in Lovecraft's deanthropocentric/personally revealing stories themselves.

Following the theatre discussion was a roundtable panel, where Jonny Davidson from The British Library, Hannah Kate of Hic Dragones, and Maria Giakaniki of Ars Nocturna discussed the trials and tribulations of publishing, preserving, and translating short-form Horror and Gothic fiction in the twenty-first century. Attendees took the opportunity to ask how the panellists had come to occupy their current places in publishing, and while it is always hard not to become a little dispirited when hearing writers and their work reduced to marketing potential and profit margins, all three of these speakers were interesting and insightful as they explained their roles within the industry.

Next came the "Disturbed and Diseased Imaginations" panel, comprised of Camilla Schroeder (Kingston University, UK), Daria Denisova (Shevchenko Institute of Literature, Ukraine), and yours truly (University of Glasgow, UK). This panel discussed how and why various writers twist existing forms into terrifying versions of themselves. Through the history of Heinrich Hoffman's controversial picture book, *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), Schroeder demonstrated how fearful illustrations can be used for both control and freedom, scaring young readers into acting 'appropriately' and helping the same readers overcome these fears. Through close readings of *Looking for Jake* (2005), Denisova explored how China Miéville's personification of 'The City' simultaneously literalises a desire to change the sociocultural status quo and a weird anxiety surrounding the potential that such an 'apocalypse' might actually happen. My own paper interpreted Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos as self-consciously 'corrupted' fairytales, highlighting both Lovecraft's scorn towards those who mislead themselves away from the pessimistic truth about the universe, and the psychological necessity to do exactly this. These papers, together, left me wondering whether Weird fiction has the same paradoxical function as Hoffman's picture book does; terrifying us into conformity and ignorance even as it encourages us to confront these fears, preparing us for the inevitable revelations that lie in wait for us – whether we are ready or not.

Continuing the discussion of fairytales, the last panel of day one – "Monstrous Fairytales" – addressed the 'refashioned,' 'reworked,' and 'reimagined' fairytales of such writers as Angela Carter, Sarah Pinborough, Emma Donoghue, and Robin McKinley. Silvia Storti (Kingston University, UK) gave a fascinating paper exploring the curse of flawlessness and feminine beauty as represented in folkloric revisitations. Storti demonstrated how such re-worked tales question the contradictory values promoted through the 'original' texts – how they emphasise the element of terror in the sublime – and concluded that for a female character to have or attain physical perfection is for them to risk becoming unnatural and threatening: paradoxically imperfect. Following this, Chien-hui Hsu (National Chengchi University, Taiwan) demonstrated how female sexuality was treated as sinful by Charles Perrault in *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697) and as animalistic and organic in Angela Carter's *Wolf-Alice* (1979). This paper started with a fascinating history of werewolves in folklore – Chien-hui Hsu dissecting their traditional role as representative of lust to then better demonstrate Carter's sympathetic challenge towards outdated attitudes concerning female sexuality.



Laying day one of the conference to rest was the first keynote, “Terra/Terror Incognita: Women Writers and the Colonial Gothic Short Story,” delivered by Melissa Edmundson of Clemson University (USA). This paper took listeners on a fascinating tour through the lives of three criminally underrated female writers and their forgotten works of colonialist short fiction. By noting which of their works survived through to posterity – those filled with two-dimensional, amiable, female characters and domestic compliance – and comparing them to their forgotten stories – the ones featuring empowered heroines and white males being made culpable for their crimes – Edmundson demonstrated how writers like Margery Lawrence, Alice Perrin, and Mary Fortune were overlooked for daring to challenge the assumptions typically made in male works of colonialist fiction.

After some spirited conversation at the conference meal, day two kicked off bright and early with the “Disembodiment” panel. Here the caffeine and sleep deprived among us were confronted with lively discussions of fetishised limbs, existential dread, corporeal grotesqueries, anorexia, and cannibalism – a tale of terror indeed. Shona McEvoy (Oxford University, UK) presented on spectral hands in ghost stories, demonstrating how the Victorian obsession with the white, upper-class, female hand led to a stream of ghost stories featuring such hands resisting their objectification, invading ‘male’ social spaces, and exacting revenge for the wrongs committed against them in life. From paranormal ghosts we moved on to social ghosts with a paper by Louise Benson James (University of Bristol, UK). James argued that in self-consciously playing with genre-specific expectations and presenting undeniably physical, female characters – which refuse to be easily read or typecast – Rhoda Broughton’s ghostless ‘ghost stories’ were actually haunted by the Victorian woman’s own spectrality. Following this, the first panel of the day ended with a frankly harrowing exploration of the subjective experience of mental illness and fatal predestination in Michel Faber’s chaotic illness narrative “Miss Fatt and Miss Thinne” (1998), as presented by Heather Ballantyne (University of Surrey, UK).

The next panel focused on “Liminal States” and the blurring of the division between death and life in the writing of three authors of Weird fiction, and with them the theme of contradiction was revived – somewhat appropriately. Henry Bartholomew (University of Exeter, UK) presented the counterintuitive tangibility of the spectres and ghosts in the works of M. R. James, an analysis focused through the lens of object-oriented ontology. Following him, independent scholar Daniel Pietersen demonstrated the proto-Weird themes and progressive elements in a largely forgotten writer of Gothic/Decadent short stories, R. Murray Gilchrist. By studying Gilchrist’s portrayals of living deaths and the living dead, Pietersen showed how Gilchrist reverses the structure of the traditional ghost story, marginalising the horror of a supernatural Other in favour of a proto-Weird uncanniness brought on by the reader introspecting their own human condition. This topic of the human condition was then explored again by Agnieszka Łowczanin (University of Łódź, Poland), in her paper on Olga Tokarczuk’s *Bizarre Stories* (2018). Tokarczuk’s stories, Łowczanin argued, are the linguistic embodiment of all that confuses, amuses, and terrifies us in life; they are contradictory narratives stripped of sociocultural specificities in order to offer readers a raw dose of universally-relatable subjective experience.

From universality to locality, onwards I proceeded to the “Regional Horrors” panel, which kicked off with the University of Warwick’s Martha McGill. McGill’s paper on the relationship between Scottish Gothic Horror stories and ‘real’ Scottish folklore brought up interesting points about the simultaneous cultural exploitation and ethnographic validation made possible by the work of Walter Scott, James Hogg, and Robert Louis Stevenson. These same points were brought up in the next paper by Joan Passey (Universities of Exeter, Bristol, and Bath Spa, UK). Passey gave a detailed account of the explosion of Cornish ghost stories at the end of the nineteenth century, and through it demonstrated how writers embraced the sudden popularity of Cornish ghost tourism — exploited it even — in lieu of their declining mining industry. Finally, Helena Bacon (University of East Anglia, UK) delivered her own paper on Gothic East Anglia. This fascinating paper shed light on the impermanent landscape and ethereal atmosphere of this region, showing how East Anglia’s shifting geographical state became the ideal setting for ghost stories and surreal Horror films alike.

My final panel was “Gothic Ephemera and The Digital Age.” Though postcards, video games, and viral internet narratives appear a strange combination, they complimented each other remarkably well. Carys Crossen (University of Manchester, UK) began with her paper on postcards and their surprising relationship to the Gothic; highlighting their naturally conservative form, the secrets they implicitly keep, and their technological regressiveness. Next, Caitlin Jauncey (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) guided listeners through a ludo-narratological explanation of various small-budget Horror computer games, arguing that such works operate in much the same way as Gothic short stories do. Finally, independent scholar Conny Lippert rounded out the panel with her paper on contemporary Gothic fragments on the internet. Lippert’s paper highlighted the dual nature of the internet — both the abundance of information and artistic forms available, and the vast amount of unknown, un-regulated, and potentially threatening cyberspace lurking on the fringes of our social media websites and search engines. In doing so Lippert demonstrated how the internet is an ideal place for the cultivation of terrifying short forms.

Ending the conference was the second keynote, “On Incompleteness: The Fragment, the Dash, the Broken Form,” by Roger Luckhurst of Birkbeck, the University of London. I can safely assure you I have never been so entertained by a discussion of punctuation before. Luckhurst’s paper started with a theoretical discussion of the Gothic/Horror short form as born from fragments and snippets, and, through this, demonstrated how many writers of such works very deliberately take advantage of the broken form even still. Focusing on ever more specific uses of diaspora, diasparaction, and aposiopesis, Luckhurst concluded his paper — and the conference — on an appropriately anticipatory ‘Or More—,’ questioning, as we all were I am sure, what will come next in the academic study of Gothic and Horror short forms.

The short story, particularly those designed to elicit fear, may be one of the oldest forms of literature that we know of. It has stood the test of time and flourished into countless mediums and subgenres since mankind first sat beside their campfire and speculated as to what lay beyond the light. This conference demonstrated these facts brilliantly. The Tales of Terror conference was planned, pieced together and, indeed, animated by the University of Warwick’s own Jennifer Baker,

who single-handedly organised the event and ran it with the gracious help of a group of Lancaster MA student volunteers. A massive thank you to her and her team.

#### BIONOTE

**Oliver Rendle** is currently undertaking his PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Gothic Studies, UK, where he researches nihilistic satire, philosophically cynical humour, and their relationship to sociopolitical disillusion in contemporary culture. He is a graduate of the University of Glasgow's Fantasy MLitt program, where he specialised in humour theory and existential horror, and he has presented papers on these topics at Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations, Fantastika, and Tales of Terror.

# GLITCHES AND GHOSTS (APRIL 17, 2019)

Conference Report by Vicki Williams

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***Glitches and Ghosts*. Lancaster University, UK. 17 April 2019.**

The first ever *Glitches and Ghosts* conference took place on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2019 at Lancaster University. Organised by PhD researcher Kerry Dodd and Brian Baker (Lancaster University, UK), the conference welcomed researchers from across the disciplines to discuss intersections of mediated error and the supernatural. In particular, the day sought to consider the ways the ethereality of new media and their technological systems are captured (or fail to be captured) by language – particularly that which obfuscates complex system processes, anthropomorphises machine agencies, and leaves the unique affective potentials of our interactions with new media behind. The conference consisted of six panels made up of twenty speakers, including a smart kettle and Google Home assistant who co-presented one paper, and the keynote speaker for the day, Will Slocombe (University of Liverpool, UK). The conference theme invited a number of key central concerns, but formations of digital-oriented ontologies prevailed. Indeed, considerations of design, process, and ontological formations brought together all of the glitches and ghosts that were present, or made present, in the fantastic talks presented. To use a diagram to illustrate the central concerns of the day seems to do it some injustice, but a short discussion period during the conference lead the collective of researchers to come to the following:

	GIG	
	LIL	
HUMAN	III	THING
	TIT	
	CIC	
	HIH	

Such assemblages of humans, glitches, and things were presented via a number of mediums and technological emergences, including: Creepypasta, music albums and digital distribution of music, YouTube playthroughs, (video)games, Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR), streaming platforms, internet of things, contemporary art, surveillance and cybersecurity, algorithmic culture, and the novel. Such diverse considerations of manifestations of both glitches and ghosts leave an exciting legacy, which is being followed up by an edited collection on the conference theme.

It seems appropriate to initiate discussion of the panels with a quote given as part of Will Slocombe's keynote talk from Italo Calvino's lecture on "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (1967): "The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze with ghosts." Glitches and ghosts both

emerge as unruly presences – things that challenge ontological boundaries and inspire new forms of knowledge and agency beyond the humanist subject. With Calvino's quote in mind, the day was certainly enlightening in thinking about the multitudinous ways glitches and ghosts are being approached in contemporary academia and beyond, from various disciplines including, but not limited to: English Literature, Linguistics, Media Studies, Sociology, Design, Musicology, and Game Studies. The day began with an opening address from the conference organisers. Kerry Dodd made reference to the pre-conference Twitter ramblings and networks which had led to speculation that speakers might be "ghosting through walls" to be able to move seamlessly and stealthily between panel talks.

The panel themes emphasise the multidisciplinary, multisensory explorations of the glitch and its prevalence in contemporary Anglo-American technoculture. Panels 1A and 1B explored "Disrupted Transmissions" and "Cybermyths and Spectral Realities." These first panels of the day shared considerations of the agency of the virtual and the blurred lines of authorship and agency implicated by both the glitch and the ghost. Whilst maintaining focus on the current state of 'digital culture' and digital cultural studies, talks posed the question of what the glitch might offer in terms of thinking beyond the textual interface – engaging with various multimedia practices. Joe Ondrak's (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) paper "Beyond the LCD Veil: Creepypasta's Annihilation of Digital Reality" considered the emergent genre of Creepypasta fiction and the way it relies on the digital form. Ondrak likened this reliance to the spectral by arguing for Creepypasta's flattening of individuals via digital, which links inherently to Horror through the ways it seems to self-evolve, marking a process of uncanny affect. Henry Morgan's (Cardiff University, UK) paper "Hypergrunge and the boy with the melting face: authorship, horror and fragments of identity surrounding Daniel Lopatin's *Garden of Delete*" explored the ways in which music and digital culture coalesce. Morgan's paper examined the intersections of the posthuman, the hyperreal, and the album-as-assemblage. Hayley Louise Charlesworth (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) then considered the emergence of "YouTube Horror" in her paper "You Made Him Real: Interactive Digital Haunting's for the YouTube Generation." Charlesworth's presentation delved into the creation of YouTube doppelgangers and the various ways interactive storytelling is used across digital platforms.

Panels 2A and 2B explored "Affective Narratives" and "Algorithmic Détournment"; the second round of panels centred upon both the affective and systemic infrastructures of the glitch, and the ways they seep into everyday lived encounters with digital technologies. Talks considered the evolution of glitch aesthetics in videogames, whilst moving into the emergent and disruptive capacities of mediated error to challenge embedded cybersecurity systems, algorithms and to enable various kinds of social protest. Stephen Curtis' (Lancaster University, UK) paper "From Descartes to Tron and Beyond: What Do You Do if the Ghost in the Machine is You?" considered the semantic shift of the word 'save' as it has become associated most explicitly with the digital. Curtis looked at the metaphysical evolution of the 'ghost within the machine trope,' analysing the ways humans are preoccupied with the frailties of the fleshy form. Vicki Williams (University of Birmingham, UK) followed with her paper "Feeling the Presence of Mediated Error: Glitch Ecologies, Horror, and the Phenomenology of Virtual Reality." Williams' paper considered the ways glitches interact with their

users in a more embodied and visceral manner in immersive technologies, adding new cartographies of immersive glitch to current theorisations. Charlotte Gislam (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) presented on “Glitches and their Emergent Capabilities: Replicating the Anomalies of Digital Game Narratives.” Gislam explored the different implications of glitches within gaming narratives, arguing that the glitch provides the truest form of emergent narrative within gamespaces.

The final panels of the day were “Theorising the Glitch” and “Phasing through Boundaries.” As the panel titles emphasise, talks thought about the ontological instability of the glitch and the ways digital presences manifest visually and experientially. The talks continued to explore the affective coming-into-contact with the glitch as a kind of post-anthropocentric encounter. Joseph Lindley (Lancaster University, UK), presented his research into Design Fiction with the help of a smart kettle and Google Assistant in his paper “Ghost Hunting with Object Oriented Ontology and Animism.” The two smart objects were given opportunity to engage in a conversation with one another, challenging one another’s agential capacities – the smart kettle sharply uttering “but you can’t boil water though, can you?” This talk, along with the others of the day, emphasised the relevance of object-oriented ontologies (OOO), animism, and post-anthropocentric theoretical frameworks for understanding the complex agencies and presences of glitches as important and valid objects for critical concern. Kerry Dodd’s (Lancaster University, UK) paper “Rendering the Ghost: Towards a Digital-orientated Ontology” considered the mixed ontologies implicated in digital spaces, looking closely at the TV series *Mr Robot* (2015-2019). David Hulks (University of East Anglia, UK) presented on ‘The Glitchiness of Contemporary Art.’ Hulks’ paper considered the human desire for error, and the ways artworks emerge as living systems.

During a short 20 minute discussion section after lunch, speakers and audience members reconvened for the section of the day entitled “Please Stand By.” Two ‘glitch’ video montages, created by the collaborative artists Matthews AND Allen, were shown to the audience of attendees, made up of footage of various malfunctioning machine assemblages from World War One to the present day. The short videos inspired conversations about the roots of digital ephemerality, moving from the server to the cloud, and the utilitarian aspects of contemporary technological use. Attendees also discussed the gendered roots of spiritualism and the ways this coincided with the female role of ‘computer’ during the World Wars.

Will Slocombe’s keynote talk “On System Interrupts and the Structural Imagination” was a fascinating and rigorous exploration of system interrupts, particularly in relation to fictions concerned with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Slocombe considered the “structural imagination,” as a way of thinking about the imaginings of AI and their presentation in both written and visual fictions. The paper considered the visualisation of the glitch and the ghost, leading Slocombe to argue that the ghost is a reality glitch – an unruly presence which marks a breakthrough. The glitch, Slocombe considered, can also be a voice of freedom enabled when there is a breaking through *into* a system. Slocombe’s paper explored the mixed representations and theorisations of surface and depth in considerations of glitch and error, linking this to debates around narratology and discourse-as-interface which is to read *through*. Slocombe’s book *Emergent Patterns: Artificial Intelligence and the Structural Imagination* was published with Peter Lang in 2019.

Overall, the *Glitches and Ghosts* conference provided a really unique opportunity for researchers of a fairly niche subject area to come together and share their work; this was particularly effective given that researchers were at all stages of their careers. The organisation of the conference was stellar, and Kerry did a fantastic job of putting together the programme and circulating information to attendees prior to event. Both Kerry and Brian were incredible hosts and initiated some really enlightening discussions throughout the day. The conference left me with a real sense of the importance of considering mediated error as a fruitful and important enterprise. Glitches entertain the strange and the beautiful, the unproductive and the productive, surface and depth. I truly look forward to reading the papers that have come out of the conference, and look forward to *Glitches and Ghosts* conference #2!

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## BIONOTE

**Vicki Williams** is a doctoral researcher in the English Department at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her research focuses on the ways identity and embodiment are captured in and through immersive virtual environments and virtual reality (VR) in particular. She has published work on the compatibility of virtual reality and the Horror genre. Her research interests include phenomenology, immersive technologies, mediated horror and glitch studies. Vicki also co-convenes the PLAY/PAUSE videogame and VR seminar series at the University of Birmingham.

# GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL FANTASY CONVERSATIONS (MAY, 23-24, 2019)

Conference Report by Benjamin Miller

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***Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations. Mapping the Mythosphere. University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK 23 and 24 May 2019.***

What is Fantasy? Fantasy is a collective, made up of a myriad of different stories by numerous authors. It is nebulous and ever expanding, made up of books, movies, games, works of art, poetry, and many other forms of expression. Even more than that, Fantasy has deep roots, stretching all the way back to myths, folktales, and legends. All of these different stories are interconnected with each other and these connections constitute the Mythosphere, which formed the central theme for this year's Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations: *Mapping the Mythosphere*. Panels were devoted to understanding and contextualising the complex and ever-changing network of Fantasy. The event spanned two days and included fourteen panels, three keynote speakers, and four different workshops, all of which were centred around the ideas of fantasy and the Mythosphere.

The event had three keynote speakers, each of which were invigorating as well as informative, and helped cement the theme and tone of the event. The first keynote speaker was Kristy Logan (United Kingdom), an author who specialises in rewriting fairy tales and folktales, who presented on "Twice Upon a Time: The Lure of Retelling." Logan discussed how other authors and herself have reframed folktales in order to make them more relevant to today's society. Specifically, she engaged with stories that put agency back into the hands of the female characters through the books she writes or performance art pieces that she creates. One of the stories she is particularly interested in is the English folktale, Mr. Fox. The story focuses on a young woman, Mary, who gets engaged to the wealthy Mr. Fox. Before their wedding, Mary realises that Mr. Fox is a murderer and gets her brothers to intervene. Logan turned this story into a performance piece in which she gives even more power to the female protagonist by turning Mr. Fox into a steppingstone in Mary's life.

Brian Attebery's (Idaho State University, USA) keynote explored the differences between the Horror and Fantasy genres and how the latter can help its readers to deal with fear in their own lives. The border between Fantasy and Horror is often highly contested due to them having quite similar elements. Both genres ask the reader to imagine the impossible and Fantasy often contains terrifying monsters and moments of horror. However, Attebery argued that Horror is Fantasy cut off before the conclusion. The former is only interested in creating one visceral emotion, while the latter goes through highs and lows to tell a story. This allows Fantasy to show what happens after the terror has passed; reminding the reader that fear is something we all must face, but that we can overcome.



The final keynote by Mel Gibson (Northumbria University, UK) was “‘For the Love of Mary Anning, A Pack of Dinosaurs?!’ The Mythosphere, STEM Subjects, Agentic Girlhood and Comics.” Gibson’s talk primarily focused on two comics, *Lumberjanes* (2014) and *Ms. Marvel* (2014). Both comics are primarily aimed at a younger female demographic, trying to provide girls with positive role models. *Lumberjanes* focuses on fostering a love for Maths and Science in young girls, where *Ms. Marvel* focuses on politics, especially women’s rights and immigration. However, instead of just pushing these arguments completely on their own, which would be dull for the intended audience, they are presented in fantastic narratives which are much more engaging for younger readers. Comics such as these use fantastic settings and whimsical styles to make social issues and political activism more accessible and exciting for their readers. Overall, Gibson argued that comics are a very intertextual medium in which many different genres and ideas can mix together, breaking down borders.

On the second morning of the event, participants were given the opportunity to attend one of four workshops in order to get more hands-on learning. I attended the workshop “When Your Characters Have Their Own Ideas: Approaches to Research in Fantasy” by the author K. L. Bone (Queen’s University Belfast, UK), who discussed how important research is to writing as readers will be more engaged when the story world is realistic. She shared her experience as a published writer and pointed out areas that she thought were important when doing research. What was really helpful about this workshop was that participants were also able to give their own experiences and thoughts on the subject. This allowed those in attendance to hear multiple perspectives on the subject, and learn more information than just the speaker could provide alone. Workshops like this are particularly helpful because they give aspiring writers the chance to talk to an author about how they got published and ask them questions about their writing process.

Over the course of the event, there were many different panels in which delegates shared their research and discussed the intricacies of Fantasy. The first panel that I attended was “(Un)Still Lives: The Art of the Mythosphere,” which explored the different ways that art interacts with and has affected the genre of Fantasy. The first speaker, Alexandra Gushurst-Moore (University of York, UK), talked about how the romanisation of the Medieval period during the Victorian era has shaped how the former is represented in Western Fantasy today. Victorian artists became obsessed with Medieval Britain, due to the fact that it was undeniably English, but this period was fictitious in the nature of its representation – a place where anything could happen, a time when dragons could have existed, and the world was a utopia of knightly honour and chivalry. All of these dreams of the medieval have persisted into the modern day and are the reason that it is an attractive setting for Western Fantasy. Lucinda Holdsworth’s (University of Glasgow, UK) presentation was on how the Glasgow Girls’ art style influenced Fantasy, but has been almost forgotten because they were looked down on by critics. She argued that one of the artists, Jessie King, inspired J. R. R. Tolkien’s illustrations of Middle Earth, due to the fact that the two share a lot of similarities, such as their landscapes and style of tiaras. Amy Barkhaus (University of Glasgow, UK) presented on the map of Fairyland by Bernard Sleight and how it represents the idea that all stories are connected. She tied this map to Tolkien’s analogy of Fantasy being a collective soup that is eternally being added to,

saying that the map of fairyland is ever expanding; indeed that if it were created today, the map would be much larger.

The second panel I attended was "Drawing Your Own Map: Fan Creation in the Mythosphere." The talks for this panel focused on why non-canon material is created and how they affect the primary texts. Christopher Lynch (University of Glasgow, UK) talked about how maps and guides of Discworld made by outside sources affect how people read Terry Pratchett's work. While writing his books, Pratchett did not want to make an official map of Discworld, intending instead for readers to not be constrained in how they picture it. However, this did not stop outside sources from making maps and guides in order to cash in on the popularity of the books. Now most people who read the books have at least one of these guides, which shape the way they approach the story. Parinita Shetty (University of Leeds, UK) discussed fanfiction's potential as a space where minorities, like the LGBT+ community, can express themselves and get their voices heard. Unlike more mainstream authors who are trying to get their books published, fanfiction writers have the freedom to engage with subjects that are deemed too controversial. Staying on the topic of fanfiction, Sarah Boyd (University of Stirling, UK) argued that this form is an important type of media because it helps to take ownership of our stories back from large corporations. When Disney company bought the rights to *Star Wars*, they were able to freely dictate what is canon and made much of the media around the series, other than the movies, outside of it. However, fanfiction is a field in which these corporations do not hold all of the power, and the fans can finally take control.

My third panel was "The Map is the Territory: The Real is the Fantastic," which focused on how Fantasy interacts with real world history and ideologies. Ben Littlejohns (University of Glasgow, UK) discussed how in media, pirates have become silly caricatures, devoid of any real humanity, and thus it is hard to fully explore the disturbing colonial past that led to them. In most stories the pirate treasure was first stolen from colonised indigenous people and countries thus Britain villainised the pirates so that they did not have to account for their own actions. David Allen (University of Wolverhampton, UK) and Agata Handley (University of Łódź, Poland) did a joint talk on theology in Fantasy. They engaged with J. R. R. Tolkien's idea that writing a secondary world is a reflection of God's creation and the Romantic idea of *locus amoenus* or the mythic garden. They argued that the obsession in the eighteenth and nineteenth century of reclaiming the lost garden of Eden lead to the rise of Fantasy. Finally, Mariana Rios Maldonado (University of Glasgow, UK) talked about how the comics series, *Hellblazer* (1990) engages with contemporary anxiety about nuclear trauma. The comic was based off of real events that took place in the UK in the 1980s, but have mainly been forgotten, comics like this ensure that these tragedies are not truly forgotten.

My fourth panel was "A Trail of Breadcrumbs: Fairy Tales in the Mythosphere." Akylina Printziou (University of Athens, Greece) talked about the works of Angela Carter and Kurahashi Yumiko, two female authors who rewrite fairy tales for a modern audience. Even though these two female authors come from different cultures, their stories are quite similar to each other, adding more mature content to fairy tales and making providing them with a feminist slant. Alba Morollón Díaz-Faes' (University of Oslo, Norway) presentation was on the way internet creators use Disney imagery

to make social commentary pieces. Disney movies have become a symbol of media safety, never dealing with what they perceive as controversial representation, so artists using Disney characters and motifs in order to make social commentaries on subjects deemed un-family friendly, such as homosexuality, makes this art more shocking and therefore thought provoking.

The final panel I attended was "Mythosphere-ology: Approaches to Fantasy." Mary Reding (Upper Iowa University, USA) discussed the idea of looking at the hero's journey as a three-dimensional sphere, as it is more complex than just a straight line. She proposed that the journey is actually a series of cycles that interlock with each other, because often the journey does not end but loops back to the start or starts a new cycle. Georgina Wilkinson (University of Glasgow, UK) theorised about how Fantasy fits into the multiverse theory. She argued that if the multiverse theory is correct then there must exist realities in which all of the Fantasy stories of our world are likewise true. The final talk was by Stephanie Millar (University of Strathclyde, UK), who discussed the YouTube group, Monster Factory, who play video games but make new narratives out of them which the original creators never intended. She argued that one of the more famous characters that they made, The Final Pam, was supposed to be based off of Christian imagery, but took a lot of influence from Greek myth, showing how creators can be influenced by works that came before them subconsciously.

Overall, it was a great opportunity to come to Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations. It was truly an extraordinary opportunity to be able to hear and compare ideas with other up and coming fantasy scholars creating a new understanding together, just like the Mythosphere.

## BIONOTE

**Benjamin Miller** has a BA in Anthropology from Northern Arizona University, USA. He is currently working on an MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow. Throughout his life, Benjamin has traveled the world, having visited Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and a large portion of Europe. He has interests in German folklore and Greek mythology, and has researched them throughout his studies.

## GOTHIC SPECTACLE AND SPECTATORSHIP (JUNE, 1, 2019)

Conference Report by Brontë Schiltz

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***Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship*. Lancaster University, Lancaster, England, 1 June 2019.**

On a suitably overcast day in June, scholars and lovers of the Gothic congregated at Lancaster University for *Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship*, a one-day symposium which aimed “to provoke questions as to the nature and evolution of viewership and performance within the Gothic.” Beginning with a keynote given by Xavier Aldana Reyes (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) on reception studies as the future of Gothic scholarship, the symposium then consisted of five panels, four of which ran in parallel pairs, throughout the day.

Panel 1A was on Gothic fashion, and consisted of papers by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK) on the intersection of race, fabric, and horror in imperialist narratives, Victoria Hurtado (Independent) on the aesthetic experience of Alexander McQueen, and Jennifer Cameron (University of Hertfordshire, UK) on attire and otherness in *Dracula* (1897). Meanwhile, Panel 1B, on the Victorian Gothic, featured work by Kate Cherrell (University of Lincoln, UK) on the influence of Victorian reality on Gothic fiction, Zoe Chadwick (Newman University, UK) on marketing freakshows, and Brian Jukes (University of Hertfordshire, UK) on vampirism and degeneration in *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). After lunch, Panel 2A, on the Gothic on screen, comprised of my paper on implicated viewership and the production of horror in *Inside No. 9* (2014-current), Luke Turley (Lancaster University, UK) on liberal horror in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-current), and Teodora Nikolova (Durham University, UK) on contemporary American Gothic aesthetics in *Riverdale* (2017). At the same time was Panel 2B, on Gothic theatricalities, which saw Marita Arvaniti (University of Glasgow, UK) speak on staging *The Monk* (1796) in the twenty-first century, Shauna Caffrey (University College Cork, Ireland) discuss the supernatural in Restoration theatre, and Gheorge William (Durham University, England) explore the role that Gothic theatricalities play in the urgent need to express the unspeakable experience of sexual trauma. Finally, the day came to a close with a paper by Katie Noble (Independent Scholar, UK) on portraying infanticide in representations of Medea, and a presentation by Ruth-Anne Walbank and Lara Orriss (Lancaster University, UK) of their creative critical undergraduate project, “Death of the New Woman: A Photographic Novel,” a strikingly modern feminist reimagining of *Dracula*.

Given that the symposium sought not just to explore the Gothic, but also “viewer/performer relationships and the instability of these boundaries within the Gothic mode,” Aldana Reyes’ work could not have been more suitable to open the day. Reception studies, he argued, is about knowing ourselves and our actions and reactions. This is vital to a comprehensive study of horror, which,

as he illustrated through a brief examination of *Mama* (2013), which has been variously read as centrally concerned with the return of the repressed, critiquing patriarchy, castration anxieties, and a scary, vengeful revenant, produces potentially vastly different responses in different audiences, which may or may not be those which writers or directors intended. This thought-provoking address set the tone for the day: those in attendance were, like Aldana Reyes, clearly not merely interested in a mode of fiction which has terrified, repulsed, and delighted audiences for over two and a half centuries, but also in what it means to participate in such viewership, and, by association, what it means to be human.

Aldana Reyes' work also posed a question which again recurred throughout the day. In his monograph on the subject at hand, *Horror Film and Affect* (2016), he explains that, after watching *Hostel* (2005):

I pondered not just about the ethics of the characters' actions but also my own involvement and role as consumer of violent spectacles: had I enjoyed the film? If so, did that make me complicit in the torture-for-sale business at the heart of the film? Was I in some way responsible for the carnographic spectacles I had witnessed? (1)

This appeared to be a question with which many in attendance were preoccupied, and the symposium was boldly unique in that, while derision from numerous external sources prompts many academics within the field to defend the Gothic ferociously, many of the day's speakers acknowledged the potentially damaging effects of both producing and consuming the darkly spectacular. Cherrell, for instance, discussed the manner in which Victorian spiritualism, while providing a means of escape from the suffocating confines of feminine expectations, also prompted numerous violent and exploitative practices.

The symposium also highlighted the role of new media in shaping and reshaping the Gothic mode. The symposium's call for papers was accompanied by Dale Townshend's assertion that "the Gothic imagination is one of ghostly and ghastly spectacle" (xl). This, Townshend argues, is because it is "[s]ynonymous in the mind of Coleridge and other detractors with the phantasmagoric displays of the magic lantern show" (xl). In *The Ghost: A Cultural History* (2017), Susan Owens delves into the influence of such theatricalities on the Gothic mode's genesis, explaining that, prior to the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), "[l]ight shows had long been associated with the projection of ghosts" (132). This proved of particular relevance to the panel on Gothic television since, as Karen Williams argues, alongside spirit photography, "the supernatural of reality TV participates in another genealogy as well: the ghost show or phantasmagoria," and tied the panel perhaps surprisingly neatly to that on the Victorian Gothic, during which Cherrell explored the influence of Victorian spiritualism, including spirit photography, on Gothic fictions past and present (149). As some worry that the term 'Gothic' has becoming troublingly loose, such connections served to demonstrate that the spirit of the Gothic is much as it always has been.

The Victorian Gothic panel also demonstrated that Aldana Reyes' concerns for the morality of the consumption of extreme Gothic spectacles is by no means new, through Chadwick's investigation into the exploitative marketisation of otherness in the nineteenth century freakshow. In this way, a further question emerged from the day's discussions: spectacle may be inherent to the Gothic, but might it not also be possible that the Gothic is inherent to spectacle, too? In its association with the dark side of culture, the return of that which society has repressed, and an obsession with transgression, which Turley argues is the core component of the Gothic mode, is perhaps spectacle itself as potentially Gothic as crumbling castles and suits of armour? Moreover, if this is the case, then could there be any better time to study the Gothic? As Guy Debord remarks at the very beginning of *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), "[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life itself is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (7). This could not more clearly connect with Jerrold Hogle's work on "the ghost of the counterfeit" – that is, "the Gothic re-faking of fakery" that has been intrinsic to the mode since the ghosts that walked Walpole's eponymous castle emerged not from graves, but from paintings (489). In the age of reality television and social media, could Angela Carter's forty-five-year-old claim that "we live in Gothic times" be any more apt (133)?

A slight difficulty presented itself in the fact that the event was held in the Ruskin Library, the open plan architecture of which meant that it was sometimes possible to hear applause or audio from one panel while sitting or presenting in another, but these occasional and minor distractions seemed to be unanimously forgiven in light of the beauty of the space. The primary triumph of the symposium, however, was its defiant assertion that the Gothic is, in spite of itself, still very much a part of contemporary culture. From Julian Wolfreys' claim that "[t]he Gothic was dead, to begin with," to Alexandra Warwick's that the Gothic is now "so large as to be meaningless," there is a sense that a growing number of academics are now shaking their heads at the insistent, perpetual probing of the Gothic for scholarly debate (xi; 8). As Aldana Reyes argued, however, as he took Fred Botting's sense of hopelessness towards the future of the field to task, it is perhaps not so much that the Gothic is now redundant, but rather that it is by nature adaptable and hence multifarious, and *Gothic Spectacle and Spectatorship* adeptly reflected this element of the mode. One would be hard-pressed to find many other symposiums with source materials including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* alongside *Riverdale* and Alexander McQueen, or which showcase the creative critical works of second year undergraduates. As Chadwick argued in her paper, Gothic fiction, like the freakshow, provides a response to the mysteries of human nature that can be answered neither by science nor religion. In these uncertain times, such meditations are perhaps more vital than ever. The Gothic, the symposium resolutely proved, remains, in spite of itself, very much alive and kicking, and as spectacular as ever.

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## BIONOTE

**Brontë Schiltz** recently graduated from the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, with an MA in English Studies: The Gothic. Her research interests include the televisual and digital Gothic, the neoliberal Gothic, and the queer Gothic. She recently had an article published in the SFRA Review.

## CURRENT RESEARCH IN SPECULATIVE FICTION 2019 (JUNE 6, 2019)

Conference Report by Phoenix Alexander

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***Current Research in Speculative Fiction. Liverpool University, Liverpool, UK, June 6, 2019.***

The ninth annual Current Research in Speculative Fiction (CRSF) conference took place on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and brought together early-stage scholars and faculty working at the intersections of digital humanities, speculative fiction, Africanfuturism, and physics. The conference took place in its now-established home in the beautiful library of the School of the Arts, and welcomed around forty attendees.

Nicole Devarenne (University of Dundee, UK) was the first keynote speaker of the day. Their talk, titled "Primitives, Liars and Savages: British New Wave Science Fiction and the End of Empire in Africa" commenced proceedings with inspired critical readings of British New Wave authors who used the continent of Africa as a backdrop for their narratives. Invoking Achille Mbembe's work, Devarenne explained that, typically, when "Africa" was invoked in Science Fiction (SF) by non-African writers, it was usually to comment on something *else*. They eloquently encapsulated the fact that the continent serves as a backdrop for a kind of colonial narcissistic imagination. A particularly startling connection was revealed through Devarenne's comparing dialogue from a Nigerian character in John Christopher's *The World in Winter* (1962) with an address from Viscount Malvern in the House of Lords in March, 1959. The comparative analysis illuminated the paranoia of a British colonial administration that frequently resorted to sweeping and gross characterisations of "African" people. Similarly, J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) invokes primordial psycho-geographic landscapes reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Both texts, Devarenne argued, used their "African" settings as metaphysical battlefields devoid of all specificity, presenting sites of internal struggle for the *European* wanderer.

Shifting perspectives (and decades), a morning panel on "Non-Western SF" looked to the contemporary genres of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism and the increasing recognition of genre literature written by people of colour. Fruzsina Pittner's (University of Dundee, UK) talk "Taking Charge: African Past, African Futurism" was driven by the question: what happens when African and Afrodiasporic authors take charge of their own narrative? Looking at a range of 'texts' – covering fiction, illustration, games, and other digital media – Pittner emphasised the fact that there is no one tidy answer, gesturing to the complexity of the issues of representation and inclusion. Lyu Guangzhao's (University College of London, UK) "The Boom and the Boom: A Comparative Study of Post-1990s British and Chinese Science Fiction" compared 'booms' in British and Chinese SF in the twentieth century, focussing on the ways in which shifting political landscapes permitted a more



challenging – and critical – form of SF to emerge. While both presenters offered compelling cross-cultural analyses of contemporary trends in SF, some audience members pointed out that the overarching theme of ‘Non-Western’ genre fiction was too broad a topic to allow for satisfyingly in-depth discussion.

The afternoon panels saw a deeper engagement with contemporary technologies that change our understanding and definition of speculative fiction. Rachel Hill (Goldsmiths, University of London, UK), in a panel on “SF Visualities,” opened their talk (“Saturn, Trembling in the Crystal Lens of the Telescope:” Science Fictional Visualities of Outer Space”) with the provocation: how do we counter reductive, conditioning and predictive deployments of SF visuals? Hill presented and analysed images from the Hubble telescope, revealing how they draw upon visual tropes of Romanticism and the sublime. The artifice of Hubble images has been naturalised; they purportedly present what space ‘actually’ looks like, all lurid vistas and dizzying vertical compositions. Moreover, the aesthetic has permeated other SF ‘texts’ – particularly in the lens-flare style and lurid coloration of *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017). Hill cited Afrofuturist Kodwo Eshun in their reading of such techniques as embodying the concept of “control and prediction”: a narrative strategy that reorients public imaginaries to certain visions of futurity.

The next presenter, Dani Williamson (Independent, Israel), presented alternate modalities of futurity and narrative-breaking aesthetics with their projects “XPlaceSpace” and “Seedwire” – the latter drawing on the “Earthseed” creed from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) novels. Their research and work as a video artist deals with probable and ideal futures through the lenses of technology, futurism, social connectivity, and borders by focusing on two-dimensional filmic mediums that connect space. Such media, they argued, allow for a communal state of interaction as opposed to the more solitary sensory phenomena enabled by technologies like VR or AR (virtual and augmented reality).

The final presenter on the “SF Visualities” panel was Jaime Babb (University of Dundee, UK) with their analysis of visual representations of hyperspace in comics in their talk “To Blaze Forever in a Blazing World’: Space, Time and Hyperspace in Comics.” Babb, who has a background in mathematical physics, gave a brief historical overview of the concept of “hyperspace,” which emerged from n-dimensional mathematics and refers to conjectured spaces with dimensions beyond height, width, and depth. Albert Einstein’s popularisation of the idea of time as a fourth dimension resulted in “hyperspace” becoming a temporal concept in the public imagination. Babb discussed the problems of presenting hyperdimensions in comic panels, summarising three means of doing so: unravelling them into 3D parts, presenting their 3D cross-section, and projecting them into a third dimension via animation. Closing with similarly divergent depictions of hyperspace in Alan Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* (2007), Babb concluded by affirming comics as a fascinating laboratory for explorations of hyperspace.

One of the last panels of the day, “SF Productions” saw critical readings of contemporary digital media and comic narratives. Connor Jackson (Edge Hill University, UK) and Monica Guerrasio

(Lancaster University, UK) both analysed female representation in the *Dead Rising* (2006-2017) video game series and independent comics respectively. Jackson's talk, "'I'm tired of low carbs. I'm tired of celery. I'm hungry': Gluttonous Food Consumption in Capcom's *Dead Rising* Series," traced the reaction of the in-game world as players excessively consume its food items, serving as a sharp critique of consumerism and food industries. Guerrasio took us through the deconstruction of gender in mainstream and independent comic books via a genealogy of female representation in four case studies: *The Boys* (2006-2012), *Harrow County* (2015-2018), *Nimona* (2015) and *Pretty Deadly* (2014-2016). Beáta Gubacsi (University of Liverpool, UK), in a slightly different register, turned to video games that move away from encouraging exploitation of natural resources/killing biological life (such as *The Last of Us*, 2013). Instead, Gubacsi presented games that create "emotive" storytelling in their design. Gubacsi cited *Flow* (2006) and *Flower* (2009) as early games that were invested in creating a sensory "flow" or particular user experience. More recent games, such as *Journey* (2012) and *Abzû* (2017), take similarly visual and non-narrative approaches to tell stories in unfamiliar virtual environments, blurring the line between ecology and civilisation. All the papers provided sophisticated analyses of contemporary trends in speculative fiction texts, modelling an interdisciplinary approach in the connections, and contrasts, they drew.

Paul March-Russell (University of Kent, UK) gave the final, keynote lecture of the conference: "On the Threshold of Sexual Difference: Re-Gendering the Eerie in Daisy Johnson's *Fen*." In their analysis, the "eerie" has two modalities: that of the failure of *presence*, whereby we expect something and are instead met with an abyss – and that of the failure of *absence*, whereby we expect nothing but are instead met with residue and excess. *Fen* (2016) not only embodies these dynamics, but allows us to access – as all short stories do, in March-Russell's analysis – a generative state of liminality. Thus, they concluded, short stories should always be read as *fragments*; not liminal in themselves, but producing liminality as one of their generative effects.

Border-crossing and boundary-shifting, then, emerged as the overarching themes of CRSF 2019. We thank all of the presenters and attendees for inspiring new thought with their research, and look forward to next year's conference!

## BIONOTE

**Phoenix Alexander** is the Science Fiction Collections Librarian at the University of Liverpool's Special Collections and Archives division, UK. He recently completed his PhD in the departments of English and African American Studies at Yale University and is a writer as well a scholar of Science Fiction. His work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Black Static*, *Metaphorosis*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.

# LEGACIES OF URSULA K. LE GUIN: SCIENCE, FICTION AND ETHICS FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE (JUNE 18-21, 2019)

Conference Report by Heloise Thomas

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*The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction and Ethics for the Anthropocene.* Institut du Monde Anglophone, Paris, France, June 18-21, 2019.

In her keynote address, Julie Phillips (Independent, Netherlands), Ursula K. Le Guin's official biographer, quoted an excerpt from Le Guin's journal: "what happens to me when I am writing: I am in love with the work, the subject, the characters, and while it goes on and a while after, the opus itself. – I function only by falling in love." Unabashedly predicating one's relationship to the world on love felt relevant and urgent at a time where power abuse seemed to dominate the news cycle. The *Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin* conference that took place in the heart of Paris in June 2019 thus paid homage to Le Guin, notably by emphasising the care, love, and attention that characterised Le Guin's mode of seeing, thinking, and writing the world around her.

Before anything else, I must thank David Creuze and Katie Stone, whose respective recordings and livetweeting of the conference have been incredibly helpful as I was writing and fact checking this report.

The conference opened on Tuesday night with a screening of Arwen Curry's dazzling 2018 documentary, *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Then, through nine panels and three keynotes from Wednesday to Friday, the conference materialised the intersections of Le Guin's philosophy and practice. The first panel, "Anthropocene," grappled with the relevance and limitations of this term. Through Le Guin's "She Unnames Them" (1985), Chessa Adsit-Morris (University of California Santa Cruz, USA) reflected on how we imagine post-Anthropocene futures in an effort to move toward multi-species, non-anthropocentric alliances. Taking his cue from Le Guin's keynote address at the *Art of Living on a Damaged Planet* conference, Brad Tabas (ENSTA Bretagne, France) highlighted the role of the light/darkness dichotomy in Le Guin's work, to show how the "dark" functions as a nourishing principle that materialises the messiness of human existence and human roots. Supriya Baijal (Deemed University, India) turned her attention to the eco-critical dimension of children's literature, with a focus on *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968): she analysed how this literature stages the impossibility of infinite human growth by engaging with power and balance through the prism of ecological concerns. Kim Hendricks (KU Leuven, Belgium) rounded off the discussion of how Le Guin's practice of Science Fiction relates to the future by "activating the present" – a mode of engagement with time that helps bypass simplistic predictive models of the future.

The “Worlds, Bonds, Beings” panel shifted the focus more explicitly to relationality. Focusing on *Always Coming Home* (1985), Eli Lee (*Minor Literature[s]*, UK) explored how Le Guin’s non-hierarchical communities are predicated on the dismantling of binaries, including the human/non-human one. Katie Stone (Birkbeck, University of London, UK) took the figure of the “geolinguist” in Le Guin’s works as one of her focal points and highlighted how the relationship between human and non-human ceaselessly comes back to the forefront: you cannot escape the grip of the non-human even by travelling through time. Drawing on Achille Mbembe and Gerry Canavan’s works, Francis Gene-Rowe (Royal Holloway, UK) considered the role of necropolitics in Le Guin’s works. He connected the growing meaninglessness of language in works like *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) to our contemporary experience of ecological grief and argued that confronting necrofuturism means questioning what deliberate atrocities are passed off under the guise of historical inevitability.

We then moved toward a discussion of the entanglements between indigeneity and Le Guin’s writings and philosophy. As a daughter of anthropologists, she had access to thinking about indigeneity in other ways, but still retained privilege from her position as a white settler, something Arwen Spicer (Clark College, USA) clearly articulated. Analysing the Ekumen, Spicer highlighted how they operated within a model of consent rather than colonialism and put Le Guin’s writings in conversation with indigenous futurism. Miranda Iossifidis and Lisa Garforth (Newcastle University, UK) gave a joint paper discussing the creation of speculative sociology in Le Guin’s works: they connected the fragmentary, polyphonic nature of these writings to the genre of critical green utopias. Stefan Schustereder (Universität Tübingen, Germany) proposed that *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) troubles and complicates the canon of dystopian writing by refusing to flatten various modes of difference into simplistic binaries and by foregrounding postcolonial hybridity and fluidity.

The first keynote brought the day to a close. Julie Phillips spoke of Le Guin’s life in Paris, and what the city brought her in terms of opening up new horizons of the imagination. Le Guin went to France on a Fulbright scholarship, and this experience was formative on many levels: she was seeking a place and time when she made sense and preferred to think in terms of millennia rather than in years, which nourished her political understanding of human communities. Phillips spoke movingly of Ursula and Charles Le Guin’s first encounters in Paris and their unfurling relationship, connecting Le Guin’s curiosity and wide-ranging interests to her practice of writing Science Fiction, and concluded that Le Guin thought of it all in terms of relations of love.

The “New Epistemologies” panel on Thursday morning further addressed how the utopian core of Le Guin’s writings engenders new modes of knowledge. David Creuze (Université de Lille, France) examined the role of Taoism in Le Guin’s vision of the world, especially through the yin/yang binary, which Le Guin interrogates while simultaneously revalorising the “yin” aspect. Creuze parsed out the significance and implications of the yin utopia expounded in the 1989 essay “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be.” Liesl King (York St John University, UK) read in Le Guin’s Science Fiction an exhortation to slow down and allow for truth to be “a matter of the imagination,” rather than a fixed thing. Only then, as King pointed out, can we access the kind of deep interior travel that Le Guin sought and explored through her fiction: while moving slowly

implies a massive recalibration of the ways we interact with and relate to the world around us, it may be our saving grace.

In the second keynote, Brian Attebery (Idaho State University, USA) pointed out how Le Guin's career is often divided into two distinct eras: the sixties and seventies versus the post-nineties. While some of her readers grumbled at the later era, which notably saw the expansion of feminist visions in Le Guin's writing, many others rejoiced in such a reframing and in the more experimental works. However, what interested Attebery first and foremost is what happened between these two eras: far from falling silent, Le Guin carried on creating category-defying works, hinging on her oft-overlooked masterpiece, *Always Coming Home*. The latter, Attebery argued, weaves a narrative that favours sustainability and collaboration on all levels: it is not the storytelling we have been used to, but the storytelling that we need, entreating us to listen, remain attentive, and off the beaten track.

The "Stages of Life" panel put in conversation two papers that looked at the construction of family and childhood in various Le Guin's works. Meghann Cassidy (Ecole Polytechnique, France) drew a parallel between the transformation of caterpillars and that of teenagers, which led her to discuss the metaphysics of Tenar's transformation in *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), weaving a line through the metamorphosis of personhood and nominal identification from childhood to adulthood. Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard (Université de Tours, France) argued that various texts from the Hainish cycle gestured at a redefinition of the human family paradigm by questioning the self-evidence of heterosexuality and the nuclear family through the prism of the Gothic.

The next panel delved more profoundly into Le Guin's utopias, starting with Dennis Wilson Wise (University of Arizona, USA) who offered a reading of *The Dispossessed's* ambiguous utopias through Plato and Leo Strauss, discussing the similarities between the ideal republic imagined by Plato and Socrates and Le Guin's Anarres. Joshua Abraham Kopin (University of Texas Austin, USA) focused on the concept of fidelity in *The Dispossessed* (1974), expanding on how trust and loyalty, especially for Shevek, hinge on freedom and the ability to choose. Justin Cosner (University of Iowa, USA) analysed *The Lathe of Heaven* as a meta-science-fictional text that offers a nuanced critique of both the authoritarian antagonists and the liberal heroes.

The last day opened with a panel on "Translation / transmission." Stephanie Burt (Harvard University, USA) could not make it to the conference, but Julie Phillips read her paper, which drew parallels between Le Guin's stories and the X-Men superheroes in order to explore the complex layers of power and responsibility. Maria Skakuj-Puri (Independent, Poland) spoke about the translation of Le Guin's works by Stanisław Barańczak in communist Poland, which allowed her to expand the discussion to that of transnational transmission of Science Fiction and the various forms of censorship that accompanied it. Tracing an arc from "creating *the* future" to "creating potential futures," Emily York (James Madison University, USA) talked about using Le Guin's Science Fiction and essays in STEM classes, where she tries to get students to recognise there are assumptions even in science and to interrogate them. Finally, Diégo Antolinos-Basso and Damien A. Bright (Sciences Po, France / University of Chicago, USA) offered another joint paper, which took the form of a slightly

tongue-in-cheek, fabulated epistolary exchange. Noting the similarities between stories and letters, they explored the conversations about science, authority, and speculation that Le Guin weaves with her readers through her fiction and essays.

The French-language part – two panels and the last keynote – were grouped on Friday afternoon, and in many ways brought the conference full-circle. In the “Fiction-panier” (“Carrier bag theory of fiction”) panel, Noémie Moutel (Université de Caen, France) gave a close reading of the 1982 short story “Sur” to reflect on alternative stories that reject the dominant narrative arc of conquest and exploitation and that centre a form of humility in exploration. Thierry Drumm (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) recalled Audre Lorde’s warning: the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house. He concluded that if the hero’s story supports the master’s house, then we need other stories that are about people and characters rather than heroes, something Le Guin actively practices throughout her work.

The following panel, “Hors la maison du maître” (Outside of the master’s house), prolonged this train of thought. Quentin Dubois (Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France) discussed Le Guin’s rejection of abstraction and militarism and her decision to privilege technologies of reparation rather than domination. Éliane Beaufils (Université Paris 8, France) used the upcoming performance of “Faire Monde Commun” in December 2019 as an example of how theatre may explore the same concerns as Le Guin: the need to change how we construct our subjectivities and how we share and experience together the material world.

Isabelle Stengers (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) gave the last keynote of the conference. She reflected on what it means to think through a science-fictional mode, notably on an ethical level. Using “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973) as a starting point, she drew parallels with William James’ reflections on how the foundation of philosophy necessarily excludes people: just like the philosopher is haunted by the latter, those who stay in Omelas are haunted by those who left. From there, Stengers interrogated our relationship to the institution of science and argued that it is the humanities’ job to explore the realm of possibilities of that institution. Through science-fictional narratives in particular, we are led to avoid serving progress in a mindless, irresponsible manner and to learn gratitude.

Stengers concluded with Donna Haraway’s reminder that we have a lot to learn together. This idea, paired with a quote from *Always Coming Home* that recurred throughout the conference – “One does not get on without hope” – seemed to be a major running thread, as every participant sought to highlight the ambiguous utopias that live within Le Guin’s speculative fiction and essays. This collective energy, dedicated to thinking otherwise under the guidance of Le Guin’s celebration of multiplicity, ensured the conference’s enduring success and the confirmation of Le Guin’s perennial heritage for science and ethics in an Anthropocenic world.

**BIONOTE**

**Heloise Thomas** is a PhD student at Bordeaux Montaigne University and an adjunct at Lyon 3 University, France. Their dissertation studies the representations of history and historiography in twenty-first-century US literature, from a feminist, queer, and decolonial perspective, notably exploring the interplay of archives, gender, queerness, race, and the apocalypse in contemporary literature. A former student of the ENS de Lyon, they have taught in French and US colleges and are invested in literary activism in parallel to their academic work.

## FOLK HORROR IN THE 21ST CENTURY (SEPTEMBER 5-6, 2019)

Conference Report by Miranda Corcoran

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***Folk Horror in the 21st Century*. Falmouth University, Penryn, UK, 4-6 September 2019.**

The landscape of Cornwall is weird and wild. Farmland is etched onto the façade of a vast countryside that seems older and stranger than its expanses of pastoral silence at first suggest. The coastline is a jagged outcropping where stark, premonitory cliffs tumble down to a roaring sea. The fields and furrows of the Cornish countryside are vital with a lingering, ancient magic. In essence, this remote corner of England's south west peninsula is the most fitting location for a conference dedicated to the eerie power of the rural, the folkish, the rustic. Taking place over three days, from September 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> 2019, *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* set out to interrogate the role of Folk Horror as a transmedial genre. The conference was hosted by Falmouth University's Penryn campus, a remote location conducive to the study of how the countryside lends itself to a horror born of isolation, the arcane, and the uncanny.

Folk Horror is simultaneously very old and intriguingly modern. The term owes its origins to a 2010 interview with the director Piers Haggard, who claimed that in making his Horror classic *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) he was "trying to make a folk horror film..." (Scovell 7). The term was later redeployed by Mark Gatiss in his BBC 4 documentary series *A History of Horror* (2010). In the second episode, "Home Counties Horror," Gatiss utilises the term to knit together three films from the late 1960s and early 1970s that place the uncanniness of the English countryside at the centre of their horrific visions. These three films – *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) – codified a subset of Horror cinema rooted in the perceived eeriness of the rural landscape, its people, and its traditions (Scovell 7). A testament to the power of spectral returns, the genre re-emerged after decades of dormancy in the early twenty-first century with texts such as *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), *The Loney* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *Devil's Day* (2017), and *Midsommar* (2019). Perhaps even more intriguingly, the re-emergence of Folk Horror has spurred critics and fans to search for the genre's origins, tracing its roots not only to nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and M. R. James, but all the way back to Anglo Saxon and Middle English texts like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*Folk Horror in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* was an ambitious conference that sought to interrogate this expansive history and understand the role of Folk Horror in contemporary culture. Panelists and keynote speakers, in formal sessions and in casual conversation, undertook to define the genre, probe its limits, and analyse its key concerns. Although commencing on September 4<sup>th</sup> with a series



of film screenings that included Mark Jenkin's and Denzil Monk's *The New Weird: invoking horror through formal limitation* and *Making Strange: Adapting H. P. Lovecraft for the Screen* by Neil Fox, Ryan Mackfall, and Angela Annesley, the conference proper began on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> with an introductory session by co-organiser Dawn Keetley (Lehigh University, USA). In welcoming the assembled delegates, Keetley outlined existing constructions of Folk Horror, alluding both to academic definitions of the genre and those developed by fans. In particular, Keetley emphasised the important critical work undertaken by Adam Scovell in his book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) and suggested some ways in which existing theories of the genre could be challenged and expanded on over the coming days.

The first panel I attended was entitled "Witchcraft, Feminism, and Folk Horror." The papers in this panel clearly established the ability of Folk Horror to engage with theoretical paradigms and social movements like feminism. The speakers explored a diverse range of topics: Sarah Cave's (University of London, Royal Holloway, UK) fascinating paper discussed mystics like Marjory Kempe and Mother Anne Lee; Deborah Bridle (Université Côte d'Azur, France) spoke about execution in the era of fourth-wave feminism via a stunning analysis of China Miéville's short story "Säcken" (2015); and Máiréad Casey (NUI Galway, Ireland) brilliantly connected body horror and precarious labour in her study of the film *Starry Eyes* (2014). The second session I listened to was focused on the theme of "Encountering Nature in Folk Horror," and it featured some brilliant analyses of the relationship between Folk Horror and the natural landscape by Katy Soar (University of Winchester, UK), David Sweeny (Glasgow School of Art, Scotland), and Andrea Kalthoff (University of Münster, Germany). Lunch featured musical accompaniment by the band We Are Muffy, a group whose songs harken back to both imagined and remembered pasts, and whose work demonstrates the dynamic manner in which Folk Horror motifs have migrated across media to inflect music and performance.

After lunch, I attended my third panel of the day which was centred around the eerie geographies of Folk Horror. The speakers included James Thurgill (University of Tokyo, Japan), who analysed ideas of topophobia and eeriness; Kerry Dodd (Lancaster University, UK) who uncovered traces of Folk Horror in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979); and David Evans-Powell (University of Birmingham, UK) who looked at urban Folk Horror in his discussion of the woefully overlooked British film *Death Line* (1972). The fourth session I attended was entitled "Folk Horror in the US". A delightfully eclectic panel, it featured everything from contemporary cinema to children's cartoons. In this context, Ian Brodie (Cape Breton University, Canada) gave a highly original paper on the use of folklore in the poplar 1970s animated programme *Scooby Doo*. His paper was followed by Linda Shepherd's (Palomar College, USA, and University of East Anglia, UK) incisive analysis of the arcane and landscape memory in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983). Still centred on the landscape but moving further north, Frances Auld (State College of Florida, USA) excavated the layers of topographical meaning inherent in William Gibaldi's Alaskan novel *Hold the Dark* (2014). Finally, Alexandra Hauke (University of Passau, Germany) presented a highly original reading of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) as a folk horrific critique of the prison-industrial complex. The day closed with a fascinating keynote speech by Tanya Krzywinska (Falmouth University, UK) that centred primarily on video games and the manner in which Folk Horror in gaming is shaped by the electronic

medium itself. Krzywinska further encouraged delegates to consider Folk Horror as a transmedial phenomenon by curating an art exhibit, "Strange Folk," which displayed some astounding examples of Folk Horror in visual art.

The second day of the conference opened with a broad-ranging and innovative keynote paper by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK). Spooner discussed the myriad diverse ways in which the infamous story of the Pendle Witches – twenty individuals tried for witchcraft in 1612 – has been adapted and reinterpreted by twenty-first century culture. Spooner's talk incorporated reimaginings of the Pendle Witches in novels, folklore, film, and young adult fiction. However, the most interesting aspect of her presentation was its focus on "Dark Tourism" and the manner in which Lancashire tourist industries that centre on the trials evoke Gothic narrative tropes.

Following Spooner's keynote lecture, I attended a session themed around representations of magic and the occult in Folk Horror. The first speaker, Timothy Jones (University of Stirling, UK), spoke about occulture, an environment in which supernatural, esoteric, and conspiratorial ideas emerge. Jones provided a unique and intriguing analysis of Dennis Wheatley's (1897-1977) occult fiction and his tendency to employ Satanic themes to represent the collapse of an empiricist, classist English conservatism. Angeline Morrison (Falmouth University, UK) followed with a truly original analysis of televisual Folk Horror in her presentation on White Logic vs Black Girl Magic in *Hammer House of Horror's* "Charlie Boy" (1980). Morrison's paper contemplated how, in this episode of the popular British anthology series, the black body empowers and drives the narrative. More importantly, Morrison's presentation highlighted and challenged the troubling absence of people of colour in Folk Horror texts and criticism. The last speaker on this panel was Barbara Chamberlin (University of Brighton and Central Saint Martins, UAL, UK), a practice-based PhD student who provided a fascinating overview of Folk Horror in comics, but also gave the audience an insight into her own graphic narrative about Joan Wytte, the "Fighting Fairy Woman" of Bodmin. The papers at the sixth session I attended were linked thematically under the banner of "Folk Horror's Folklore." The first presentation, by Joan Passey (University of Bristol, UK), discussed folklore collecting and Cornish Gothic. The next paper was presented by Katarzyna Logozna Wypych (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland) and dealt with the many supernatural cats found in the fiction of Stephen King. In particular, Logozna Wypych framed King's sinister felines as a bridge between modernity and the past. The panel concluded with Chelsea Eddy's (University of Lancaster, UK) analysis of Cumbrian Gothic and its relationship to the folklore of the English north.

The third and final keynote speech of the conference was delivered by Bernice Murphy (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland). Centred on the theme of "Backwoods Horror and Human Sacrifice," Murphy's paper positioned Shirley Jackson's iconic 1948 short story "The Lottery" as the foundational text of US Folk Horror, arguing that its repeated refrain of "lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" signals the centrality of corn or maize to American Folk Horror traditions. From here, Murphy moved on to discuss the centrality of the harvest to a host of US Folk Horror texts, from Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home* (1973) to the recent backwoods horror *Jug Face* (2013), as well as analysing how these texts repeatedly foreground anxieties about rurality.

My own paper featured on the penultimate panel of the day and it was co-presented with my colleague Andrea Di Carlo (University College Cork, Ireland). Our paper explored how Robert Eggers's film *The Witch* (2015) draws on Puritan conceptions of the natural Sublime while simultaneously challenging these visions of a threatening wilderness with a feminist interpretation of the sublime that views nature as a liberating force. The panel, which was entirely focused on *The Witch*, also featured a highly original reading of the film by Shauna Louise Caffrey (University College Cork, Ireland) who argued that music is a vital participant in the film, serving as an extension of the often-unseen witch and facilitating a sort of embodiment through music. The final paper on this panel was an insightful comparative study by Amelia Crowther (University of Sussex, UK) who explored *The Witch* in dialogue with the 2006 film *The Woods* and argued that these works represent anxieties about the boundless reproductive body. The conference drew to a close with a panel session that sought to test the limits of the Folk Horror genre. "Rethinking Folk Horror through Contemporary Film and TV" opened with a stunning paper by Andrew Jarvis (University of West Scotland) on the films of Ben Wheatley. The presentation revolved closely around Wheatley's 2012 film *Sightseers* and discussed how this text enacts an "enweirding" of England and Englishness. Kyna McClenaghan (Columbia University School of the Arts, USA) followed this with an insightful exploration of Christian and pagan motifs in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and the Netflix film *Apostle* (2018). The last presentation, by Muhamet Alijaj (University of Exeter, UK), constituted a thoughtful reflection on the role of ritual in *Requiem* (2018) and *True Detective* (2014).

As noted at the outset, *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* was a highly ambitious undertaking. Over a short three-day conference, more than 60 delegates – presenters and keynote speakers – addressed a wide array of ideas pertinent to the burgeoning critical canon of Folk Horror studies. The sheer volume of delegates necessitated a parallel panel format, and I immensely regret all of the incredible panels and presentations I missed. Yet, everything I saw, and the reports I heard of panels I was unable to attend, suggests that each speaker brought something new and original to the conference. Interrogating the way in which Folk Horror intersects with issues of race, gender, class, ecology, identity, architecture, history, and more, the assembled delegates laid important critical groundwork for the future study of the genre. Moreover, the breadth and scope of the papers presented indicate that while Folk Horror may be a comparatively small generic type – a single subset of Horror fiction – it is by no means limited by its specificity as a genre. The presenters who spoke at *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* not only sought to articulate the nature of this very particular mode of Horror, they also pushed the boundaries of what Folk Horror can be, searching out traces of the genre in a host of different modes and media. It is truly a credit to the conference organisers – Ruth Heholt (Falmouth University, UK), Dawn Keetley (Lehigh University, USA), Joanne Parsons (Bath Spa University, UK), and David Devanny (Falmouth University, UK) – that a conference focused on a single genre could produce so many variegated interpretations, ideas, and discourses.

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**BIONOTE**

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## FICTION REVIEWS

# MODERN MONSTERS AND OCCULT BORDERLANDS: WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

Review by Emily Alder

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Aldana Reyes, Xavier, ed. *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson*. British Library, 2019. Short stories.

This collection is a recent addition to the British Library's 'Tales of the Weird,' a flourishing new series offering a number of enticing volumes. Editor Xavier Aldana Reyes curates a succinct and purposeful set of Hodgson's short weird tales designed to showcase his distinctive version of the mode.

There have been Hodgson short story collections before, but they have not all remained in print or have limited availability. Even so, *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* is set apart, by its concision – ten stories, compared to which S. T. Joshi's *William Hope Hodgson* (2013) contained a not untypical nineteen stories, and two novels – its chronological arrangement, and its precise focus on its theme: the Weird, that borderland mode on the edges of other speculative genres. Aldana Reyes' introduction deftly contextualises Hodgson in relation to the weird tradition as encapsulated by the more familiar name of H. P. Lovecraft, and to the more familiar genres of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Hodgson, writing at the *fin de siècle* between the Gothic revival of the 1890s and the pulp magazines of the 1920s, occupies a chronological and generic niche in which writers often get overlooked. This new edition helps to extend the accessibility and availability of a vital strand of Hodgson's work, supported by the rest of a series that stakes out the Weird's claims to recognition as a distinct popular mode.

Writing was Hodgson's third career after spending his youth as a sailor in the Merchant Marine, followed by a stint as a body-building instructor in Blackburn, Lancashire. Most of his publications date between 1904 and his death in World War One in 1918. Collected editions began within his lifetime; the tales of occult detective Carnacki, first featuring in *The Idler* in 1910, form an obvious grouping; six stories were collected as *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* in 1913. The volume was revived with an additional three tales in 1947 by Mycroft & Moran, and reprinted by Wordsworth Editions in 2006 as *The Casebook of Carnacki the Ghost Finder*, with a valuable introduction by David Stuart Davies. Yet here, for reasons I will explore, just four of the stories are singled out, and only three are grouped together. Another early collection, *Men of the Deep Waters* (1914), included a number of sea stories, plus two poems, while certain stories – notably "The Voice in the Night" (1907) – have been regularly reprinted and anthologised. There is naturally a degree of overlap between the stories included in *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* and in earlier Hodgson story collections, but there are also some key distinctions: the reasons for both are worth exploring.

Through chronological presentation of the stories, the collection at once samples Hodgson's best-known tales, different stages in his writing career, and his different ideas in the vein of the Weird. As the introduction explains, Hodgson's weird tales can be loosely grouped into the sea horror and the occult Carnacki tales. One effect of the chronological ordering is to mix up these groups – so that the Carnacki stories are not all in a single sequence, for example, and sea stories both begin and end the collection.

Juxtaposed in this way, the two types of story at first appear greatly contrasting. The Carnacki stories belong the niche mode of 'occult detective,' a Holmesian figure who investigates mysteries that may or may not concern genuine weird hauntings. There are other examples – E. and H. Heron's Flaxman Low (1898-1899), Algernon Blackwood's John Silence (1908), Dion Fortune's Dr Taverner (1922) – but Hodgson's series makes a distinct intervention. Carnacki's expertise with modern technology like cameras and audio recording equipment combines with extensive research into the occult, both the archaic and the new. Where Blackwood keeps Silence's psychic training mysterious and unspecified (as suits the character's origins in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), Hodgson constructs a fantastic bibliography of texts stretching back into the past, named and cited regularly by Carnacki. One favourite is the Sigsand Manuscript, whose claims and methods he has tested, verified, and updated: a pentacle of chalk, garlic, and water, for example, is electrically enhanced as a defence against outer monstrosities. Bringing occult traditions and rediscovered ancient relics (a ring in 'The Gateway of the Monster,' a hidden inscription in 'The Whistling Room') into the contemporary, everyday world aligns Hodgson's technique with Lovecraft's (think of the bas-relief in 'The Call of Cthulhu' [1928]) and cements the Carnacki stories as weird tales. In the Weird, the 'supernatural' is 'natural' – the unknowable, the insanely terrifying, the shocking knowledge that overturns everything we thought we knew about space and time, reality and history – these are all part of the world and can never be dismissed as 'super' anything.

Here is the uniting undercurrent of this collection. Carnacki, spinning his tales in his London residence, is a world away from the uncharted remotes of the Pacific and the Atlantic. But sailors bring fabulous tales home too, and many of Hodgson's sea stories use a similar narrative framing. They, too, present radical new monstrous beings whose existence challenges conventional scientific knowledge. Such monsters are undeniably real in the world and yet still remain elusively beyond the reach of human comprehension and control. They include the organisms in the two 'fungus' stories featured here: "The Derelict" (1912) and "The Voice in the Night," virtual musts for any Hodgson collection foregrounding his Weird Horror tales. Fungus and mould, interstitial organisms neither plant nor animal that posed intriguing puzzles to *fin-de-siècle* biology, here gain the power to move, attract, consume, and transform; the human characters must recognise new forms of life and agency developing within the natural world (rather from outside its metaphysical boundaries) – and they must understand, as Carnacki does, a new set of relations between the human and the Other, in which the human rarely if ever dominates.

The same is true of those stories involving more recognisable sea creatures, often serpent- or squid-like. "A Tropical Horror" (1905), the first in the collection and Hodgson's second published

story, plunges us straight into a first-person, present-tense account of a ship terrorised by a giant sea monster which eats most of the crew. Comparing it to the eighth story, "The Thing in the Weeds" (1913), shows the development in Hodgson's style – the later story builds up suspense and uncertainty, delays identification of the monster, and presents a more convincing animal (a malevolent kraken) within the strange weedy habitat of the Sargasso Sea. The Sargasso as an alien world of alternative evolutionary development is a scenario Hodgson regularly uses – *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1907) and "From the Tideless Sea" (1906), for example, also feature giant squid and other betentacled things.

The remaining two stories are interesting choices that fit neatly into neither category. "Out of the Storm" (1909), in fact, uses a Carnacki-like piece of experimental communication technology to record the story of a sailor who does *not* survive his encounter with a weird horror: the sea itself, revealed as a terrible, all-consuming god-like force. "The Riven Night" (published 1973) portrays a ship's encounter with yet another unknown ocean phenomenon: a violet chasm apparently opening into the spirit world, but which may conceal more sinister forces behind the appearance of the sailors' lost loved ones.

For Hodgson, the sea provided many resources for weird tales: uncharted islands and seascares, unknown animal species, the otherworldly mysteries of the deeps, and a characteristic blurring of states. On the ocean, 'down' can look like 'up,' skies resemble water, mirages mingle with reality, and the boundary between life and death is fragile. These borderlands are reflected both in the experience of being at sea and in the superstitions and legends attendant on the Age of Sail. In his weird sea stories and the Carnacki tales, Hodgson combines ancient and folkloric traditions with the new technologies and modern occult and spiritualist philosophies, whether based on sea lore or on the family and local histories that lie behind "The Gateway of the Monster," "The Whistling Room," and "The Horse of the Invisible."

*The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* makes for a thorough introduction to Hodgson as a writer of weird tales – these stories may be the most representative of his short weird works in their own right, but they also introduce key Hodgsonian ideas at work in his novels too. The idea of the sea as a borderland between states of existence is developed and sustained throughout *The Ghost Pirates* (1909), while the islands and waters through which the 'Glen Carrig' survivors struggle house a vibrant range of organic beasts, and the outer horrors glimpsed by Carnacki in 'The Hog' linger on and encroach the edges of human reality in *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Night Land* (1912).

The inclusion of Hodgson's work in this prominent series from the British Library is a welcome addition to collected editions of his fiction, as well as marking the increased recognition of this author's position in the development of the weird tale.



**BIONOTE**

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# FROM THE DEPTHS

Review by Daniel Pietersen

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**Ashley, Mike, editor. *From The Depths; And Other Strange Tales of the Sea*. The British Library, 2018. Short Story Anthology.**

It is curious to think that the stories we most often describe as being stories of the ocean - pirate yarns, perhaps, or naval epics - are not necessarily actually about it. They take place on the ocean, of course, and the ocean's whims may well influence their narrative flow but, very often, the same story could quite equally happen elsewhere. A tale of high-seas buccaneers is little different from one of highway robbery, for example, whilst massed naval battles translate almost too neatly to war between the stars. It would appear to be a problem that most nautical narratives suffer from; they treat the ocean as a setting when it is more properly a character.

Anyone who has lived in proximity to any large body of water, especially looking out to the open ocean, knows this for a fact. The ocean is not just a simple background but is teeming with life and, given that it causes change in its surroundings, has a life in itself. It is this almost vulgar vivacity of the ocean, however, that makes it an environment so inimical to our inevitably all-too-human concept of life. We know less about its extremities than we do about the near-sterile gulfs of space and yet there is a strange irony in that we often find the dead void above us less strange, less weird, than we do the teeming life of the ocean below us.

Which is precisely the point. The ocean 'is' weird. If, as Mark Fisher claims in his landmark work *The Weird And the Eerie* (2016), the weird is a piercing-in of things that should not exist in our reality then we need only look at the presence of the creatures which the ocean nurtures at pressures, temperatures, and toxicities that would kill us in an eye blink for proof of this. Even more fundamentally, we stare up at the other planets in our solar system to see only bare rock, soup-thick atmospheres, or blankets of frozen gas. The presence of liquid water, let alone the vast array of life born from it, suddenly seems vanishingly rare, nauseatingly weird.

And if the ocean is weird then only the Weird can tell stories that are oceanic. Only the Weird can fully allow the piercing-in of the otherness that the ocean demands. Only the Weird can use the language of the ocean – fo'c'sles and mizzentops, sloops and barks - as surely as any guttural denizen of Zothique or Leng mutters their own arcane argots.

In *From The Depths* (2018), editor Mike Ashley, himself author of *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine* (1974) amongst many other works, has done a superb job in bringing together a collection of over a dozen 'strange tales of the sea' to showcase this weird nature of the nautical.

Like the other collections in the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, most of these stories were written by now largely lesser-known authors (and not all of them men, which is an uncommon but welcome sight in collections such as these). In it you will find stories of abyssal monsters, of inhuman revenge, of murder, and of madness. A handful of stories stand out, worthy of separate mention.

Ward Muir's "Sargasso" tells the story, in an epistolary format, of how the tramp steamer *Wellington* becomes trapped in the vast tangle of weed that is supposed to clog the northern Atlantic and of what her crew encounter there. Pre-dating the "slimy expanse of hellish black mire" of Lovecraft's "Dagon" by almost a decade, Muir has the *Wellington* come to ground on the uncanny island of the Sargasso, where fast-growing weeds hold it fast, and the increasingly hysterical crew become aware of some kind of creature scraping at the hull (*Necronomicon* 5). As the unnamed narrator clarifies, its approach is accompanied by "the sound of gentle touching - the touching of a tentacle" (76).

In "No Ships Pass," first published in 1932, Lady Eleanor Smith invokes a hint of Science Fiction as she describes the unnamed limbo-island that haunts the seas, looking for lost souls to sweep into its nets. The chilling blankness of the mongrel group that Patterson, her narrator, finds himself part of illustrates not only the stark horror of the never-dying but also the stifling, mask-like decorum that Lady Eleanor, an early member of the decadent Bright Young Things, must have found formal English society to be.

In what many readers would recognise as a more obviously Weird tale, perhaps because it deals with one of the genre's repeated concerns, Morgan Burke tells us of "The Soul-Saver," known to the narrator as the cruel but charismatic Captain Morbond. Morbond, as he reveals early in the story, has found a way to capture dead men's souls in the forms of white mice familiars – similar, loosely, to Lovecraft's tale, published six years before Morgan's, of how the Terrible Old Man "talks to these bottles, addressing them by such names as Jack, Scar-Face, Long Tom, Spanish Joe, Peters, and Mate Ellis" (*Eldritch Tales* 128). Why, or how, Morbond captures these souls is never fully explored but Burke paints the picture, briefly but succinctly, of a man used to controlling his sailors' corporeal existences and who sees no issue with extending it to their spiritual essences.

Finest of all, though, is the exquisite, implacable chill of F. Britten Austin's titular "From The Depths." When the *SS Upsal* heads out into the North Sea, former hunting ground of World War One's early submarine packs, it receives an unexpected message that chatters up, staccato and impossible, "from the depths." The nature of this message, delivered through terse Morse Code, is both as heart-stoppingly horrifying and as accusatory as the voice that barks suddenly from the hidden telescreen, revealing Winston and Julia's conspiracy, in Orwell's *1984*. Of all the tales in this collection, this one chilled me the most.

Not every story works as well as these. C. N. Barham's "Tracked," the only story in this collection originally published prior to 1900, is a tedious advert for credulous clairvoyance and William Hope Hodgson, in "The Mystery Of The Water-Logged Ship," allows his tale to fizzle out

with a disappointingly mundane reveal – choosing this story over other nautical explorations of Hodgson's, some of which S. T. Joshi's *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares* (2006) describes as containing "giant fungi and trees that howl," seems to be a singular misstep for Ashley (460). Yet, as a whole, this is still an excellent collection, dredging rare gems from a largely-ignored source of the Weird.

In fact, and it is a revelation that only really hits once the collection is finished, the only genuinely disappointing aspect of *From The Depths* is how difficult it is to find other work from the authors without delving into vintage collections. F. Britten Austin's *On The Borderland* (1923), which contains his weirder fiction, is only available from specialised sellers and at not inconsiderable cost whilst Morgan Burke seems to have faded into nothingness. In some ways, though frustrating for a modern reader, this even echoes the conflicting nature of the sea - both permanent and impermanent. The individual elements of the sea never stand still, ebbing and flowing to rhythms more fundamental than we can understand, and yet the sea itself always remains to haunt us with its strange tales.

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## BIONOTE

**Daniel Pietersen** is an author of Weird fiction and cultural criticism on Horror and other genre fiction. He is a regular contributor to *Sublime Horror* and *Dead Reckonings*. His recent essay on the limit experience in the work of Clive Barker can be found in *Thinking Horror* vol 2. Daniel lives in Edinburgh (UK) with his wife and dog. He can be found on Twitter as [@pietersender](https://twitter.com/pietersender) and his blog is <https://pietersender.wordpress.com/>

# 'SHUN THE FRUMIOUS BANDERSNATCH!': CHARLIE BROOKER, FREE WILL AND MK ULTRA WALK INTO A BAR

Review by Shannon Rollins

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Slade, David. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Performances by Fionn Whitehead, Will Poulter, Asim Chaudhry, Craig Parkinson, and Alice Lowe. Produced by Netflix, 2018. Film.

*Sugar Puffs*  
*Thompson Twins*  
*Refuse*  
*No*  
*No*

Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* has always explored the impact of technology, social media, and contemporary culture's high focus on digital connectivity. Candy-hued "Nosedive" (S03, E01) questions the integration of an Instagram/Yelp-esque mashup into daily interactions, Star Trek-inspired "USS Callister" (S04, E01) exposes behavioural dissonances from the same personality online and offline, and nannycam-gone-wrong "Arkangel" (S04, E02) prods at the line between ethics and personal safety. *Black Mirror* has never been a stranger to dystopian introspection of the near-future. As other Netflix programming such as *Bird Box* (2018) and *You* (2018) capitalise on Brooker's oeuvre and transition social media critiques into a booming genre, Brooker must have felt some pressure to retain his crown. With this proliferation of entertainment centring on our culture's obsession with screen technology and its transformation of what constitutes a meaningful encounter, the full-length *Bandersnatch* is both a revelation and a free will metanarrative. Across its possible two hour-plus running time, *Bandersnatch* charts the downward spiral of aspiring coder Stefan Butler as he attempts to translate a Choose Your Own Adventure novel (belonging to his deceased mother) into a genre-redefining video game of the same name.

As a child of the late 1980s/1990s I have fond memories of the Choose Your Own Adventure genre, devouring a variety of titles spanning *Jem and the Holograms: Find Your Fate* (1986) and *Goosebumps: Give Yourself Goosebumps* (1995). Brooker depends on the nostalgia Gen Xers and older millennials hold for these analogue hypertexts. He further leverages this nostalgia in setting *Bandersnatch* in 1980s London. Brooker's signature style balances a multi-layered narrative and singular focus on the A-plot, so *Bandersnatch*'s introduction of viewer choice and multiple B-plots immediately signals to the audience that this is no ordinary *Black Mirror*. Fionn Whitehead's performance as Stefan is both poignant and heart-wrenching; Stefan's anxieties,

trauma, and intelligence radiate through each socially awkward encounter with his father, therapist, and colleagues. There are no allusions to friendship, extended family, or life beyond Stefan's unnamed mental illness. In this way, Stefan reads as a direct descendent of Victor Frankenstein, completely consumed – to the point of madness – by the desire to transform the Choose Your Own Adventure novel *Bandersnatch* into a computer game that captures the novel's binary A/B plot selection process. The manic obsessive behaviours, loneliness, and confluences of love/revulsion are trademarks of a Frankenstein allusion. As with Shelley's novel, as *Bandersnatch's* narrative quickens, and Stefan grows more isolated by his task, the viewer's participation takes on sinister connotations.

With each decision Stefan must make, the viewer must choose between two options. In the beginning, this is simple and inconsequential: Sugar Puffs or Frosted Flakes? This rapidly transitions into making life choices for Stefan and questioning your own moral compass as you push Stefan to confront therapy sessions, drug use, parental boundaries, mental health, and the possibility of free will. Prior to pressing 'play,' I had determined that after each conclusion I would re-watch *Bandersnatch* – and change my answers to these questions – as many times as it took to unlock every possible ending. Initially I had chosen this course of action to explore all possible outcomes. However, by the mid-point of my second round of adventure-choosing, I realised that each decision I made was either based on my own moral compass or a grudging determination to find a different pathway. The constant pressure of the A/B structure forces the viewer to make small allowances with their own impulse control: in one permutation of the hypertext, Stefan considers his medication as *Bandersnatch* presents the viewer with "flush them" or "throw them away." The viewer is aware that either choice is detrimental to Stefan's diminishing control over his mental state and is powerless to effect positive change. At moments like these, *Bandersnatch* shows the method in its metanarrative madness.

Without delving into the realm of spoilers, one particular set of decision making led to another character – one over whom I had no direct control – making a catastrophic decision during a bout of recreational drug use. The ethical weight of each decision I made weighed on me as a viewer: did it say something about me that I forced Stefan into traumatic or violent situations? Ultimately, after unlocking all endings, I came to the conclusion that only one of the possible endings could be construed as 'happy' – and that even that narrative ended with suffering. In one version of events, the viewer is exposed to the same scenes as another ending but with a sentimental frame. Brooker's ability to splice the same scene – that of Stefan's mother calling him to join her – means events can be delivered as either a heart-wrenching tragedy or a sick MK-Ultra-esque experiment. Brooker's reliance on wordplay and substitution are intended to keep the editing smooth from one choice to the next – a tactic that succeeds in maintaining pacing. And yet, with repeated viewing, this same tactic distracts the viewer from cinematic nuances. Stefan has two 'boogeymen' who haunt his obsession-fogged mind, one left-brained and one right. When choosing the more analytic path, Stefan's haunting is in the shape of *Bandersnatch* novelist Jerome F. Davies. On the more creative (read: manic) path Stefan is instead met with Davies's own tormentor, a monstrous demon named Pax. Like Stefan, Davies also became obsessed with the concept of free will, binary pathways, and distrust of those surrounding him. This level of metanarrative is common for Brooker, and expertly

delivered as the viewer connects Lewis Carroll's 'bandersnatch' which cannot be outrun with the unrelenting pressure of obsession. The inclusion of the stuffed rabbit subplot increases the Carroll connection.

In all storylines, childhood trauma – namely the tragic death of his mother – dictates Stefan's mental state and stimuli response. Stefan and his father Peter are awkward in each other's company, with Peter at times appearing afraid of his son's volatility. Stefan blames himself for his mother's death in a train derailment: five-year-old Stefan refused to leave the house without a misplaced toy (a stuffed rabbit), and the delay caused her to take the later, doomed train. Here the Carroll reference is nearly too heavy handed as the rabbit toy is, in fact, late for a very important date. On one path, Stefan dreams that he moves through the bathroom mirror – literally through the looking glass – into the past, where his five-year-old self discovers the whereabouts of his rabbit. Regardless of which pathways the viewer chooses, *Bandersnatch* ensures that they learn of both his mother and his rabbit's loss. This glimmer of humanity is crucial to the more gore-laden moments where Brooker transitions from flirting with horror to accomplishing it.

For those unmoved by nostalgia-driven cinematography, kitsch creatures, gore, or drug-induced special effects, *Bandersnatch*'s reliance on novelty will prove insufficient. For this audience, a rapid ending – which I experienced on my first viewing – would be enough to drive the viewer away. *Bandersnatch* must be revisited to be fully appreciated, with each storyline tapping into a different emotional vein – and rounding out Stefan's character. With one possible pathway ending the story and restarting 'game play' in less than ten minutes, the opening song "Relax" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood (1983) commands a mind-set shift for the viewer while also highlighting a round of intense foreshadowing that includes mechanical medication-taking, Sex Pistols-referential graffiti, and several remarks from Stefan's father. 'Rounding out' Stefan, and making sense of his madness, becomes the viewer's responsibility. This transitions the viewer away from traditional narrative in a way that is unnervingly on-brand for *Black Mirror*; the 'black mirror' reflection in the case of *Bandersnatch* is that there are no objectively 'right' choices or 'wrong' paths – only a moral compass.

In crafting *Bandersnatch*'s pathways Brooker appears to have taken cult coming-of-age-in-the-80s stories into account; one storyline bares remarkable resemblance to *Donnie Darko*'s portrayal of philosophy and madness (2001), while another delves into the territory of the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* (2016-2019) by alluding to a questionable LSD human behaviour study with strong MK-Ultra overtones. For me, this plot branch read as the least convincing and the least satisfactory. Framing Stefan's harrowing experience as a 'bad trip' – orchestrated or otherwise – diminishes the character's definition. As such, though it handily engages the key theme of free will via metanarrative, upon later reflection the dosing storyline cheapens Stefan's struggles with mental health. Likewise, Choose Your Own Adventure requires a rapid pacing that is insufficient to fully explore the study's context and purpose. Due to this, the MK-Ultra storyline read as pandering towards the portion of *Black Mirror* fandom that delights in Brooker's conspiracy theory episodes. Regardless of these small quibbles, *Bandersnatch* is a prescient and innovative addition to Weird Fiction, contemporary satire, and techno-horror genres. Fans of binge-watching and *Black Mirror* alike can only hope that Brooker

incorporates learnings from his foray into Choose Your Own Adventure in future seasons – and that other programmes take note of this masterclass in full-concept television.

#### BIONOTE

**Shannon Rollins** is an independent researcher based in Antwerp, Belgium. She holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh where she studied the material impact of twenty-first century romance fiction on women's dress practices in Anglo-American steampunk cultures. Her most recent publication "The Frankenstein Meme: The Memetic Prominence of Shelley's Creature in Anglo-American Visual and Material Cultures" (*Global Frankenstein* 2018) investigates the continued cultural currency of Frankenstein's monstrosity in Western cultures. Her current research interests include steampunk in the Anthropocene, the impulses driving retrofuturistic technologies (from both maker and mainstream cultures), and the contexts of female representation in contemporary Science Fiction.



# THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY UTOPIA

Review by Ruth Booth

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**Chambers, Becky. *Record of a Spaceborn Few*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2018.**

During his 2019 series of Leverhulme lectures at the University of Glasgow, Brian Attbery proposed that works of Utopian Fiction need not describe large-scale, long-term changes to society to be successful. Indeed, he suggested that small-scale utopias may make Utopian Fiction more persuasive – even when the utopia in question comprises a single interaction between one person and another. Becky Chambers's third novel in the *Wayfarers* series, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018) serves as a singular exploration of this notion, portraying a reclusive, post-apocalyptic human society thrust by tragedy into the intergalactic community. In presenting the collective's resulting growing pains through the lives of the ordinary people caught in their wake, Chambers not only humanises issues of globalisation, but offers real, everyday solutions to issues that often feel too big to resolve.

The popularity of the *Wayfarers* books lies partly in their tackling of social issues with compelling, recognizable characters, which has led to favourable comparisons with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Firefly* (2002-2003). Long-term fans of the series will not be disappointed. Set on the Exodan fleet, a collection of 'Homesteader' spaceships originally constructed by humans fleeing climate change, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* explores the lives of four cross-generational Exodans at a time of upheaval in their society. Emphasising the necessarily socialist nature of this resource-limited society, the characters are connected by their roles: Isabel, an archivist, who also carries out baptism-like rituals; Eyas, a caretaker, who not only cares for the dead, but ensures their composting for crop growth; Kip, an impatient teen, and Tessa, a young mother and scrap worker facing redundancy due to mechanisation through alien technology. Further perspective comes from the experiences of two outsiders – visiting alien anthropologist Ghuh'loloan and new resident Sawyer, a "grounder," or human born on one of the many planets that form the inter-species community of the Galactic Commons. Those familiar with earlier novels will be delighted to note the return of a Santoso to the cast – Tessa is sister to Ashby from the first novel in the series, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2014) – as well as other Easter eggs aplenty.

Fans of the *Wayfarers* series will also expect Chambers's sensitive and well-drawn depictions of neuro- and cultural diversity. While this is the most culturally homogenised of their works due to its setting, Chambers has lost none of their powers of observation, giving us nuanced portrayals of frustrated teens, exasperating toddlers, over-worked parents, and blunt grandparents that any of us might recognise. Notably, this novel returns to the multiple viewpoints of the first novel, which depicted the experiences of the crew of a small tunnelling ship; however, this approach loses something in the wider context of a Homesteader, built to house hundreds of thousands. The minimal

time spent with disparate characters, coupled with the lack of strong emotional connection between them, lessens the impact of some events, even when they affect the entire cast. Consequently, the accident that occurs half-way through the novel loses the deep impact of similar pivotal events from earlier in the series, leaving us somewhat disconnected from the accident itself, if not its results.

However, this is the sacrifice for what Chambers does accomplish with this novel – namely, a skilful depiction of the interconnecting web of a post-apocalyptic human society through the everyday lives of ordinary people. It is the smaller things that Chambers deftly illustrates as holding the novel's tension: Tessa's trials as a lone parent and carer for their elderly father, for example. For each of these characters, though, their anxieties are rarely completely divorced from wider society. Isabel must negotiate their relationship with Ghuh'loloan, a Harmagian from a much more affluent society with very different customs, not only in the context of a society unused to, and sometimes even hostile towards aliens; their wife Tamsin is also suspicious of the Harmagian's motives for studying their society, and not shy about sharing their feelings – particularly in the company of their houseguest. The public and the private are entangled: connections to others are always primary, whether they are familial or communal, or physically embodied in the sharing of the environment and maintenance of its resources, as well as the birthright to food and shelter. Indeed, this is the true tragedy of the accident in the middle of the novel. Testament to Chambers's skill, what hits home is not the event itself, but Eyas's realisation that no one is coming for this person's body: the empty death ritual, the lack of benefit to their own family from their compost; the loneliness this embodies.

One might then ask whether the socialist Exodan fleet is a utopian community, despite their dystopian origins. Certainly, the barter-based economy, as opposed to the credits-based system used by other planets in the Galactic Commons, allows all a living in this community of limited space and means. But Chambers avoids making simplistic inside-good, outside-bad distinctions. The Exodan fleet uses credits to trade with the Commons; meanwhile, Ghuh'loloan is quick to point out in their reports that, while the Exodans are technologically backwards, they are not as impoverished as outsiders might think. The comparison between the two places, as well as the anthropological perspective of the Harmagian, places Chambers's Exodan fleet perhaps closest to Ursula K. Le Guin's ambiguous utopias of *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *Always Coming Home* (1985) in nature, if not content.

Despite this realistic approach, Chambers's novel is profoundly optimistic about the future. Humanity survives, somewhat the wiser for it, but is in many respects largely the same: teenagers still fight with their parents, toddlers are still profoundly frustrating – and, unfortunately, xenophobia and hostility persist towards those seen as outsiders. But there is also understanding and the desire to change in the wake of the accident, leading several characters to make life-changing decisions. And this is where Attebery's concept of small-scale utopias comes to bear on Chambers's novel: in its focus on intimate scales and the hope of kindness and change in the everyday, Chambers finds alternatives to the conflict and escalation that might otherwise tear society apart.

However, to consider this purely as a small-scale utopian text – or even one purely of the Exodan fleet – is to do this novel a disservice. The life-changing decisions of the characters come to

have wider societal impacts, and not just for their own communities. The Commons is always utmost in the mind of the characters, whether for its promise of escape for the teenage Kip, or its threat to the stability of the lives of elder community members Isabel and Tamsin. Ghuh'loloan's interest in the Exodan fleet relates to its nature at a point in history when Exodans are increasingly moving in and out of their own community. Indeed, it is the relationship between the Exodans and the Commons that creates much of the tension in the novel. This novel, at its core, with its notions of home and homecoming, is as much about large-scale issues of immigration and emigration in the wake of climate change and movement into global – or in this case, galactic – society as how we deal with them on intimate scales. Indeed, for Chambers, the one cannot be solved without change at the level of the other.

This is the great achievement in Chambers novel: in eschewing bombastic adventure and disastrous large-scale fears about globalisation and change for the intimate everyday, Chambers achieves the tricky balance of depicting an isolated society on an intimate level while at the same time tackling big issues. In highlighting the interlinkages between society, environment, and other nations within these small interactions, Chambers offers alternative perspectives on universal problems that, considered on their own terms, would feel too big to solve; instead, we are presented with achievable solutions in the everyday. In short, this is the persuasive power of Attebery's intimate utopias in action.

Towards the end of the novel, Isabel says: "Our species doesn't operate by reality. It operates by stories" (315). While this is offered as a cautionary tale to not accept prevailing narratives, this can also be taken as a rallying call. At this point in Western society, the problems of globalisation, climate disaster, and societal change seem almost insurmountable. While lacking some of the dramatic tension of the earlier Wayfarer novels, in applying intimate, everyday stories to such issues, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* offers a compelling call for change to reality not on a heroic scale, but on a very human one. As Attebery's conception of intimate utopias suggests, for that, it may be one of the most persuasive of this moment.

## BIONOTE

**Ruth Booth** is a Creative Writing doctoral student at the University of Glasgow, UK. Their interests include adaptation and (mis)use of folktales, toxic masculinity and female complicity in genre communities, alternative heroism, and fantastic landscapes. Ruth has previously co-organized GIFCon and Eastercon 2019: Ytterbium, and recently joined the Promotions team for the Glasgow in 2024 Worldcon bid. Winner of the BSFA's Best Short Fiction Award (as Ruth EJ Booth), Ruth's multi-award-nominated stories are found in *The Dark*, *Black Static*, and *Pseudopod* magazine, amongst others. *Noise and Sparks*, their column for *Shoreline of Infinity*, won 2019's British Fantasy Award for Best Non-Fiction.

# ANOTHER GREEN WORLD

Review by Richard Howard

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**Fennell, Jack, editor. *A Brilliant Void: A Selection of Classic Irish Science Fiction*. Tramp Press, 2018.**

Jack Fennell extends the study of Irish Science Fiction yet further with the publication of this anthology. For a subgenre so little studied, the stories presented in *A Brilliant Void* (2018) contain an impressive sweep of the genre's concerns: parallel universes, alien encounters, colonisation of the moon, suspended animation, lost worlds, longevity treatment, and time travel, all of which are represented here within this edited collection. In Fennell's 2014 book *Irish Science Fiction*, he cites Gary Westfahl, who writes "literary genres appear in history for one reason: someone declares that a genre exists and persuades writers, publishers, readers and critics that she is correct," and in the case of Irish Science Fiction, there is a sense that the subgenre is being assembled from fragmented elements that have been lodged in other genre spaces (5). For instance, in Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction*, Flann O'Brien is framed as an Irish Science Fiction author, making the often overlooked *Dalkey Archive* the author's central work, which it may not have been considered to be previously. This process of reframing has tremendous potential in affording a unique perspective on Irish literature, with works by diverse authors from different time periods being studied through the same sub-generic lens.

In *A Brilliant Void*, Fennell does an admirable job of retrieving and relabelling, in the process furthering the notion that Irish Science Fiction indeed exists, and is worth studying in more depth. In the introduction, Fennell notes that many of the tales, particularly those written by women, had been mislabelled as Gothic (xiii). These tales swim in the same genre pool as the early Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, treading the tide between rigorous descriptions of scientific procedure and the intrusion of the irrational. As Fennell notes, this makes it possible to classify many of the tales just as easily as Weird Fiction, rather than Science Fiction (xiv).

For Fennell, Ireland's ambivalent relationship with science and modernity is central to understanding Irish Science Fiction, the genre lying on the threshold between pre-modern and modern worldviews. There are without doubt countless debates to be had about that assertion from within both Irish Studies and Science Fiction Studies, but it is striking that the issue of science and the supernatural arises regularly across the stories in the collection, as well as a scepticism of scientific progress that seems to prefigure the concerns of the high modernist Science Fiction of the early twentieth century that Adam Roberts discusses in his *History of Science Fiction* (156-172).

Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Diamond Lens" (1858) connects scientific positivism to the prurient interest of the scopophilic drive, its narrative climax a note of caution for would-be scientists. Francis Power Cobbe's satirical "The Age of Science" (1877) goes further with the depiction of a future in which science directly hinders progress by substituting itself for "Religion, Conscience, and for Honour" (68). This is a quite literally 'post-feminist' world in which reading is prohibited for women because it is deemed "unsuitable for their sex" (59-60). One chilling passage reminiscent of the viciousness of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" parodies scientific detachment by reporting the slow drowning of a dog watched by an eminent physiologist for its "scientific interest" (61-62).

Margaret Wolfe Hungerford's tale of suspended animation "The Professor's Experiment" (1895) is more ambivalent. Science may well have the potential to improve human existence, but there is a price to pay for certain individuals. The origin of the Professor's formula for suspended animation in a Peruvian anaesthetic "known to the Indians of South America years ago", points to the primitive accumulation that drives scientific research (108-109). The Professor's attempt to secure a condemned prisoner from Kilmainham jail highlights exploitation in the pursuit of knowledge, while also anticipating the plot from Mike McCormack's *Notes from a Coma*, a 2005 Irish Science Fiction novel that explores suspended animation as a form of punishment. The "spectral" air that the Professor gives off speaks to his attempt to transcend the border between the living and the dead, as well as the persistence of "pre-modern" modes of thought (119). The Professor prays when he believes his experiment has killed a woman, and the narrator notes that "he appealed to the Creator occasionally, as some moderns still do to Jove" (119). But for all his status as a quintessential reckless 'mad scientist,' it is the Professor who succumbs to its excesses, becoming so bodily exhausted with perfecting his formula that "all the science in Europe could not have kept him alive for another twenty-four hours" (122). The tale ends with the Professor's acquaintance Wyndham realising that the formula is irretrievable, having been memorised by the Professor rather than written down.

In Dorothy McCardle's "The Sorcerer" (1922), pre-modern traditions themselves come under the gaze of science, the Experimenter performing empirical experiments on the local use of charms and cures in order to explain their effectiveness. As Fennell's introductory note hints, the location of the Experimenter in the space of the Anglo-Irish Big House suggests a nation floundering for a position between tradition and modernity in a post-independence context in which both functioned to some extent as metonyms for Ireland and Britain in the national imaginary.

The latter are two of the eight stories by women collected in the book, Fennell noting the historical dismissal and "outright contempt" of material of this nature written by women (xii). Fennell has provided a valuable service in unearthing these stories, and many of them speak to us across the years, allowing us to connect the Irish Science Fiction of the past to more contemporary authors such as Louise O'Neill or Sarah Maria Griffin. The novella excerpt from Amelia Garland Mears's "Mercia the Astronomer Royal" (1895) imagines a globally connected, technologically advanced Earth that has largely achieved gender equality, but has failed to supersede Empire and its concomitant chauvinism. The Emperor's attempt to frame Mercia in response to being spurned is undone by the presence of a recording device, affording us perhaps a connection to that other classic of Irish speculative fiction, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

The labelling of Jane Barlow's "The Advance Sheet" (1895) as a Gothic tale is unsurprising. The story blends psychology, philosophy, and scientific speculation to create an atmosphere that threatens to develop into full-blown cosmic horror, but is in fact the set-up for a grisly take on the Gothic trope of the double.

Of the two stories by Clotilde Greaves in the collection, "Lady Clanbevan's Baby" (1915) is the most recognisably science fictional, with its cars driven by radioactivity, its formula for everlasting life, and its denouement that presents a hilarious consequence of its central novum of longevity treatment.

Fennell's introduction notes that "Ireland is not perceived as a place where sci-fi 'happens,'" and it is telling that across the collection, the majority of the stories are set in other locales (xiv). Of course, there are exceptions: Tarlach Ó hUí's "The Chronotron" (1946), translated from Irish by Fennell for the first time, is a particularly genocidal take on the grandfather paradox tale, in which a Professor attempts to erase the Great Famine from Irish history by travelling back in time and dropping an atomic bomb on London. The tale is told in a humorous register, with a satirical wink to prevailing nationalist attitudes to the former coloniser. When the narrator begs the Professor to think of the "millions of innocent English" before going through with his plan, the Professor smiles and declares "Innocent English...there's no such thing!" (246).

*A Brilliant Void* is aimed at a popular rather than academic audience, signified in Fennell's use of the term 'Sci-Fi,' rather than the 'SF' that has become the norm among Science Fiction academics. As a result, there is a disappointing lack of scholarly references across the collection, which makes it difficult for those tracing Fennell's steps, as well as for those of us who wish to set Irish Science Fiction readings in a teaching context. However, securing a popular audience for work like this is a worthwhile endeavour and can only further the appeal of Irish Science Fiction as an object of study. After all, the act of persuading the reader that a genre exists is an important component in genre formation. With this in mind, *A Brilliant Void* is a significant step forward.

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## BIONOTE

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# BURN THEM ALL? *GAME OF THRONES* SEASON EIGHT

Review by T Evans

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**Benioff, David and D B Weiss, creators. "Season Eight." *Game of Thrones*. Perf. Emilia Clarke, Peter Dinklage, Kit Harrington. Home Box Office. Television.**

In 2011 Home Box Office (HBO) released *Game of Thrones*, an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The television series gained popularity and notoriety for making trouble, becoming synonymous with female nudity, "sexposition," rape, and graphic violence, not to mention maintaining the Fantasy genre's troubled relationship to race. Yet *Game of Thrones* also made productive trouble by crafting a textual world where people with disabilities are funny and have sex lives, where gender essentialism is regularly critiqued, and where working together is celebrated as heroic. Amid these political entanglements, *Game of Thrones* troubled the Fantasy genre itself. The series was marketed to Fantasy fans and novices alike, referred to as 'Fantasy for people who don't like fantasy.' The series fed the need for heroic journeys and magical possibilities that film adaptations of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* sparked in the early 2000s while giving us what Helen Young (2015) calls a "gritty realism" that brought us back to our own postmodern world and promised to keep a refreshing distance from generic safety. The eighth and final season of *Game of Thrones*, which aired in May 2019, was by far the most widely circulated season, and one of the major moments in the history of the Fantasy genre. The six-episode season sees the climax of two major conflicts in the pseudo-medieval world of Westeros: the long-awaited battle between the protagonists and the army of the living dead (called 'white walkers') at Winterfell and a climactic attempt to reclaim the Iron Throne in King's Landing.

What makes season eight important is not the plot but the execution and its reception. Audiences around the world vented their frustration and disappointment with the final two episodes, "The Bells" and "The Iron Throne." Two million people signed an online petition to "Remake Game of Thrones Season Eight with competent writers," and thousands of angry blog posts and Reddit threads appeared across the internet. The reasons for this dismay are complex, but can be summarised as rushed and inconsistent character development and story arcs; an anticlimactic battle against the white walkers; a simplification of the series' complex female characters; and errors in continuity and universe logic (especially the infamous Starbucks coffee cup). It is impossible to address each facet within this review or even a single book, though I look forward to the research that will deal with these responses in the detail they deserve. For now, I will address a few key scenes that make trouble for me as an expert on *Game of Thrones*, a fan, a feminist, and a Fantasy scholar.

Fantasy has a complex relationship with gender (Balay 2010; Evans 2016; 2019a; 2019b; Evans and Pettet 2018; Patel 2014; Tolmie 2006), at once a site where gender norms can be disrupted through magic and reified through patriarchal pseudo-medieval settings. These ambivalent potentialities are threaded throughout *Game of Thrones*, but the final picture that Season Eight presents is less nuanced than audiences have come to expect. Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), the dispossessed heir to the Iron Throne and Mother of Dragons, is at the centre of many of these conversations about gender, as is the series' antagonist Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), the Queen (and later Queen Regent) of Westeros. I have written extensively about Cersei's violence and her reproduction of patriarchal power structures (Evans 2018); I love to hate her and think critically about her relation to power, gender, and the body. Past seasons have seen Cersei waterboard a nun, blow up a religious site and half of the Westerosi nobles inside it, and employ a Frankenstein-esque undead knight as a personal bodyguard. Yet Cersei spent most of Season Eight drinking wine and looking over the city from atop her balcony window. I will admit that I was convinced she had a trap waiting to snare Daenerys, or at least an escape plan. She did not. Her final moments were spent being almost-rescued by her lover and brother Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), crying about her unborn child, and dying under falling debris. What a waste of a complex villain and a reflection of the limited roles women are afforded in mainstream culture.

In contrast to Cersei's unoriginal demise, I wanted to appreciate Daenerys's descent into madness. The transformation is a middle finger to our expectations of the Fantasy genre and *Game of Thrones*, which has set Daenerys up as the rightful and moral queen. The series has a history of making unexpected generic moves like this: in Season One Ned Stark was characterised as the series' protagonist but was executed in episode nine. Later in Season Three, a mass murder known to fans as the Red Wedding saw another three major Stark characters killed by their faux-ally Walder Frey. Moves like these demonstrate the genre trouble that *Game of Thrones* makes and the way that trouble can be pleasurable and refreshing. However, Daenerys's insanity lacks the graceful way in which Eddard's death and the Red Wedding are executed. A hysterical woman going on a rampage is a tired and sexist move, and the awkward attempts to set up Daenerys's growing instability are confusing.. Once again, the patriarchal attitudes that dominate much of Western culture seep into the final season of a series that has otherwise paved new ground for the representation of strong women characters.

What are we to make of *Game of Thrones* considering these infamous endings? On the one hand, Daenerys's and Cersei's final moments may change our perspective on their characterisation in the previous seasons. Now when we see Daenerys free slaves and disrupt patriarchal power structures among the Astapori, Meereenese, and Dothraki in earlier seasons, we may see her madness foreshadowed rather than her subversive liberations. On the other hand, the long-form television format and the fandom itself may offer opportunities to reject these endings and focus on more satisfying seasons or wilfully ignore the final instalment. Fandoms have proven their capacity for forgiveness and creativity across many genres; fans of the space Western television series *Firefly* (2002-2003) campaign for additional seasons almost two decades after the series was cancelled, and many fans of the lesbian drama series *The L Word* (2004-2009) collectively choose to ignore the final



season and its random and unsatisfying ending. It is impossible to tell what (if any) strategy *Game of Thrones* fans will adopt at this point in time, although the promised release of the final two novels in the source series, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*, will likely make exciting trouble for our understanding of endings and adaptation.

The trouble with Daenerys and Cersei aside, Season Eight of *Game of Thrones* continued to offer a complex and critical discussion around violence. There are two scenes that stand out for me in this regard. My favourite is the one where Sandor 'the Hound' Clegane (Rory McCann) and his brother Gregor 'the Mountain' Clegane (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson) face off for the final time while the royal castle crumbles around them, which is intercut with scenes of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) escaping the destruction with the aid of a peasant woman she helped earlier in the episode. Seeking revenge has brought nothing but pain to Sandor, and his desire to kill his brother is what destroys him: Sandor pushes Gregor through the castle wall and they fall to their deaths together. The contrast is paramount here: as Sandor dies to achieve vengeance and uses violence to serve his own ends, Arya is focused on revenge for her family but she is also invested in making the world a more liveable place for everyone. While making her way through King's Landing to kill Cersei in "The Bells" she stops to help others, and later these others help her survive. The message is clear: violence should only be used to help others. Otherwise it reinforces a destructive cycle.

The final point of trouble I wish to raise here is in relation to power and reproduction. I was surprised to see that Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright), a man with a broken spine and supernatural abilities, becomes King of Westeros. Bran's inability to father children is highlighted in "The Iron Throne," and disrupts the feudal patriarchy's system of passing power from father to son. Instead, Bran is chosen by his high-class allies and is literally led by a Small Council of "cripples and bastards and broken things" made up of two disabled men (Tyrion and Sam), a queer man (Varys), a queer woman (Brienne), and two men from a working class background (Bronn and Davos). The intersectional power dynamics here are exciting and troubling: the council is almost entirely comprised of masculine people and can therefore be seen to reproduce the patriarchal structures that Bran seems to disrupt. However, there is also a promising sense of trouble because the council brings together the misfits who have been celebrated throughout the series. We so rarely see disabled men, poor men, and queer men onscreen that I want to be pleased – but I do have a nagging feminist concern over the gender disparity.

Season Eight of *Game of Thrones* leaves a lot of questions about the television industry, about the Fantasy genre, and about the promises we are made by popular culture and the feelings we have when they are not met. Was it ever possible to write a good final season of *Game of Thrones*? Were our expectations too high? Are endings always and inevitably a disappointment? What *Game of Thrones* leaves behind is a mix of the "all was well" sentimentality of *Harry Potter* crossed with Ramsay Bolton's famous line, "if you think this has a happy ending, you haven't been paying attention." We get our happy ending in the sense that the kingdom is secured and good triumphs over evil, and we get a tragedy because our hero and our villain suddenly and inexplicably lose their fire. *Game of Thrones* as a complete series offers us a rich and nuanced depiction of women and disabled people and has brought a phenomenal number of new fans to the Fantasy

genre. And yet the final season has cast a shadow of disappointment and anger over the entire series. *Game of Thrones* leaves us troubled but also invites us to question the nature of trouble and its potential to open new conversations, inhabit uncomfortable intellectual spaces, and briefly glimpse the workings of a genre, the promises it makes, and what happens when it fails to deliver.

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**BIONOTE**

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# MAKING NEW TRACKS IN AFRICAN FANTASY

Review by Kaja Franck

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**James, Marlon. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. Penguin, 2019. Novel.**

Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), a fictional account of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976 and its ongoing effect on Jamaican culture, won the 2015 Man Booker Prize. Notably, he was the first Jamaican to win this prize. Like *Seven Killings*, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) poses questions regarding identity, truth, and the power of narrative. However, rather than being rooted in the real world, James crafts a mythical Africa spun from multiple legends and folktales featuring a panoply of folkloric entities.

The novel follows a complex storyline that, despite centring on one central character, moves fluidly and quickly to various geographic locations; equally, the narration jumps through time in a manner that is sometimes difficult to follow. Based on the traditional quest narrative, James' protagonist is called Tracker, a young man with an incredible sense of smell with which he finds lost things and people. Once he has been given a scent to follow, he is unable to prevent himself from searching for the disappeared. He, along with a group of different beings and mercenaries, is tasked with finding a lost boy. The identity of this boy is a mystery and it is never clear whether he was dead from the beginning, or perhaps never existed. Yet this is to diminish the variety of the story – Tracker interrupts the central tale with accounts of his lineage, his history and other missions that he has undertaken. The story is framed as an oral narrative: at the beginning of the novel, Tracker explains that he is being held captive and must confess his story to a man he refers to as the Inquisitor. James' syntax evokes the quality of speech, making it difficult to settle into the story at first. Yet this orality soon becomes key to the effectiveness of the engaging characters and the genuinely terrifying creatures which emerge from the pages. There is an overwhelming impression that the reader is in the cell with Tracker, listening to the cadence of his speech. For such a dense and large text, the reader is pulled through this world at an impressive pace.

James excels at transporting the reader into a world that overcomes the senses. The novel opens with a map of the fantasy world – a nod to more traditional Western Fantasy – but from which the geography of the novel deviates fully. Throughout the novel each location is evoked with a prodigious intensity. This is an embodied novel full of texture, colour, and particularly smells. Tracker 'sees' the world through his nose, detecting people before they arrive and immediately identifying what they conceal. Through Tracker's nose, the reader is offered a multi-sensory experience, as visual descriptions are overlaid with a potent specificity of scents:

The room, dime and plain, walls the brown-green colour of fresh chicken dung, with sacks packed on top of each other all the way to the ceiling. Tall statues leaning against each other, sharing secrets about me. The floor smelled of grain, dust, perfume bottles lost in the dark, and rat shit. (245)

In his reliance on his sense of smell, Tracker is described as wolf-like, blurring the distinction between human and animal. This is heightened by the presence of the Leopard, a shape-shifter who becomes Tracker's close friend and love interest. The Leopard defines himself by his animal qualities, eschewing human norms such as regular cleansing and clothing, and preferring to eat raw flesh. However, James writes against an anthropocentric viewpoint of the world by making Leopard one of the most sympathetic characters in the novel. Though *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* contains many monsters – vampires, shadow-creatures who crawl from the ceiling, cannibals, and blood suckers – animality is never depicted as equitable with monstrosity. Instead, humans are repeatedly represented as violent and horrifying, if only because they kill and torture for power and money rather than to appease their hunger. The array of different beings depicted in the novel will have the reader reaching for a pencil, to underline each entity, in order to research their folklore. James effectively renders a fantastical version of Africa that cleaves from the generic conventions of Eurocentric Fantasy. Moreover, the novel reacts not only to Fantasy but also European and North American depictions of the continent in nineteenth and early twentieth century adventure narratives. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is at its most powerful when such xenophobic and racist depictions are exploded.

There are, however, problems with the novel. Much like Tracker's behaviour, James' prose reads as wilfully oblique and difficult to follow. This is particularly true during dialogue which repeatedly unravels into one-liners creating rather soulless interactions, a conceit which obstructs the development of emotional connections between the characters. Early in the novel, a character tells Tracker he "speak[s] in riddles," an accusation that is repeatedly levelled at him (155). His speech is often overly portentous; this may be an attempt to parody the speech of a wise, old sage – one of the many recurring tropes of High Fantasy. However, if this is meant to highlight the limitations of drawing on traditional Fantasy such as that of Tolkien, it is undone by the fact that such a claim rings true of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* itself. Though the oral quality of the narrative and the novel's framing technique is effective, the manner in which it is undertaken is frequently confusing and overly mystical. In some ways the prose style is reminiscent of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009); in the sequel *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), Mantel used a less overt version in order to bring clarity to a difficult story to tell. Given that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is the first novel in James' *Dark Star* trilogy, minimising the overly arch dialogue and opacity of the prose would allow the brilliance of the storytelling to become more central to its sequels.

More problematically, the continuous violence in James' novel, especially the rape, becomes banal and repetitive. The text fails to engage with the long-term effects of sexual violence on survivors, and in places reads as dismissive of the reality of such violence. The flippant depiction of rape and sex work lacks consideration, and is used for effect rather than serving as a meaningful

aspect of character development. While the central character could be read as homosexual (this term is not explicitly used), the depiction of queer, male identity is trapped in a brutal, performative hyper-masculinity which denounces its own queerness. Homophobic slurs are casually expressed by male characters, including Tracker and Leopard. The violence of this language is not challenged; rather, those subject to such accusations defend themselves by letting it be known that they are, to use the vernacular, 'top' or 'bottom' – a concept which is repeatedly related to gender. In one brothel scene, Tracker sleeps with Ekoie, a young male sex worker "from the land of the eastern light, which means an emissary raped a girl and left her with child to go back to his wife and concubines" (256). The feminised description of Ekoie along with his parentage becomes a throwaway example of Orientalism. The shortcomings in the novel's portrayals of violence – particularly sexual violence – and non-heteronormative identity are such that it reads like a failed attempt at using Fantasy as a revolutionary rather than a reactionary force. There needed to be significantly less phallic affirmation throughout. The novel's repeated problematic moments undo its success in decolonising Fantasy: rather it re-affirms the idea that historically, in Fantasy, men are violent by necessity and women are witches and sex workers.

The overall experience of reading *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is hypnotic and delirious, yet, tinged with frustration. Its opaque style, repetitive violence, and homophobia prevent the novel from achieving its potential – which is great. There is a thrilling and exciting novel lost behind a little too much posturing which cannot simply be blamed on the characterisation of the central character. Hopefully, the later novels in the series will be more at ease in their storytelling, rather than concentrating on the style, in order to allow the reader to enjoy both the imagined world and the characters more fully.

#### BIONOTE

**Kaja Franck** was awarded her PhD in 2017 in the UK. Her thesis looked at the literary werewolf as an ecoGothic monster, concentrating on the relationship between wilderness, wolves, and werewolves, and how language is used to demarcate animal alterity. She is part of the 'Open Graves, Open Minds' research project and has published on the depiction of wolves and werewolves in Dracula and Young Adult fiction. She is currently lecturing at the University of Hertfordshire.

# IMPOSSIBLE CREATIONS FOR THE GOTHICALLY MINDED

Review by Rachel Mizsei Ward

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McConnell, Christine, creator. "Season One" *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell*, Performances by Christine McConnell, Adam Mayfield, and Dita Von Teese, Wilshire Studios, Henson Alternative and Netflix, 2018. Television.

As a crafter and lover of the Gothic *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* (2018) looked like a wonderful Halloween treat to binge-watch on Netflix. Although the show turned out to be the light and effervescent mix of genres that I had hoped for, it highlighted significant issues surrounding the lifestyle Gothic and the way that genres are combined to create what can be an unsatisfactory whole, despite their individual pleasures.

The show is a multi-genre confection combining light Gothic comedy-drama with creative craft projects. The star and show creator is Christine McConnell, an Instagram celebrity who specialises in elaborate cakes and crafts. The show's introduction describes her as "a woman who uses her unique skills at baking, sculpting, and sewing to create delicious confections and hauntingly disturbing decor." The episodes form a narrative around the heroine Christine and her puppet friends, featuring a crazy cousin who wants her inheritance and a romantic relationship with a serial killer. The puppets are created and animated by Henson Alternative, a division of Henson Productions that specialises in productions aimed at adults. The puppets portray a number of key characters that Christine interacts with in every show, specifically Rose (a re-animated racoon with a fork for a hand), Rankle (a mummified Egyptian cat), and Edgar (a wolf man). As this summary suggests, the show features several Gothic tropes, such as the 'mad woman,' and the serial killer, along with a ghost portrayed by Dita Van Teese who lives in a mirror, and an undead grandmother in the graveyard. The Gothic is frequently considered to be a feminine genre, often featuring female lead characters, dealing with issues that concern women. This show's use of Gothic generic tropes, along with several strong female characters, combined with its concentration on handicrafts marks this as a show targeted at the female viewer.

Catherine Spooner identifies lifestyle Gothic as a way that the Gothic is expanded beyond something that adherents read or watch into something that they live (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 29-48). Much of this is due to a slippage between Gothic as a genre, and the Goth subculture where consumption is an important way of creating one's identity (36). The lived expression of the Gothic includes clothing, hair and make-up, homewares and home decoration. Much of this requires an act of bricolage by the Gothic consumer, combining items from many different places to create their individual expression of a gothically lived life. Sometimes this requires craft skills as well as creative bricolage to create bespoke items that are not available in shops.

The show is an expression of this kind of Gothic bricolage through its sets, costuming, and crafts. These work together to present a kind of Gothic lifestyle rooted in a vintage aesthetic, something which Spooner identifies as a core part of twenty-first century Gothic style (49). The vintage styled kitchen is one of the most important sets in the show, acting as the main stage for Gothic creation. The styling recalls the 1960s, with its pastel accessories, including an authentic period pink refrigerator. A Gothic touch is incorporated through the cupboards, with their cobweb patterned doors; this is where we watch Christine make most of her curious creations. The show demonstrates how to create a variety of Gothic crafts, including a shortbread ouija board, three-dimensional biscuits shaped like bones and shrunken heads, spiders made from toffee, and a spooky gingerbread mansion.

However, this apparent autonomous creativity is where the show becomes problematic. Although we watch Christine making her creations, she gives the viewer no recipes or detailed instructions on how to recreate the crafts. The show is not supported by a complimentary website or cookbook for viewers to refer to, like many other cooking or craft shows. Beyond this, the crafts shown are highly intricate and time consuming to create, and often require specialist equipment such as an air-brush, a dremel tool, and an industrial sized refrigerator, that the home crafter may not have. A three-dimensional biscuit werewolf is decorated with pieces of shredded coconut to create individual hairs, then air-brushed with food colouring, while the shrunken head biscuits are carved with a dremel. All of this, therefore, creates a tension in the show between the Gothic crafts and your ability as a viewer to recreate the crafts depicted. Although the show provides some inspiration for a gothically lived life, it becomes almost impossible for the viewer to take part by recreating Christine's crafts. This means that the show is generally more of an entertainment, rather than an instructional programme. Instead those that want to make Gothic crafts are better returning to the crafting stalwarts of YouTube and Pinterest for more realistic practical tutorials. This makes the show's narrative and humour more important than it might otherwise be, in order to support the under-explained crafting content. Like *Heston's Feasts* (2009-2010), the show becomes "cooking as pure fantasy, a spectacle to enjoy but not emulate" (Spooner 45). For the viewers of *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* this can lead to the show becoming an ultimately dissatisfying experience. This is due to the inherent differences between the two shows and the way the central personalities are constructed. Both Heston Blumenthal and Christine McConnell are highly skilled professionals who make a living from food, with McConnell being described by *The New Yorker* as "Martha Stewart meets Tim Burton" (Rosner). However, within the context of her own show, Christine McConnell is presented as a dilettante housewife who just happens to have the time to play around creating curious creations, rather than someone with incredible skill and creativity. This is part of a frequent longstanding problem within the cooking show genre, where male presenters are presented as expert chefs while the expertise of women is frequently minimised, being reduced to the position of the unthreatening home cook. In a sense this also relates to traditional early Gothic texts of the nineteenth century, where women are not presented as an example of the rational, rarely occupying the space of the expert investigator, or scientist. Instead women are usually portrayed as emotional, hysterical characters who rely on their intuition to make decisions.



To a degree the show questions its own nature as a part of the instructional genre. As is typical for a cooking or craft show, Christine breaks the fourth wall to explain how to make her creations. However, the puppets Rankle and Rose both ask, "Who is she talking to?" in Episodes One and Two, pointing out the artificiality of the genre norms for cooking shows. The unusual multi-generic mix of the show featuring aspects of the Gothic, comedy, and lifestyle genres means that it already challenges the notion of the traditional cooking show, which more frequently pairs itself with travelogue, historical, and competitive reality genres. This deconstruction of the cooking show appears to be part of a trend on Netflix, with its highly successful show *Nailed It* (2018-) where home cooks are shown failing at complex bakes, in an atmosphere of comedy and a celebration of mediocrity.

Rather than primarily being an example of the cooking genre, *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* is more easily identified as an example of the whimsical macabre which Spooner suggests "reconfigures the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky, and even cute" (99). One of Christine's craft projects is the resurrection of Rose, in the Gothic manner of Frankenstein and his monster. Although this is a gruesome sounding origin, Rose is a cute puppet character who is the source of much comic interaction in the show. On her birthday in Episode Five Rose becomes jealous when she thinks Christine is making a replacement for her, but it is instead just a life size cake. The show's nature as a multi-generic oddity combined with its mix of human and puppet characters helps to mark it as a playful popular culture product. As a show *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* potentially has many different sources of pleasure for a variety of viewers. As its Netflix trailer suggests, "it's a place where the strange and unusual are welcome," making it a place where the gothically minded can feel at home, even if they cannot make the crafts depicted.

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## BIONOTE

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# IN A BROKEN DREAM: THE HOME FOR WAYWARD CHILDREN SERIES

Review by Alison Baker

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McGuire, Seanan. *Down Among the Sticks and Bones*. Tor, 2017; *Beneath the Sugar Sky*. Tor, 2018; *In an Absent Dream*. Tor, 2019. Novellas.

Seanan McGuire's award-winning novella, *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016) introduced readers to Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children. Part-school, part-therapeutic setting, the home houses and educates young people who have returned from the wonderlands that they travelled to as children. Her subsequent novellas, published after *Every Heart a Doorway*, are companion texts - only *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018) can really be considered a sequel, as it follows on from the events of the first novella. Both *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (2017) and *In an Absent Dream* (2019) tell the stories of the other characters connected to the Home, set within this universe of McGuire's creation.

*Down Among the Sticks and Bones* tells the story of Jack and Jill, the twins who found a door at the bottom of their grandmother's trunk. The girls are considered accessories to their parents' upper middle-class lifestyle, who want one perfect child, either a sporty, preppy boy, or a delicate, feminine girl; and they impose gender binaries on their twins. This is overturned once the girls reach the Moors; the twins are manipulated into selecting their roles as the daughter of the Master or the apprentice of Dr Bleak. Both are gendered roles: Jill chooses to select the delicate dresses, beauty treatments, and an iron-rich luxurious diet of the vampire-in-training: a role that values femininity only for its corporeal possibilities. The Master expects "... your loyalty, your devotion and your obedience," but does not value her intelligence, her opinions, or her personality (96). Jack, meanwhile, chooses to join the "mad scientist," to wear suits, boots, and gloves (192). She learns from Dr Bleak how to reanimate corpses, how to dissect cadavers, and how to carry out exhumations; she is taught to be logical, rational, and to think scientifically. McGuire demonstrates that Jack and Jill's parents, in their inability to recognise that girls can be both sporty and quiet, or feminine and clever, have not recognised the desire in Jill to be pretty, or in Jack to be challenged intellectually, similarly to how Robin Hobb subverts the heteronormativity of the "binary oppositions between body and mind" within her work (Prater 27). Ultimately this culminates in a series of events, including the death that leads to Jack and Jill being chased out of the Moors, but also represents a profound loss for Jack and Jill's parents, who through their selfish desire to have one perfect child, actually end up childless, and may thus be interpreted as a more contemporary morality tale.

*Beneath the Sugar Sky* is the sequel to *Every Heart a Doorway*, continuing where this novella left off, shortly after the murders of students and staff at the Wayward Home. It begins

with new student Cora (who has been a mermaid in a world called the Trenches) tentatively joining with Nadya (from a Drowned World, where she lived among turtles) in a pond in the grounds. However, this watery bonding is halted by a naked girl falling from the sky, who claims to be Rini, the daughter of Sumi, the first murder victim in *Every Heart a Doorway*. Thus begins a quest to avenge their friend and fulfil Sumi's prophesised defeat of the Queen of Cakes in the land of Confection, before Rini fades from existence. Just as in the other novellas in the series, McGuire adeptly uses Fantasy to interrogate stereotyping and prejudice: in this text it is what McGuire describes as Cora's fatness, perceived as laziness and greediness, that become the focus. Her size and strength has been invaluable to her as a mermaid; the Queen of Cakes underestimates her:

[Cora] knew what the Queen wasn't seeing... She wasn't seeing the athlete or the scholar or the friend or the hero of the trenches. All she was seeing was fatty fatty fat fat, because that was all they ever saw when they were looking at her that way. That was all that they were looking for (115).

McGuire's approach to inclusive representation, as in *Every Heart a Doorway*, is beautifully rendered in *Beneath a Sugar Sky*. Cora's size makes her insecure and inclined to suspect overtures of friendship as being anything but because of society's preconceptions about her. However, it is to her advantage in Confection; Cora sees that the Queen can be manipulated by flattery, and this enables the Wayward Children to defeat her.

The most recent novella in the Wayward Children sequence is *In an Absent Dream* (2019). It is another prequel, although predating even *Down Among the Sticks and Bones* (2017) with its subject matter, addressing the story of Lundy, the final murder victim in *Every Heart a Doorway* (2016). Katherine Lundy travels to a Goblin Market, a world where she can travel backwards and forwards until she becomes too old. A well-read girl, Lundy knows that she must follow the rules until she is eighteen, and then must choose either the Market or her home.

Unlike the characters within other novellas in the series, Lundy's home-life is devoid of conflict. She is not escaping a family that does not understand her as her father had the same journey to the market that she did. However, his assumption that because they have shared their experiences there, that his daughter will want to make the same choice that he did means that he is unable to help her with her decision, and so she tries to bend the rules rather than break them. Lundy's bargaining to try and get out of needing to conform to the rules ends in her becoming the Lundy that we meet in the first novella: ageing backwards, a middle-aged woman in the body of a little girl. She fails to in her attempt to break from these rules and suffers the consequences, becoming another Wayward child in this suitably allegorical narrative that perhaps demonstrates these sorts of stories do not always have the traditional happy endings synonymous with the genre.

Of all of the novellas, this was the one that engaged me the least; perhaps because I was not strongly drawn to Lundy in the first novella, and therefore her murder felt somewhat inconsequential

without this backstory, and it might be beneficial for new readers to read the novellas in internal chronological order, starting with *In An Absent Dream* before *Every Heart a Doorway*. However, McGuire's lyrical, rhythmical writing contrived to draw me in much as with the rest of the series – and there are other backstories that I would love to read: such as how Eleanor West came to open the home, or related to some of the other students who attend, like Christopher. Since McGuire is committed to an eight book series as announced in early 2019, I hope that these further explore the rich world that she has crafted, within this inimitable style, and that they continue to examine, challenge, and subvert many of the traditional tropes of the genre, with similar effectiveness.

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## BIONOTE

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# **BLACKFISH CITY: A PLACE WITHOUT A MAP**

Review by Lobke Minter

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Miller, Sam J. *Blackfish City*. Ecco Press, 2018. Novel.

A mysterious orcamancer arrives in Qaanaaq, the floating Arctic city, with an orca and a polar bear in tow. Their purpose unknown, the orcamancer immediately becomes a site of speculation and projection for the inhabitants of the overpopulated city. The importance of stories is the first introduction to this post-apocalyptic city, where refugees make up most of the inhabitants. Sam J. Miller makes a point of emphasising how identity is formed through storytelling: "Stories are valuable here. They are what we brought when we came here, they are what cannot be taken away from us" (1). This awareness of storytelling makes *Blackfish City* (2018) a beautiful dystopia.

Qaanaaq itself is beguiling in its complexity, a pastiche of the postmodern city, where no map exists to effectively guide you through the chaos of overpopulation, poverty, and human suffering. Run by Artificial Intelligence (AI) software, the city is owned by secret shareholders, the capitalist elite who manage to profit from the end of the world. They have created a space where technology has effectively replaced human awareness, while in the process also erasing their collusion in the collapse of world systems. The fast-paced narrative is fragmented across four separate characters, each of whom traverses the city in a distinct way. The choice of the inhospitable Arctic as the story's setting enhances the direness of the situation. Qaanaaq, as sketched by Miller, mirrors the sentiments expressed by Mary Shelley's Robert Walton "inspired by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight" (Shelley 2). The four protagonists are alternately enchanted or horrified by the city they live in. The "beauty and delight" of the cityscape cannot hide the "desolation" many of its inhabitants experience while living in deplorable circumstances.

The multiple perspectives seem completely unrelated to one another in terms of outlook and experience; however there are areas within Qaanaaq where their paths cross, even though they never meet. The disease "the breaks" is a point of intrigue throughout the narratives, disrupting the flow of the text in a way which reflects how the symptoms appear:

Bodybreaking, they called it. What happened when the breaks finally killed you. The moment when your mind's hold on the here and now finally ruptured forever and you broke free from your body [...] Midsentence she could see it happening, watch his eyes as one train of thought was abruptly replaced by another. (67)

Once diagnosed, an individual increasingly becomes “interrupted” by memories. As the illness progresses, these interruptions become more and more marked. The mind cannot make sense of the multiplicity within itself, a condition which manifests physically as tremors and tics which become more pronounced over time. There is no cure for “the breaks,” and very little is understood about it.

The sexually transmitted disease that racks the city dwellers seems like a remnant of the past – in Miller’s vision, the mind cannot internalise history or other people’s stories. Stories form part of the power wielded by the resistance ‘Author’ within the text, who remembers on behalf of the individuals listening to the pirate podcast. This podcast, “City Without A Map,” reminds listeners that they are separate from the AI systems that control everything – that the AI systems are not all powerful. The disembodied voice speaks truth, by detailing how suffering empowers those who orchestrate reality from hidden spaces by creating fear and misinformation.

At the turning point in the novel the orcamancer introduced at the beginning of *Blackfish City* is given a narrative segment as well as a name, Maasaraq. This point of view, filled with many different memories, engages directly with the speculation and projection of others regarding the dramatic arrival. This narrative fragment becomes the catalyst driving towards the resolution of the novel, echoing the transformative power of including a completely other narrative. Maasaraq’s bond with the orca is the reason for her immunity to “the breaks”: she explains that culturally “our ancestors do not depart, suggesting there is pre-existing awareness or ability to incorporate multiple realities or memories within one mind (325). The representation of Maasaraq also brings to the foreground the possible antidote for self-disintegration. In a city populated by many different refugees, Maasaraq is a survivor of genocide, and as an outsider driven by vengeance and loneliness, seems initially to embody the anti-hero within the expectations of Post-Cyberpunk. Her story highlights ecological awareness as a counternarrative, implying that mindfulness of environmental cohabitation is preferable to the caged, trapped status of those living in Qaanaaq.

Miller ends on an action-driven stand-off that is followed by a heartfelt reflection on the way forward for the protagonists as well as the city. The characters so clearly differentiated throughout the novel no longer find themselves distanced from each other, understanding that “Home is where we make it. Where we’re together” (324). Maasaraq’s narrative reveals that the characters, though separate and distinct throughout the novel, are in fact family. While this functions as an interesting plot twist, the concept of family seems to settle or gloss some of the complexity of what is presented throughout *Blackfish City*. Family becomes the antidote to all the city’s ills.

*Blackfish City* mirrors current concerns about the future critically. Qaanaaq and the people that live there do not feel incomprehensibly different. If anything, their thoughts, concerns and world feel all too familiar: their fate, Miller speculates, could be ours. Increasing nationalism and fear of immigrants and refugees, along with a denial of climate change and its impact, ravages and destroys the world. Their technological advancement and scorched earth political policies of exclusion and apathy – all of these lead to the floating dystopic city.

Miller uses lyrical prose to write an overpopulated city that is breathtaking in its magnificence and decay. The tension is maintained expertly, jumping between points of view, refugees and the elite, hope and despair, all the while maintaining a crisp insight into the world he has created.

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#### BIONOTE

**Lobke Minter** is an independent researcher living in Cape Town, South Africa. Her research interests include Dark Romanticism, imaginative explorations, Gothic expressions of Speculative Fiction; as well Science Fiction across a variety of subgenres.

# DINÉ LEGEND COMES TO LIFE IN REBECCA ROANHORSE'S *TRAIL OF LIGHTNING*

Review by Madelyn Marie Schoonover

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Roanhorse, Rebecca. *Trail of Lightning*. Saga Press, 2018. Novel.

Rebecca Roanhorse's first foray into the publishing world, her short story "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™" (2017), was met with much critical acclaim and earned her the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Short Story, as well as several other nominations and accolades. Roanhorse's second publication and debut novel, *Trail of Lightning* (2018), first instalment of The Sixth World series, continues to impress. Nominated for a Nebula Best Novel award in 2018, this Young Adult offering should not be overlooked simply because of where it is shelved in the bookshop. Roanhorse's excellent worldbuilding, her artistic vision and ambition, and her depictions of an almost entirely Diné (Navajo) universe breathes life into a story that manages to go beyond being just another trope-filled Young Adult adventure/romance.

The action takes place in Dinétah, the land that was formerly the Navajo Reservation, but which was closed off by a magical Wall before the calamity referred to as the Big Water. Wiping out the vast majority of the United States, including even the Midwest, the Big Water devastated life outside Dinétah, completely destabilising the United States government and further exacerbating the gaps between socioeconomic classes. However, that is not the focus of Roanhorse's story. The people and legends of Dinétah in the first Sixth World novel are far more interesting than what is outside the Wall. As the trickster Coyote character Ma'ii states: "This last flood, the one you call the Big Water, ended the Fifth World and began the Sixth. It opened the passage for those like myself to return to the world" (101). With the Big Water and the Wall came the rebirth – or perhaps re-invigoration – of Diné legends of old.

*Trail of Lightning* is told from the perspective of Maggie Hoskie, a monster hunter imbued with supernatural power thanks to a horrifying encounter with band of yee naaldlooshii (skin walkers). This encounter killed her grandmother, but the trauma activated Maggie's clan powers – an invention of Roanhorse's which draws upon Diné naming conventions, literalising the meanings of Diné family names. Since Maggie is "Honágháahnii [Walks-Around], born for K'aahanáanii [Living Arrow]," her clan powers manifest as super speed and blood lust (6). While others without clan powers can fight monsters to a point, Maggie's abilities turn her into a literal killing machine who takes pleasure in the carnage that follows her. Before the events of the novel, Maggie's former mentor – Neizghání, a mythical figure in Diné legend and the son of Changing Woman – left her in part because of her monstrous K'aahanáanii bloodlust. Hurt and alone, Maggie's life is changed yet again when she takes a contract and finds that a new kind of monster, one unlike anything out of Diné legend,



has begun terrorising Dinétah. She must team up with a mysterious and charismatic young man named Kai Arviso, who also happens to have clan powers, in order to find out who is creating these monsters and why.

As it should be abundantly clear even from this short synopsis, *Trail of Lightning* is steeped in Diné culture and language, fitting it strongly into the creative tradition of Indigenous Futurism. The text abounds with Diné words that are not set apart stylistically from any other word in the novel and are often translated several pages (if not several chapters) after their initial usage. Some are not directly translated at all. In doing so, Roanhorse makes both Diné and English seamlessly entwined in the eyes of her characters and her readers. This also helps highlight Diné culture. The novel is composed almost entirely of Diné people telling Diné stories with Diné words – something unheard of in mainstream American fiction, Young Adult or otherwise. Although some aspects of Diné legends are explained, such as Neizghání's relationship to Changing Woman and the trickster nature of Coyote/Ma'ii, most are not. The only non-Diné characters in the novel are the Goodacres, a black family that owns the prosperous All-American bar. However, focusing on the lack of white characters in the novel would be to put more importance on their absence than the novel does. Roanhorse does not highlight their non-existence and so, it seems, neither should readers. Clearly, there are far more interesting elements to focus on.

There are many strengths to *Trail of Lightning* beyond its use of legend and language. Roanhorse's website quotes literary agent Sara Megibow as stating that "the book was pitched [...] as 'an indigenous *Mad Max: Fury Road*'" (Roanhorse, "My Novel is Coming! Trail of Lightning"). This indeed feels aesthetically apt. Readers follow Maggie and Kai across vast, sandy stretches of wasteland, while they are harassed by the unsavoury police force called the Citizens' Watch and Guard (CWAGs) and detained by a gang called the Thirsty Boys. Much like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Roanhorse's pacing keeps readers racing to the finish line while her charming characters, intriguing hints at larger mysteries, and genuinely disturbing monsters keep them dreading the end.

Not everything about the style is perfect, of course. Most predictable, and glaringly unoriginal in the face of all Roanhorse's otherwise deeply innovative narrative, is the romance between Maggie and Kai. The night after meeting Kai – and being propositioned by him – Maggie muses on her physical and emotional scars and feels suddenly "ridiculous for even thinking Kai and I could be friends, more than friends" (124). Like so many other Young Adult novels, it seems that Kai – with his stylish clothes, "more than just handsome. Movie-star boy-band handsome" face, and easy-going demeanour – will never see our flawed, first-person narrator protagonist as anything other than pimply and wrongly proportioned (39). Their will-they-won't-they flirtations even features a Cinderella-meets-Mad-Max style transformation when Maggie must don a skimpy leather top to infiltrate a nightclub and, upon revealing the new look to Kai, leaves him speechless and staring.

However, these pulpier moments should not discount Roanhorse's ingenuity which is apparent throughout the novel. Indeed, they rather show her ability to adhere to genre expectations while giving new life to tired tropes. Yes, Maggie is a lanky, theoretically undate-able heroine, but the

vivid horror of her backstory (along with some of her deeply questionable and violent choices) gives a depth and complexity to her character often missing in other mainstream Young Adult offerings.

Additionally, while Maggie and Kai certainly have their own internal struggles, neither of them is afflicted with a confused sense of identity that is a predominant theme in so many Native American stories – and indeed in Roanhorse’s own “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™.” Because Roanhorse’s protagonist grew up in Dinétah, surrounded by Diné culture and largely cut off from white colonising influence by the Big Water, Maggie’s conflict is not so much about who she is but *what* she is and how she fits in with the world around her. Unlike other works of Indigenous Futurism that can depict Indigenous culture as a haunting presence that ultimately overcomes Western colonising hegemony despite its status as a cultural and ideological underdog, the total exclusion of white characters and their voices from the novel makes Diné culture, tradition, and values the sole focus of the text and the mechanism through which the audience and the characters assess the morality and meaning of their actions. In this way, Roanhorse is not so much ‘talking back’ to the coloniser in the sense Homi K. Bhabha describes, but rather talking over the coloniser by ignoring their culture completely. Although identity – and especially its relationship to colonisation – is undeniably an important theme for any culture to explore, it is refreshing to read a novel centred on Native Americans that does not seem haunted or antagonised by any white presence. Roanhorse’s characters simply exist in their own, all-encompassing, complex, and complicated culture and world.

For those interested in Young Adult and Horror literature, Diné legend, or just looking for a fast-paced and enjoyable read that is a bit on the bloody side, *Trail of Lightning* is a wonderful choice. Fans of the novel will certainly be eager to dig into the second installment in the Sixth World series, *Storm of Locusts*, published April 2019.

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## BIONOTE

**Madelyn Marie Schoonover** holds an MLitt in the Gothic Imagination from, and is currently a second-year PhD candidate at, the University of Stirling, UK. She studies erasure and depictions of Native Americans in contemporary American and Native American Gothic film and fiction with a particular focus on eco-Gothic, masculinity studies, and cultural hybridity.

# AQUAMAN; OR FLASH GORDON OF THE SEA

Review by Stuart Spear

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Wan, James, dir. *Aquaman*. Perf. Jason Momoa, Amber Heard, Patrick Wilson, Nicole Kidman, Willem Dafoe, Temura Morrison and Dolph Lundgren. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2018. Film.

If there is one lesson to take away from the new DC Extended Universe (DCEU) superhero film it is this: subtlety is overrated. While over the years Marvel Studios has found ever-increasing commercial success, DC's cinematic universe has been struggling. The mediocre *Man of Steel* (2013) was a bad way to start; *Batman vs. Superman* (2016) was ugly and miserable; and *Suicide Squad* (2016) was simply a terrible mess made by committee. Then came *Wonder Woman* (2017) which was confident, assured, warm, and fun. Suddenly there was hope after all for DC to be successful like Marvel. Then *Justice League* (2017) happened and spoiled it all. So it felt like a lot was hanging on the aquatic shoulders of DC's next instalment.

In *Aquaman* lighthouse keeper Tom Curry (Temura Morrison) discovers Atlanta (Nicole Kidman), the queen of Atlantis, washed up on the rocks after evading an arranged marriage. They fall in love, live together and soon have a son, Arthur. But their happiness does not last when Atlantean heavies finally track Atlanta and demand she returns undersea. For her rebellious behaviour, and for birthing a half-breed on land, Atlanta is sentenced to death leaving her other son King Orm (Patrick Wilson) to preside over Atlantis. Orm seeks to unite the historic Seven Kingdoms of Atlantis and retaliate to what he sees as the crimes committed to their world by the humans on the land. Adult Arthur (Jason Momoa), who has since become the meta-human Aquaman, is reluctant to fully submit to the hero role and even more reluctant to engage with the happenings in Atlantis. After the idealistic Atlantean Mera (Amber Heard) helps Arthur save his father from Orm's warning shot to the surface he agrees to help Mera restore order to Atlantis and the Seven Kingdoms.

What follows is a high-pomp melodrama turned up to eleven.

*Aquaman* has many shortcomings, from the sloppy writing and character arcs to its patchy structure, but believes if it can distract you with its imagery you will ignore where it stumbles. It is a film that peddles the familiar tropes: a hero eventually proving he is worthy to lead, a search for a mythical item that will unlock said hero's true identity and steer their fate, a sibling rivalry at the nexus of power, and cross-kingdom politics and machinations. These tropes, as well as the narrative beats, operate in such a by-the-numbers manner the screenplay almost feels like it was written using a script template document by an intern. There is no real deviation from or subversion of the generic hero narrative formula; instead we have clunky dialogue – which is predominantly exposition – from two-dimensional characters in a plethora of lavishly realised locations.

Ultimately, the spectacle replaces character development. There are plenty of opportunities for development, but every scene where this could happen has to be interrupted after ten minutes with something exploding in someone's face. While Arthur and Mera display good chemistry when together, these moments are too brief; but it is Orm who suffers most. Like most superhero films, the villain is underwritten and given very little to do (other than yell) and this is partly down to the introduction of a secondary villain, Black Manta, who robs Orm of useful screen time where his character and motives could have been fleshed out. Through Orm's motives there is the promise of ecocriticism - his plan for revenge stems from the humans' littering and poisoning of the oceans. His warning display involves throwing decades of pollution and discarded ships back on to the land; this causes massive devastation globally but is swiftly forgotten about narratively – an important and topical issue is being addressed, but done so almost as a token gesture. Black Manta is wholly unnecessary in this film and offers no real menace, he is just another man in a weaponised suit blowing stuff up, acting as a pawn for the main antagonist (in this film at least, the post-credit scene tells us he will return in the sequel). His inclusion in the film is a major factor in its bloated running time and yet he adds next to nothing to the narrative; worse still, it is difficult to get excited about his return in the sequel based on his introduction here.

In short, this film is a cobbled together big budget hodgepodge that drapes colourful clothing over a tired skeleton – and I really enjoyed it.

Aquaman is a character who manoeuvres on a tightrope between daft, cheesy fluff and daft, escapist fun; and here the film is bolstered by a well-cast Mamoa who is clearly having fun shifting between the physical and powerful fighter and the light-hearted buffoon with a heart of gold. It is also a welcome reversal of the recent problematic whitewashing where instead a prominent white comic book hero is portrayed by a Polynesian actor.

It was also a shrewd move to enlist James Wan as director as he has an incredible track record for producing hugely successful films that cater to a cross section of audiences and has proved so again, *Aquaman* is now the highest grossing film based on a DC character – not just of the DCEU canon, but of all time. This success is vital for the studio when their cinematic universe was seemingly faltering before it even got running, but I think it is easy to see why it succeeded. This film just has so much to enjoy: death by red wine; riding into battle on killer whales; Nicole Kidman in some sort of weird *Monster Hunter* cosplay; Mera's woodwind serenade to the ocean while Arthur recovers; Julie Andrews as a massive, incredibly powerful gatekeeping sea creature; the Brine kingdom whose captain is a crisply spoken British crab (of course); characters genuinely wanting the title "Ocean Master"; and a Jules Verne dinosaur land at the centre of the world. They threw almost everything into this film and for the large part most of it works just fine.

It all culminates in an insanely chaotic battle but the third act felt far less tiresome than in most superhero fare. Yes, it is a large computer-generated imagery brawl but the sheer spectacle of an underwater Helm's Deep is bewildering fun that does not go on and on – often in both DC and Marvel films these battles seem interminable. And while the characters are somewhat flat, the film is

a visual delight. The fluorescent colours dazzle – Atlantis rendered as a pulsing neon kingdom under water, and there is a fantastic shot of Trench creatures pursuing Mera and Arthur into the depths – and it is evident that DC are trying to break away from the dark grey/black palette that has mired some of the earlier outings. *Aquaman* feels like a comic book put on to the screen, which has to be a massive compliment.

Rupert Gregson-Williams' score finds the right balance between swelling horns, strings, and chorus alongside pulsing synth melodies; a soundtrack that amply compliments the narrative theme, the visual energy, and the sheer scale of the film. However, being *Aquaman*, it has to throw in a few bum notes here and there, such as Pitbull's "Ocean to Ocean," which samples Toto's "Africa" playing as they fly over Africa because, you know, subtlety be damned. Or when Mera's encounter with the joys of the surface world is accompanied by Roy Orbison's "She's a Mystery To Me," a combination so on-the-nose cheesy it borders on the parodic – this scene also plays out like some sort of Sicilian Tourist Board advert for an Italian town just as much fairytale as Atlantis. Also, fittingly for a film as patchy as this, Arthur's signature guitar motif which plays whenever he does something badass is completely dropped after about fifteen minutes of the film (it re-surfaces amidst the hubbub after his final encounter with Orm).

This is a film that overwhelms. It is an underwater pantomime as bright, bloated, and entertaining as they come. The DCEU has started to recognise what works: a more colourful mixture of levity, action and a modicum of character. These changes are having a far deeper impact on audiences than the dour, brooding, smashing borefests that came before. Perhaps the greatest lesson has been to take the franchise out of the hands of Zack Snyder (and Joss Whedon) and to emulate the aesthetic of Marvel's more irreverent and brash releases - most notably *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). Whether *Shazam!* (2019) maintains this new enjoyable, albeit formulaic, resurgence is yet to be seen at the time of writing, but fingers crossed. For though it is important and compelling to have superhero films that question the uses and/or abuses of power, the conflict between a private and public persona, or our place in a universe populated with intelligence and ability beyond our means, sometimes plain old stupid is better, and they do not come much more enjoyably stupid than *Aquaman*.

## BIONOTE

**Stuart Spear** is a recent MA Graduate from Lancaster University, UK. His interests include Science Fiction, eco-criticism, Modernism, and the Gothic. He is currently based in Bristol.

# THE TOWER OF PARABLE

Review by Timothy J. Jarvis

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**Wheatley, Michael. *The Writers' Block*. Black Pear Press, 2019. Chapbook.**

It came through the door sometime around noon on a grey summer's day – drizzle falling from a rack of cloud scudding by overhead, gusts howling in the branches of the stunted wych elm outside my window. The hinge of the letterbox flap creaked, and the package fell to the floor, landed with a whump. At the time I was poring over the essays in a volume of criticism on Arthur Machen I was editing. Eager for some respite from staring at text on a screen, I shut the lid of my laptop, got up, and went out into the hallway to see what had been delivered.

The manila padded envelope was addressed to me in a neat cursive. There was no return address, the postmark had been smeared and could not be made out. I tore the package open. I expected a book, and that is what I found, but it was not a book I'd ordered. There was nothing else, no invoice or note of explanation. It was a slim chapbook, *The Writers' Block* by a Michael Wheatley, title and author's name in white block caps on a black ground, the illustration pages of text hacked and seen as if through a tower-shaped hole incised in the cover.

I took the mysterious chapbook into my living room and settled down to read. Within I found six short tales – richly allusive metatexts, lively and experimental, fictional meditations on artistic creation, literature, and writing.

"The Straw Man" tells of a village amid woodland that, every year after harvest time, hosts a fortnight of unfettered artistic creation, at the end of which one of the pieces, the best of them, the Great Work, is burnt as an offering. The Straw Man is making an effigy of straw, his contribution to the tradition of the Great Work, working on the roof of a tower block that looms over the village, but he struggles to create something to satisfy his aesthetic sense. He attempts to revitalise his creativity with materials taken from the abandoned workings of other artists, but it is a disaster, raising a reeky pall when thrown into a furnace. The Straw Man then realises he must make a greater sacrifice... Fantastical Folk Horror is here fused with allegory, producing an extremely unnerving tale of the throes of artistic creation.

The second story, "Simulacrum," tells of a novel of that name first published during the second decade of the nineteenth century, and which concerns the relationship between the wealthy Camille and lower class Timothée in Paris – a scandalous and ambiguous work that seems to prefigure writing by Baudelaire and Zola. Wallace is a one-man critical industry dedicated to uncovering the secrets of this novel and reconstructing its unknown author from clues in the text. After giving a paper at a symposium, he has an uncanny encounter.

"A Burial at Sea" tells of a woman drowning in an ocean of books – a frozen sea that recalls Kafka's famous quote about the best books being axes for the frozen seas within us. But, in a skewering of a particular experimental corpus that includes Kafka (whose vampiric leaching off his female correspondents Deleuze and Guattari have written so brilliantly about), this is an oppressively male ocean of books, and the story is a thoughtful reflection on how stifling canons can be for those excluded from them.

The book concludes with two pieces that explore the commodification of writing and the development of writers. The very brief flash fiction "Catharsis" points to a model of a creative writing workshop that is genuinely collaborative. While in "The Writers' Block," we get successive iterations, drafts, of an allegory of literary creation, or uncreation, or stalled creation, stagnation, erasure – and finally a kind of liberation. It's a story of writing trammelled, of the commodification of art, of how the literary marketplace saps creativity. And of the new stories that might lie outside of the confines of the Block.

Having finished reading, I put the book aside. The approach, a fusion of experimental literature and dark fiction had engaged me. A debut full of rich ideas, *Weird Fiction* laced with metatext and innovation. So I opened my laptop again, typed "Michael Wheatley" into the search bar of my internet browser. I found a website, details of some other publications. There was even a picture of the writer. And there were endorsements on the back of the pamphlet from authors whose work I'd read and admired. It all *seemed* authentic. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. And why had the book come to me in the first place?

I turned back to *The Writers' Block* and idly flipped through the pages. My eyes alighted on this line from Attlick, the supposed author of the novel, *Simulacrum*, in the story of that name: "The book hardly belongs to me." That Barthesian notion of the text as a patchwork of quotations flashed into my mind – though *The Writers' Block* is highly original, it is also densely allusive. And I thought of how an author, a person, could also be a composite of various 'quotations.' And, of course, of 'simulacrum,' Baudrillard's concept of a copy without a model.

Pondering this stuff, I felt a chill as if someone had swiped the back of my neck with ice. I don't know how I hadn't seen it before. Michael Wheatley wasn't real, website, photograph, and endorsements notwithstanding. *Wheatley* was a straw man, the Straw Man of the lead story. *Wheatley* was too convenient a name, with its allusions to Dennis, the famous author of occult thrillers, and Ben, the contemporary film maker, director of contemporary Folk Horror masterpieces, *Kill List* and *A Field in England*. And where did that Michael come from? I realised there was another allusion buried in "Simulacrum," a reference to an essay, "Simulacrum," by art historian, Michael Camille. It all fitted together.

At one point in the story "Simulacrum," the unknown writer of *Simulacrum* is compared by Wallace to the equally unknown author of the Ripper murders. This gave me a very uneasy feeling...

I've taped up the letterbox. I've not left the house for days, surviving on dry cereal and instant coffee. I've been poring over the chapbook, looking for either reassurance or some definitive horror – I've found neither, but am entangled, more and more, in its web.

#### BIONOTE

**Timothy J. Jarvis** is a writer, scholar, and teacher of Creative Writing with an interest in the antic, the weird, the strange. His first novel, *The Wanderer*, was published by Perfect Edge Books in the summer of 2014. His short-fiction has appeared in various venues. He is also interested in drone and ambient music and has collaborated with sound artists on sleeve notes and performance. He currently lives in Bedford, a small town in the hallowed/cursed M1 corridor.



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