Data Narrator: Digital Chronotopes in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction

Astrid Møller-Olsen

Lund University / Sweden

CONTEMPORARY Chinese science fiction fills a dual role as an imaginary exercise ground for modern technologies as well as an unofficial forum for expressing hopes and fears regarding future political, environmental, and technological developments. In the words of literary scholar Mingwei Song, science fiction narratives bring into focus "invisible" dimensions of reality, that are repressed, ignored, or not yet dreamt of in mainstream discourse (Song 547). In this essay, I employ Elana Gomel's concept of "impossible topologies" to analyze and compare three literary visions of how digital realities might in the future augment, as well as impede, the physical world we live in: From Liu Cixin's 刘慈欣 use of virtual reality as world simulation in *The Three Body Problem* (*san ti* 三体, 2008), toTang Fei's 糖匪 portrayal of an "ocean of data" as the source of all stories in "Call Girl" (*huangse gushi* 黄色故事, 2013), to Ma Boyong's 马伯庸 Orwellian narrative "The City of Silence" (*jijing zhi cheng* 寂静之城, 2005),[1] where all interpersonal communication is carried out soundlessly via strictly censored online forums. I use spatiotemporal concepts to analyze digital realities as alternative, parallel spacetimes that afford imaginary arenas for experimentation, escape, and control.

Cyberfiction—fiction about digital and computer-generated levels of reality—has been defined as a subgenre of science fiction that "downplays this interplanetary theme in favor of imagining the faux space of databases and networks" (McCallum 350). The product of a specific cultural and historical context, this genre features the "integration of technology and Eighties counterculture" (Sterling xii); its most famous and pioneering examples include the film *Blade Runner* from 1982 (dir. Ridley Scott) and William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* from 1984. In China, the current boom in science fiction writing, for a national as well as global market, has introduced a new cultural edge, as well as a more contemporary addition to this subgenre that merits further study. As digital realms become increasingly integrated into our lives, the sci-fi stories depicting them span a wide variety of settings from the alien to the quotidian. In the following brief comparison, I present three very

different examples of how contemporary Chinese writers imagine possible digital futures, showing both how the genre is not merely an 80s fetish but still relevant today, as well as highlighting the diversity of contemporary sci-fi from the Chinese-speaking world.

Literary scholar Elana Gomel has pointed out that increasingly in this day and age, "we live in sorts of space that may not be grasped in Bachelard's sense—or rather, may not be grasped by the narrative paradigms inherited from the nineteenth-century realistic novel. Video games, movies, the Internet, and global transportation constantly reconfigure our spatial perception" (Gomel 5). The phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard advocated a body-centered and psychologically invested approach to space in his influential work *The Poetics of Space*, and it is this immediate sensuality that Gomel feels needs to be updated to include cyber and virtual realities. Not least in contemporary fiction is this update required as "representation of impossible spaces is an integral part of the narrative poetics of modernity and postmodernity" (Gomel 6). "Impossible topologies" is the term she uses to describe the non-physical or post-Newtonian spaces, those spaces that do not conform to absolute or tangible notions of time and space. So how do writers depict and help us imagine these impossible topologies, not to mention believe in them? What new digital chronotopes[2] do they invent? How do the futures look that they create on the page?

Digitalization as Evolution

In his world-famous novel *The Three-Body Problem* from 2008, Liu Cixin describes a computer game developed to simulate life on a distant planet: "As a game, *Three Body* only borrows the background of human society to simulate the development of Trisolaris [三体]" (248/168)[3] The object of the computer game is three-fold; apart from being a simulation meant to solve the very real problems faced by the Trisolaran civilization, it is also a personality test to judge whether or not a player is suited to form part of a secret society to help the Trisolarans take over planet Earth: "'The goal of *Three Body* is very simple and pure: to gather those of us who have common ideals [志同道合],' Pan said" (248/168). Finally, for several of the more experienced gamers, the computer-built world constitutes an alternative reality, a haven from their humdrum lives: "'I'm a bit sick of the real world,' the young reporter said. '*Three Body* is already my second reality [第二现实].' 'Really?' Pan asked, interested. 'Me

too,' the software company vice president said. 'Compared to *Three Body*, reality is so vulgar and unexciting'" (246/167).

Apart from the computer game, the novel also depicts an interesting reversal of the body-centered versus virtual spatiality that Gomel writes about. Here, computers are not mere boxes for digital landscapes, but are envisioned as an extension of the perceptiveness of the human body into digital realties: "The computer did in fact make its first appearance in Trisolaris as a formation of people, before becoming mechanical and then electronic" (248/168). Seen from this perspective, the computer is a natural evolution of human civilization, a kind of human superstructure: "But suppose that of the thirty million soldiers forming the computer, each one is capable of raising and lowering the black and white flags a hundred thousand times per second […] According to some signs, the bodies of the Trisolarans who formed the computer were covered by a purely reflective surface, which probably evolved as a response to survival under extreme conditions of sunlight. The mirrorlike surface could be deformed into any shape, and they communicated with each other by focusing light with their bodies. This kind of light-speech [光线语言] could transmit information extremely rapidly and was the foundation of the Trisolaran-formation computer [人列计算机]" (247-248, 168). As such, the virtual reality generated by the superstructure of the computer is hardly different from the social reality generated by the superstructure of the city.

Liu's novel poses an interesting dual image of digital technologies as represented by Earth and Trisolaris culture. Whereas Earth people see the virtual world as an alternative technological reality, whether simply a playground or more real that the physical one, on Trisolaris, the digital is described as a natural development of human civilization. In *The Three-Body Problem*, digital realities are represented as 1) trial grounds for physical reality, 2) a way to probe and manipulate the human mind, 3) a human superstructure of light. The computer game becomes a chronotope that blurs the boundary between reality and imagination, as well as a metafictional gesture pointing out that the two realities (virtual and physical) are both fictional, existing side-by-side on the pages of Liu's book.

The Ocean of Data

Another author to imagine the digital in more naturalistic terms is Tang Fei. In her

short story "Call Girl" from 2013, she explores the realm of fantasy and imagination and envisions it as a boundless ocean of information: "Fundamental nature [本质] consists of zeros and ones, part of the ultimate database. This sea is an illusion, a projection of that fundamental nature. The sea of data [海的数据] is too big to be compressed into the shape of a dog. Of course, you may still call it a dog. From the perspective of the story, nothing is impossible" (126/274).[4] Cyberrealities are not computer-generated alternatives to the physical world, but represent the deeper, binary structure of the universe. Here, the only force that makes this endless surge of numbers congeal into phenomena is narrative imagination. Through the structuring power of narrative, the fundamental nature of the world is molded into recognizable patterns such as dogs. As such, the sea of data represents a kind of nirvana, where selfhood ends and where one can immerse oneself in the holistic universe: "The man can feel the transparent currents—1100110111—pass through him. They'll flow through the countless trenches and caves at the bottom of the sea and leave this place behind. Someday this ancient source will dry up, too. But not now. As far as the man is concerned, it is eternity [永恒]" (127/275). Raw imagination is described as a natural resource that might one day "dry up," but until then will form the raw material for all human cognition.

In Tang's story, imagination is described as the source of all phenomena and depicted as a primeval swamp of data, from which the reality perceived by human beings is formed through the structural power of narrative. Like Liu, Tang fuses natural and digital images of reality in a metafictional exploration of the world-creating power of human imagination. Here, the cyberrevolution is not only about the future, but also provides a key to understanding the very basics of the universe as a vast undivided sea of information. Her holistic vision of spacetime as a mingling of two primary forces represented by 0 and 1 employs the technological vocabulary of the computer age to recall the ancient philosophical concepts of yin and yang. By linking these two seemingly inconsistent domains, Tang creates a chronotope of eternal oneness against which both future and past technology and natural philosophy are merely products of the human mind's ability to create patterns from the ocean of data.

Language, a Software for Surveillance

Where the two previous examples describe digital realities in semi-natural terms and use them to represent possible alternative (alien) worlds, as well as point to the role of imagination in understanding our own, the following example presents the darker side of cybertechnologies. In Ma Boyong's short story "The City of Silence" from 2005, the Orwellian world in which the protagonist lives is under constant and pervasive monitoring by a digital construct known as the Web: "He was glad of the opportunity to be temporarily free of the Web [互联网络]. On the Web, he was nothing more than the sum of a series of dry numbers and 'healthy words' [健康词汇]" (5/161). Everyone has an official avatar on the Web, a virtual personality through which the authorities keep track of them and which constitutes their only portal of engagement with society. In a fictional parable that combines images from Chinese internet-censorship[5] with George Orwell's Newspeak,[6] the number of "healthy words" allowed on the Web are dwindling by the day. Furthermore, plans are afoot to extend this linguistic poverty outside the Web as well, by help of a device known as the Listener: "The appropriate authorities [有关部门] were attempting to gradually unify life on the Web and life in the physical world so that they would be equally healthy. . . . The Listener [旁听者] was not yet sufficiently advanced to adjust to the unique rhythm and intonation of each person. In response, the appropriate authorities required that all citizens speak in this manner, so that it would be more convenient to check if anyone used words outside the regulations." (5-6/161-162). As this digital structuring is slowly spreading from the virtual to the material world, a small group of people decide to create a club where they can meet in person and engage in illicit actions, such as critical discussion, sex, and reading, away from the watchful eye of the authorities. "The Talking Club [说话会] is a gathering where we can say anything we want: There are no sensitive words here, and no healthy Web" (16/175).

In Ma's story, the digital realm is not a haven or a natural resource, but a Web of control slowly asphyxiating freedom of thought by deliberately and steadily depleting language, as "every hour, every minute, words vanished from it" (30/195). The advent of this digital linguistic control is described as a threat not only to liberty, but to life itself: "He was stuck in an electronic quagmire [电子淤泥] and he couldn't breathe" (13/170). Here, freedom is symbolized by linguistic diversity,

both in terms of a rich Chinese language without forbidden zones and by invoking various foreign languages such as the Greek, English, German, and French found in books. In their illicit sharing of books, the Talking Club recalls images from the Cultural Revolution, where sent down youths continued to copy and rewrite banned literature to be shared as *shouchaoben* (手抄本 hand-copied fiction, Henningsen 111-112). In "The City of Silence," language is the fabric through which we live and breathe, while both books and the internet are historical and future technologies for sharing that can be censured.

In this brief comparison of three examples from contemporary Chinese sci-fi, we have seen the impossible topology of the digital realm envisioned as a lightscape, a seascape, and as a cityscape under surveillance. The chronotopes we have encountered include the computer-generated alternative reality in *The Three-Body Problem*, the ocean of data in "Call Girl," and language as World Wide Web in "The City of Silence." The digitalization of our world is imagined variously as the next step in the civilization process, a metaphor for understanding narrative cognition, and a weapon of authoritarian control. To be sure, the digital domains of our lives already incorporate all these aspects and more, but sci-fi narratives such as these can help us visualize and comprehend what they might come to mean in the future, and a not too distant future at that.

Notes

1. I want to thank Mingwei Song for generously helping me access Ma Boyong and Tang Fei's original manuscripts.

2. The term chronotope was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" from 1937, in which he defines the term thusly: "We will give the name chronotope (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). I find it useful as a term that recognizes the inseparability of space and time in our experience of reality and directs analytical focus towards the narrative-shaping impact of specific time-spaces. For a more recent reconfiguration of literary time-spaces in a Sinophone context, see Møller-Olsen.

3. In the following references to quotes from *The Three Body Problem*, the first page number refers to the Chinese text and the second to Ken Liu's English translation.

4. In the following references to quotes from "Call Girl," the first page number refers to the Chinese text and the second to Ken Liu's English translation.

5. "If Chinese internet users think Big Brother is watching them, or that fellow users may report them for "provoking trouble [寻衅滋事]" then they make think twice about what they search for, what they read, what they forward, and what comments they make" (Abbott 167).

6. "The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the worldview and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible." (Orwell, "Appendix").

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