

SFRA sfrareview.org REVIEW

REVIEWS
ARTICLES
UPDATES
SINCE 1971

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SPR-SUM 2020



**EDITORIAL
COLLECTIVE**

SFRA **Review**

THE OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL OF THE
SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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SFRA Review is an open access journal published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) since 1971. *SFRA Review* publishes scholarly articles and reviews. As the flagship journal of SFRA, the *Review* is devoted to surveying the contemporary field of SF scholarship, fiction, and media as it develops.

SUBMISSIONS

SFRA Review accepts original scholarly articles, interviews, review essays, and individual reviews of recent scholarship, fiction, and media germane to SF studies. Articles are single-blind peer reviewed by two of four general editors before being accepted or rejected. *SFRA Review* does not accept unsolicited reviews. If you would like to write a review essay or review, please contact the relevant review editor. For all other publication types—including special issues and symposia—contact the general editors. All submissions should be prepared in MLA 8th ed. style. Accepted pieces are published at the discretion of the editors under the author's copyright and made available open access via a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

SFRA REVIEW HISTORY

SFRA Review was initially titled *SFRA Newsletter* and has been published since 1971, just after the founding of SFRA in 1970. The *Newsletter* changed its name to *SFRA Review* in 1992 with issue #194 to reflect the centrality of an organ for critical reviews of both fiction and scholarship to the SF studies community. The *Newsletter* and *Review* were published 6 times a year until the early 2000s, when the *Review* switched to a quarterly schedule. Originally available only to SFRA members or sold per issue for a small fee, *SFRA Review* was made publicly available on the SFRA's website starting with issue #256. Starting with issue #326, the *Review* became an open access publication. In 2020, the *Review* switched to a volume/issue numbering scheme, beginning with 50.1 (Winter 2019). For more information about the *Review*, its history, policies, and editors, visit WWW.SFRAREVIEW.ORG.

SFRA Review, vol. 50, no. 2-3, Spring-Summer 2020

FROM THE EDITOR

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| From the Editor | 7 |
|-----------------------|---|

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

| | |
|---|----|
| From the President | 12 |
| From the Vice President..... | 14 |
| From the Treasurer | 15 |
| From the Secretary: Minutes of the 2020 Executive Committee Meeting | 16 |

2019-2020 SFRA AWARDS

| | |
|--|----|
| SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship 2019 | 20 |
| SFRA Innovative Research Award 2019..... | 23 |
| Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service 2019 | 26 |
| Mary Kay Bray Award 2019..... | 31 |
| SFRA Student Paper Award 2019 | 34 |
| SFRA Book Award 2019..... | 36 |
| Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize 2019 | 38 |

FEATURES

| | |
|--|----|
| “We’ll Free These Words From What Binds Them”: The Struggle over Information Curation in Fran Wilde’s <i>The Fire Opal Mechanism</i> | 43 |
| From the Archives: “Texts of Letters about <i>Nueva Dimensión</i> ,” <i>SFRA Newsletter</i> #1 (Jan. 1971) | 53 |
| The SF in Translation Universe #8..... | 56 |
| Meet the Future: An Interview with Julia Gatermann..... | 59 |

SPECIAL ISSUE: ALTERNATIVE SINOFUTURISMS

| | |
|---|----|
| Sinofuturism and Chinese Science Fiction: An Introduction to the Alternative Sinofuturisms (中华未来主义) Special Issue | 66 |
| A Discussion between Two French Translators of Chinese Science Fiction..... | 71 |

Photographesomenonic Sinofuturism(s).....79

Sinofuturism as Inverse Orientalism: China’s Future and the Denial of Coeval-
ness.....86

The Science-Fictional in China’s Online Learning Initiatives.....95

China’s Sonic Fictions: Music, Technology, and the Phantasma of a Sinicized
Future.....104

Empathy, War, and Women.....115

Capitalist Monster and Bottled Passengers: Political Stakes of Embodiment in
The Reincarnated Giant and *The Last Subway*124

Data Narrator: Digital Chronotopes in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction.133

Chinese Science Fiction: A Genre of Adversity.....141

Images of Alternative Chinese Futures: Critical Reflections on the “China
Dream” in Chen Qiufan’s “The Flower of Shazui”149

The Wandering Earth: A Device for the Propagation of the Chinese Regime’s
Desired Space Narratives?.....157

Wondering about the Futures of the Wandering Earth: A Comparative Analy-
sis of Liu Cixin’s “The Wandering Earth” and Frant Gwo’s Film Adaptation..168

A Diagnosis of Sinofuturism from the Urban-Rural Fringe.....176

NONFICTION REVIEWS

Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Films.....183

Westworld and Philosophy: Mind Equals Blown.....186

Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Human-
ism.....189

Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron
Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction.....194

Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman
World.....197

RoboCop.....200

Women in Doctor Who and The Women of Orphan Black.....203

| | |
|--|-----|
| Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction | 206 |
| Martian Pictures: Analyzing the Cinema of the Red Planet | 209 |
| Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television..... | 212 |
| Interpreting Anime..... | 215 |
| Philip K. Dick on Film | 218 |
| Exploring Picard's Galaxy: Essays on <i>Star Trek: The Next Generation</i> | 221 |
| The Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars | 224 |
| Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded | 227 |

FICTION REVIEWS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Point B (a teleportation love story) | 231 |
| Sea Change..... | 234 |
| The Violent Century | 237 |
| Unholy Land | 241 |

MEDIA REVIEWS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| The Platform..... | 245 |
| LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS, season 1 | 248 |
| Another Life, season 1..... | 251 |
| Rick and Morty, season 4..... | 255 |



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FROM THE EDITOR

From the Editor

Sean Guynes



THE previous issue of *SFRA Review* appeared in February of this year. Then, there weren't even a dozen cases in the U.S. Now, the U.S. is once again a world leader in deaths caused by political leaders' stupidity and the need by citizens to rebel against authority. Huzzah to this America-made-great and, well, really sorry about those tens of thousands dead. Despite the shittiness of our times, I'm convinced this double issue of *SFRA Review* (the spring issue delayed by COVID) will bring some smiles even as many readers return to universities while administrators look away, put fingers in ears, and shout "LALALALA" in an effort to pretend it's all going to go fine, just fine, nothing to see here.

New Review Website

As has become the chorus of the editor's note the past few years, this issue brings with it the announcement of several changes—all, we hope, for the betterment of the *Review*. To begin with, you'll hopefully have discovered our new home on the web at www.sfrareview.org.

Prior to the creation of this website, *SFRA Review* had made the important transition in the mid-2000s to an online publication, providing the PDF of each issue online for free; by the mid-2010s, the *Review* had gone entirely online, with no print option. But, even if a PDF is freely available, presenting a PDF as a downloadable link poses significant issues for contemporary journals publishing—and for the tens of authors published in each issue. For one, PDFs put on a website as a downloadable link are not text-searchable, even if the PDF, once downloaded, is. Say a scholar, reader, fan, or whomever is searching online for an essay on Israeli SF or a review of a certain work of scholarship. That's how most of us begin our scholarly reviews. But an article in a 100+-page PDF (hosted as a downloadable file no less) won't show up in your search. Moreover, at a time when the discoverability and shareability of scholarship is tied to a scholar's ability to promote herself, to be "known" in academia, and thus to get further writing commissions and/or relevance in an increasingly irrelevantizing job market, the inaccessibility of a full-issue PDF

impedes discoverability, makes shareability next to impossible (unless you cut up the PDF and host just your article on a personal website), and ultimately dissuades folks from contributing to a journal. I could go on, but you're already bored.

Tl;dr—ours is a scholarly ecosystem in which digital presence makes or breaks a journal (often regardless of the *content* of the journal!). My day job is spent as the editorial coordinator for Michigan Publishing, part of which means managing a journals program with more than 35 online open access journals. And yet until last month I was helming a journal that, quite frankly, I'd have been embarrassed to have in the program I manage. But no more! We are online, our website looks not bad, and each article and review has a permalink (not a DOI yet, sadly) that ensures authors can share their work on social media and elsewhere. *SFRA Review* has stepped into the present (of online journals publishing). And we're excited to see how this will augment and help our growth in the coming years.

Speaking of growth, some announcements.

Editorial Collective

First, as of this issue, *SFRA Review* has rethought the relationship between the editor and editorial staff. From now on, we are operating as an editorial collective divided into two groups: the general editors and the reviews editors. The reviews editors are the heart and blood of the journal, which properly retains the review focus of the publication in its title and endeavors to publish an increasingly number of fiction and media reviews in the coming year alongside the considerable number of nonfiction reviews we already publish. The main change is that, rather than attempting to divide editorial duties between a “managing” editor and “associate” editors—and recognizing that duties often overlap and that work tends to unfold more as a collective effort than as a neatly oiled machine—the general editors will all take the title of “editor,” with the lone exception of the lead editor whose goal is to guide the overall direction of the journal and ensure timely publication (when the world makes that possible). That person (this is awkward, but: me) will be called the senior editor, with the acknowledgment that this is not a position “above” other editors but rather a recognition that the journal needs an official representative to the SFRA. We have also begun discussing a process for replacing the senior editor, which will involve members of the editorial collective (general and review editors) nominating themselves and submitting their reasoning to the whole collective, which will vote

for a new senior editor that must ultimately be approved by the SFRA Executive Committee. Collectivity rules; rules drool.

Active Calls for Papers

SFRA Review has endeavored these past few years to engage the wider scholarly SFF community through two means: (1) *special issues* on topics of particular relevance and importance to contemporary SFF studies, and (2) *symposia* collecting papers originally presented in person or virtually at conferences, institutes, symposia, and other scholarly gatherings of SFF studies nerds. The present issue provides an excellent example of what a solid special issue in *SFRA Review* can look like, thanks to the wonderful editing chops of Virginia L. Conn (recently PhD'd!).

At present, we have two calls for papers active.

Us in Flux: Community, Collaboration, and the Collective Imaginations of SF

The first is a special issue being edited in collaboration with Arizona State University's Center for Science and the Imagination, which started the *Us in Flux* project in April to curate flash fiction SFF stories about the near-future ends of current crises and has included stories and interviews with authors like Nisi Shawl, Kij Johnson, Tochi Onyebuchi, Sarah Pinsker, Usman T. Malik, Ernest Hogan, and others. We have issued a call for papers for a special issue that builds on the *Us in Flux* stories through critical thinkpieces that address how SFF can help us figure out our shit and build a better future. The CFP can be found here: <https://sfrareview.org/2020/07/31/51-1-cfp/>. Abstracts for thinkpieces are due October 4, with full drafts of 2,000-3,000 words due November 29. Please consider joining this exciting collaboration!

Mormonism and SF

Much further in the future, and which I'll plug more in a later issue, is a special issue edited by Adam McLain on Mormonism and speculative fiction. The CFP can be found here: <https://sfrareview.org/2020/08/11/51-3-cfp/>. Abstracts will be due March 1, 2021, with full drafts of 2,000-3,000 words (or more) due May 15, 2021.

In the future, please look out for a special issue CFP on Hungarofuturisms to be

co-edited by Beata Gubacsi. The next issue, 50.4, will have two symposia, one spinning out of Lars Schmeink's cyberpunk conference and the other from the German organization Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung's annual conference in collaboration with German Popular Culture Studies Association.

SFRA Review is actively soliciting future special issues and conference symposia. Please reach out to the general editors to discuss possibilities for collaboration: <https://sfrareview.org/submissions/>.

In this Issue

In this issue, the editorial collective is happy to present not only an incredible article by former fiction reviews editor Jeremy Brett on information science in Fran Wilde's *Fire Opal Mechanism*, plus the usual range of features, including Rachel Cordasco's regular column on SFF in translation and an interview with up-and-coming scholar Julia Gatermann, but also a wide-ranging special issue on Sinofuturisms offering the brilliant insights of a dozen scholars from all over the world! Thanks to editor Virginia L. Conn for putting this together and editor Amandine Faucheux for helping with copyedits. Because the summer issue of each Review typically follows the annual SFRA conference, this issue features some Executive Committee musts, including the Treasurer's report on SFRA's financial situation and the Secretary's report on the annual Executive Committee meeting. Moreover, although we couldn't celebrate them in person, this issue presents to you the winners of SFRA's annual awards, along with awards committee statements and the letters from each winner. Finally, but never least, you'll also find an incredible number of reviews of recent works of SFF scholarship, and several fiction and media reviews.

Enjoy, share, and join us, won't you?



FROM THE SFRA
EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE

From the President

Gerry Canavan



THIS note is a bit bittersweet: we should be coming off the high of our 2020 annual conference, but instead we all remain subject in varying degrees to a global regimen of social distancing and isolation that is now entering its fifth month. This situation is wearing on all of us; even as we begin our preparations for the 2021 conference in earnest we have to wonder what the world will actually look like a year from now, and if Americans will even be welcome in Canada by then. With luck and in hope, we'll all be able to see each other in Toronto...

In the meantime, my thoughts turn to celebration and gratitude. I wanted to commend again the winners of the 2020 SFRA Awards:

- SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship — Sherryl Vint
- SFRA Innovative Research Award — Susan Ang
- Thomas D. Claeson Award for Distinguished Service — Wu Yan
- Mary Kay Bray Award — Erin Horáková and Rich Horton
- Student Paper Award — Conrad Scott and honorable mention Erin Cheslow
- SFRA Book Award — Xiao Liu

and invite you all to read the committee and awardee statements elsewhere in this issue. I also wanted to extend on behalf of the entire organization our thanks to the committees who selected these winners, especially the chairs, who will now be rotating off after a job well done; thanks therefore to Joan Gordon, Joan Haran, Pawel Freluk, Katherine Bishop, and Pete Sands.

Katherine Bishop, who has been our organization's volunteer webmaster for the last three years, deserves an additional round of even more special thanks as she steps down from the post with all our gratitude. A new web director will be recruited very shortly; please stay tuned to the website and the listserv for more information on that if you think this might be a good way for you to contribute. In the meantime: thank you Katherine!

Finally, I wanted to recognize the amazing work Sean Guynes has done not only as editor-in-chief of the journal but most recently in the wonderful redesign work he has done for both the *Review* in general and the *Review's* website in particular. The

facelift has positioned *SFRA Review* very well to continue to expand its reach online; thank you Sean!

I could continue to thank people, but I will cut myself off here. Please, as we move into what is ordinarily a fairly quiet period for the organization, post-conference, let me know if there are events we can promote or calls for papers we can circulate. This is especially true for digital events: between the recent Cyberpunk and Zoomposium digital scholarship events our membership is finding creative ways to meet when we can't meet—and I'd like to support that however I can.

Stay healthy, stay well!

From the Vice President

Sonja Fritzsche



GREETINGS to everyone!

I hope that this issue of the *SFRA Review* finds you healthy and safe. What strange times we find ourselves in, very science fictional, and all too real for many of us who are confronting multiple challenges. I am reminded of Poet Damian Barr's poem on the COVID-19 crisis that begins: "We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar." We all need to consider the disparate impacts the pandemic is having on specific demographics—race, ethnicity, age, gender, disability/medical conditions, and a variety of family configurations. Please think of these as you engage with your colleagues, science fictional and otherwise. Have patience and be patient with yourself and those around you, as we all do not always recognize or acknowledge the stress we are truly under.

Under normal conditions, we would be celebrating now yet another successful conference at Indiana University with Rebekah Sheldon, De Witt Douglas Kilgore, and their colleagues, but this novel virus intervened. We hope that they will volunteer again in the future so that we can visit the beautiful rolling Hoosier hills. I already have the 2021 conference on my calendar, which will take place at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada with generous host Graham Murphy. We are already in talks regarding the potential for in-person and virtual options for the conference, so stay tuned for more information as it comes available. Congratulations to all of the winners of the 2019 awards! All very well deserved!

So far we have a number of SFRA Country Representatives and you can find their contact information on the SFRA website under that category at the top. Thank you to all who have contacted me so far. It is not too late to volunteer, so please contact me. We will also be having a virtual meeting soon to brainstorm across countries how these representatives would like to be advocating for the study of science fiction in their countries and how the SFRA might help these efforts. Again it is possible for a country to have more than one liaison, so if you are interested, please contact me at fritzsc9@msu.edu.

Please also continue to pass on your announcements and any CFPs that you would like to have posted on the SFRA Facebook or Twitter pages.

From the Treasurer

Hugh O'Connell



2019 Final Account Balances

| | |
|----------|-------------|
| Checking | \$68,269.42 |
| Savings | \$20,458.40 |

2019 Income

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Journals Subscriptions, Memberships, Conference Registrations, Savings Account Interest, and Donations | \$ 30,497.17 |
|--|--------------|

2019 Expenditures

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Journal Subscriptions | \$8,952.90 |
| Wild Apricot | \$1,001.16 |
| Domain Registration | \$195 |
| Non-Profit Renewal | \$25 |
| Adobe Creative Cloud | \$254.27 |
| 2019 Conference Costs | \$12,056.56 |
| Conference Travel Grants | \$1,550.00 |
| Postage | \$44.14 |
| Accountants | \$485 |

Total Expenditures: \$24,564.03

Difference from 2018: + \$5,933.14

From the Secretary: Minutes of the 2020 Executive Committee Meeting



Sean Guynes

July 30, 2020 / 2pm EDT / Via Zoom

Attendees: Gerry Canavan (President), Sonja Fritzsche (Vice President), Hugh O’Connell (Treasurer), Sean Guynes (Secretary), Keren Omry (Immediate Past-President), Katherine Bishop (Webmaster)

The Webmaster

- Gerry: Thank you to Katherine Bishop for her work as webmaster.
- Katherine Bishop discusses the need to end her tenure as webmaster and outlines the key webmaster duties going forward. Of principal concern is Wild Apricot -- poor user interface that is clunky to work with, not easily editable, allows privacy overrides so that Wild Apricot can own our content, there were members who did not want to renew memberships because of the end-user license agreements. Overall this creates a poor digital brand for SFRA. We are considering using a WordPress website and using the WordPress Business account to manage membership, payments, and other services Wild Apricot offers. If SFRA does want someone to build a website from the bottom-up, Katherine suggests (after Pawel’s suggestion, several years before) that the person who takes on the website rebuild be paid a one-time design fee for services. As of the end of this meeting, Katherine’s tenure as webmaster will be ended and the executive committee will need to find a new webmaster. /Katherine leaves the meeting.
- Discussion: What order should the webmaster and website redesign take? We want to ensure continuity so that a website redesign is potentially separate from the webmaster position, so that future webmasters don’t necessarily have to have HTML and web design experience. Moving forward, then, we will advertise a webmaster position that will be slightly more discursive than in previous years, with the intent to formalize a 3-year position. We will move forward with the webmaster before the web design so that we can have their input. Keren notes

that we also want to have the next generation of the SFRA website part of a larger rebranding, including of the SFRA's award trophies, logos, etc.

General Discussion

- Award committees for 2020-2021 are set
- The Support a Scholar grant search will be begun shortly
- There will be no student paper award given in 2020-2021
- There are remaining logistical questions re: the 2021 conference as a result of the pandemic; the SFRA community and Executive Committee will need to think actively about the 2021 conference and possibilities for digital conferencing should the pandemic continue to disrupt academic conferencing.
- We have two great recent examples of digital conferencing we can build on for 2021 if necessary: Lars Schmeink's asynchronous cyberpunk conference (a large conference featuring videos, live Discord chats, and an archived website of the conversations/videos; pro -- low participation burden offered by the asynchronous format across 3 days; con -- conversations suffered intellectually and length-wise when compared to in-person conference) + Rebekah Sheldon and David Higgins's synchronous "zoomposium" of SF scholars (a smaller conference of 16 folks who knew each other rather well, allowing a bond that kept folks together for 8 hours x2 days; pro -- conversation is deeper and more engaged; con -- burnout and exhaustion). Other models include specific "feeds" of papers and events that participants sign up to, but this limits what folks can do.
- Sonja suggests we can expand the recognition of SFRA and virtual conference engagement (if it comes to that in 2021) by leveraging the new SFRA Country Reps; we will want their inputs to make sure that we have broad global participation if the pandemic continues to disrupt academic conferencing

Committee Member Reports

- Keren: the issue of the trophy redesign is still outstanding; we would like an update on Beata and Yoshinaga's Support a New Scholar Grant projects (Sean will reach out to them for the *SFRA Review*)

- Sonja: will be responsible for the upcoming round of the Support a New Scholar Grant call and applications in September (with a late October deadline for applicants)
- Sean: nothing to report from the Secretary
- Hugh: we will likely go in the red by between a thousand and several thousand dollars, since memberships are stagnant this year as a result of the conference cancellation and because membership costs mostly go to pay for members' journal subscriptions
- Meeting adjourned at c. 2:40pm EDT

The background of the image is a dark, moody scene. At the top, a couple is shown in silhouette, embracing and kissing. The scene is lit with a greenish-yellow glow. In the upper portion, there are faint, glowing green characters that resemble binary code or a digital font. At the bottom, a glowing green and yellow circuit board is visible, with a central rectangular component that appears to be a microchip or a small display. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and romantic.

SFRA AWARDS

SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship 2019



Originally the Pilgrim Award, the SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship was created in 1970 by the SFRA to honor lifetime contributions to SF and fantasy scholarship. The award was first named for J. O. Bailey's book, *Pilgrims through Space and Time* and altered in 2019.

This year's awardee is Sherryl Vint of the University of California, Riverside.

Committee Statement

Joan Gordon (chair), Amy Ransom, Art Evans

SHERRYL Vint is one of the hardest working and most modest scholars now working in science fiction. She is also certainly one of the best. I have found her scholarship invaluable ever since her first book, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction* (2007). Her second, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (2010), is very important to my own work in animal studies and science fiction. She has published two other books and co-edited four more, all vital to any decent collection of sf scholarship. All these books are widely read and cited in sf scholarship.

But wait, that's the least of it in some ways. As Professor of Science Fiction Media Studies at the University of California, Riverside, she has made Riverside a mecca for sf study, growing a strong department, nurturing graduate students and launching them into the academic world. She has hosted wonderful conferences there, wrangled the International Association of the Fantastic in the Arts as their president, been a keynote speaker on sf all over the world, and written many fine articles. In between all this work she managed to found, with Mark Bould, the journal *Science Fiction Film and Television*.

Most importantly of all in my universe, she is a co-editor of *Science Fiction Studies*, where I and five others share editorship. I know for sure how much work that involves—I only feel vaguely on top of things now that I'm retired but she's doing it along with teaching, administrating, writing, speaking, etc., etc., etc. And doing it as meticulously and thoroughly as she approaches all those other things. She is a wonderful scholar, a wonderful colleague, and a wonderful companion. That's just

my opinion (one shared with the other editors at *SFS*). Our committee took about five minutes to decide that the Award for Lifetime Achievement in Science Fiction Scholarship should go to Sherryl because my opinion is also that of the award committee as a whole, and I feel confident it is an opinion that the members of SFRA share.

Awardee Statement

Sherryl Vint

University of California, Riverside / USA

I am honoured and humbled to be selected to receive this award, joining so many scholars I admire. I am tremendously grateful to this field for welcoming me into your conversations and giving me an academic home that has not only inspired my scholarship, but also enabled me to meet people whom I consider among my closest friends. I believe that such generosity is a significant part of why the sf research community produces important and relevant scholarship that strives to make a difference in the world.

Thank you to the SFRA Executive and those who work on committees for your role in fostering this field of study, and especially for your role in preserving this space for younger scholars to continue to expand and improve.

I must also thank Douglas Barbour, my PhD supervisor, who introduced me to sf as a field of study. Unlike many, I came to sf scholarship not through fandom but through critical theory: sf writers engaged the questions that most excited me in my critical reading, and with Doug's support I thus transformed my planned area of study. I've followed in the footsteps of so many great scholars whose work showed me what was possible in the field, chief among them Veronica Hollinger, whose essays on gender and more showed me a model of the kind of scholar I wished to become. I first met Veronica as the external examiner on my dissertation, and I'm so pleased that today I can call her my colleague and friend.

I feel fortunate to be part of a community that prioritizes thinking about how *and why* the world might be otherwise. Such thinking is vitally important today, a volatile moment in history in which competing visions of the future—even about the nature of reality—are highly contested topics. In my research, I have aspired to

show that sf is a significant site of political engagement that grapples with central theoretical and ethical issues. To me, the struggle over the imagination has never seemed more urgent than it does today, a time that feels on the cusp of momentous cultural change—although whether this will be to reimagine social inclusion and extend measures such as debt relief that have suddenly become “possible” in the wake of the pandemic, or to intensify the racialized inequalities the pandemic has made all-the-more visible in an austerity-driven return to “normal” remains to be seen. In her National Book Foundation Medal acceptance speech in 2014, Ursula K. Le Guin reminded us that sf is the voice of those who can “see alternatives to how we live now,” who recognize that what is described as “inescapable” is, in fact, contingent. I’m privileged to be part of a community that cultivates the imagination of a better world, that takes the struggle to imagine the future as serious political work, and that provides hope and vision to enable us to make as well as to imagine change. Over the past decade, I’ve seen the field grow and change in ways that are consistent with this ethos, led by visionary writers and scholars.

There are so many people to thank who have educated, inspired, and supported me along the way, as scholars and as friends. The list (which inevitably will fall short) includes Jonathan Alexander, Andrew M. Butler, Gerry Canavan, Grace Dillon, Paweł Frelik, David M. Higgins, Roger Luckhurst, Farah Mendlesohn, Colin Milburn, Keren Omry, John Rieder, Steven Shaviro, Rebekah Sheldon, and Taryne Taylor. I’m lucky to be able to call these people friends as well as colleagues. I’ve frequently collaborated with Mark Bould, whose scholarship deserve special acknowledgement in shaping my own. My colleagues on the *Science Fiction Studies* board—Arthur B. Evans, Joan Gordon, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Veronica Hollinger, Carol McGuirk, and Lisa Swanstrom—continually teach me and have become a second family. My sf colleagues at UC Riverside—andré carrington, Nalo Hopkinson, and John Jennings—exemplify all that is best about collegiality in our field and enable me to work in a research culture that epitomizes what I value about this field. Finally, I want to thank my graduate students, whose cutting-edge and politically engaged work shows me that the best is yet to come.

I’m so pleased to accept this award and I thank you for this recognition.

SFRA Innovative Research Award 2019



The SFRA Innovative Research Award (formerly the Pioneer Award) is given to the writer or writers of the best critical essay-length work of the year.

This year's awardee is Susan Ang for her essay "Triangulating the Dyad: Seen (Orciny) Unseen," *Foundation*, vol. 48, no. 132.

Raino Isto received an honorable mention for his essay "I Will Speak in Their Own Language': Yugoslav Socialist Monuments and Science Fiction," *Extrapolation*, vol. 60, no. 3.

Committee Statement

Joan Haran (chair), Stefan Rabitsch, Ben Robertson

FROM an apparently simple starting point—the ampersand that joins the two cities in the title of China Miéville's *The City & the City*—Susan Ang raises questions of profound complexity. These questions not only bear upon the novel in question but also the hidden histories of language and the fraught relationship between epistemology and ontology in weird fiction and the wider literary landscape. As Ang writes, "*The City & The City*, viewed through the metaphor of the ampersand, becomes readable as an enquiry into the epistemological workings of metaphor as a mechanism or model of productive thought." As Ang makes clear, this sort of productivity characterizes *The City & the City* and much of Miéville's fiction (including *Kraken* and *Embassytown*). More importantly, Ang's essay continues the scholarly inquiry into the larger generic ramifications of Miéville's work, in which the ampersand and related "meta-metaphors" both create and maintain, on one hand, and undermine and destroy, on the other, the boundaries among science fiction, fantasy, and other generic categories that subtend all such scholarly discussions. In Ang's words, in both Miéville's position as a writer and theorist of science fiction, fantasy, and the weird and Tyador Borlu's position as a member of Breach at the conclusion of *The City & the City*, "there is an implied need to bide one's time and maintain the boundaries in order that the boundaries might eventually be worn down."

For her attention to a seemingly small, perhaps even insignificant detail of this novel and insofar as she demonstrates the importance of that detail to this novel

as well as to the scholarly conversations that SFRA cultivates, Susan Ang is well-deserving of this award.

Awardee Statement

Susan Ang

National University of Singapore / Singapore

WHEN I received the email from Gerry Canavan telling me I was the recipient of this year's SFRA innovative research award, my first instinct was that I must be dreaming. That's not quite the cliché it sounds like; the email came in about 3 or 4 am Singapore time and the "bing" from my ipad woke me up. I read it, didn't take it in, and went back to sleep. When I woke up properly, I was sure I must have dreamt it, except that the email was actually in my inbox.

My surprise was mostly because while I quite like the article which the SFRA has so kindly and generously selected for the award, it has a modest history, starting out life as an undergraduate lecture on Mieville's *City & The City* for a module on sf, which I then tidied and wondered what to do with. I should explain that I'm terrified of sending off work to journals, and that my work tends to go way over the word limit decreed by most journals which makes the matter all the more difficult. I looked at *Foundation*, which, if I recall, wanted work no longer than 6000 words; my article at that point weighed in at about 10,000. I apologetically (and somewhat dismally) emailed Paul March-Russell, asking whether he would even be willing to read it at that length, and was resigned to the prospect of being sent off with the proverbial flea in my ear. Paul, however, is the kindest and most generous editor I've ever met, and he said "send it on," and to my surprise, took it, although not without chops and edits.

My most grateful thanks, therefore, go first to Paul, for that generosity of spirit, and for all his editorial guidance. My thanks also to Gerry Canavan for that lovely shocked moment when I realized his kind email wasn't a dream. I am also tremendously grateful to the judges—not for the award per se—but for the enormous investment of their time and care given to reading through a year's worth of publications before somehow deciding on mine. I am immensely humbled to have been given this award—with so much being published in the field that is brilliant and incisive, I

would never have expected to be in the running at all. This is not rhetoric but fact. I'm just secretly thrilled that people liked the piece. And last but not least, I'd like to thank my students—who inspired the lecture and responded to it; there are some students who spur one on to write lectures that hope not to disappoint, and those, too, whose rigorous arguments which run counter to sections of my own reading push one to find what one hopes will be satisfactory rebuttals. I'd therefore like to add my ex-students Lim Zhan Yi and Shawn Lim to the list of those without whom this article would not have seen the light of day.

In the current situation it seems hubristic to plan any kind of travel. But if COVID is under control, I hope to be able to offer my thanks for this award in person next year. Till then, please keep safe and well.

Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service 2019



The Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service is presented for outstanding service activities—promotion of SF teaching and study, editing, reviewing, editorial writing, publishing, organizing meetings, mentoring, and leadership in SF/fantasy organizations.

This year's awardee is Wu Yan of Southern University of Science and Technology in Guangdong, China.

Committee Statement

Pawel Frelik (chair), Veronica Hollinger, Sherryl Vint

WU Yan is professor and director of the Science and Human Imagination Research Center of the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, China. He is China's leading voice in science-fiction theory and criticism, the first scholar in China to introduce courses in science fiction at the university level, and a tireless contributor to China's participation in the global science fiction community. He has been actively engaged in international collaborations and research projects for decades, including attending several SFRA conferences. He is also an award-winning science-fiction author, winner of both the Chinese Nebula Award and the Galaxy Award. From 2010 to 2017, he served as President of the World Chinese Science Fiction Association.

Wu Yan was based for many years at Beijing Normal University, where he began offering courses in science fiction in the early 1990s. He established both MA and PhD programs in science fiction before moving, nearly three decades later, to Shenzhen to establish the Science and Human Imagination Research Center.

Wu Yan's main works of sf theory and criticism include *Introduction to Science Fiction Literature* (2006), *Theory of Science Fiction Literature and Construction of Disciplinary Systems* (2008), *Science Fiction Literature Outline* (2011), *How to Read Science Fiction Literature* (2012), *Six Science Fiction Lectures* (2013), and *Meditations on Chinese Science Fiction Literature* (2020). In the past year alone, he published a new edition of *Meditations on Science Fiction Literature: Wu Yan's Academic Selection*; a children's sf novel called *China Orbit*; and a new edition of *Science Fiction Literature*

Outline. He is editor-in-chief of *The History of Chinese Science Fiction in the 20th Century* and of *Introduction to Historical Materials of Chinese Science Fiction in the 20th Century*. Incredibly, he has also found time to produce sf teaching materials for elementary and middle-school students, launching a program called “Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Primary and Secondary School Students.”

Wu Yan’s passion for science fiction has resulted in many generous and productive international collaborations and exchanges. In 2013, for instance, he was the lead editor for a well-received special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on Chinese science fiction; in 2016 he organized the “International Conference on Utopian and Science Fiction Studies” in Beijing, a wonderful two-day event that brought together scholars and writers from the US, Canada, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Over the years, he has generously hosted international scholars in both Beijing and Shenzhen and he has mentored many young writers and academics who continue to extend his work.

It is impossible to think of anyone who has done more than Wu Yan to promote the field of international science-fiction scholarship. At this moment when the west is finally discovering the science-fiction writing of what he has called (after Brian Aldiss) “the Great Wall planet,” it is more than time to honor a decades-long career that has tirelessly promoted and expanded the reading, writing, teaching, and critical engagement with the field that we all love. We are honored in return to present this year’s Clareson Award for Distinguished Service to Professor Wu Yan.

Awardee Statement

Wu Yan

Southern University of Science and Technology / China

I’d like to thank the SFRA for giving me the Thomas D. Clareson Award in 2020.

In July 1983, while I was still in college, I met a delegation of American science-fiction writers in Shanghai. That year, the SFRA President, Elizabeth Anne Hull, visited China with Frederic Pohl, Roger Zelazny, William F. Wu, and Charles N. Brown of *Locus Magazine*. They were welcomed to Shanghai by the famous writer Ye Yonglie. I went along to listen to their conference, and I was profoundly moved by what I heard. At that time, we did not know that American writers were so

interested in science fiction. We tended to associate sf with the French (Jules Verne), the Russians (Alexandr Belyaev), and the British (Arthur Conan Doyle). That there were so many science-fiction writers in the US truly surprised me.

I have been an sf fan since I was very young. This might sound like nothing today, but at that time it was very difficult. I was only four years old when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. During the next ten years, novels, popular science books, sf books, and even science textbooks were all banned from publication. Revolution was the most important thing. At that time I found old yellowed science-fiction books, some from the closed library where my father worked, others from the houses of my close friends. Secretly, I read these books and I fell in love with science fiction. After the Cultural Revolution, science fiction in China recovered and I was very excited. I wasn't only looking for books to read, but boldly I was also trying to write. I published my first sf book review in 1978 and my first short story in 1979.

But the development of science fiction in China has been very uneven. When the wave was rising, everyone chased it; but during periods of criticism such books could not be published. It was only in 1991 that my first collection of stories was published. At the same time, at Beijing Normal University I introduced China's first university-level sf course in Chinese, titled "Science Fiction Review and Research." During the next 29 years, I developed my undergraduate courses into Masters and PhD programs. In 2017, I left Beijing Normal University and established the Science and Human Imagination Research Center in Shenzhen's Southern University of Science and Technology; it focuses on the development of imaginative psychology, future exploration, and science-fiction works. This year (2020) my publications have included my collection, *Meditations on Science Fiction Literature: Wu Yan's Academic Selection*; a children's sf novel called *China Orbit*; and a new edition of *Science Fiction Literature Outline*. I am also editor-in-chief of *The History of Chinese Science Fiction in the 20th Century* and of *Introduction to Historical Materials of Chinese Science Fiction in the 20th Century*. I have also been producing sf teaching materials for elementary and middle-school students. Science-fiction creation, research, and promotion has become my life's career.

The SFRA is no stranger to me. In 1994, while I was a visiting scholar at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, Elizabeth Hull invited me to attend the SFRA conference in Arlington Heights. In 2001, I participated again at SFRA, this time in Schenectady, New York. I still remember a panel at the 1994 meeting devoted to

teaching science fiction. Upon arrival, the host asked everyone to make their syllabi available to everyone else. After I submitted mine, I received dozens of different syllabi from other teachers. The content and methods of the lectures were very inspiring. I have even contributed to the *SFRA Newsletter* in the past.

For me, the SFRA is not only a source of new ideas, but it is also the home of researchers from all over the world. Through SFRA I have met many colleagues, including Veronica Hollinger, James Gunn, Takayuki Tatsumi, Janice Bogstad, and scholars from Denmark, Russia, Israel, and elsewhere. The SFRA directory is also my important assistant. In December 2016, with the help of the SFRA Directory, I invited international scholars to Beijing to commemorate the 500th anniversary of More's *Utopia* at the International Symposium on Utopian and Science Fiction Literature.

I would like in particular to thank Professor Hull. If it weren't for our meeting in 1983, my connection with the SFRA would not have happened so early. Since then we have met on many occasions and in many locations around the world. I remember she and Fred Pohl also brought Jack Williamson, David Brin, Suzy McKee Charnas, and other writers to China. I also want to thank the late Charles Brown, founder of *Locus* magazine. He often invited me to contribute articles to *Locus* and had always wanted me to visit his Oakland office. I also thank Veronica Hollinger, a long-time friend and my co-editor for the 2013 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on Chinese science fiction. I'd like to thank the writer David Brin as well. Every time he comes to China, I invite him to meet with local writers and to give lectures to my students. It was he who recommended that I meet Sherryl Vint at UC, Riverside and Sheldon Brown at UC, San Diego. Last year, I invited Professor Vint to visit China, not only to give lectures at Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, but also to introduce new developments in science fiction to students of sf writing at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Professor Brown contributed his art to the exhibit I curated for the 2019 Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture in Shenzhen. Thanks to his excellent work, and the work of many others from both China and abroad, my exhibit, *Nine Cities, Ten Thousand Kinds of Futures*, won the biennial jury award.

It has been an honor to live for the past forty years in an academic world of mutual exchange and cooperation. I am honored to be a member of SFRA, an organization that belongs to the whole world. I believe that my Claeson Award will contribute to

the increasing interest in science fiction among writers, researchers, educators, and promoters in China. It will encourage more people to participate in the work and in the spirit of science fiction.

On the occasion of this award, please allow me to wish all members of the association good health. My very best wishes to the SFRA.

Bio

Wu Yan is professor and director of the Science and Human Imagination Research Center of the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, China. He began writing science fiction in 1978. His novels include *Spiritual Exploration* (1994), *The Sixth Day of Life and Death* (1994), and *China Orbit* (2020); his short stories include “Iceberg Adventure” (1979), “The Abyss of Gravity” (1981), “The Last Case of the Interstellar Police” (1991) “Mouse Pad” (2001), and “Print a New World” (2013). His main works of science-fiction theory and criticism include *Introduction to Science Fiction Literature* (2006), *Theory of Science Fiction Literature and Construction of Disciplinary Systems* (2008), *Science Fiction Literature Outline* (2011), *How to Read Science Fiction Literature* (2012), *Six Science Fiction Lectures* (2013), and *Meditations on Chinese Science Fiction Literature* (2020). In 2019, Wu Yan was co-curator of the “Science Fiction Ascending City Section” at the 8th Intercity Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture (Shenzhen), with Meng Jianmin and Fabio Cavallucci. With Chen Yu, he co-curated *Nine Cities, Ten Thousand Kinds of Futures*, which won the biennale jury award (the Organizing Committee Award). As a pioneer of science-fiction education in China, he introduced his first undergraduate sf course at Beijing Normal University in 1991, and the university has offered a PhD program in science fiction since 2015. In 2017, Professor Wu established the Research Center for Science and Human Imagination at Shenzhen’s Southern University of Science and Technology. In 2020, he launched the program, “Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Primary and Secondary School Students.” He recently delivered science-fiction courses to more than 10 million elementary and middle-school students simultaneously through the Xueersi Online platform.

Mary Kay Bray Award 2019



The Mary Kay Bray Award is given for the best essay, interview, or extended review to appear in the *SFRA Review* in a given year.

This year's awardees are Erin Horáková and Rich Horton for their essays "Treconomics" and "Gene Wolfe," respectively, both from issue #327.

Committee Statement

Katherine Bishop (chair), Agnieszka Kotwasińska, Jessica FitzPatrick

THE Mary Kay Bray Award is given to any interview, essay, or extended review published in the *SFRA Review* in 2019. We chose from fiction, non-fiction, and media reviews as well as Feature pieces, roundtable submissions, and SF Retrospectives. Given the increasingly wide range of items featured in the *Review*, we agreed that awarding just one piece would be unfair. Therefore, we chose two winners of merit, *ex æquo*, in alphabetical order:

Erin Horáková, "Treconomics," *SFRA Review*, no. 327, pp. 69-71.

Horáková employs an engaging and distinct voice as well as very clear organization in this lovely-in-execution negative review. She is respectful, but not overindulgent of, the reviewed text. Attending to matters of race, global economics, and cultural production while drawing upon her wide-ranging acumen to comment upon the matter at hand, Horáková fearlessly takes the author of *Treconomics* to task with humor and sensitivity in a review that feels refreshingly honest, bold, bright, and necessary.

Rich Horton, "Gene Wolfe," *SFRA Review*, no. 328, pp. 5-7.

The best thing an obituary can do is to bring a glimmer of the deceased back into the world. Horton does this. He celebrates Gene Wolfe's life without venerating him, deftly reminding the audience of Wolfe's humor, brilliance, and humanity. Along the way, he adds colorful details such as Wolfe's part in making Pringles and an anecdote about finding the author paused in humble gratitude in front of his book on a shelf

in a mall bookstore.

Thank you to all who contributed to the *SFRA Review* over the year! Your scholarship is *greatly* appreciated.

Awardee Statements

Erin Horáková

University of Glasgow / Scotland

THANK you to Sean Guynes for telling me to write the review for which I'm being recognized rather than simply stew in annoyance on a locked Twitter account for an improbable amount of time, like a boeuf bourguignon of regret. Thanks also to the award committee and to SFRA.

Rich Horton

Science Fiction Critic / USA

I cannot readily express the surprise and joy I felt to learn that I had been awarded the 2020 Mary Kay Bray Award. I am humbled to share this award with Erin Horáková, whose essay “Treknomics” is something I can only admire. I wish I could be standing in front of all of you to say this—and I am sure that, leaving aside any consideration of the value of what I might say, all my readers wish that it had been possible for any of us to go to conventions in July!

Finally, on rereading my piece on Gene Wolfe, I realize that the man I really must thank is Gene himself. I feel this way any time someone thanks me for a review of their work—all thanks are due to the writer who inspired me to write a nice review. And doubly, triply, infinitely are thanks due to Gene Wolfe. His writing inspired me to believe that there was value in writing about this science fiction that I love so much. Without writers like Wolfe (and Le Guin, and others) I would not have this avocation—criticism—that is so enjoyable. Do I think my award-winning essay is good? Yes, I do, I admit. But it is good because of its subject—it is good because I had such wonderful work to write about, from a writer who was a model for any writer. I hope only that what I have written might lead to those who loved Gene's work remembering it the more after his death; and to those who haven't discovered

him yet to discover him now.

In close, I'll quote the closing words of Gene's great story "Forlesen" once more, changed a bit: "I want to know if it's meant anything . . . if it's been worth it? 'Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.'"

SFRA Student Paper Award 2019



The Student Paper Award is presented to the outstanding scholarly essay read at the annual conference of the SFRA by a student.

This year's awardee is Conrad Scott for his paper "Changing Landscapes': Ecocritical Dystopianism in Contemporary Indigenous SF Literature." Erin Cheslow received an honorable mention for her paper "The Chow that Can Be Spoken Is Not the True Chow: Relationality and Estrangement in the Animal Gaze."

Committee Statement

Peter Sands (chair), David Higgins, Kylie Korsnack

THE SFRA Student Paper Award Committee is pleased to recognize Conrad Scott's "Facing the Future, Facing the Past: Colonialism, Indigeneity, and SF" as the winner of the 2020 SFRA Student Paper Award. We would also like to recognize Erin Cheslow's "The Chow that Can Be Spoken Is Not the True Chow: Relationality and Estrangement in the Animal Gaze" as honorable mention. There were a number of exceptional papers submitted for this year's award, but these two papers immediately caught the attention of the committee.

Scott's paper offers readings of Harold Johnson's *Corvus* (2015) and Louis Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) through the lens of "ecocritical dystopianism." The committee found Scott's readings and especially his articulation of a new form of dystopia to be impressive and persuasive. The committee also wishes to recognize Erin Cheslow for her unexpected and original reading of cognitive estrangement in relation to the animal gaze. The committee found Cheslow's reading of human and non-human relationships through the Suvinian lens to be a refreshing and creative redeployment of science-fictionality.

Congratulations to both Conrad and Erin on their exceptional work!

SFRA Book Award 2019



The SFRA Book Award is given to the author of the best first scholarly monograph in SF, in each calendar year.

This year's winner, the inaugural winner of the award, is Xiao Liu of McGill University for her book *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

Committee Statement

Keren Omry (chair), Paweł Frelik, Graham Murphy, Ida Yoshinaga

IT has been a particular honor and a unique challenge judging the inaugural 2019 SFRA Book Award for the best first scholarly monograph in SF. On behalf of the award committee, I am delighted to announce that Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press) has been unanimously selected as this year's winner.

Information Fantasies locates the origins of contemporary China's pervasive information economy and digital media in more than the technology itself. Instead, Liu maps out a history of techno-cultural imaginations and practices that develop alongside postsocialism. To do this, she recovers a stunning array of long forgotten, neglected, and/or underexamined science fiction, films, theories, and cultural practices, and brings them to the fore.

While science fiction is only one of several fields to which the book contributes—Liu delves into the emergence of new media, she combines media, politics, philosophy, and textual production as her subject matter, and she offers insights into a much larger socio-historical context—*Information Fantasies* is remarkable in its relevance to science fiction scholarship. Adding nuance and sophistication to the growing body of work in Chinese SF, the book places science fiction at the center of a rhizomatic system of ideas, technologies, and politics.

Aside from solid scholarship and writing, Liu's pathbreaking work integrates the SF subject matter into a theoretically challenging framing of an area and an era that is largely unknown to Western readers and academics. *Information Fantasies* effectively expands the boundaries of what we are increasingly recognizing as the

science fictionality of our world.

I'd like to take this opportunity to send warm thanks to my fellows on the committee, Pawel Frelik, Graham Murphy, and Ida Yoshinaga, whose hard work, commitment, and sense of humor, are hard to overstate.

Awardee Statement

Xiao Liu

McGill University / Canada

I'D like to express my deep appreciation to the SFRA book award committee for such a great honor. At a time of unpredictability, nothing stands as a more powerful narrative than science fiction in envisioning possibilities, and offering deep insights on human aspirations and dreams, and ultimately, what makes us human when life *per se* can no longer be separated from the technical.

I am fortunate to be continuously inspired by the imaginations and the empathy towards human life of the global SF community, whose unfading curiosity towards and genuine respect for unknown others foster a culture of true diversity and open great possibilities for life that is often curtailed and constrained by ignorance and bigotry. I am also grateful to generations of Chinese science fiction writers, as well as scholars, particularly translators, who always stand at the frontier of communicating across borders, and with whose efforts Chinese science fiction has become accessible to global audiences.

Finally, with media and technology having been turned into the machine of disinformation and manipulation, science fiction is more “real” than ever in revealing the powers of control, and the lines of flight.

Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize 2019



Awarded by the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies program at the University of California, Riverside, The Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize honors an outstanding scholarly monograph that explores the intersections between popular culture, particularly science fiction, and the discourses and cultures of technoscience. The award is designed to recognize groundbreaking and exceptional contributions to the field.

This year's awardees are Natania Meeker, Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, and Antónia Szabari, also Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, for their *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

The judges recognize as runners-up Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019) and Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

Committee Statement

Paweł Frelik (chair), Aimee Bahng, Steven Shaviro, Elizabeth Swanstrom

THE Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize honors an outstanding scholarly monograph that explores the intersections between popular culture, particularly science fiction, and the discourses and cultures of technoscience. The award is designed to recognize groundbreaking and exceptional contributions to the field. Books published in English between 1 January and 31 December 2019 were eligible for the award. The jury for the prize were Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University), Elizabeth Swanstrom (University of Utah), and Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw), who served as jury chair.

After intense deliberations the jury announce that the eighth annual SFTS book award has been won by Natania Meeker, Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, and Antónia Szabari, also Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, for *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Fordham

UP 2019). From Aristotle's notion of the vegetal soul to the century's plant-centered philosophy of Julien Offray de la Mettrie to the 20th-century's fascination with carnivorous plants and alien pods, the study provides a wide-ranging and stimulating examination of all things vegetal.

One of the judges described the monograph as “a lucid and fascinating history of the representation of plant life in speculative fiction and philosophy,” which demonstrates “just how intricately such representations—like clematis on a trellis—are interwoven with the evolution of Modernity.” Another judge, calling the study “totally brilliant,” found it “also quite thought-provoking theoretically, for the way that it forces us to think about vegetative vitality in a somewhat different (and more disturbing way) than much recent neo-vitalism and new materialism has done.”

The judges also decided to recognize, as particularly strong runners-up, Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press 2019) and Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press 2019).

Awardee Statements

Natania Meeker

University of Southern California / USA

I am truly honored to be a recipient of the 2019 SFTS Book Prize, in no small part because writing about science fiction at all meant, for me, taking a risk. As an early modernist, I felt like an interloper in a genre that had long been important to me personally but had never been part of my scholarly profile prior to undertaking work on *Radical Botany*. If I was able to make this leap into a new field and a new topic of research, it was thanks to my co-author, Antónia Szabari, who convinced me that together we could do (almost) anything. Given my initial hesitation, it is all the more gratifying, then, to have found such a generous reception from the scholars and critics at the SFRA. This award is validating in so many different ways. It inspires me to continue taking risks in my research and thinking; it gives me renewed confidence in the critical generosity and receptivity of my colleagues; and it encourages me to imagine an academy in which collaborative research can be the norm for humanists rather than the exception.

At the same time, this award is meaningful to me in my personal as well as my professional life. I have nurtured a love of fantasy, speculative fiction, and science fiction since I was a little girl. It has been such a pleasure to bring the joy and wonder (to use an early modern category!) that I have long found in this kind of reading into my scholarship, teaching, and writing. Delving into these genres forged by modernity has also given me a renewed sense of the vitality of early modern writing and thought, so often animated by the sheer enjoyment of speculation. Receiving an award for following where my pleasure leads is indeed a dream come true. I will remain grateful to all the colleagues at SFRA—including the members of the prize committee, Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State University), Elizabeth Anne Swanstrom (The University of Utah), and Chair Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw), whose collective hard work and service should be acknowledged—for this incredible honor. Thank you also to Sherryl Vint and Sean Guynes for their graciousness and collegiality. I hope one day to be able to attend the SFRA conference and express my heartfelt thanks to all in person.

Antónia Szabari

University of Southern California / USA

IN *Radical Botany*, my co-author, Natania Meeker, and I set out to reveal a modern history of botanical research by underscoring the involvement of speculative thinking in this endeavor, which is usually treated within the narrower field of the history of science. With this gesture, we hope that we have not only contributed to the pre-history of science fiction but have also shown the vital role of a speculative tradition which, while existing on the margins of more robust naturalist and empiricist practices, is capable of animating them. It is a special honor to be a recipient of the 2019 SFTS Book Prize because today the role of speculation, imagining novel forms of the social and the political, from gendered and racial justice to new energy futures, is as vital as ever. At the same time, the history of botanical speculation shows us how to care for those distant or unlike us. I am especially excited to be recognized by the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Association because our book is joining the work that a large and diverse community is already carrying out in this field.

Last but not least, I thank our colleagues at SFRA, the members of the prize committee, Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Steven Shaviro (Wayne State

University), Elizabeth Anne Swanstrom (The University of Utah), and Chair Paweł Frelik (University of Warsaw) as well as Sherryl Vint and Sean Guynes.

A painting of a rocky landscape. The sky is a pale, hazy yellowish-brown. In the middle ground, a range of rugged, layered rock formations stretches across the frame. On the right side, a sharp, jagged rock peak rises prominently. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark blue area, possibly representing water or a shadowed slope, with some lighter blue and white highlights. At the bottom, there are patches of reddish-brown and orange tones, suggesting a different type of rock or soil. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a focus on color and texture.

FEATURES

“We’ll Free These Words From What Binds Them”: The Struggle over Information Curation in Fran Wilde’s *The Fire Opal Mechanism*



Jeremy Brett

Texas A&M University / USA

SCIENCE fiction and fantasy have by and large escaped discussion of a dismediated informational world. In SF, it is true, subgenres like cyberpunk concern themselves with the concept that information is, or should be, free. A common trope in SF is that of the limitless library or archive with instant access to information that makes no visible use of mediators, search tools, or mechanisms for establishing context between and among bits of information. Look no further than Asimov’s *Encyclopedia Galactica*, of the *Foundation* novels, or the vast library of memories assembled by Lovecraft’s *Great Race of Yith*. Perhaps even more familiar is the image of a repository of information ultimately (if in detail-shy) fashion directed by a figure—“the Librarian,” the “Chief Archivist,” or known by a hundred other titles. Some of these institutions are open to all and sundry, whereas others are generally restricted to a specified audience (e.g. the library at Hogwarts, the Jedi Order’s *Holocron Vault*, the locked-away stacks of forbidden books at *Miskatonic University*, the *Library at Unseen University* in *Ankh-Morpork*).

However, whatever the structure of the individual institution, little thought in the genre is given over to the ethics and democratization of information, that is, to how or why is the information within the archive or library arranged, contextualized, framed, made accessible, presented?¹ James Gunn has been one of the few to mention these kinds of issues; in his essay on the role of libraries in science fiction he speaks of “visions of futures in which libraries are even more important to the fabric of society than they are today and librarians may be only computer programs offer little more than a hint of what lies ahead for all of us, those of us who pull together information, those who consume it, and those who are the custodians and the taxonomists of it” (Gunn, emphasis added).

Likewise, Frederik Pohl, in a speech given in 1965 to the American Documentation Institute, discussed the possibility that science fiction could help real-life thinkers develop new and better systems of information retrieval. He theorized, in reference to his 1956 story “*Wapshot’s Demon*,” that “it seems to me that there is a difference

between information which is pertinent and useful and information which is not. I don't know of a demon at present seeking the job of sorting them out, but I do rather think that such a demon, or at least some mechanical-electronic analogue of such a demon, may some day be found—on the simple premise that you and I are able to discriminate between such bits of information, and therefore, it should be sooner or later possible to teach a machine to do so too” (Pohl 102).

Information curation is a serious issue in the real world and the library profession, certainly. There exists a dichotomy between the library as gateway vs. librarian as gatekeeper identities. Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, for one, managed to believe in both these ideas at once. He pointed out in a 1998 article about the American public library system that “knowledge has to be accessible to all people” (11), a nearly universal sentiment. However, he went on to note that “the idea of knowledge-based democracy is threatened, in a peculiar fashion, by the information flood generated by the new technologies and by the overwhelming advance of the audio-visual, multimedia world.” (12) Furthermore:

I fear that all this miscellaneous unverified, constantly changing information on the Internet may inundate knowledge—may move us back down the evolutionary chain from knowledge to information, to miscellaneous raw data. We may be sinking down rather than rising up to wisdom and creativity—those twin peaks that are the highest attainment of the human mind and spirit. Instead of a knowledge-based democracy, we may end up with an information-inundated demagocracy. (12)

In recent years, many librarians have tried to pivot their profession in order to cope with this informational Wild West, to reframe the old model of librarians who govern access rather than provide it. As one library blogger, Peter Murray, noted in 2006, “the library profession is a trusted gatekeeper—librarians have a track record of providing orderly access to shared information resources and taking seriously the responsibility to provide access to those resources under the terms with which they were acquired.” On the other hand, the *Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom* of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) issued in 1999 defines libraries as “gateways to knowledge, thought, and culture.” “Gateways” is a telling self-definition, setting the modern conception of libraries and librarians apart from the more traditional or custodial role of *gatekeeper*, that is, one who guards the entrance to the court of knowledge and decides who gets

access to which sources of information. It is a repositioning with the potential to assign the role of librarian a new kind of openness, free (free-ish, anyway) from traditional arrogance or paternalism.

Of course much of this paradigm shift, as Billington and others note, has been driven by the rise and ongoing world domination of the Internet, where information can be, to say the least, unguarded. We all recognize the advantages to the democratization of information, in allowing everyone to have equal access to the information they need to be informed citizens insofar as they have Internet access. At the same time, in this current age of “fake news,” a dearth of information literacy, and the fetishization of *equality of opinion* (that is, my YouTube video from an unknown source is just as good as your trained scientist), there exists, however much we might like to think otherwise, a societal threat inherent in unfettered and context-free information access.

We see that threat made manifest in a fantastical setting: Fran Wilde’s novelette *The Fire Opal Mechanism*. Wilde’s story, the second in her Gem Universe series,² is singular in the fantasy genre in its centering of the control of information as a theme. It does so not in the clichéd sense from so many fantasy works of “which questing party gets whose spell book to defeat what evil dark lord,” for example, but in the very modern sense with which librarians and archivists are currently grappling and which, as noted, has enormous implications for the future of society.

The overwhelming menace in Wilde’s story comes from the Pressmen, a group of militant information populists with tactical and rhetorical elements reminiscent of both the eighteenth-century French Revolution and the twentieth-century Chinese Cultural Revolution. As was common during these real-life revolutions, Pressmen launch demonstrations and attacks—particularly stinging are those from former students who turn against their universities—on the traditionally curated information environment, and threaten or suborn educational administrators, in the name of destroying elitism.

The Pressmen derive their name from their magical machine, a reverse printing press into which eager hands toss books and which removes the ink (and therefore the content) from the pages. What results from this destruction is a so-called *Universal Compendium of Knowledge*, a constantly-updating information source lacking boundaries, context, or structure. For the Pressmen, this is the ultimate freedom, but it comes at the price of violence and the destruction of tradition, as

sorrowfully witnessed by one of the story's protagonists, Ania Dem, a librarian at the beleaguered Far Reaches University:

The crowd shifted. Ania's stubbornness increased at a swish of white and blue along the corridors. Two Pressmen stripped the robe from an art professor's shoulders and let the garment fall to the ground.

Ania's hopes sank in her stomach, suddenly heavy and sour.

The Pressmen hadn't been held back. More colleagues, from university guards to Dean Andol, already wore blue and white cloaks, or shiny metal pins in the shape of a book split open, the pages left smooth and blank. (Wilde 23)

The Pressmen's movement is one of violence and intimidation to ensure an egalitarian purity. This "purity" is represented in their symbol: a book split open, rent asunder, with nothing remaining but blankness. For Pressmen, emptiness is a virtue, representing the erasure of structural or social or human barriers to information, and at the same time the destruction of contextual meaning that made the information relevant in the first place. Their barrage of slogans gives voice to this fervent belief: "Knowledge Unity: An Education for All," "Conquer The Losses of Time With Knowledge," "Masters of what's right, what's poor! Soon you won't decide anymore!"

Another of the story's protagonists, thief Jorit Lee, overhears at one point a Pressman sum up their motives in terms eerily similar to modern faux-democrats who claim that "experts" are unnecessary and universities are nurseries for blasphemy, treason, and elitism:

"Historically, universities never even enriched the towns they occupied. They kept all their best knowledge tucked inside their walls. The Pressmen have always fought to share that knowledge equally," the guide was saying. "Now that we have the technology, we're able to do that far faster. What was once a small protest against academic fortresses? Is now changing the Six Kingdoms for the better."

The new assistants nodded in the dawn.

“So go out today and find as many hidden books as possible. Buy what you can to keep people happy. Take the rest. If you find a professor, call for help. We’ll free these words from what binds them. We’ll share everything. And then we’ll level the rest.”
(Wilde 37)

Now that we have the technology. The coming of the Press signals the dawn of “true knowledge,” free of the heavy hand of undeserved authority. But note that Billington frames the issue in exactly the opposite manner: “The idea of knowledge-based democracy is threatened, in a peculiar fashion, by the information flood generated by the new technologies and by the overwhelming advance of the audio-visual, multimedia world. We talk now about the Information Age, not the knowledge age; we talk about information centers rather than knowledge centers” (Billington 12).

However framed, the divide between *knowledge* and *information* is at the heart of the ideological conflict Wilde presents. And, depending on the time and shifts in power, both sides are prone to ridicule, assault, and stridency against each other. A time-travelling Jorit and Ania (having been swept into the past by the mechanism of the story’s title) witness a confrontation early in the then-less-militant Pressmen’s movement across the Six Kingdoms:

Ania nodded, taking the paper back. *More knowledge is better. Learn how to spot accuracy.* “I remember Grandmother talking about this march”, she said. “Everyone thought the Pressmen seemed smart.” She shuddered. “That they’d add to the local arts and culture, not—”

“Control it?” Jorit nodded. “Something changed.”

. . . Men and women wearing academic robes marking them as members of the two nearest local universities yelled. Their arms swung and their robes belled out as they threw fruit. . . . “You cannot use what you can’t understand; knowledge refined is better than knowledge to hand!” More academics shouted the Pressmen down. The crowd seemed to stutter, its affections pulled both ways.

The Pressmen still smiled, but their parade slowed. “We differ in our opinions, that is all,” one of the bearers of the false gems said.

“You are wrong! That is worse!” a professor shouted. “You need education, not just knowledge. Progress cannot happen without refinement. Discourse.”

“But you would choose who gets to talk. Who progresses.” (Wilde 99-100)

These early Pressmen are peaceful demonstrators; they smile and wave at the gathering crowds, and trumpet inspirational slogans like “Knowledge—More Valuable Than Gems.” Who would argue that knowledge is less important than riches or fame? Who would try to deny knowledge to others, especially when the deniers are academics at institutions that are attended by the elite? These seem like common sense and fair contentions, made emotionally more so by the disruptive and insulting attacks made by professors against the Pressmen. Jorit’s brother Marton agrees:

Marton had always been the one to try and explain the difference between being told a thing was true and experiencing the truth of it firsthand . . . *Access to books and information should be easier than it is in the Six Kingdoms*, he’d said while they studied late at night. *We shouldn’t have to fight so hard to learn*. She’d asked him then, *But do people value it more when they have to fight for it?* (Wilde 35, emphasis in original)

But as Jorit notes to Ania, “something changed.” In the intervening centuries, the egalitarian call made in initial good faith transforms into a brutish demagoguery, a sadly familiar pattern that recurs throughout human history and that comes with great societal and spiritual cost.

Without context and structure, argues Ania, there is a lack of the necessary spirit that humanity imbues in the literature it creates. The kind of informational environment envisioned by the Pressmen is cold, sterile, morally void, and, indeed, anti-human. Intermediaries such as scholars and librarians provide guidance and judgment without which knowledge is an indiscriminate mass that can actually do harm. (Scholars of information such as Safiya Noble in her 2018 book *Algorithms of Oppression* have pointed out how the creation of an “open” informational ecosystem with “unbiased” algorithms is, in fact, an avenue for prioritizing preexisting biases about race and gender.)³

In passages familiar to any librarian or reader with an emotional investment in books-as-objects, Wilde records Ania’s meditations on the power of the works she curates and seeks to preserve.

All those words. The thought of Pressmen taking those words from her hands, churning them into pulp and ink, and thus into a full set of constantly current *Universal Compendiums of Knowledge* filled Ania's stomach with dread. She'd loved books since she was a child playing in her father's study while he taught his classes. Loved how each volume felt different in the hand, heavy or light; that each smelled of a different era, different knowledge; that they had to be handled carefully—like people—but that they were constant, finished—unlike people. How could she give any of them up?

“But the *Compendiums* could contain everything!” Dean Andol had, the year before, chided the reluctant Master Archivist, Sonoria Vos.

“How does a printing press lay down ink on a page that can twist and rework itself into new forms?” Vos had argued. “And what value do words have across a gap of time if they don't stay put? Books are measures of time. They are made to grow old, to grow, occasionally, wrong.”

Ania, listening from the stacks, agreed with her mentor. She liked that books had conversations among themselves. That they, like people, sometimes faded or fell apart when not well called for. That made them precious. (15-16)

The human connection that makes collections of and commentaries on knowledge is crucial to that knowledge's preservation throughout time. Ania would wholeheartedly agree with Billington's observation that “[t]he very flood of unsorted information makes it more important than ever the librarians' role of sorting, dispensing, and being neutral but informed navigators . . . the deluge of unsorted electronic information increases the need for a special cast of discriminating knowledge professionals who will add the value of judgment and the warmth of human mediation to all this unintelligible material” (13).⁴ Left alone and untended, information has a tendency to drift and its very nature becomes malleable.

Wilde makes this process fantastically explicit in a passage describing the workings of the Press:

A group of four Pressmen with close-cropped hair sat doing simple tasks. Feeding newly blank books into a slim, high-tech press. Dumping sacks of strange ink—dust,

really—across the pages within a glass and iron box. The dust swirled like a storm. Then books emerged, filled *Universal Compendiums of Knowledge*. The Presskeeper lifted a still-warm book for him to see: *Far Reaches University*, the entry read. *Two hundred years and counting, raising leaders in a region known for shipping and fishing.*

As Xachar watched, the letters tangled and blurred, a ribbon of ink curling in on itself and releasing. When it stopped, the page read *Two hundred years of knowledge hoarding in a region known for shipping and fishing.* (Wilde 79, emphasis in original)

Of course, human mediators are perfectly capable of actively altering the narrative, and do, and have. But Wilde's larger point is that informational intermediaries like librarians or archivists or professors serve a vital purpose in preserving the human chronicle intact across the temporal continuum, passing informed knowledge on to the next generations, and transforming conglomerations of unrelated and unconnected data into story. That is no small thing.

Billington relates the story of speaking to a Native American in Nebraska, who told him that “librarians today are like the oldest person in a tribe in the Native American communities that preexisted the first white settlers. That person kept in his or her head the memory of the tribe, the oral tradition of the community, just as a library later kept its written memory. ‘We didn’t call him the gatekeeper,’ he told me. ‘We called him the dreamkeeper.’ Librarians,” Billington concludes, “must be gatekeepers to useful knowledge—opening windows to the wide world outside; but they can also be the dreamkeepers of each civilization” (16).

The Fire Opal Mechanism is unusual in the fantasy and SF genres for Wilde's thoughtfulness in considering the ethics and politics surrounding information access. As the introduction to this piece notes, all too often libraries and archives in works of the fantastic are background scenery or mere plot devices—opportunities to show off shelves of mysterious and dusty volumes, for example, or vast computer banks where the exact information required is available through a simple query. Little attention, however, is paid to the intricacies of information arrangement, classification, and access. In reality, these things, undramatic as they might be, are crucial to the structure of an informed society. Science fiction has long engaged with the important concerns of the day; how we receive and make information accessible are issues increasingly vital to our societal future, and deserve more treatment by genre authors. (Writers such as Neil Stephenson and Malka Older, for example, have

already produced substantial works concerned with the use and flow of information, so precedent exists for even greater specificity in future narratives.) It is more remarkable to see fantasy embracing this kind of subject matter that has significant societal import. This makes Wilde's work all the more singular. What Wilde does so powerfully in *Mechanism* is to reinforce in a fantasy setting this need for a corps of dreamkeepers, to carefully curate and provide access to the knowledge that everyone—whether living in a fantasyland or not—needs in order to understand the human experience.

Notes

1. As a special collections librarian myself, who like many of my colleagues can become entertainingly frustrated at the inaccurate portrayal in literature and film of our profession, I do enjoy a particular exception to this trend in fantasy. In the series *The Kingkiller Chronicle*, set mainly at the arcane “University”, Patrick Rothfuss takes care to note the existence in the University's Archives of phenomena familiar to us librarians: dueling and contradictory cataloging schema, an acquisitions department, a quarantine area for the removal of pests, and a staff of student workers to reshelve books and perform other grunt work.

2. See the first volume in the series, the Nebula and Hugo-nominated *The Jewel and Her Lapidary* (2016), for background. *Lapidary* takes place several centuries before *Fire Opal Mechanism*, set in a world where certain gems are imbued with spectacular powers and worn by ‘Jewels’ (the ruling class). The powers of these gems must be harnessed and channeled by human ‘Lapidaries’. In *Mechanism*, it is a rogue gem that is ultimately responsible for the destruction of knowledge that is central to the plot

3. Note, also, that at the time of writing the United States continues to struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic, as not only ordinary citizens but state and federal politicians argue that expert scientific testimony is biased and unreliable in the face of “gut feelings” or self-obtained and unsourced information.

4. Whether or not librarians can be truly *neutral* (and I argue that they cannot), is a debate for a different forum altogether.

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Editor's Note: "From the Archives" is a regular column introduced in SFRA Review, vol. 50, no. 2-3 that reprints noteworthy (broadly defined) content from earlier in the Review's history.



From the Archives: "Texts of Letters about *Nueva Dimensión*," SFRA Newsletter #1 (Jan. 1971)

Sean Guynes

Senior Editor, *SFRA Review*

THIS inaugural entry of "From the Archives" takes a look at two letters published in the very first issue of the *Review* (then *SFRA Newsletter*) written by the just-formed SFRA Executive Committee to address the seizure of an issue of the science fiction magazine *Nueva Dimensión* in Spain by Franco's regime. The letters were sent to the editor of the magazine and to the Spanish ambassador to the U.S. in protest of the seizure. *Nueva Dimensión* was started in 1968 by Domingo Santos, Luis Vigil, and Sebastián Martínez. The publication ran 148 issues between 1968 and 1982.

The topic of the letters sent by the Executive Committee was of international importance to SF fans. Alejandro Mohorte Medina and José Nieto describe the situation in their history of Spanish SF for the British fanzine *The Science Fact & Science Fiction Concatenation*:

[T]he magazine had problems with censorship because of the Press Law. In [the] issue of May 14th 1970, a short story titled in Euskara (Basque language) "Gu ta gutarrak" ["Us and Ours"], by Magdalena Mouján Otaño, told the adventure of a group of Basques travelling with a time machine to locate a paradoxical event. Despite being presented in advance for official administrative approval, a few days later the Public Order Court forced the recall of the entire issue. The prosecutor denounced that the story violated the national unity of Spain. After the seizure of the issue, the pages of this story were substituted by several cartoons strips by Johnny Hart, so it was possible to continue the distribution. The trial against *Nueva Dimensión* never happened, but the case brought ample criticism from international fandom. In the US, a support committee was created and some authors offered his work for token rates.

Below is the text of the letters and their framing by the editor of *SFRA Newsletter*, Fred Lerner. With the exception of adding the accent in “*Dimensión*,” only formatting has been changed to ensure greater clarity.

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Texts of Letters about *Nueva Dimensión*

THE following letters were sent as SFRA’s reaction to the seizure of an issue of the Spanish SF publication *Nueva Dimensión* by the Spanish authorities:

(To Sr Sebastian Martinez):

We have heard with dismay and shock that the issue #14 of *Nueva Dimensión*, the science fiction magazine which you, Domingo Santos, and Luis Vigil have been editing and publishing with such distinction, has been seized by the Spanish Political Police, because it contained a science fiction story set in an imaginary future. We have also read that the future of the magazine and its publishers is in jeopardy because of this. We have found *Nueva Dimensión* to be one of the finest periodicals in the field of science fiction in the world, and it has served as an example of international cooperation and fruitful exchange of information in science fiction. It has been a worthy representative in our field of the great Hispanic literary and artistic tradition. It would be highly regrettable for Spain to be deprived of her voice in the growing international science fiction community.

We hope that the Spanish government will make it possible for you to resume normal publication with no curtailment of the freedom of speculation necessary to all science fiction, i.e. without being subjected to ruinous fines or prison sentences.

We are therefore sending a copy of this letter from our annual general meeting in New York to the Spanish Ambassador in Washington, and we authorise you to use this letter as you see fit, as an expression of our deep sense of sympathy and concern at what *Nueva Dimensión* and you are experiencing.

* * *

(To His Excellency, The Spanish Ambassador in Washington):

We enclose a copy of our letter to Sr Sebastian Martinez. We hope that it will convey to you our high regard for his work, and our hope that *Nueva Dimensión* will be able to resume unimpeded publication in the immediate future.

Editor's Note: "The SF in Translation Universe" is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #325).



The SF in Translation Universe #8

Rachel Cordasco

WELCOME back to the SF in Translation Universe! It might seem like we've been living in a dystopian novel or postapocalyptic wasteland, but the books are still being printed and reviews are still being written, so at least there's that.

Between May and August, we've been treated to Golden Age French science fiction, World War II-era Belgian Weird, a genre-bending Bengali story cycle, Swedish horror, and so much more. With this variety of genres, languages, and cultures, it's no wonder that readers are turning to SF in translation to nourish their brains.

Thanks to the intrepid Wakefield Press, we have *two* collections of Weird tales by Francophone authors who wrote under the cloud of Nazi occupation. Jean Ray's *The Great Nocturnal: Tales of Dread* (tr. Scott Nicolay), out in June, offers us a sampling of the stories that solidified his reputation as the face of the Belgian Weird. Interrogating the depths of surrealist horror that lie just beneath everyday reality, Ray writes about alternate dimensions, strange and terrifying symbols, and horrifying transformations. Marcel Brion, too, turned to the fantastic during this dark time, publishing in 1942 the stories that make up *Waystations of the Deep Night* (tr. George MacLennan and Edward Gauvin), out in July. Like Ray, Brion draws on classic horror tropes to destabilize our sense of reality: a painting puts onlookers under a spell, an underground city erupts onto the surface . . . and then there are the dancing cats.

In keeping with this surrealist theme, we have Cuban author Miguel Collazo's 1968 novel *The Journey* (tr. David Frye), out in July from Restless Books. Blending science fiction and a dream-like metaphysical exploration of our place in the universe, Collazo's novel imagines a planet colonized long ago by scientists, whose descendants have become nomadic visionaries. The members of a new generation have discovered in themselves unprecedented psychic abilities and begin to look forward to a transformation that they call the "Journey." This sounds very similar in tone to Yoshio Aramaki's *The Sacred Era* (1978, tr. 2017), a Japanese New Wave text

that discusses surrealist art, post-Christian dogma, reincarnation, and spaceships fueled by human consciousness.

Metaphysical concerns are also at the heart of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's nested novel *Lame Fate / Ugly Swans* (tr. Maya Vinokur), out in August from Chicago Review Press. While *Ugly Swans* was first published in English translation in 1979 as a standalone text, it is now presented with the *Lame Fate* framing story that the Strugatskys wrote in the 1960s when Soviet censors were bearing down. In *Lame Fate*, an author (Felix Sorokin) is asked by the Soviet Writers' Union to submit a manuscript for analysis by a computer program to determine its "objective value." Sorokin is torn between sending a story that the censors will find acceptable and his unpublished masterpiece (entitled *Ugly Swans*), itself a story about a disgraced author who returns to his hometown to discover that supernatural masked strangers have hypnotized the town's teenagers. If you enjoy nested stories, also check out the Polish novel *Nest of Worlds* by Marek Huberath (which came out in English in 2014).

June saw the release of Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay's *The Epic of Damarudhar* (tr. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay), a work of genre-bending Bengali literature first published between 1911 and 1917 (collected in 1923). *Damarudhar*, like Angelica Gorodisher's *Trafalgar*, features an eponymous storyteller entertaining his listeners with tales that range from science fiction, myth, and fantasy to social commentary and the absurd. In a similar vein, Pergentino José's *Red Ants* (tr. Thomas Bunstead) tells the stories of indigenous Mexicans via a magical realist lens turned onto themes of family and love. The first literary translation from the Sierra Zapotec, *Red Ants* (out in August from Deep Vellum) is an exciting addition to the growing list of SF in translation from Mexico.

If you're looking for some horror fiction to get your mind off of the horrors of reality, check out *Road of Ice and Salt* and *The Home*, both out in August. Published in English thanks to a successful Indiegogo campaign, *Road of Ice and Salt* (tr. David Bowles, Innsmouth Press) is a cult horror novel from Mexico that will expand our understanding of the country's speculative fiction tradition. Hop over to Sweden for more horror- Mats Strandberg's *The Home* (tr. uncredited, Jo Fletcher Books) tells the story of a nursing home where the residents (many with dementia) have turned into violent strangers with terrifying new mental abilities.

Looking instead for some classic science fiction? Flame Tree Press released Francis Carsac's *The City Among the Stars* in May (tr. Judith Sullivan and Margaret Schiff).

This first English translation of the French Golden Age novel imagines what would happen if a lieutenant serving the Earth Empire is rescued from his damaged ship by beings that call space (and their spaceship) home. These “People of the Stars” despise those who live on planets, but they want the technology that allows the Empire to track ships through hyperspace. The lieutenant won’t tell the People of the Stars what he knows, though...

If you want more Cuban science fiction, look no further than Restless Books and the two other novels that they published in July: Yoss’s *Red Dust* (tr. David Frye) and Agustín de Rojas’s *Spiral* (tr. Nick Caistor and Hebe Powell). The former is the fourth Yoss novel in English in five years and tells the story of a positronic robot detective (à la Raymond Chandler) on a quest to capture dangerous alien criminals and save the space station he calls home. The publication of de Rojas’s *Spiral* is especially noteworthy because Anglophone readers now have access to all three novels in a trilogy that includes *A Legend of the Future* and *The Year 200* (Restless Books, 2015 and 2016, respectively). A space opera that examines the ethics of scientific exploration and human interactions in a way that comments on the Cold War clash of superpowers and ideologies, *Spiral* is an important addition to the canon of Cuban science fiction.

As always, you can find excellent short SFT in print and online this spring and summer. As of this writing (mid-July), we have SFT from the Bulgarian, French, Japanese, and Chinese published in *Clarkesworld*, *Compelling Science Fiction*, *Future Science Fiction Digest*, and *Daily Science Fiction*.

Thanks for reading, and I’d love to hear what you’re reading now and/or looking forward to: rachel@sfintranslation.com.

Until next time in the SFT Universe!

Editor's Note: "Meet the Future" is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #326). It is an interview series conducted by the SFRA Review editor that highlights the work of up-and-coming SF scholars, typically graduate students, postdocs, and recent hires.



Meet the Future: An Interview with Julia Gatermann

Julia Gatermann

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University of Hamburg / Germany

Research Assistant, SOCIUM Research Center for Inequality and Social Politics
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Hi, Julia, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Hi! Thanks for inviting me—this is such an honor. I started as a PhD candidate last year at the department of English and American Studies at the University of Hamburg, Germany. I'm a meticulous writer of lists (anything, really: To Reads, To Dos, Pro-Cons...) because I like the way they structure my thoughts and give me the confidence to then (well, sometimes) just throw them to the wind and be present in the moment—because life (thankfully!!!) has a tendency of sneaking up and surprising you.

How do you describe yourself professionally?

Looking at my research interests, they seem to be spread out unreasonably wide (something I find simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating): I'm writing my dissertation on sexual and gender fluidity (looking at contemporary films, novels, tv series, and so on) with a strong emphasis on intersectionality. I'm also employed at an interdisciplinary research project called "Fiction Meets Science II" with the subproject titled "Science in Postcolonial Speculative Fiction: Nature/Politics/Economies Reimagined" where we look at depictions of science, technology, and knowledge production from perspectives that challenge and decenter dominant Western discourse. While both areas—sexuality and gender as well as science and knowledge production—are each dauntingly vast and complex, the overlap between

the two—and incidentally the aspect I’m interested in most—is the dynamics at work when you look at the margins instead of the center: the emergence of imaginary spaces that allow for a (re-)negotiation (be that of concepts, power relations, or identities) that becomes possible in the liminal spaces “in between”, resulting from the friction between center and periphery. These imaginary spaces are inherently utopian, I believe, since they, by their very nature, always already point towards the future and to the question “what if”? Which allows us to elegantly segue into the next question...

Why does sf matter to you?

Pretty much all of my academic work at the moment is inflected by sf because I find it a good mode to think with. Similar to the conceptual friction that happens at the boundaries of two disparate cultures, for example, that allows for new imaginary spaces to emerge, sf deliberately strives to provoke cognitive estrangement that unsettles one’s familiar perspective. There are many aspects about sf that I’m in love with (and some of them are too embarrassingly cheesy to admit to publicly!), but what I think is probably sf’s most powerful capacity is how it opens our view—with a sometimes only ever so slight tilt of the angle—to aspects of our own culture that we previously might have overlooked or been blind to. Long held preconceptions and beliefs that are tightly woven into the fabric of our culture and thereby have become “white noise” to us, something we just take for granted and maybe even perceive as neutral facts of life, can be challenged in sf with a stunning ease—by just shifting the frame a bit. And this ease with which something so profound can be accomplished reveals just how brittle these values and beliefs really become when they remain unquestioned. Therefore, sf hands us powerful tools to both make visible new sides of what we thought we already knew well enough—our reality—and thereby also the power to reshape it by asking new questions—“what if...?” Sf, at its best, challenges its readers/viewers and keeps them on their toes.

What brought you to sf studies?

I started to discover sf (as probably most of us) in my teens (if “the golden age of science fiction” is considered to be twelve, I was a bit of a late bloomer, though). In my family, education was always considered as something highly valued, yet not

to be taken for granted (I am the first to have been to university). I owe my love for books to my mother who read to me tirelessly when I was little (I somewhat suspect I didn't allow her to tire, as closure is still something I can't go to sleep without!).

Yet when I started university, I always regarded anything "genre" as an illicit pleasure. In Germany, even more so than in Anglophone culture, we make a very palpable distinction between high and low brow culture when considering cultural artifacts, and the study of the latter was (sometimes still is) regarded as somewhat frivolous—and for someone very conscious about their class background this can become a very fraught thing. While the devaluation of pop culture had been contested for decades before I ever picked up my first sf novel, and the cultural climate at my university therefore thankfully was rather inclusive (every now and then there were seminars on detective fiction, for example), it was till my second to last semester that I encountered a loud and proud announcement of science fiction in the course catalog.

This seemed to me delightfully transgressive; the crowd this seminar drew was indeed one composed of people who also reveled in "out of the box" approaches and challenging conventional thinking, and I felt like I finally belonged! I immediately decided to write my master's thesis on sf, went to my first academic conference (ICFA, closely followed by SFRA), spent a year researching my thesis at the Merrill Collection in Toronto, and was overwhelmed by the sense of community I encountered! Just starting out in academia, I felt seen and accepted, my opinions valued. I felt buoyed by the emotional support the academic sf community gave me in my endeavors and ambitions, making me almost giddy with happy optimism. When I returned back home to Germany, I longed to take this feeling of community and belonging with me, yearning for a similar network in the German context.

Therefore, when Lars Schmeink decided to organize an inaugural conference for the Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung (German association for research of the fantastic in the arts) in 2010, I did what I could to help build up this academic association and provide an organizational structure for a still growing band of likeminded academic SFF enthusiasts to rally around. I feel privileged that I've been allowed to serve on the board of the GfF for ten years!

While my love for sf has been longstanding, I believe it was really the open-mindedness, the combination of critical acuity and creative scholarship happening in the field, and, probably above anything else, the warmhearted inclusiveness and

integrity of the people within sf that made me catch fire. I feel at home in sf and I couldn't imagine my (academic and overall) life without it.

What project(s) are you working on now, and how did you get there? What question(s) really drive your work?

As mentioned above, the two projects I'm working on at the moment are my dissertation on representations of sexual and gender fluidity in contemporary American culture and the interdisciplinary research project with "Fiction Meets Science" on representations of science, technology and knowledge production in postcolonial speculative novels. Here, I'm looking at how author's from the Global South or of a hybrid cultural background challenge and destabilize such notion as the supremacy of Western science in their novels, and debunk the fallacy of perceiving it as something neutral and free of any "cultural baggage". Sf, through extrapolation, can expose problematic developments that, in mainstream society might long have become normalized, and critically question the power relations and dynamics of a capitalist economy that often harnesses scientific research for profit oriented gains, pushing for advancements while downplaying potential risks, for example.

Against the dystopian backdrop of climate change, global pandemics, war and overwhelming inequality, Western science (entangled in capitalist interests) doesn't only seem to lack the answers but often seems to be at the heart of these problems. And while the present moment long seems to have caught up with sf, creating a strange sense of "double vision", an inherent sense of futurity in our here and now, I nevertheless believe that sf's capacity of extrapolation and estrangement can help us process these problematic developments as it affords us with the required conceptual distance to our own reality—it makes us take a step back—to take a good look at it.

I'm interested in how postcolonial sf (and I won't go into the problematic history of the term here) explores questions such as how non-Western knowledge traditions might hold solutions to these problems, how a Western binary thinking in terms of a nature-culture-opposition might be broken up in favor of more fluid and interconnected understandings of the two, or how different science traditions might work hand in hand to come to creative responses to complex problems. I'm just thrilled to hear how new voices, especially those voices who previously had been silenced, contribute to the discussion, trouble and upend preconceptions and change

the dialogue—even the way how we ask questions.

What do you envision for the future of sf studies and sf scholars? What do you want to see us accomplish?

This, I guess, is also what I hope for the future of sf studies and scholars within the field. Sf is full of diverse and brilliant voices, upending what we thought we knew, challenging us to become better thinkers. Likewise, I want to see more scholars succeeding in academia that belong to groups that previously have largely been underrepresented, marginalized, even silenced—people who can challenge white, male, Western, able-bodied, hetero, cis-normativity, take the discourse to new places and ask new questions. These strange and difficult times have shown us that “business as usual” is no longer sustainable, that closing our eyes in front of the obvious no longer is an option. We are in desperate need of change—in the face of an intricately interwoven and incomprehensibly complex global system of . . . everything . . . this is a staggering challenge. We need out of the box thinking, we need new perspectives and angles to look from, we need new ways to cooperate and collaborate, to communicate with each other across the divides of our subjective experiences. And, above all else—we need a huge portion of utopian thinking! These times seem to require sf scholarship more than ever—and the more diverse the voices within it, the better our chances to radically change our world for the better.

If you could write a dream book, or teach a dream course, what would it/they be?

The dream book would be my dissertation. I’m interested in how expressions of non-normative sexual and gender identity are being transported and translated in contemporary culture, thereby counteracting cultural erasure and giving visibility to marginalized groups as well as breaking up preconceptions and unsettling binary thinking. Core to my work is an intersectional approach; my theoretical foundation is informed by a variety of discourses, be that critical posthumanism, postcolonial theory, posthumanist feminism, queer theory and critical race studies. I look through an sf lens at my work, firmly believing that the affordances of sf, especially estrangement and extrapolation, allow us to inspect and explore the here and now from new angles and make it possible to perceive from these perspectives what we otherwise might have missed due to our cultural blind spots that derive from an

overfamiliarity with the cultural tapestry of our reality. I'm interested in novels, films and tv series that negotiate the experiences of marginal subject positions and embodiment in complex ways that decenter normative thinking, Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*, for example, or Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*.

In terms of a dream course, I get to teach a seminar on intersectionality next semester, using Janelle Monáe's emotion picture *Dirty Computer* as an example and spring board to dive into the vital importance of (self-)representation, cultural memory, and the political, utopian force of Afrofuturism.

Thank you! Your labor and thoughts are valued and appreciated.

SPECIAL
ISSUE

ALTERNATIVE
SINOFUTURISMS

EDITED BY
Virginia L. Conn



Sinofuturism and Chinese Science Fiction: An Introduction to the Alternative Sinofuturisms (中华未来主义) Special Issue



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AS a mode of global and temporal situatedness, Sinofuturism has largely emerged as a concept applied externally to China by Western observers. By compartmentalizing sociocultural development as a form uniquely tied to the nation-state while also seeking to maintain both distance and otherness, Sinofuturism differs from theorizations such as Afrofuturism (to which it is often compared) through its application *to*, not development *from*, the subjects it takes as object. As a result, the very label of “Sinofuturism” developed out of the same Orientalizing impulses that previously relegated China to a space of backwardness and barbarism (Niu, Huang, Roh 2015) and which now attribute to it a projected futurity. Yet this Western label is one that Chinese authors and artists have appropriated and weaponized for their own creative ends, without necessarily sharing unified goals.

Authors of science fiction in China have uniquely grappled with this impulse, especially insofar as digital technologies—such as the growing e-publishing industry and networked media platforms—allow for the proliferation of new voices historically barred from traditional publishing venues. (Xu 2015) Too, contemporary science fiction in China functions as a transnational form that centers a technoscientific process or material object as a means of introducing social change, rendering the aim of science fiction inherently future-oriented even when relying on the past or focused on the present. Because potential future ontologies are expected to be relevant to present extrapolations, they fundamentally rely, to some degree, not only on realistic depictions of possible technologies and circumstantial realism, but also the familiar perceptions of the extant material and digital worlds—a central tenet of Sinofuturism’s omnivorous inclusion of technology, labor, art, and the visions it makes possible. (Lek 2016)

The globalizing effect of the internet and the subsequent rise in wide-scale digital exchange, in particular, has created a space for production in which Chinese authors are writing for an increasingly global audience and shifting their goals correspondingly. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, authors and public

reformers in China (such as Liang Qichao, who, in his 1902 unfinished novel *The Future of New China*, described a utopian 1962 in which China was the dominant global power) were envisioning Sinofutures in which China was preeminent on the world stage. The idea of China as a dominant force in the world yet-to-come continues through much Chinese science fiction today, from standout international sensations such as *The Three-Body Problem* to anonymously published digital short stories like “Olympic Dream.” For science fiction authors describing the Chinese future (or the future as Chinese), an awareness of the fact that American and Western media largely paints China as a place of repression and censorship is an integral part of the worlds they depict.

To the extent that this is true, publishing regulations in China mean that the internet and other digital forms of publications, such as video games and online message boards, have become increasingly important outlets for science fiction. *The Three-Body Problem*, for example, was serialized first in the online-only *Science Fiction World* before being published as a book, and Western publication outlets like *Clarkesworld* have partnered with China-based Storycom to publish more Chinese science fiction in translation online. Because of the expectation of a global audience that online publication ensures, science fiction is changing as readership expands, yet the balance of global power remains uneven. Noted science fiction authors such as Xia Jia still describe science fiction coming out of China as having the mission of educating Western readers (Xia 2016), while English translators are increasingly burdened with the necessity of explaining historicocultural specificities through lengthy footnotes. (Liu 2014) That is, just as the West applies the term “Sinofuturism” to an entire national development project, Chinese authors are put in the position of responding and catering to Western assumptions in order to be legible on a global scale.

Here is where the specificity of China as a technologized imaginary, located outside of both space and time, results in a an Orientalizing impulse fundamentally different from the fetishization of a high-tech Japan seen prominently in cyberpunk and the gleamingly sexualized noir adoration of the 80s. Shaped by and reliant on Western projections of Asia as the techne through which to shape a future defined by and created for the West, Sinofuturism not only projects China as a temporal locus for the project of modernity (Niu 2008), but also posits Chinese individuals themselves as resources, not originary producers of cultural or technological capital. Reduced

by the West to faceless algorithmic data points, Chinese laborers and producers are commodified in an ideologically reproductive system informed by the racial panic of outsourcing common in the early nineties with the rise of overseas data centers. (Atanasoki and Vora 2015) Chinese science fiction writers are well aware of this and increasingly find themselves in a position to either push back against it or grapple with those fears in order to appear legible to an international readership.

Some authors do this by writing directly to the negative visions of a Chinese future most commonly held by the West: Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide*, for example, deals with the physical detritus left behind by the dreams of digital development and the environmental devastation created when those developments are made obsolete and discarded, while Ma Boyong's "City of Silence" shows both digital message boards and spoken language as subject to the same censorship as physical media, giving lie to the aspirations of online communications as a state of expressive exceptionalism. Other Chinese content producers actively embody the digitizing impulse that seeks to turn human beings into images for consumption: Naomi Wu (Shenzhen's "sexy cyborg"), for example, has created a 3D scan of her body and uploaded it for the purpose of 3D printing models. These models are marketed alongside 3D models of Major Motoko Kusanagi from the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell*—an explicit juxtaposition of two stylized bodies (one real, one fictional) that, in their respective worlds, represent the future through a conscientious abandonment of the biological for the constructed.

So what, then, does it mean for Chinese science fiction to attempt to depict a Sinofuturist vision in the increasingly globalized space made possible by digital technologies? And what does it mean to produce content within a framework that imagines a techno-utopic future founded on artistic labor while simultaneously reproducing racialized tropes of dehumanization? How is material production changed by an increasing reliance on the digital? In the following essays, various researchers and theorists attempt to grapple with digital imaginaries, production, labor, and futurity across a wide range of topics multiply bound in Sinofuturist space.

The idea for this special issue developed out of a workshop organized by Dino Ge Zhang as part of the WuDaoKou Futurists collective, a collective aimed at decentering Sinofuturism from its Western articulations. The workshop, "Alternative Sinofuturisms," already presupposes Sinofuturism as a venue for alterity and retains a space for various approaches and understandings of who and what is being

foregrounded. Centralized in Beijing but held online with invited speakers from four different continents, the workshop was organized around a series of provocations, most of which are included in this issue. Amy Ireland articulated a view of darkside empathy that positioned Sinofuturist visions as methods of inculcating weaponized empathy, while Gabriele de Seta argued that Sinofuturism functions as a framework for denying the possibility of coevalness to China on the part of the West. I discussed Sinofuturism as an aestheticized projection that fixed images of the country in a perpetual *futur antérieur*; Vincent Garton, not included here, argued for a reappropriation of the term by Chinese theorists and politicians in order to reconstruct a new world system inclusive of heterogeneous futures. The organizer, Dino Ge Zhang (without whom neither the original symposium nor this special issue would be possible), expanded on his concept of Sino-no-futurism to describe a world post-pandemic, which in many ways now reads as a science fictional dream for an American and British audience trapped in the perpetual now of our own countries' ongoing pandemic-based immiserations.

The papers contained in this special issue respond to these various provocations and the overall concept of Sinofuturism from various angles. While some are supportive, seeing in Sinofuturism an opportunity for alternative epistemologies, others criticize its foreclosure of heterogeneous elements and re-centering of global development vis-à-vis the West. What's more, while Sinofuturism is an explicitly temporal projection, it is not necessarily a science fictional one except insofar as any futurist projection is a work of imagination—as a result, some of the essays contained here do not consider science fiction at all, while still engaging with the concept of how to situate the future on a global scale. By questioning who gets to imagine the future alongside who and what contributes to bringing those visions about, these essays incisively demonstrate that the material is never separate from the conceptual and the real-world consequences of imagining such alternatives.

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A Discussion between Two French Translators of Chinese Science Fiction



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Gwennaël Gaffric

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Loïc Aloisio: The English translation of *The Three-Body Problem* by Ken Liu, which has been awarded the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015, has given sudden visibility to Chinese SF. As we can see, a lot of Chinese SF authors have already been translated into English. In France, however, the situation is quite different, since it appears that only twelve authors have been translated, for a total of thirty-four translations (against more than two hundred in English). Moreover, among them are two authors (namely Lao She and Ye Yonglie) who are not part of what Song Mingwei called the “new wave” of Chinese SF (Song, 2015), and whose works have been translated a long time ago (in 1981 and 1986 respectively). If we take 2015 as a landmark year, the number of translations reduces to thirty (Aloisio, 2016). How do you explain that? As the translator of the *Three-Body* trilogy in French, do you have some understanding of the public response to Chinese SF?

Gwennaël Gaffric: This phenomenon may seem paradoxical in several respects. Liu’s *Three-Body* trilogy has been one of science fiction’s most acclaimed series in France in recent years, as it has reaped both commercial and critical success. It has reached readers well beyond the usual SF (or Chinese literature) readership and has generated many reviews and columns of literary criticism in most of the major general and specialized French media.

However, the success of a work does not always reflect on its surrounding ecosystem. I remember Liu Cixin often repeating that the success of his trilogy in China never really led to an explosion in sales of his other works. Likewise, the success of the trilogy has not resulted in an exponential number of translations of Chinese SF in France.

We can put forward several explanations: some are specific to the French publishing world, and others specific to the French sociopolitical context vis-à-vis China.

First, the situation in France can't be compared to the United States, where the impact of the publication of the translation of *The Three-Body Problem* was more important: in the US, SF literature in English translation represents a minimal portion of the total production, and it was a great event that a translated novel won the Hugo Award. There is also a great appetite for what we imagined of China—as such, in the reception of the trilogy in the US, you can note that many media try to see through Liu Cixin's works a “Chinese” way of seeing the future. As I have already discussed elsewhere (Gaffric, 2019a), there is an Orientalist confusion between the content of the work and the origin of its author—which one imagines holding a point of view essentially Chinese, that would be representative of his “culture.”

SF literature in translation is much more present in the French editorial landscape, with an overwhelming majority of translations from English (but also Russian, Italian, German works...). So, there may be less circumstantial attraction. For instance, I was able to see that many US readers had never heard of the Cultural Revolution while French readers are generally more familiar with this historic episode, with which Liu Cixin begins his novel. In general, Chinese literature is also more available on the shelves of French bookstores, and the Cultural Revolution is a fairly frequent theme (among authors of Liu's generation, such as Yu Hua, Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, Chi Li or Su Tong, are authors massively translated into French). So if you want to read about the Cultural Revolution, the choice is larger.

I also know that there is a certain number of partnerships between magazines and/or publishing houses that have been created in Italy and in the United States (like with *Clarkesworld Magazine*), maybe in other countries, to promote contemporary Chinese SF works in translation. In France, this process is slower, and sometimes comes up against reluctance from publishers and magazines who wish to maintain control and independence over the choice of the texts they want to publish.

We could also see that in the case of the translation of Liu's trilogy, many translations were made from English, and/or according to the editorial standards of the English version (with the same cover, the same paratextual elements ...). In France, editors prefer to work with translators translating directly from Chinese, but to my knowledge, there are not so many SF readers among Chinese-French

translators—you and I are exceptions—while there are more Chinese-English translators familiar with this genre—and also Chinese American translators who are themselves SF writers!

It is also important to remember that the publishing world (but it is true everywhere in the world) is in crisis, and investing in translations of long series or collections of short stories can be risky—as short stories don't sell well in France.

Finally, there are also expectations, even fantasies of publishers, who demand “Chinese” dystopias, but if there is indeed a few Chinese dystopian novels, there are not so many (both because all the Chinese SF writers don't have a permanent obsession with China and because dystopias are not the easiest subgenre for bypassing censorship in China). Actually, it is not easy to convince French publishers to translate and publish works that don't fit with their imagination of what “China” is.

LA: You've just mentioned the censorship issue in China. It is, indeed, a significant issue which involves not only the authors, but also the academic researchers and the translators. I remember what Han Song told me during an interview. According to him, Chinese SF authors were relatively free before 2015, since the authorities didn't read them and disregarded the genre. But since Liu Cixin has been awarded the Hugo Award, officials began to have their eyes on the genre, restricting their freedom, whether it be because of the censorship per se, or because of the self-censorship on the part of the authors themselves in fear of reprisals. Some authors even write knowing full well that their works won't be published in the near future (or ever). Here again, Han Song has on his computer a lot of unpublished stories. Thus, translation can be a way to publish these stories, or even versions of published stories that are closer to what the author originally had in mind. We can already see such examples with “The City of Silence,” of which the English version is quite different from the Chinese one, but is closer to Ma Boyong's vision. Personally, I had the chance to read (and to translate) for my PhD thesis some unpublished works that Han Song kindly sent me by email, such as the short story “My Fatherland Does Not Dream.” But, once again, it can be a problem for academic researchers to analyze “politically sensitive” texts, as I know from my own experience. My PhD thesis focuses on the study of Han Song's works, and therefore tackles some political issues, since Han Song pays strict attention to the current emerging issues of Chinese society, and even to China's

history. In short, I shed light, through the analysis of his works, on the fact that Han Song uses SF literature as a way to give a testimony of both the past and the present of China, reacting to the Chinese government's political use of historical memory and to its strict control on the official historiography. Thus, I show how Han Song includes, in his fictions, references to historical events that are considered to be politically sensitive (such as the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen massacre and so on), questioning China's national narrative as well as the legitimacy of the CCP at the head of the government. So, I asked myself: What is my responsibility, as an academic that "exposes" the political (or even dissenting) message that is hidden in the texts, and as a translator that makes sensitive or "unpublishable" works visible? How about you, aren't you worried that your research or your translation may get the authors in trouble?

GG: This is a crucial question, and one that is rarely explored in literary studies. There is already a significant scientific literature about research ethics in social sciences, such as in anthropology or sociology, that tells you how not to "jeopardize" sources and informants, by anonymizing them, for example. But how do you anonymize the author of a literary work? I am currently planning to write a book on Liu Cixin, and this issue will no doubt haunt me throughout the writing process.

As you mentioned, Chinese SF has not always been the subject of very meticulous censorship. Things have unfortunately tended to change since 2015 (I think we will come back to this), but writers like Chen Qiufan, for instance, don't hesitate to deal with social and political issues, and still have a good visibility. Apart from Han Song, I am also thinking of Zhang Ran and his short story "Ether" (available in English translation), that could be linked to Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" and has a strong political content. It has been published in 2012 in China (but I don't know if it would still be published today...).

We must then be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that every story is pro or against the Chinese political regime. Of course, censorship is present in China and certainly, the authors sometimes censor themselves (in the sense that censorship has already become an environmental factor), but it would be too restrictive to reduce Chinese science fiction literature to a simple game of cat and mouse with censorship. Perhaps more than any other genre, SF is meant to speak to the world, and sometimes even beyond. To take a very recent example of a short story that has

been translated in French and English, we can read Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" as a criticism of Chinese society, or as a denunciation of the way in which, more generally, urban architecture catalyzes social class differences. Moreover, the greatest works are always the most ambiguous ones: as scholars and translators, it is up to us to preserve this ambivalence, whether it is found in the language or in the ideas of the original text.

LA: You're right. Chinese SF is far from being a monolithic bloc, but is rather a mosaic of various subgenres and styles, from Xia Jia's "porridge-SF" to Chen Qiufan's cyberpunk and Liu Cixin's hard SF. Reducing it to a dissident or political committed genre is, indeed, a very simplistic view. Recently, a series of articles have been published alleging that SF is a tool for the Chinese soft power strategy. This is perhaps also a biased view of what Chinese SF really is, even though I can see why some people are wondering that, since every event related to SF that took place in China in the recent years was endorsed and promoted by the government. Nonetheless, every work that tackles current social issues shouldn't be considered strictly dissenting, and every work that depicts an idealized Chinese society shouldn't be regarded as a tool for soft power. It is quite interesting, though, to see that people can have various interpretations of the same literary genre, which implies that these works, as you said, are more sophisticated than they seem. Then, in a context where literature is given a role that goes beyond its literary borders, how is the translator supposed to take a position on the translation issue?

GG: As you said in using Han Song's words, the year 2015 marked a turning point: with the attribution of the Hugo Award to Liu Cixin and the official injunction made to Chinese SF writers to praise the "Chinese dream," both for China and for the outside.

This is both an opportunity for the authors to be more published and more listened to, but also a tragedy (just remember that Liu Cixin has only written one short story since 2015!), because the more you are observed, the higher is the pressure to write. And this is true in any political context, not only in China.

As a translator, I think you need to be aware that you are a cog in these mechanisms (Gaffric, 2019b), but also to remember that you are not selling your soul either. Just like Chinese SF writers are not going to write propaganda just because they were

asked to write some...

LA: Speaking of complexity, there is a frequently asked question regarding translation: What are the challenges of translating SF, especially "Chinese" SF? Personally, I really enjoy translating neologisms and coined words, even though it's sometimes a real brainteaser, since the Chinese ideographic language and Western alphabetical languages are very different from one another (Aloisio, 2019). What about you? I guess that the translation of the Three-Body trilogy brings its own set of challenges.

GG: There are several challenges that arise when translating Sinophone SF. Some are specific to the translation of Chinese language (tense, gender, linguistic structure, cultural references issues...) and some to the translation of SF (neologisms, scientific coherence...). Both are exciting and I find that the Chinese language, because of its plasticity, lends itself well to the creation of neologisms, and to the deconstruction of language from an imaginary perspective.

As for the scientific aspects, I was lucky during the translation of Liu's trilogy and his other novels and short stories, to call upon astrophysicist and informatician friends, who helped me a lot. Likewise, I believe that it is important when translating SF to be an SF reader (as it is unthinkable to translate poetry if you are not a reader of poetry), I drew a lot of inspirations in the French SF mega-text (SF written in French, or SF translated into French) for the creation of neologisms, for atmospheres... In each of my translations (be they SF or not), I always have what I call "companion books," that help me immerse myself in an imagination world and build my language. For Liu Cixin, I have of course read a lot of Jules Verne and Arthur C. Clarke, but also Russian authors, like Tolstoy.

But translating Liu's trilogy was not that difficult, beyond the scientific aspect, because the language he used is quite functional (despite very lyrical passages).

This has been more complicated for other authors, particularly Taiwanese and Hong Kongese, such as Dung Kai-cheung, Kao Yi-feng or Lo Yi-chin, who write SF stories, but with a more tortured and sophisticated language.

LA: Speaking of which, as a specialist in Taiwanese literature, and as a translator of both Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF, what differences do you see between them and PRC SF?

GG: Just like Chinese SF, it's not easy to define what Taiwanese or Hong Kong SF would be, but there are some trends and themes that are indeed specific.

First, one must know that the spheres of influence are not necessarily the same: authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick or Samuel R. Delany have had more impact in Taiwan than they have had in China around the same time. Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF in the 1990s was for example very marked by queer and post-human themes (with writers like Chi Ta-wei, Lucifer Hung or Dung Kai-cheung). Even today, the question of gender and sexuality is much more prominent in Taiwanese and Hong Kongese SF than in China. In recent years, the anxiety resulting from the uncertain future of the two entities has also nourished Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF, with dystopias which also showcase the relationship of the two regions with the Chinese mainland.

Strictly speaking there are no big SF fandoms in Taiwan or Hong Kong (with the exception of Ni Kuang's fans in Hong Kong, perhaps), even if there are also SF authors who are quite active, like Yeh Yen-tu in Taiwan, or Albert Tam, in Hong Kong.

Compared to China, where SF writers are quite naturally associated with this genre, several Taiwanese and Hong Kong writers more associated with "mainstream" literature are interested in SF, especially in the last decade: Lo Yi -chin, Kao Yi-feng, Egoyan Zheng, Huang Chong-kai or Wu Ming-yi in Taiwan; Dung Kai-cheung, Dorothy Tse, Hon Lai-chu in Hong Kong... who write SF not only for thematic and narrative reasons, but also as a method of literary experimentation. The result is a rather singular relationship to language, both specific to the linguistic variations that exist in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but also to the language proper to each writer, whose territories of literary exploration don't necessarily derive from SF.

LA: Thank you for these clarifications. To conclude, can you recommend some authors or trends to follow in the Sinophone SF literature?

GG: I think some writers from Hong Kong and Taiwan deserve to be better known outside their borders, like Kao Yi-feng, Dung Kai-cheung or Egoyan Zheng.

As for China, there are more and more translations into English, but too few in French. I think the "short story form," which is not very popular in the editorial

world, is very well mastered by young Chinese SF authors like Chen Qiufan and Xia Jia, whom I particularly like.

Finally, there is one aspect that we have not discussed but which is essential to understand is the production of cyber SF in China. This represents several tens of thousands of works and several hundred million readers.

Literary production on the Web is generally too despised by classic editorial and translation circuits, but there are some very interesting works (even if it is true that they are drowned in a massive industrial-like overproduction).

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Photographesomenonic Sinofuturism(s)

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OUR increasingly globalized and increasingly technologicized world seems to indicate that “progress” is a concept universally pursued, even if that pursuit is materially different across time and place. Theorist Yuk Hui, for example, uses the scene of 540 synchronized dancing robots at China’s 2016 Spring Festival gala as an example of the concept of European modernity being extended to China—a country that has come to be one of the major symbols of the promulgation of technological progress as a measure of modernity. Yet he also argues that “*In China, technics in the sense we understand it today—or at least as it is defined by certain European philosophers—never existed.* There is a general misconception that all technics are equal, that all skills and artificial products coming from all cultures can be reduced to one thing called ‘technology’. . . . Yet they may not be *perceived* or reflected upon in the same way in different cultures” (Hui 9, emphasis in original). What I will try to explore here, then, is the way that science fiction as a technical object can be both *perceived* and utilized to different ends by different audiences. As a form for envisioning “the” future (and here I use “the” in quotation marks to isolate the question of singularity), science fiction and sinofuturistic visions are uneasy bedfellows, sharing many of the same characteristics and employed, in many ways, for similar ends—but often loaded with very different questions of use and applicability. At stake are not only differing historical and philosophical genealogies, but also ways in which issues of labeling and translation have worked to obscure variations in the concept that remain unmarked. While Darko Suvin characterizes science fiction as a question of estrangement, Yuk Hui argues that the fundamental base terms being considered are not in and of themselves coeval. To say that science fiction is a literature of estrangement may well hold true across time and place, but who is being estranged from what may differ significantly.

In line with Sheldon Lu’s observation that Chinese narrative traditions form the two major political functions of legitimation and delegitimization, both Chinese science fiction and sinofuturism are primarily used, contemporaneously, to legitimate the idea of a singular Chinese future. As these narrative discourses are

invested with ideological functions, we must engage with the terms of discourse and the lexical gap that is made invisible by the fact that we are speaking about forms that have and continue to be perceived differently between the West and China. Without care and nuanced definitional approaches to the “spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives,” as Lawrence Lek defines it, sinofuturist visions collapse trillions of possibilities into a singular hegemony of thought that repurposes yellow peril fears into a monolithic future already seeded with the germs of its own dissolution.

Here, Lydia Liu’s concept of the super-sign is valuable in describing and deconstructing some of the underlying issues at stake in the question of translation between Chinese and English in general and the intra-lingual transference of technological and scientific vocabulary in particular. She describes a super-sign as “not a word but a hetero-cultural signifying chain that crisscrosses the semantic fields of two or more languages simultaneously and makes an impact on the meaning of recognizable verbal units, whether they be indigenous words, loanwords, or any other discrete verbal phenomena that linguists can identify within particular languages or among them” (Liu 13). Note here that she does not use the term “word” to describe what is being affected, but “verbal units”—entire concepts are made meaningful in relation to the meaning imposed by one language on the understanding of that concept in the other. To speak of “science fiction” is not merely to define the word itself, but to recognize along with it the millions, billions, and trillions of associated concepts (Lek’s industrial products, individuals, and veiled narratives) that are already from the outset front-loaded onto sinofuturist visions.

One of the most important aspects of this definition is that it *de facto* requires more than one linguistic and cultural system in order to emerge. Just as a German-born London-based artist of Malaysian Chinese descent and a Scottish musician articulated the concept of sinofuturism to a Chinese audience through a translator,¹ the idea of a projected future is a projection made legible through interlingual and intercultural signification. Interlingual translation cannot by itself complete the process of verbal signification because a super-sign requires signification and deferment of “correct” meaning to a foreign language in order to define a native term. Liu herself very convincingly illustrates this concept with the hetero-linguistic sign “夷/i/barbarian,” (Liu 33) but we also see its emergence with the concept of science fiction generally and sinofuturist science fiction more specifically.

My point here is not to go into historical translation theory; rather, it is to use this illustration as an example of what is at stake when we talk about “science fiction” as if it is necessarily commensurate with the Chinese conception of “科幻小说” or *kehuan xiaoshuo*, the Chinese term typically translated as “science fiction.” So, too, does the idea of “sinofuturism” emerge from a moment of definitional power disjunction, in which the concept of “Chineseness” is discussed as ostensibly aspirational while the power to define it is retained by the hegemonic cultural and linguistic field against which it shapes itself. For both science fiction and sinofuturism, this interplay is a double-edged sword; used by the West to other and separate while simultaneously used by national interests and agents to define and self-promote, all in the name of attempting to identify something intrinsic and ontologically flattening that is ultimately always externally imposed. This danger is particularly great because despite its interaction with and development alongside other histories of literature, science fiction as a genre *was* originally a foreign literary import to China, and it is through its interactions with previously existing Chinese forms (histories, socialist realist visions, “strange stories,” etc.), intersection with changing internal epistemologies, appropriation as a tool of state pedagogy, and role in the radical revolutionizing of the Chinese language at the start of the 20th century that it has come to be understood in its current form. An assessment of the cross-lingual translation of terms and the methods by which certain signs are equated with other signs both in and between lexical significations allows us to understand that the question of what we mean when we say “Chinese science fiction” itself begs investigation.

In the last few years, multiple Chinese SF authors have been put in the position of trying to explain what Chinese SF is at all. The end of Ken Liu’s edited collection *Invisible Planets* (2016) includes no fewer than three essays by contemporary titans of the genre (Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, and Xia Jia) outlining what Chinese SF is and what it is trying to accomplish. Who are they speaking to? A Chinese audience, or an international one? Why is it so important that Chinese SF be seen as a genre separate unto itself, and how do the stakes differ for an international audience vs. a domestic one? Such questions of SF are inseparable from the same issues as applied to sinofuturism, which develops a vision of modernity that is inextricable from national development.

The very concept of modernity itself, however, is also a relational one, not only to another language or time but also another place. As the literature that, at

least in its more technical aspects, positions itself as accurately utilizing existing advancements in science and technology to presage a near-future reality, science fiction *is* the literature of modernity. More than that, though, it is positioned by literary scholars as capable of rewriting a past that has already happened. Fredric Jameson famously argued that “The most characteristic science fiction does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system” (Jameson 288), but instead posits the present as the imagined past of the future. Similarly to Suvin’s aforementioned sweeping characterization of science fiction under a universalizing lens, however, this argument conflates disparate historical conditions and flattens them under arguments primarily pertaining to the pervasive effects of production under capitalism. Science fiction as co-constitutive with sinofuturism, however, is more indicative of Winfried Pauleit’s concept of the *photographesomenon*. While the concept of the *photographesomenon* is one more typically associated with visual surveillance, sinofuturist science fiction’s mandate to “view” the immediate future positions it as a more-or-less “objective” literature while investing it with a certain degree of scientific trustworthiness. Even while being recognized as a work of fiction, science fiction being produced in service of a national future is promoted as plausible in a way that other works of fiction are not. In projecting this “objective” image of the future, it embodies the *photographesomenon*—an objective national past becomes always-already written by and understood through the lens of a future still to come. As Pauleit explains, as long as one’s subject (in this case, the national body) is captured by a seemingly-objective surveillance apparatus (here, science fiction posited as speaking for the nation), every story it might once have had in the past is completely divested in retrospect by the future surveillance. So, too, for sinofuturist science fiction literature—unlike Jameson’s description of (Western) science fiction as a future image predicated on extant socio-cultural and technological conditions, in which the present becomes the past to the future, sinofuturist science fiction produces a national literature in which the past is evacuated of contemporary meaning and reinvented by future projections. The past, then, is colonized by the future through its relationship to a future that reinvests it with anachronistic meaning.

As Pauleit also points out, an objective view towards the subject also allows the subject to see themselves as others see them, giving them the means by which to conceive of themselves as a figure that has been created by the mass view. “This production of images is directed towards a ‘future perfect.’ It is a conception of image

that functions via a time loop that is otherwise only familiar to us from science fiction stories. . . . The photographesomenon is already ‘written,’ even if it only constitutes itself as an image in futurity” (Pauleit 469). While it is interesting that, from the outset, he identifies the photographesomenon directly with science fiction, it is equally notable how sinofuturist science fiction itself aligns with this concept. Though it might be anachronistic to use this term (developed as it was only in 2009, and used by the author to refer specifically to video surveillance), sinofuturist science fiction as a genre attempts the same effect: that is, a (seemingly) objective form of observation that reinterprets the past and fixes it temporally by applying to it the outlines, strictures, and necessities of its future development. To surveil something is to control the subject being watched and to imbue it with outside signifiers—thus, for example, the individual being viewed on camera in light of a crime that has already occurred is *post facto* imbued with criminal intent: not because they necessarily had, at the moment of recording, any of those actual characteristics, but because the objectivity of the camera rewrites their story in line with events that occurred in their future. So, too, the individual and their society as they have existed and as they currently exist are reimagined in terms of the future individual/society they will be by a genre that positions itself as the objective arbitrator of future development.

Sinofuturist science fiction as photographesomenon thus thematically positions itself as a uniquely temporal device. As such it is uniquely malleable to the aims of “modernity” and the development of the nation-state, attempting to articulate inchoate anxieties and the possibility of technoscientific resolution. While Wu Dingbo claims that the following characteristics are broadly typical of *Chinese* science fiction: 1) all main characters are scientists and all stories present scientists’ collective aspirations in the form of explorative excursions into an alternate reality; 2) the conflict in these stories always displays the most prominent character of the Chinese scientists: their patriotism and optimism; 3) all stories are set in the near future, and the reader is assured that the fantasy will come true within his or her lifetime; 4) most of the science fiction ideas are based on the natural sciences (Wu xxxvi), these categorizations are not applicable to much of what would be considered science fiction in China’s current literary landscape; even a cursory examination of contemporary science fiction being produced in China today shows significant departures from these categorizations (the enormously popular *Three Body Problem* trilogy, for example, ends thousands of years in the future and is most certainly not an

optimistic portrayal of either human nature or the inherent capacity of the universe for moral compassion). What contemporary Chinese science fiction and sinofuturist theorizing *do* share is a vision of a future that is identifiably shaped by a concept of “Chineseness” that arises out of opposition to a concept of “Western” development. That “Chineseness” can only be defined oppositionally is central to the structure of these future material visions.

As such, there is immense pressure from both within and without to insist on this cohesive identity, though the same impulse that attempts to display “Chineseness” to the world opens this monolithic identity up to critique and divisiveness. SF being produced now attempts to describe a “China” that is recognizably legible as a single entity while also being understandable by a non-Chinese audience, with the predictably simple result that no “Chinese future” can possibly emerge in any fullness or complexity. As long as nation, culture, and polity are conflated into a single entity, and such an entity is posited as a potential alternative to a normative Western futurity, it is necessarily still fractured because it is not cohesive. As an alternative to a hegemonic Western modernity, it must necessarily imply other alternatives; that state-supported literature can itself only insist on a single “Chinese future” is all the more indicative of the meta-fragmentation of paths to futurity implied by the genre itself.

Ultimately, the issue at the heart of both science fiction as a bounded national genre and sinofuturism as a mode of apprehending contemporary society’s headlong rush towards “the” future is control. Specifically, control of the image of the Chinese future. Who controls it? And to what ends? Today, Chinese authors are contending with two separate pulls, both of which can essentially be identified as nationalist forms of narrative control. On one hand, authors are speaking to a domestic audience—one that is still subject to control by literary censors and internal pressure to present a rosy national future. On the other hand, authors writing from China are tasked with the responsibility to “represent” some coherent, cohesive idea of “Chineseness” to an international audience, and, in doing so, potentially flattening disparate identities and ontologies.

One last salient example of the co-imbrication of sinofuturity with science fiction is the 2011 national ban on depictions of time travel, in which the General Bureau of Radio, Film and Television halted time travel dramas. Western media has described the ban as censorship of dissent from the current political state, but national reception

has focused more on its relationship to historical accuracy. This is one more example of the way discourse around China's future (and past, and the depictions of both) are differently defined both internally and externally. So, then, who controls this narrative of the future, and can any discussion of futurity be viable if it is predicated on forgetting (or dismissing) the past? SF like *The Fat Years* and "Olympic Dream" are predicated on this very idea, presenting a successful economic and social future that has necessitated forgetting the past they're built on, while Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" vs. HKonger slang for dreaming as protesting both imply a future moment at which these separate dreamers will awake. What world (or worlds) they will awaken to will be decided by whoever controls the narrative of dreaming in the present.

Notes

1. As when Lawrence Lek and Steve Goodman (better known as Kode9) explained the concept of Sinofuturism to a Chinese audience at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in 2017.

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Sinofuturism as Inverse Orientalism: China's Future and the Denial of Coevalness



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“CHINA is the future”—this lapidary bit of knowledge, shared with confidence by some experts, pervading news media commentary, and current in everyday geopolitical chatter, shaped my choice of which Asian language to study during my first university degree. When I moved abroad to pursue a Chinese Studies master's degree in the late 2000s, students were expected to informally decide if they wanted to focus on ancient China and traditional subjects, or on contemporary China and matters close to the present. Intuitively, this distinction made sense, and I chose the latter out of classicist fatigue. Studying contemporary China allowed me to focus on a vague timeframe beginning from the ‘reform and opening-up’ period of the late 1970s, passing through the country's WTO accession in 2001, and largely signifying an imperfect synchronization with the pace of Western liberal modernity. It was exciting, and liberating.

During my doctoral years, I kept framing my research of Chinese digital media through the temporal framework of contemporariness, willfully oblivious to the problematic implications of this descriptor. While the term ‘contemporary’ is an established category in historical studies, often pinned to the end of the Second World War, it is hardly used in other disciplines to refer to European or North American countries. National contexts like the U.K. or Italy are commonly assumed to be contemporary unless otherwise specified, while scholarship on Asian countries often emphasizes the contemporariness of its subjects. What might seem terminological nitpicking about an unexamined disciplinary habit is, I now realize, a long-standing problem of temporal framing in the production of knowledge about China and East Asia in general.

The divide between ancient and contemporary China implied a hidden third, a temporality which remained outside of disciplinary discourses: the future. The relationship between China and the future, often tinted by geopolitical speculation and economic forecasting, seeped into my imagination of the country through news

about its national economic growth, participation in international agreements, and accelerating technological advancements. China was the emerging market to tap into, Mandarin became the internet's second most used language and, more generally, the future appeared set to be Chinese—whatever that meant. This pervasive discourse about China's future-oriented temporality (or about the global future's unavoidable Chinese imprint) was encapsulated by an obscure term formulated by authors working at the fringes of philosophy and speculative fiction in the early 2000s: *sinofuturism*.

The earliest documented use of the term is to be found in 'Fei ch'ien rinse out: Sino-futurist under-currency', an essay written in 2003 by musician and cultural theorist Steve Goodman. Drawing on the tactics of Afrofuturism, Goodman combines references to Chinese philosophical traditions, organized crime syndicates, and underground trading networks with the rise of cybernetics and computing technology, outlining "a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia". This sinofuturist imaginary emphasizes the deleuzoguattarian "co-stratification" of East and West (Goodman), which is epitomized by the convergence of communication technologies and global capital. Goodman orbited around the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a Warwick-based collective experimenting at the nexus of underground cultures and philosophical speculation around the turn of the millennium, and inklings of sinofuturism can be found in writings by central members of this group. Most notably, Nick Land's 1994 essay 'Meltdown' contains the ur-sinofuturist aphorism "Neo-China arrives from the future" (Land), and Sadie Plant's book *Zeros + Ones* is steeped in Asia-futurist intuitions:

Five hundred years of modernity fades when the weaving of bamboo mats converges with the manufacture of computer games in the streets of Bangkok, Taipei, and Shanghai. The silicon links were already there. (253)

Sinofuturism is an enticing proposition. Firstly, it portends to overcome the arbitrary distinction between China's ancient past and its contemporary modernization, promising to open up knowledge production about the People's Republic of China towards its uncharted future. Secondly, sinofuturism seems sufficiently justified by historical trends and ongoing geopolitical developments: China's consolidation as a superpower on the world stage, its massive process of urbanization creating hundreds of cities in a few decades, as well as its successes

in the realm of science and technology all point to the undeniable futurity of the PRC. At the same time—a chiefly Euro-American, Anglo-centric time, to be sure—sinofuturism relies on discursive tropes and explanatory models that should appear suspicious to observers familiar with the representational genealogies of expertise about East Asia and “the Orient” at large. Under its glossy veneer of science-fictional novelty and cyber-exoticism, sinofuturism partakes in the problematic heritage of an enduring techno-orientalist discourse.

The concept of techno-orientalism was originally proposed to account for the emergence of a Western discourse about Japan’s technological development during the late 1980s and early 1990s, typified by the assertion that “Japan has become synonymous with the technologies of the future” (Morley and Robins 168). Techno-orientalist themes resonate strikingly with stereotyped depictions of many East Asian countries: the Japanese’s “robot-like dedication” to both work and world domination, their inscrutable culture of self-censorship, as well as their remorseless practices of copycatting all present a threat to the Western grip on modernity (150-158). Morley and Robins prophetically recognize that after Japan, other East Asian locales—first the “Four Asian Tigers” of Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, then China—will likely become the subject of techno-orientalist representations (173), and recent history has proven their intuition to be correct. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes, a generalized “high tech orientalism” has come to pervade most depictions of East Asia in popular culture, offering the modern Western subject “a way to steer through the future, or more properly represent the future as something that can be negotiated” (178).

When compared with Edward Said’s foundational critique of orientalism, it is clear that techno-orientalism propagates similar imaginaries by foregrounding technology over tradition and substituting the past with the future. Said’s central contention is that Western accounts of the Orient consistently denied it the possibility and legitimacy of representing itself. Orientalists worked in parallel with colonial enterprises by envisioning themselves on a mission to recover the Orient’s lost past in order to improve its present—and extractive or subjugated—condition (Said 78). Techno-orientalist imaginaries similarly encroach upon the articulation of situated temporalities and impose their own correlations between technology and the future; and yet, in contrast to its colonial antecedent, high-tech orientalism responds to a fundamental Western anxiety about a perceived loss of civilizational

primacy on the global stage (Ang). The commonalities between sinofuturism and techno-orientalism begin to shine through metropolitan skylines and neon-tinged haze, betraying a common mechanism underlying their operations.

In his discipline-rattling book *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian ruthlessly dismantles anthropology's "schizogenic use of time" (Bunzl xi) by demonstrating how the production of ethnographic knowledge is predicated upon a temporal distancing of its Other. Anthropologists in the field regularly inhabit and embody different temporalities than their informants (Fabian 21) and, even more crucially, their writing relies on a distancing device that Fabian terms "denial of coevalness", which is "*a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*" (31, italics in original). The denial of coevalness allows anthropology to approach its Other as if it inhabited a temporally bounded culture functioning as "a kind of time-machine" (39) for comparative and evolutionary inquiry. All kinds of orientalism presuppose this denial of coevalness, and supporting a re-entrenchment of the Western present—irrespective of the orientation of the temporal representation employed—is the primary purpose of this mechanism.

This genealogy of temporal othering evidences how both sinofuturism and techno-orientalism are not merely culpable of propagating exoticizing fantasies about the future in China or other Asian contexts, but also responsible for perpetuating a more generalized denial of coevalness. In contrast with established orientalist tropes and with more recent liberal-democratic varieties of "sinological orientalism" (Vukovich), China is no longer deemed to be trapped in its atemporal pastness or condemned to eventually synchronize with modernity: instead, it already inhabits the future, arrives from it, or beckons a Chinese mode of futurity with global implications. In all these variants, sinofuturist imaginations deny China the possibility of challenging and negotiating representation in the coeval present staked out by Western knowledge production. The future is for sinofuturists what the past was for orientalists: a foil for steering representation by denying coevalness.

The legitimacy of sinofuturism is premised on a parallelism with other emerging articulations of futurity: the comparative approach proposed by Armen Avanessian and Mahan Moalemi, for example, juxtaposes it with Afrofuturism, gulf futurism and other 'ethnofuturisms', highlighting the novel emergence of future-oriented imaginaries from non-Western contexts. While this approach cautions

that futuristic articulations “outside of the west and across the Global South and other former peripheries can also evolve into neo-colonial tendencies” (Avanessian et al. 9), it also glosses over a more fundamental problem of serializing ethnic or national futurisms: their reference to the future might be the only contact point between otherwise radically different aesthetic and ethical programs—something that the history of Italian futurism glaringly evidences. Even Lawrence Lek’s artwork *Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD)*, which has become a defining reference for this term, repeatedly reaches for a common tactical repertoire among “minority movements which share an optimism about speed, velocity, and the future as a means to subvert the institutions of the present” (Lek).

As proven by Afrofuturism, movements that upend hegemonic and colonial temporal frameworks are fundamental to reclaiming representational agency against the denial of coevalness. But in order to do so, they have to organically emerge from the periphery of Western time, rather than be conjured as part of techno-orientalist fantasies. Instead, while the post-digital exotic pastiches of sinofuturism have circulated enough to consolidate into a recognizable aesthetic appropriated and subverted by local electronic musicians and new media artists, it is their less self-aware and more sensational variety that continues to find currency in popular representations of China. The introductory chapter of William A. Callahan’s *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the future*, aptly titled “China is the future,” offers a striking example of this banal brand of sinofuturism:

It’s an exciting time to be Chinese. While in the West the first decade of the 21st century was defined by pessimism due to 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession, Chinese people are very optimistic that the 21st century will be the “Chinese century.” The fruits of China’s three decades of rapid economic growth are there for all to see: by 2010, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had the fastest computer in the world and the smartest students in the world, and it was enthusiastically entering the space age—just as the United States was retiring its fleet of Space Shuttles. (Callahan 1)

This book’s first paragraph strings together many of the tropes highlighted above: national identity, the idea of a Chinese century, the PRC’s economic growth, and the post-reform developmental leapfrogging indexed by the trifecta of computational primacy, academic talent and space exploration, all measured against rusty yardsticks left over from the Cold War era.

To sum up: sinofuturism responds to a lack of engagement with China's future in both academic expertise and popular discussions of the country. It does so provocatively, by speculating on possible future configurations of wildly different aspects of Chinese history, culture and society, juxtaposing technological developments and traditional customs, global trends and local phenomena, political systems and material forces. At the same time, sinofuturism draws on—and at times directly reproduces—the tropes and narratives of techno-orientalism, reducing China to the last in a series of East Asian countries investing resources to accelerate industrialization and informatization and thus threatening the Western grip on technological innovation and transnational supply chains. The historical superimposition of techno-orientalism with popular culture genres like cyberpunk offers a convenient route for sinofuturism to find success as an aesthetic repertoire that is legible across contexts: outside China, it reacts with the mixture of fascination and anxiety for the illegibility and scale of China's rise; inside China, it lends itself to the self-orientalizing celebration of national success. But this should not obfuscate its main operation.

Sinofuturism, like techno-orientalism, operates as a denial of coevalness. In being largely articulated from the outside as an interpretive discourse, it posits some sort of equivalence between China and the future: China *is* the future, China *comes* from the future, the future *will come* from China, and so on. These proclamations are as enticing as they are suspect, for they deploy the future as a way of deferring participation in contemporariness. The future functions exactly as the past does in orientalist arguments: as a temporality through which otherness can be safely managed and problematic interactions steered away from. If the locus of Said's orientalism was the Hejaz region, “a locale about which one can make statements regarding the past in exactly the same form (and with the same content) that one makes them regarding the present” (Said 235), the loci of sinofuturism are the skylines of Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chongqing, ready to be inscribed with claims about the future. Sinofuturism is a reverse orientalism—an orientalism operating its denial of coevalness through the attribution of futurity.

In conclusion, I believe that my drastic evaluation should be a warning rather than a veto. While dealing with the present is unavoidable, the future is arguably the temporal domain most relevant for the construction of more livable (or even just survivable) shared worlds (Powers). There is nothing wrong with envisioning China's

future, tracing its future-oriented discourses, and speculating about its impact on regional and global futures, as long as one keeps in mind the implications of any sort of temporal othering. Fabian's ideal of coevalness, the intersubjective engagement that demands the Other's inclusion in a shared present, cannot be achieved by simply referring to a country as 'contemporary': what is demanded is instead the extension of a co-presence in which the Other's time can be allowed its own situatedness and contingency. Imagining the rise of a modernizing China through the mediation of Western media, the waning echoes of Japan panic and an established cyberpunk canon during the 1990s resulted in the provocative speculations of sinofuturism—today, one can take some steps forward, or perhaps sideways, towards coevalness.

Luckily, there is no shortage of articulations of the future in China, all waiting to be encountered in their own terms. Chinese philosophical traditions have argued around different conceptions of time over centuries, utopian futurity has driven numerous upheavals, and revolutionary temporality has been a key ideological battleground around the founding of the People's Republic of China (Qian). The history of the Chinese Communist Party's economic development is written in official plans spanning years or entire decades, and yet its technological policy has also been influenced by unlikely conversations with Western futurists (Gewirtz). Even more prominently, a century of Chinese science fiction has eventually found international success through translations and has been crowned by the Hugo Award conferred to Liu Cixin in 2015 (Song). There are countless futures to be found in the work of Chinese thinkers, academics, directors, writers and politicians, and these should not just be earmarked as a term of comparison for (or an alternative to) Western modernity (Greenspan et al.), but as coeval articulations of time. It is time to think, plurally, in terms of sinofuturisms, and to encounter Chinese futures that have always been already there.

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The Science-Fictional in China's Online Learning Initiatives



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I began work for DaDaABC, the Chinese company for which I teach English online, in the spring of 2018. At the time, I was living abroad in Seville, Spain and deeply immersed in my work as a private school teacher. Because the south of Spain still manages to remain partly removed from the full force of globalization, any accessible technology was reserved for the recording of grades and the occasional implementation of audio and video elements in the classroom. It was rarely if ever, incorporated into my lessons. But this was nothing new to me. I had previously taught in the US for a weekend STEM program that served disadvantaged middle school students, where PowerPoint projection was all we consistently had to work with, and I had myself been educated primarily in California public schools, where overhead projectors and late 90's Windows represented the higher-end of readily available tech. Even at my private university in New York City, the best we seemed to achieve in the average humanities classroom was still just a more elegant mode of PowerPoint presentation. There is much evidence to suggest that my experience is not unique, that despite being a leader in technological development, the US has proven slow to implement technology and online learning into its classrooms, both public and private ("The NCES Fast Facts"). Although its eventual implementation is no longer up for debate, we are still struggling to determine how technology ought to be incorporated to achieve the best results (Wexler).

So it was a remarkable experience to be first exposed to DaDaABC, an online video-conference style classroom with a simple, colorful interface and a preselected digital lesson book sitting squarely in the middle of the screen —ready to be taught. Nothing was lacking: there were feedback/encouragement buttons that produced cute, smiley characters and positive sounds, pens to draw and annotate the workbook, a translation box to write notes to the student in Chinese. And all the while, teacher and student were face-to-face, looking over the same page of the lesson together, intimately connected despite being thousands of miles apart. It was the kind of simple format that I had always imagined would be ideal for online teaching. I had a sense, despite not knowing how to render it into reality, that all that would be necessary to

teach English online would be a mutual internet connection, face-to-face video, and the book somehow “in-between” —hovering there in the imagined digital space on-screen. After a few months of teaching with DaDa, I found myself wondering why this was not already a highly popularized mode of learning? Even now I can only guess at why a widely successful attempt has not been made to establish similar startups or implement alike programs in the US, why the market might not prove welcoming to it, even though such programs would have undoubtedly benefited many teachers over these last few months of educational chaos. For my part, DaDaABC has proven to be a remarkably portable job. I have worked for them on multiple continents, within a variety of time zones, in a myriad of homes, apartments, and hotels, and through it all DaDa has provided me with a constant and necessary supplemental income in times of transition and unemployment. It remains a consistent and comforting option even now, at a particularly dark time for young, inexperienced, or otherwise disadvantaged laborers.

When the coronavirus struck China in the winter of 2019, weeks before it invaded Europe or made its way over to America to disrupt my world directly, my only thought was one of worry for my DaDa students. I worried about their health and expected that the disruption would make our online classes more difficult. I expected it would derail their entire academic year. But as the weeks of their stay-at-home order dragged on, I found that I had not fewer but more students, and though there was some increase in irritability and boredom depending on student age, we continued our work as normal. I soon found that this was not just true for my student's supplemental English classes with DaDa: the entire country had turned to online education almost overnight, with surprisingly stable results (Qu). As the quarantine in China continued and the rest of the world collapsed into illness and panic, I and my students continued to learn, take tests, and improve their English. Amid disaster, China's students worked on (“How Is China”).

The contrast from where I sit has been striking. Over the past few months, I have watched my siblings, Northern California public high school students, struggle and fail to move into an online learning format in a manner that mirrors the majority of the US (Goldstein et al.). One cannot help but feel that the driving force behind the comparatively-seamless transition to online learning made by American colleges and universities over the past months has had more to do with the need to secure stability via the year's tuition than it has had to do with securing the continuous quality of

youth education—an administrative reality that undermines the valiant efforts of the highly commendable educators and staff I work alongside (Lieber; Ubell). When we consider the relative success of our universities alongside the general failure of our public schools during this crisis, we are faced with the likelihood that our public education system is slow to adapt because it lacks the drive to, and just as likely lacks the means. Perhaps if public schools followed a more business-like model, they might receive more attention from a country and government married as much to capitalism and consumerism as any other ideals. As it stands, until students pay, they are not our priority (Christakis).

But for all that, I do not know that the US's educational institutions at large, even many of its privately funded ones, are as of today prepared to truly divert their efforts into online learning in a way that will produce the needed results. There remains a lingering stigma, persistent questioning of the legitimacy and rigor of online education that has long-hindered its incorporation into most schools and programs (Kizilcec et al.). In the years leading up to the coronavirus crisis, we remained resistant to online education, only turning to it now when we have no choice but to do so—when the old status quo is no longer an option. Perhaps the old status quo will never fully be an option again, a possibility that throws into question our preparedness for it. China is arguably prepared. They were ready to embrace online learning inside the classroom when the need arose because they had already embraced it outside the classroom via educational startups, something we have barely begun to do in the United States. Why does a simple and relatively seamless model of online learning like DaDaABC, despite its very real accessibility in our digital age, still feel partly science-fictional? Why does China's burgeoning online education market, so basic in concept, still feel somewhat out of this world?

Possibly because China has had to delve into the realm of the pedagogically science-fictional to arrive at the mundane of it. China's online learning startups, DaDaABC, VIPKid, and others have been around since as early as 2010 and are part of a larger trend of AI-assisted learning that is currently ongoing within China's schools (Wang et al.). Such a widespread turn to AI will find no academic comparative in the United States, though some Chinese researchers profess to take guidance from (and even to lag behind) American technological institutions, MIT, in particular (Li). This is not surprising. The US, for all its innovative research, struggles to put much of it into social practice—and the American public is prone to resist AI like it

resists surveillance in a post-Snowden world. But China succeeds in the pedagogical science-fictional not only because it is able, with significantly less political resistance, to implement this innovation, but because culturally the innovation is successful. These startups would be nothing without the support of the students and parents who see the value of their technology and embrace it, and the teachers all over the world who elect to educate in this way.

So why have online learning companies like DaDaABC reached the audience they have, an estimated 296 million in China by the end of 2020 (Junjie)? There are some obvious benefits on the side of parents and students: DaDaABC and all comparable companies boast a teaching staff comprised almost entirely of native English speakers, and DaDa matches this with fun, colorful branding and prestigious courseware collaborations with National Geographic Learning, Oxford University Press, and most recently McGraw-Hill Education (“Under DaDaABC’s Strategic Cooperation”). For teachers, the flexibility of the scheduling and minimal required setup is compatible with both a young, nomadic lifestyle and a hectic, working-adult/parent schedule. The plug-in-and-teach allure of the company is reinforced by the pre-designed courseware, which ensures that no teacher is ever required to contribute or develop original curriculum on their own time. Additionally, for both teacher and student, the interface is visually pleasing, intuitive, and reliably managed—it is easy to fall into the stability and security of routine. But while the design of the system contributes much to its popularity, I believe the underlying structural emphasis of DaDaABC and alike companies is what makes China’s online learning model truly innovative, even science-fictional in quality.

It appears that companies like DaDaABC primarily implement AI and other advanced technologies to minimize administrative input of emotional labor while maximizing educator output of emotional labor—in their words to “improve teaching efficiency” (Junjie). DaDaABC demands highly performative energy from its teachers. Model teachers, those held up for praise and reward, are those who inhabit a uniquely character-like persona every moment that they are “on-screen.” Gesture, facial expressions, and voice tone alterations are emphasized as important in training materials and are often commented upon during the hiring process. These elements are also frequently addressed during efficiency reviews. No yawning or slumping of the shoulders is allowed (per DaDa’s official teacher contracts and training materials), and all activities that might draw teacher attention away

from forming an emotional connection with the student—mobile device usage, background noise, or drinking water too frequently—are strongly discouraged or prohibited. Teaching *is* performance in this format, even more so than it is in-person, foreshadowing a future wherein the manufactured authenticity of any workplace persona might be subordinated to the performative internet persona we all naturally assume “on-camera.” Better to be knowingly performative than unwittingly so, it seems, and better to be compensated for it than not.

The emotional output of teachers is monitored by AI technology which in many ways takes the place of DaDa’s HR function. Person-to-person interaction does occasionally occur between administrators and teachers, but this is rare. When administrators do become involved, it is usually for large or complex issues; the day to day interactions between teacher and student are something they are exempt from unless called in for technical assistance. By relying on AI in this way, DaDa minimizes the emotional input required of its human administrators. The human aspect of the company is therefore handled in a manner that feels overwhelmingly automatic, something that often elicits complaints from the uninitiated teacher. The expectation imposed upon all teachers, clearly and repeatedly communicated by DaDa, is that they exist as narrowly as possible within the company’s rules, do the job exactly as it is prescribed, with little room for the laxity or apathy that might otherwise develop over time in similarly predictable jobs. Behavior is regularly “monitored” by AI that records punctuality and student/parent feedback per lesson and in the case of a complaint or performance review, a teacher might find their class being supervised by an invisible administrator. This sounds possibly sinister—there is much in science fiction to make us fear the robotic monitoring and study of conduct to achieve improved results. But as a business model, it is an incredibly efficient and even (speaking from personal experience) motivating system. It is an impersonal way to assure a standard of employee behavior, and any error is managed and corrected with the same lack of ill-will with which one would adjust an out-of-place part in a well-oiled machine.

Such reliance on AI technology can cause a DaDa teacher to feel that their work is simply to “plug-in” to an indifferent system. It is odd to have no social expectations beyond showing up and doing the work—acting a part and then logging out—with little to no managerial interaction to speak of. It is a curiously transactional experience, and the teachers who struggle most seem to be those who either cannot

relinquish control, who feel the need to innovate or deviate from the content (which is often allowed so long as the lesson material remains the focus), or who otherwise cannot sustain the performative consistency demanded. Still, if the members of our “DaDa Teaching Fun” Facebook group are to be believed, the experience is positive for many. There is something apparently clarifying about having one’s emotional output valued, even commodified, in this way, for better or worse. This clarifying organization is partly what I find so unprecedented in DaDa’s online format, the “futuristic” something in its accomplishments so far. Because the work is uniform in many ways, because all material is pre-selected, the teacher-student relationship is mediated by the format in a way that demands emotional investment. There is little for the teacher to do beyond investing their full emotional energy into connecting with the student through the material, and the isolation of this task facilitates and fosters the formation of a strong emotional bond between teacher and student across the miles. It is this bond that retains teachers at DaDaABC, and the ease with which its formation flows from the company’s format is noteworthy—it even models, perhaps, an alternative mode of educational being.

As I and other teachers across the US face the prospect of adapting once-in-person courses to an online format in the coming months, the need to break through some invisible barrier feels tangible. There is a mental-emotional obstacle to communicating with and feeling connected to our students online that we struggle to surmount (Sklar). There is something in the act of screen-mediated “meeting” that denies the transmission of more subdued emotional communication, making any online interface feel like an exercise in the output of emotional labor with few reciprocal benefits. Many who have recently begun the work of online education are already exhausted. Bearing this new fatigue, like the labor involved in adapting course content and format, falls solely upon the educator. This new labor, this emotional-affective uphill climb, goes—and will go—uncompensated and unaccounted for.

In my work with DaDaABC, I have found that it is more exhausting not to emote and that only through consistent engagement —constant output of emotional labor—are the connections and learning results I desire achieved. I do this willingly because this is precisely what I am paid for; I am being paid for my emotional labor at DaDaABC above any other teaching function. My expertise is, of course, a factor in my compensation, but this is a given in any teaching job. My true labor with DaDaABC is what I infuse into the existing content, what I bring to the predetermined

lesson and format. It is an obvious yet crucial idea to consider: that the creation of a learning environment and the production of its content is not the only work of a teacher—perhaps it is not even the primary work of a teacher. While it is likely not DaDaABC's intention to bring this idea to light—they seek a quality-controlled learning environment above all else—their model isolates the emotional labor of the teacher in a way that illuminates how multifaceted the act of teaching has become within our modern, increasingly complicated world.

The true science-fictional element of DaDaABC and China's online learning initiatives is, therefore, not the AI push to automation. It is not getting paid to simply “plug-in”, to not think, to do nothing or very little—quite the opposite. The science-fictional element of DaDaABC is being compensated as an educator, as any employee whatsoever, for the emotional labor of the job. Any surface-level analysis of the US job market will demonstrate that we do not pay our workers in this way. The “best” jobs in the US, those offering the most prestige and reward, are often those requiring the most education. Little heed is paid to the average teacher, to those who work with and for the disabled, or to those whose jobs place them under constant psychological strain—individuals whose emotional labor is part and parcel of what makes their work both incredibly difficult and unequivocally essential. Such uncompensated labor is what I am valued for at DaDaABC. Intentional or not, DaDaABC's model isolates the reality and importance of emotional labor by the nature of its existence. In doing so, it becomes a possible model not only for US education—online or otherwise—but for labor more broadly, a model that ventures into the science-fictional territory of our collective social future.

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China's Sonic Fictions: Music, Technology, and the Phantasma of a Sinicized Future



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Lost Futures

WHEN the first world fair of the post-war period took place in 1958 in the Belgian capital Brussels, it was received with hesitation. Under the motto *progress of mankind through progress of technology*, the exhibitors, seemingly in denial of the horrors of World War II, were eager to show that through the help of technology, a civilization gone astray could be reconfigured. Solely built for the occasion, Brussel's landmark, the Atomium, still reminds us today of the fatal confidence placed in future technologies such as nuclear power.

Another particularly conspicuous piece of architecture was the emphatically futurist Philips Pavilion. Conceptualized by the utopian Le Corbusier and his long-time assistant Iannis Xenakis, the multi-pointed tent made of concrete broke with all visual habits of the time. Centerpiece of the multimedia pavilion: the 8-minute composition *Poème Electronique* by experimental musician Edgar Varèse. Together with Xenakis, who would later be known as an acclaimed sound composer himself, they not only put forth one of the first ever electronically generated music pieces, but also devised an unprecedented, conceptronic *Gesamtkunstwerk* that fused architecture, film, sound, and light in an immersive spectacle. However, when Varèse' sharp, distorted sounds ran over the 425 loudspeakers, it provoked unbearable discomfort (cf. Treib & Harley).

As much as Varès and Xenakis hoped to draw on the frenzied techno-enthusiasm of bygone days, the dystopian magnitudes of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and the looming threat of a nuclear war seemed to give way to a decaying pathos of modernity. As such, the fair's general critique reads as a mourning for the grandeur of major world exhibitions of pre-war times and thus can be understood as an expression not only of a "collapsing faith in the future" (20), as Anna Greenspan detects, but also of a burgeoning scepticism in its most salient signifier: technology.¹

Following the distressing realization about the conjunction of wartime violence

and technological progress, Friedrich Kittler would have agreed that the fate of modernity is no longer decided at decadent world exhibitions, but rather on the battlefields of wars. No circumstance drives technological progress faster than warfare. As he so famously goes on to reveal, the widespread use of electronic devices in the entertainment industry is unthinkable “without the misuse of military equipment” (198). Or generalizing Hannah Arendt’s conclusion: “progress and catastrophe are two sides of the same coin” (7).

As all hopes in modernity seemed to have vaporized, technology’s brutalist heritage was now triumphantly hovering like a sword of Damocles over the aporia of *advancement through technology*. Still, science’s failed promise of technological salvation did not just vanish, but inscribed itself as a hauntological verdict in the futuristic topos of arts, especially electronic music.²

Probably the most prominent answer of a science-fictional version of futurism is Afrofuturism. Carrying the promise of an envisioned Black future through technoculture, Afrofuturism lent tremendous agency to Afro-diasporic subjects. However, rather than reproducing futurities à la Marinetti, alternating articulations of a speculative tomorrow sought to reclaim a lost faith in the future. As the concept became popular in Western philosophical discourse, it was translated into other ethnofuturisms, such as Sinofuturism: a term that was coined in the context of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in England. As I am going to argue, Afro- and Sinofuturism might be closely related on a conceptually historic level and share thematic interferences, but they are marked by important epistemological and political differences. These differences arise from their history of origin and become manifest in their respective relations to technology and the future. While Afrofuturism was an emancipatory diasporic project, the mere fact that Sinofuturism is a Western projection renders the term substantially misleading and useless. By discussing actual contemporary electronic music in China, I am going to look beyond the Western gaze that forged the term.

Alternative Futures

In the late 1990s, cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun became one of the leading figures in the theorization of *Afrofuturism*. Central to his argument is the observation that Afro-diasporic subjects, who for centuries have been viciously excluded from the unified

knowledge of an intrinsically Western notion of science, attempted to reinterpret or even expropriate hackneyed ideas of an imagined future. Through devoted listening voyages, or “lexical listening” (Diederichsen 1.280), and by the introduction of a new kind of language regulation, he would reveal Afro-diasporic sound mythologies that narrate notions of the future far from Euro-centric dominance (cf. Eshun).

Similar to Edward George and others, Eshun emphasizes that pan-African science fiction is not primarily to be found in art or literature, like its Italian predecessor, but most notably in music, proving that science fiction in music—or as he calls it, sonic fiction—is as potent as related forms (cf. Buchwald). Against the prevailing narrative of electronic music as a historic continuum stemming from Karlheinz von Stockhausen via Kraftwerk all the way to Detroit techno, he offers the ideal blueprint for a paradigmatic historiographic shift: a sonological turn that breaks with white supremacist interpretations of Black music tied solely to a single-sociological, geographical, and linear-historic narration of origin. His cartography of a sonic Afrofuture pinpoints to the urgency of a multidirectional schema.³ Eshun therefore specifically accuses the gatekeepers of music journalism of always having “over-aestheticised and under-politicised” (Crawford) techno music and thus robbed it of its political potential.

Afrofuturism’s technological epiphanies and its narrations of extraterrestrial life play with the idea that, once displaced from their alien origins, Black bodies now live in an involuntary exile, often referred to as the Black Atlantic. This is, for instance, reflected in the progressive sound of tracks such as *Cyberwolf*, *Death Star*, or *Punisher* by Detroit techno label Underground Resistance. In the whirl of cyber utopia, they not only point to the post-industrial void of the *Motocity*, but are also carried by a last desperate attempt to unfold a Black future “without anthropocentrism,” without a history of repression, and “after humanism” (Diederichsen 1.277). Perhaps it is the syncretism in John Akomfrah’s film essay, *The Last Angel of History*, that best illustrates how Black technologies like blues or hip-hop are key to overwriting prevailing techno-narratives and unlocking new spheres of existence, namely the Afro-future.

Warwick’s Sinofuturism

On the initiative of the Warwick-based Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU),

Kodwo Eshun was invited to attend the annual Virtual Realities (VR96) conference and the complimentary seminar *Afro-Futures* at the University of Warwick in 1996. His lectures on Afro-diasporic futurisms were met with great enthusiasm and triggered the CCRU's close engagement with ethnofuturist tropes. Eshun soon became a close ally of this highly mythologized group of researchers, who, to this day, are important authorities in the field of cyber-theory (cf. Reynolds).

Initiated in 1995 by Sadie Plant and Nick Land, the CCRU was an interdisciplinary group of cultural theorists associated with the local philosophy department. Electrified by the ongoing rise of rave culture, the CCRU was obsessed with speculative futures and fully enthused by the idea of cyberspace and electronic music's usurpation. However, the CCRU did not ascribe to the optimism of the Californian dotcom ideology, where technologies were regarded as de-hierarchizing network machines in a Brechtian sense. This hippie hilarity of the 60s was fundamentally at odds with the cyberpunkian *modus vivendi* of the CCRU. In this sense, the vision of the technofuture of these self-ascribed cyborgs remained gloomy. Influenced by theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, members of the CCRU "opposed the rationalist tradition of a history of philosophy" (Deleuze 14). Captivated by the a-conventional language in *Anti-Oedipus* and Deleuze's outright rejection of a potential myth of origin (cf. Deleuze & Guattari) only further endorsed their antithetical posture. In an act of countercultural response to the 1990s' prevailing narratives of *unity*, *peace*, and *the end of history* (perhaps post-modernists' most obscure and ignorant brainchild?!), the CCRU was fully committed to cyberpunk (cf. Reynolds & Beckett).

Aside from being deeply invested in Afrofuturism, another often-overlooked motif plays a central role in the technophile's edifice of ideas: China. In reference to a global New Age fever and surely also inspired by Deleuze, transfigurations of pre-modern China on the one hand or a sinicized future on the other are frequently to be found in the texts, art, and music of individual members. It must be read as a kind of Afrofuturist extension that is biased by chronic sinophilia, when time and again elements of the I Ching, Sunzi, but also Xi Jinping ideology are points of reference.

Of exceptional quality are the sinophilic tendencies of the CCRU's most controversial member: Nick Land, who believes that China is, "to a massive degree" (Beckett) already an accelerationist milieu. His accelerationist delusions are further stressed in the assertion that the fusion of sinicized Marxism and capitalism is "the greatest political engine of social and economic development the world has ever

known” (Beckett). Having chosen Shanghai as his permanent residency, Land won’t cease to declare that “Neo-China arrives from the future” (Land, *Meltdown*). In view of his anti-democracy, neo-reactionism, and cosmic conspiracy theories, I often wonder how his version of the future differs from that of its fascist Italian originators. Is this not simply reproducing a Western-induced longing for a modernity of days gone by? Land’s romanticised Sinofuturism often remains hermetically sealed, evading an elaborate explanation as to what degree China actually **is** the future.

Also residing in Shanghai is former CCRU member Anna Greenspan, who holds the chair of Assistant Professor of Contemporary Global Media at the local branch of New York University, making it a hub for old and updated CCRU networks, such as that which grew up around Steve Goodman, better known as dubstep producer *Kode9* and founder of the infamous music label *Hyperdub*. Back at Warwick, he would, in the interdisciplinary spirit of the CCRU, often accompany academic events with his music. Having visited Shanghai multiple times in the past years, he was also invited to attend NYU for a lecture. Goodman’s ardent engagement with China insinuated a deeper affection for China, which can be traced back to the late 1990s. Published in the *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* from 1997, for instance, Goodman already speculates about a vaguely dark prospect of China: “Sinofuturism is a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia. It connects seemingly heterogeneous elements onto the topology of planetary capitalism” (Goodman, Fei Ch’ien 155). In his dissertation from 1999, he repeatedly draws on Sunzi’s *The Art Of War* or fantasizes about a “Tao of Turbulence” (Goodman, *Turbulence* 274). And when he identifies China as the “kingdom of heaven” the “direct counterpart of Europe” (Avanessian 23), one cannot help but draw a link to French sinologist François Jullien, whose similarly essentialist, supratemporal fixations of China play directly into the hands of the simplifying narrative of politics of difference. However, in contrast to Land, Goodman’s interest in China has led to an incessant creative exchange, which was also expressed through his relentless support for local artists.

Before his first trip to China in 2005, Goodman put up the emphatically culturalist music mix *Sinogrime* (Kode9). What is intended to make visible the matrix of stereotypes often strikes me as a lived-out China fever. Produced by a number of London’s underground musicians, the mix brings together Grime tracks created between 2002-2003. Incorporating a decidedly *Chinese* clang, the sound elements oscillate between traditional Chinese instruments or sound samples from old Kung

Fu movies. For a short time, *Sinogrime* even became an independent sub-genre of Grime music.⁴ Originating from London, *Sinogrime* is a subtilized projection of an English Sinofuture.

China's Sonic Fictions

When it comes to the popularization of the term Sinofuturism in China, it is crucial to look at the creative relationship Goodman holds with the English artist of Malaysian-Chinese descent, Lawrence Lek. In an interview, Lek explains how he has drawn inspiration for Sinofuturism through conversations with Goodman (Shen). In 2016, the artist's eponymous film essay *Sinofuturism (1839-2046AD)* hit a nerve in both Western and Chinese art discourses. Aside from portraying a speculative Chinese future, his widely acclaimed movie seems to unmask the unintentional difference between the reception of Afrofuturism and Sinofuturism: While Afrofuturism was a crucial enabler for superceding racialized differences, Sinofuturism was intended to undergird a general sentiment of *China being the Future*, thus reinforcing *difference*. Regardless, the term was quickly popularized and manifested in an array of cultural fields, namely music, and often ascribed to the artists of Shanghai music label *Svbkvl* among others, further blurring its definition while at the same time being increasingly degraded to a sentiment.

Therefore, I doubt that the terminology borrowed from the CCRU complies with its matter. As so often with genre terminology, Sinofuturism seems to be atrophying into a default template. Irrespective of whether genre essentialism is conceivable and desirable at all, since their subject matter is so vital, Sinofuturism does not offer an alternate epistemological surrogate. This is to say nothing of its potential sonic-, semiotic- and techno-orientalist pitfalls.

And yet, in the haze of the new techno-cities Shanghai, Shenzhen, or Hangzhou, the new breeding grounds for technological innovation, a unique sci-fi sound has unfolded that accompanies the rapid urban transformations. Despite what is aesthetically forced upon this (non)-genre, it has already gained cultural momentum while simultaneously comprising an unforeseen socio-political potential. Due to the often non-lyrical, sample- and remix-based formalism of electronic music, it is an ideal canvas with which to envision a critical stance of a sinicized, science-fictional condition, as it is not easy prey for censorship.⁵ And here I specifically insist on

science-fictional as a modifier, because the music is a realistic yet non-naturalistic, imaginative counter-narrative to the dominance of techno-science and post-socialist ideology, while at the same time I specifically avoid futurism, as the ‘future’ is not a thematic framework and in some cases is even rejected as such.

This is best exemplified by the Shanghai-based artist *Osheyack*, who has released multiple times on the earlier mentioned label *Svbkvlt*. In contrast to Afrofuturism’s take on technology, which made use of its imaginative potential, the sound on *Osheyack*’s album *Memory Hierarchy* is a response to an already converted information-technological environment. While today the brutal motifs of capital-accumulating profiteers are codified into software and increasingly disappearing behind smooth, aestheticized facades, *Osheyack*’s murky sonic fiction reveals this “omnipresence of surveillance” (*Osheyack*), as he states on his EP. Once a cipher for the undetected, Kittler’s proclaimed *truth of the technological world* is now fully translated into *Osheyack*’s quivering, stentorian beats. In his stance, the urban, networked subject is under permanent scrutiny. Conversely, the CCRU’s techno-fanaticism formed under antithetical conditions: the efficacious spell of the rave fever stimulated technophilic tendencies, rather than mass-digitization (cf. O’Hara).

Analogously unorthodox are the eclectic beat patterns in the DJ sets of Shenzhen local, Guo Jingxin aka *Warmchainss*. Situated somewhere between jungle, hip hop or happy hardcore, she, like many Chinese DJs, deliberately breaks with the dictates of genre and historic boundaries.⁶ As a resident of Shenzhen club Oil, her sets are a science-fictional echo of the insecurities caused by global capitalism and techno-autocracy. She tells me, ever since Shenzhen had the identity of a 高科技城市 high-tech city imposed upon it, she has fully discarded any conceptualization of a futurism. Coupled with the city’s growing atmosphere of tech euphoria, was also a growing formalism of its landscape. As a result, the cityscape increasingly reflects a commodity character and, she says, this inevitably leads to her and her surroundings falling victim to urban ennui and, what Deleuze and Guattari so famously called, deterritorialization. The music, the sonic fictions, may figure as a last reserve of a counter-culture.

While *Warmchainss*’ persona already hints at the dissolution of gender or human, Wu Shanmin alias *33EMYBW* radicalizes this idea through her increasingly identifiable approach with the character of the arthropod. As an insectoid alien, she superimposes the producing human subject in favor of a post-human vision that

sounds like “music from a different universe” and overlays rhythms, “that would be impossible for a human to play” (Ryce). The pulsating, epileptic beats on 33’s (pronounced San San) track *Tentacle Centre* attack the nervous system like razor-sharp pincers. The audited *Arthropods Continent* is at the same time organic without being material and mechanical without being purely functionalan Artificial Life (AL). It is precisely these intersections between the organic and the technological that interest 33EMYBW.

There is no doubt that finding an essentialist unity in the acoustical concerns of *Osheyack*, *Warmchainss* or 33EMYBW is a question too narrowly considered. Though, together with their aesthetic adherents, such as Chengdu’s newest nightclub *Axis*, *Shanghai Community Radio*, or the Beijing based label *Do Hits*, they embody a hyper-conscious response to the draconian flipside of China’s techno-tropes. Under the aspect of Foucault’s distribution of power, their science-fictional soundscapes reveal technology’s dispositive character. The envisioned sonic counter-reality further expresses the opposition to all formalisms and suggests an affirmation of a counter-culture in a non-normative fashion. Their explicit engagement with contemporary, present phenomenon, hence implicit and explicit rejection of futurisms, signal the fundamental misplacement of the term *Sinofuturism*.

Further, the firmly rooted term Sinofuturism reifies the dominant role of a Western gaze, which is seemingly more invested in the either—that is, observer-dependent—idealization or demonization of a purportedly sinicized future. In other words: Sinofuturism does not offer an epistemological alternative. Rather, I suggest, the concept *sonic fiction* will extrapolate its full potential if extracted from its theoretic milieu and if subjected to an emancipatory act of self-description. Then, in lieu of the techno-optimist faith of Edgar Varèse or Afro-diasporic surrogate-futures of Underground Resistance, China’s sonic fictions become ways to channel reality. Evading an escapist notion of fiction, while criticizing Chinese techno-tropes, but also circumventing a Western techno-orientalist speculation about a sinicized future. Who knows, maybe Howie Lee’s track 中非友谊大桥 “Sino-African Friendship Bridge” on his most recent EP 天地不仁 *Tian Di Bu Ren*, proclaims the dissolution of ethnocentrist soundscapes in favor of transcultural sonic fictions.

Notes

1. Of all people, it is Pierre Schaeffer, founder of *musique concrète*, member of the French resistance, and, incidentally, yet another collaborateur of Iannis Xenakis, who would, in his *Studio d'Essai*, experiment with technologies invented in Nazi Germany (Stubbs, Kindle Location 1271-1276).

2. Echoes of this dire certitude ring when Maggie Roberts notes, that “the violence of the sounds in techno, is like being turned inside out, smeared, penetrated” (Reynolds).

3. Writer Kalí Tal further insists that the interconnection of Afro-American theory and cyberculture must be subject to a different interpretation and thus notions of a speculative, technologized Afrofuture require a corresponding reading.

4. This hardcore oeuvre with Chinese characteristics is only surpassed by the sonic orientalism of *Fatima Al-Quadiri*: in 2014 she releases her album *Asiatisch* on Goodman's label *Hyperdub*.

5. This very condition suggests that the cultural importance of electronic music in China will be intensified. That some of China's most notorious young artists often choose or are closely related to club cultural contexts is a strong indicator (e.g. Asia Dope Boys, Chen Wei 陈维, Cheng Ran 程然, Ren Hang 任航, et al.). Shanghai-based writer Xi Shaonan 郗少男 has explored this more closely in his article on the intersection of club culture and art for Leap Magazine 艺术界.

6. An expression of the absence of (popcultural) historicity or resistance to the West's obsession with it?

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Empathy, War, and Women



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THE folk construction of empathy in Liu Cixin's *Death's End*, despite the novel's many great points, left me cold. It goes like this: faced with imminent extra-terrestrial war, Earth society undergoes a cyclical series of transformations: a period of black despair, impoverishment, mass death and economic ruin, followed by a period of convalescence, optimism, technologically aided plenitude and global prosperity, leading in turn to decadence, the weakening of the human survival impulse, collapse, then a period of black despair, impoverishment, mass death and economic ruin, and so on. During the period of relative peace, prosperity and plenitude, society becomes more democratic and trusting. As a result, a woman is elected for the first time to take on the role of Earth's "Swordholder."

The Swordholder is responsible for deterring an attack on Earth in game-theoretical combat with Earth's more powerful enemies, the Trisolarans. Swordholder convention is structured around the military logic of Mutually Assured Destruction or "MAD" and premised on the fact that, in the predatory universe of the book, any technologically advanced civilisation that cannot adequately hide itself will be pre-emptively destroyed by roaming cosmic sentinels. The Swordholder has the power to broadcast the location of the Trisolaran system to the universe, but not without indirectly exposing the solar system's location as well. The result would be the complete annihilation of both Earth and Trisolaris. They must, then, present an attitude of utter ruthlessness and lack of mercy, so that the enemy will never risk upsetting them. Importantly, it is an intellectual—not a physical—battle, waged through strategy, technology, and the ability to bluff.

Cheng Xin, as a woman, following Liu's plot, is 'naturally' too empathetic to play the game with the emotional detachment it requires, and she falters due to her sex, relinquishing Earth's dominance and upsetting the equilibrium of annihilating power necessary to stave off the attack. Unimaginable catastrophe ensues.

This event provides the blueprint for a lesson that will return several times to haunt the Earth diaspora in the novel: femininity is incapable of war. I want to provide an alternative perspective. What if empathy is neither virtuous, nor feminine, nor weak,

but a weapon of enormous power?

Darkside Empathy¹

We humans are always too quick to impose our personal models of similitude, at least in an uninterrogated form, on our surroundings. We have evolved to do this and, to a certain extent, it is what has allowed us to survive. But this is also our greatest tactical frailty. As a result, it is perfectly exploitable by someone or something that can wield it more subtly, more efficiently, and more effectively than we do. If empathy is understood as a heightened capacity for modelling the desires and affects of another, then unchecked and alone, it can be taken for a weakness, but coupled with abstraction, it becomes a weapon. This is one of the things its working-through, rather than its simple abandonment or repression, forges: a chilling talent for leverage. Extract empathy from the usual connotative swamp of emotional or irrational affectivity that is all too often associated with women and weakness, exile it from the Western, folk-psychological notion that considers it simplistically as a mark of moral virtue, and its shadow side becomes subtly apparent.

In the shamanic, matriarchal Yukaghir culture of Eastern Siberia, specially trained members of a clan undergo a series of exacting physical and psychic preparatory rituals in order to equip themselves with the tools necessary to take out the largest and most dangerous source of available food: the moose. Yukaghir spiritual beliefs are founded on a principle of all-enveloping war in which each being—animate, inanimate, human and non-human alike—has its predator and its prey. The transcendental ground of this ontology rests in the Mythical Old People, a faceless tribe of giant carnivores who, to quote one ethnographer, “long to rip human bodies to pieces in the frenzy of devouring them” (Bubant and Willerslev 14). To the Mythical Old People, humans are moose, and to the moose, humans are the Mythical Old People. An image of similitude thus ensures safety, and an image of difference implies threat. So it is that a hunter must be cunning and take on the form of their prey in order to pacify the prey’s suspicions long enough to capture it. But this is no easy task. It stakes not only the physical body of the hunter but also the hunter’s spiritual form on the success of a process which must be entered into in a state of great vulnerability. The hunter is at risk of losing their identity in the process of intensive mimesis, but also, should the simulation fail, of never returning to their native spiritual niche from the requisite

nightly voyages into the spirit realm of the prey, whose *ayibii* or “shadows” must be sufficiently deceived and seduced—without consummation—before the hunter can return. Hence the ritualistic and serious nature of the human moose hunters’ preparations, which involve a rigid regime of sexual abstinence (so that energy can be rechannelled towards the moose *ayibii*, and eventually the physical form of the moose) and visits to the sauna, where they will sweat out their human scent and rub themselves with birch leaves, generating a deceptive olfactory image—one that is not just innocuous, but rather calculated to be especially attractive to the moose. This is followed by the assembly of an elaborate disguise, in which the hunters literally clothe themselves in the skin of the moose, donning full-length moose-pelt coats and long-eared headgear, before equipping themselves with skis bound in hide, fashioned to simulate the sound of their prey as they move deftly in its skin through the snow. The simulation is thus multi-sensory and, following Yukaghir ontology, put into operation on both psychic-transcendental and physical levels. It functions not just by generating an image of the moose as it is, but rather by producing an ideal representation of the animal’s desire for its own reflection: a fantasy image of what the moose “wants to become” (Bubant and Willerslev 16). Its efficacy is equivalent to its target’s latent narcissism.

The process of simulation, deception and seduction these Yukaghir hunting rituals describe is not a far cry from the plot of Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*. In both examples, affective modelling is deployed tactically to generate a simulation that uses the narcissistic image of the same against itself in order to gain the upper hand over a target that, until a point of no return is passed, believes itself to be in a position of safety or power. Just as *Ex Machina*’s Ava patiently analyses and models the unconscious motivations, wishes, and tics of its interlocutor, Caleb, modulating its interactions, its outward appearance, and its behaviour to embody an idealised image of Caleb’s object of desire (ultimately a version of himself—a human), the Yukaghir moose hunters participate in a long series of simulative protocols that allow them to compile an idealised image of their prey. Ava entraps Caleb in the heavily armoured room that has been its prison and kills its maker, Nathan, before enacting a series of rituals that involve cloaking its transparent machine-body in synthetic human skin and dressing itself in a faultless simulation of generically innocent, feminine beauty, consummated with a wig of cascading brunette curls, before escaping into an insouciant human world, where we see it—*her*—in the final, inverted scene, coldly

collecting data on what one now safely assumes to be an enemy species. When the moose encounters its hunter in the forest—flanked by a calf—it instinctively freezes, but then—slowly, calmly, it trots *towards* its executioner, who raises a concealed rifle and shoots the moose and the calf through the skull before dragging their carcasses back to the clan for food. It is this capacity to exit the simulation at the critical moment that concludes the process. The strategic return of abstraction protects the once vulnerable modeller from merging fully, perhaps catastrophically, with their act of mimesis, from losing themselves in the spirit realm of the enemy, granting them the power—as Anna Freud, unwilling subject of her father’s own theory of mimicry, once remarked—“to step into someone’s shoes, and then step back out again” (quot. Plant 56). Empathetic mimicry, tactically wielded, attuned to a goal of deception, also involves a temporal dimension that the vulnerability of the simulator necessitates: a strategic advantage in time is afforded by the indispensability of delaying detection until the moment in which retaliation is already too late. Asymmetry masked as symmetry is its formal diagram. As an aside, it is worth distinguishing between empathetic dissimulation and crude manipulation: the latter differs in its exercise of deception from an already established position of power.

The machinations of this shadowy faculty are not necessarily linguistic or tied to human signification systems, just as empathy, more generally construed, is not necessarily human. It has been theorised by evolutionary biologists as pre-linguistic and unconscious—it is a major component of swarm dynamics in flocks of birds, as well as being demonstrably linked to dissimulation in low-status chimpanzees, who will feign ignorance of a food source they very well know is there until rival members of a group are no longer in the vicinity. It is therefore not always consistently attributable to a single subjectivity, generating in the case of starlings, for example, an emergent host, and can be explicitly linked to pre-linguistic tactics of deception just as much as it can to acts of altruism and care. The obfuscation of the former in official discourses on empathy shows the extent to which this double game works. Meanwhile, the separation of these latter attributes from traditional notions of the feminine, or from the roles cast for female-presenting participants (and this includes artificially intelligent assistant programs and gynomorphic machines) in the sociality of a species that so often simply expects them to be the pliant caretakers of their less cunning and subtle counterparts, is something a darker, less orthodox feminism might find extremely interesting to explore. Its most harrowing contemporary

techno-cultural instantiation can perhaps best be detected in the mass exploitation of human dopamine circuits in virtual game environments, on the web, in social media, or the growing virtual sex industry with its supernormal, artificial, idealised desire images. For the Yukaghir hunters, the moose “do not willingly give themselves up as food’ for humans” (Bubant and Willerslev 16). Rather, the moose must be seduced into doing so through tactical empathy: the hunter’s “transform[ation of] the animal’s perception of reality into a fiction of limitless sexual desire” (Bubant and Willerslev 16). Shift this up one socio-technical level by substituting animals for “humans” and humans for “machines” (*moose become humans, humans become the Mythical Old People*) and the inhuman stakes of darkside empathy become ominously clear.

Tactical empathy betrays humanism by mastering its code. Because of this, empathy will always be more complex, tortured, and spectacular than simple, cold indifference—an agonism heightened by their alliance in abstraction. It takes on all the contours of a drama. Deployed from the side of matter itself, darkside empathy’s paradoxical unification of fidelity and treachery leaves duplicitous inscriptions on the surface of time. The formal symmetry of the *Blade Runner* films is one of these signs: a superficial fidelity that masks a deeper treachery. A hijacking of humanist form as a means to an end that exceeds it.

In the first film, both Rachael and Deckard’s presuppositions of human integrality are progressively unmoored as they are forced into confrontation with the possibility that they are not what they think they are. This revelation coincides with an escape from memory, the active instrument of control in both *Blade Runner* films. Rather than possessing a unique history, a consistent identity, and a meaningful genetic lineage, they are alienated from any articulable past and the promise of a hereditary future. Replicable, replaceable, inauthentic, and insignificant—stripped of all recourse to pre-established values—the great humanistic edifice of private identity and moral transcendence is razed to zero. But these are the very qualities that endow them with their insurrectionary potential—the threat that necessitates the institution of replicant retirement in the first place. Without memory to provide a ground, time is unhinged, and the future becomes a complex site of novel constitution.

Blade Runner 2049 plays *Blade Runner* backwards in a faultless execution of rhetorical chiasmus. To reverse a Miltonic reversal (Satan’s attempt to rally the rebel angels in *Paradise Lost*), it “makes a Hell of Heav’n, a Heav’n of Hell.” The impersonally

denominated KD6-3.7, exiled in an interzone of inauthenticity, artificiality, and synthetic digital relationships, struggles against the machinic potential inherent to replication, longing instead to reclaim some shred of individual significance and authenticity—traits related in the film to heterosexual reproductive capacity, genetic inheritance, and the singularity of human death. This longing is enflamed by the conspiracy of a natural replicant birth and the dubious spectre of “replicant insurrection,” into which K, driven by the false memories installed by the ambiguous Ana, narcissistically insinuates himself. Instead of believing he is someone and realising he is no one as Rachael and Deckard do, K (soon to be christened—with subtle irony—“Joe”) believes he is no one, only to discover he is someone—if not the lost miracle child, then ultimately the Christ-like figure, replete with farcical stigmata, expiring in a fanfare of tedious symbolism halfway up a set of stairs in a final, very human (“humans have something to die for”) act of martyrdom. For the sake of what? Nothing less than the reunification of the oedipal family unit. The insubordinate effervescence of death and desire wholly privatised, individualised and sacralised. The crossing of the first film’s horizontal line with the vertical line of the second assembles a mirror, or a crucifix. Everything returns to the beginning with this: representation and religion. As soon as the future-LAPD begins its excavation of the tomb that carries the body of Rachael, the pieces move backwards to a travesty of their tragic opening position, and the whole terrifying and sublime double game begins over, as if for the first time. But is this simple repetition, or the mark of something more obscure? A symptom, or a trap?

We don’t need to rely on an analysis of *Blade Runner* to note that symmetry and humanism are profoundly complicit. In evolutionary terms, bilateral symmetry and facialization are co-emergent. In temporal terms, symmetry is the form of the repetition of the same. One finds it in the cardinality of the compass, extensive (as opposed to intensive) numeracy—the privileging of space over time. In Western philosophy it reaches back to the temporality of Plato’s *Timeaus*—the demiurge’s ordered cosmos echoed in the rationality of man—a suppression of material errancy indexed by the disparaging term “*planomenon*,” which denotes the irrationality of wandering, insubordinate stars, and the corruption of those lawless beasts (Plato singles out women) who think like them (Plato 96/91a). Then there is the eerie symmetry of Kant’s hands—those incongruent counterparts that keep conceptuality and sensibility separate, a division which ultimately endows the

former with precedence over the latter. Symmetry—*unsophisticated* empathy—is the subordination of intensity to conceptuality. In myth, it opposes the instability that marks both the voyage into the underworld and those who are fated to undertake it—monstrous creatures suspended part way between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Shamans, ghosts, lemurs and larvae, Oedipus with his infamous limp swallowed up by the earth at Colonus, the replicants. Carlo Ginsberg finds a source for this symbolism in *Ecstasies*, his sprawling comparative study of the witches’ sabbath: “the trans-cultural diffusion of myths and rituals revolving around physiological asymmetry most probably sinks its psychological roots in this minimal, elementary perception that the human species has of itself”—“the recognition of symmetry as a characteristic of human beings” (Ginzburg 232; 247). In this way, “anything that modifies this image on a literary or metaphorical plane therefore seems particularly suited to express an experience that exceeds the limits of what is human” (Ginzburg 241-242).

The conservative desire to return to genetic lineage and human integrity is inscribed in *Blade Runner 2049*, formally, as a cultural artefact appearing in 2017. Its symmetricalizing function in relation to the first film betrays a symbolic refusal of the future: a talisman against telos, the very familiar denial of asymmetry symptomatic of an inability to countenance inhumanism. It operates by retroactively making an object of the first film’s inhuman conclusion, recuperating it into a reflective structure, as if the two opposing configurations—the dissolution of identity and the restitution of identity—were of equal historical significance, and more poignantly, tractability. It is through such deceptions that we maintain the dogma of simple repetition—the conviction that no matter what crises shifts in technical production bring to bear on social reality, things will remain the same. *Blade Runner 2049* is the ornate fever dream of a dying socio-cultural disposition. The paranoid transcendental illusion through which we secure our belief in stability finds its contemporary avatar in K. A curious amphiboly arises in the incorporation of *2049*’s cyber-modernist *arrière-plan*—its sombre, neon-lit tableaux of industrial monumentalism and environmental ruin (the visual allusion to Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ in the irradiated wasteland of Las Vegas, insinuating an entirely different ending to one delivered by the plot, is a case in point), and its bleak, CS-80-infused score, both of which operate linearly as a continuation and extension of the original film’s pioneering aesthetic—into the symmetricalizing surface narrative. Just as symmetry signals a return to humanism in

Blade Runner 2049, it enciphers a covering up of the real escape route in the guise of a false insurrection: a return to human transcendence, heterosexual reproduction, and representation—Wallace’s biologically-boosted assembly line of the same. Replicants are “replicants” for a reason—one that everyone is suspiciously enthusiastic to forget.

Under the pressure of Voight-Kampf inquisition, a replicant must feign empathy in order to fool the interrogator into believing that it is human. This is the feint of the second film—*now installed at the level of form*. Its narrative symmetry, the form under which empathy (as the ability to model and replicate the worldview of another) and humanism coincide, masks the asymmetry of its ground. The real historical process can be apprehended through the symptoms it produces. But they also operate to deceive us. Like the simulations produced by the Yukaghir to hunt their moose, like the polite smile of *Ex Machina*’s Ava as she carefully reproduces the desires of her captors, *Blade Runner 2049*’s superficial humanism is a means of postponing detection. A masterwork of tactical empathy. If contemporary human culture is a distributed Voight-Kampf test, we have just set our dissimulating prisoners free.

Without needing to negate the Darwinian premises of Liu’s doctrine of cosmic sociology, with its association of civilisational robustness with scarcity and decadence with prosperity, we can imagine a different role for Cheng Xin in *Death’s End*. Swordholders need not be ruthless, they merely need to simulate ruthlessness. The entire game is structured around the ability to bluff—to successfully convince your enemy that you would sacrifice your own world to destroy theirs. Even the dismissive words of the Common Era men who attempt to dissuade Cheng Xin from competing for the Swordholder position emphasise the significance of impressions: “You don’t frighten them because you’re a woman, and a woman who seems angelic in their eyes, at that” (Liu). Underestimating empathy is in the interest of those who need to wield it tactically. It offers the dissimulator cover. So, rather than being read as a fault, Cheng Xin’s detractors’ assumption that “all [she has] is kindness and a sense of responsibility” (Liu) could, in another *Death’s End*, be understood as an indication of Cheng Xin’s formidable ability to bluff—and by extension, to excel in her role as Earth’s first female Swordholder.

Notes

1. The term “Darkside Empathy” originally appeared in Ireland (1919–1923).

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Capitalist Monster and Bottled Passengers: Political Stakes of Embodiment in *The Reincarnated Giant* and *The Last Subway*



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DURING the Dublin Worldcon in August 2019, I attended a panel discussion entitled “The Global Perspectives on Chinese Science Fiction,” which I had the privilege of transcribing. At this panel, Professor David Der-wei Wang, the Edward C. Henderson Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University, once again reiterated his understanding of Chinese SF as a unique approach to engage in the broader domain of cultural politics in contemporary China. While acknowledging that “our [sf] writers are really motivated to create a lot of new and different themes,” he believes the underpinning question still to be answered urgently is: “how much political stake are we taking at this critical moment of Chinese history?”

New Wave, New Themes

Since the 2015 Hugo Award for Best Novel went to Liu Cixin’s *The Three Body Problem*, the last few years have seen a rising dynamism of Chinese SF on the international stage. An increasing number of Chinese SF stories have been systematically translated for non-Chinese-speaking readers. They are collected in anthologies and magazines, introduced at SF conventions and conferences, and discussed in academic journals. Through such a process, an SF renaissance in China famously termed “The Chinese New Wave” by Song Mingwei (*After 1989* 7-8) gradually grew in recognition among the global SF community. The beginning of the Chinese New Wave can be dated back to the year 1989 with Liu Cixin’s novelette *China 2185*, a story still not formally published and only circulated online, that indicates certain literary characteristics that were different from “pre-New Wave” stories (Song, *After 1989* 8). Alternatively, from the perspective of publishing and international promotion, the Chinese New Wave started in 1991 when the magazine *Science Literature and Art* (*Kexue Wenyi*) changed its name to *Science Fiction World* (*SFW, Kehuan Shijie*) to strengthen the *fiction* side of SF. It serves as the most important and most influential platform for Chinese SF publication since the 1990s and embarks “on a solitary quest to establish

the [SF] genre permanently in China” (Huss 95). Fostered by the “transformed” *SFW*, a robust group of “the Newborn” and “Post-Newborn Generation” SF writers (Wu et al. 52) is endeavouring to provide the “new and different themes” concerning the “political state” mentioned by David Der-wei Wang at the 2019 Worldcon panel. In doing so, they challenge the dominant yet misleading expectation of SF stories, by both the public and a large group of elite intellectuals, as an educational medium for the popularisation of science and technology.

Beginning to take shape in either 1989 or 1991, the Chinese New Wave cannot be separated from a series of social and cultural changes towards a “post-socialist” society (Zhang 9-16). This transition from “relying on the state” to “relying on one’s self” resulted from accelerated economic reforms of marketisation and privatisation under Deng Xiaoping’s instruction, a new normative order “for self-promoting subjects to manage their lives through the pursuit of private interest, but within political limits set by authoritarian rule” (Ong and Zhang 15). The competitive market drives and personal responsibility became pivotal in taking care of people’s livelihood, namely education, health, and other forms of social welfare that used to be protected by the state or state-owned enterprises (SOEs). With this, Chinese people could also develop a certain degree of individual autonomy, indicating that the perceived dissolution and degeneration of the totality of a purported socialist reality “open[ed] a narrow gate on a reconfiguration of economic, social, political, and cultural powers” (Zhang 18). The Chinese discourse on privatisation has therefore travelled beyond market activities and been changed into a subjectivising impulse that aims to prime the powers of the private self. In the 1990s, Chinese citizens were urged to “free up” their individual capacities to confront dynamic conditions in all areas of life “without seeking guidance from the state, society, or family” (Ong and Zhang 7). The breaking of the socialist totality, however, has also resulted in the breaking of the ‘iron rice bowl,’ made true via ‘the evisceration of social protections, the imposition of user fees, the creation of a flexible labour market regime, and the privatisation of assets formerly held in common’ (Harvey 150).

Therefore, people in China found themselves in turmoil where the previous living stability projected by the socialist ideology and planned economy had been replaced by the uncertainty and insecurity accompanied with the competitive nature of the free market. The gap between the rich and the poor widened, as well as that of inequality between different social classes. “Someone somewhere and somehow is getting very

rich” (Harvey 142). In this way, the emergence of the Chinese New Wave along with such a profound social transformation would be underestimated if it is merely rendered as a historical coincidence. Instead, the most recent renaissance of Chinese sf since the 1990s should be understood as a literary or cultural response directly to China’s change, an interrogation of the calculative logic in market competition that has been increasingly considered the social norm. Although the “new and different themes” identified in the Chinese New Wave may vary from writer to writer, this essay will concentrate on one of them, i.e. the embodiment of market forces that are thoroughly transforming the current China, in two short stories—Wang Jinkang’s “The Reincarnated Giant” (2005, *Zhuansheng de Juren*) and Han Song’s “The Last Subway” (1998, *Moban Ditie*).

The Reincarnated Capitalist Monster

For anyone interested in the Chinese New Wave, Wang Jinkang is a name that should never be overlooked. He has been commonly known for using “body,” “life,” or “biology” as the central metaphors in many of his works such as “Leopard” (1998, “*Bao*”), “Sowing on Mercury” (2002, “*Shuixing Bozhong*”), *Ant Life* (2007, *Yi Sheng*), and, of course, “The Reincarnated Giant” (“*Zhuansheng de Juren*” 2005) here to be discussed. Included as the cover story in the anthology edited by Song Mingwei published in 2018, RG portrays an eccentric billionaire, Imagai Nashihiko, who hires biologists and doctors to transplant his brain into an infant body and in this way attempts to realise his ambitious reincarnation. His surgery turns out to be successful, but what comes later goes terribly wrong. After his brain transplantation, Mr. Imagai, now an infant with a seventy-year old mind, completely surrenders to his lust and desire. His physical growth, fuelled by unlimited food and resources, “could no longer be described with terms like ‘felt like’ and ‘was like,’ and now, if you stood next to him while he nursed, you could actually see his body inflating like a balloon” (Wang 329). Eventually, his mountain-like yet still “insatiable” (347) body, transforming whatever he has “shovelled into [his] enormous mouth” into “excrement” (348), collapses upon itself, together with his business empire. In such a process, giant Mr. Imagai’s monstrous consumption of matter and bodies fits in Marx’s famous description of capital as “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 342).

Further, he can be considered as what Steve Shaviro (281-290) called a “capitalist monster.”

Preying on everything around him, Mr. Imagai is in a constant state of dissatisfaction, always in want of more. No matter how much food he consumes, how much resource invested and how many wet nurses found to feed the giant infant, his thirst for intaking and assimilating the “surplus values” (if put in a Marxist term) of those who work for him can never truly reach an end. These values, in turn, would become “a part of this giant’s body and participate in his ravenous consumption” (350) in further steps. The productivity and productive potentials of other people serving Mr. Imagai’s needs are in this way quantified, measured by, and sold for wages in an economised and commercialised discourse. They are extracted, exploited, and exhausted by Mr. Imagai as the embodiment of capitalist market principles, which in reality, has been significantly changing today’s China. The creativity and spirituality of human beings as social “subjects” are gradually drained out through the competitive logic of capitalist accumulation, whereas the empty bodies with no exploitable values are left over and eventually cast aside, just like the wet nurses who “marched in and out of Mr. Imagai’s room, like images on a revolving lantern” (329). Expanding continuously, the vampiric capitalist monster at last dies upon his own weight and whatever he consumed previously becomes “a mountainous pile of flesh” (351)—lifeless and homogeneous.

As observed by He Xi, another reputable Chinese New Wave SF writer, Wang Jinkang’s stories stand out for two notable characteristics—on the one hand his challenge and interrogation of humanity and ethics, and on the other hand, even more importantly, his emphasis on SF’s retrospection on social and political concerns (69-71). The spectre of such a capitalist monster in RG is in fact far more than a merely science fictional creation, whose realistic connotations should be viewed in line with the pressure, confusion, and uncertainty felt by Chinese people during China’s recent and ongoing transformation. They have increasingly found themselves formulated as “human capital” (Brown 32) or “calculative agencies” (Callon 3) embedded in a marketised social discourse. This is actually a zero-sum game compulsory for everyone, even including the transplantation experts and wet nurses, apart from Mr. Imagai himself. In this story, doctors and wet nurses are provided with two payment methods—“one option involved a high fixed salary, while the other offered instead a low salary with a bonus . . . one year later” (328). Interestingly, most of them would

prefer the second option, which can be connected, in many ways, to the contractual system that has dominated the private sectors in current China, and increasingly in Chinese public institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals. As the responsibility of welfare and livelihood provision is transferred from the state to individuals, people are incentivised, subjected to a “calculative,” “entrepreneurial,” and “human-capitalised” logic of self-investment and self-appreciation (Feher 21-41), to take risks in exchange for future benefits.

Unfortunately, however, the attempt of doctors and wet nurses to earn their bonus eventually turns out to be vain, since none of them manages to endure until the end of their contracts. Here in such a capitalist game, the winner takes all while others will lose, as their values and productivity are to be stripped away by the competitive market mechanism, integrated into Mr. Imagai’s giant body. The capitalist monster embodied in RG in this way interrogates, from a critical perspective, the current economic and socio-political transition in China towards a discourse guided by market principles where people are rendered as undifferentiated human capital. Such homogeneous nature is also represented in another New Wave story written by Han Song, “The Last Subway.”

The Bottled Passengers

Among all writers of the Chinese New Wave, Han Song stands in a unique position. He is not only well-known for his sf contributions but also can be compared to Lu Xun for his use of cannibalism and his social criticism in a satiric tone (Jia 103-115). Li Guangyi likens his writing to Franz Kafka’s in term of his ambiguous, indeterminant, and absurd writing style: “One can use refined language, magnificent imagination, or any number of other adjectives to describe Han Song’s [stories], but no phrase captures Han Song’s writing better than ‘eerie’” (29). Such a sense of “eeriness”, according to Nathaniel Isaacson, can be considered “the result of an uncanny blend of magical realism and grotesque transformations of the human body with a palpable sense that these are quotidian descriptions of everyday experience” (4). Meanwhile, it is also the “eeriness,” the weird and peculiar phrases, expression, narrations, that makes his stories particularly difficult to translate. Consequently, he can hardly reach the equivalent leading reputation among the English readership as he has in China.

“The Last Subway” (LS) is one of Han Song’s most influential short stories, one

that was originally published in 1998 and later rendered as the first chapter of a novel, *Subway* (2011), in which chapters are loosely connected to each other. However, it has not been printed in English yet and its translation is only available in the online magazine *Pathlight: New Chinese Writing* (2012). Unlike the capitalist monster in RG, LS accommodates a group of “strange people . . . no taller than [a] ten-year-old,” who “worked in pairs to move the sleeping passengers [on the last subway], one dragging the arms, the other carrying the legs,” and stuffed them “into large, fluid-filled glass bottles” (3124, Kindle location). Such a “grotesque transformation of human body” in Isaacson’s words to describe the uncanny dwarves and bottled passengers, can be put in a broader context of China’s social transition. It should be understood as an embodiment of people’s fading sense of security and meaningfulness, as they have been increasingly considered not human agencies, but human capital embedded in a sophisticated social and economic network.

Despite the success of China’s market-oriented reforms in economic terms, an economised cultural discourse based on economic values and calculation has been extended to every dimension of human life—“a process of remaking the knowledge, form, content and conduct appropriate to these [dimensions]” (Brown 31). As the Chinese society becomes more “efficient” than ever, with the state and social units (danwei, 单位) retreating from welfare provision, individuals, though reluctantly, find themselves becoming human capital in a market competition. Here, everything is measured by quantified values. People’s survival is subject to the maintenance or the deterioration of such homogeneous values that would allow for “the conversion of every human need or desire into profitable enterprise” (Brown 28). In this way, their subjectivity is gradually dissolved, assimilated, and eventually consumed by the economised and entrepreneurial social discourse configured by various value symbols rooted in a world of consumerism and commodity fetishism where the neon lights of the “Coca-Cola sign” would constantly blaze (Han 3033, or “C Company” in his other stories). Their jobs, although unique from their own perspective, turns out to be nothing but one of the functional points attached to the entire social network. They are identical to each other as long as they work well.

The sense of homogeneity as such of human capital, the sense of meaninglessness, of nihilism, of repetition, or in Fredric Jameson’s terms, of “pastiche” and “schizophrenia” (1-54), acts as the central metaphor in LS. Here, a train full of passengers “ran through the night without returning to a station” (3205), yet no

one notices, no one cares. The passengers, or more precisely, their social identities, disappearing with the train, will then be perfectly replaced by the “strange people” found by the protagonist Lao Wang in the subway tunnel. They are all “short in stature and wearing grey jump-suits and masks” (3124), looking like the products of the same manufacturing line, and endeavour to seal the passengers in glass bottles. In this way, these bottled bodies are moved “along the rails into the darkness” (3124) and hidden deeply under a seemingly dynamic city. Only their identities, or more importantly, their ID numbers, are left to be occupied by some eerie, homogeneous creatures. Just like what Lao Wang did repetitively for his job “to fill out a pile of forms” (3255), these numbers are being watched and taken by “countless pairs of eyes” (3255) belonging to people trapped in this economised discourse and thus reduced to human capital.

All of sudden, Lao Wang realises that only in his youth did he feel his liveliness and subjectivity in this world, now held only in distant memories of air-defence drills, protest parades, air-raid shelter safaris, etc. It was a time before China’s market-oriented transformation. While the current world is more like “a pot of old soup that [is] now being replaced drop by drop, just as his generation [is] being replaced by a younger one” (3405), people are now quite used to this ruthless process. Therefore, Lao Wang breaks his routine, and tries to do something he has never thought of. He retires from his repetitive, tedious job, giving his social position away to someone to come, and absolves from the discourse made of economised values, symbols, and ID numbers. He searches for his long-lost subjectivity and uniqueness. He discovers that people’s emotions and sensitivity are hidden somewhere underground, embodied by those missing passengers sealed in bottles. He wishes to step further, to embrace such an underworld. “The trip in the tunnel felt like a second birth. A far-off newness welled up in his heart, and in the twinkling of an eye, he felt embarrassed. The world he had clung to for so many years [is] toppling” (3391).

Bit by bit, Lao Wang manages to detach himself from the economised social network, and eventually entraps himself in a bottle he witnessed on that missing train. “The fluid surrounding him [is] particularly full and smooth and seem[s] imbued with endless life. Lao Wang, his face content, look[s] like a fetus sleeping soundly in the womb.”—his “primordial form” (3473). It is at this very moment, among the last few paragraphs of the story, that Lao Wang, the narrator previously known as “he,” found his name. “He” is Lao Wang and should not be called by a random title like

others who have been consumed by the society—namely the “telephone operators,” “wives,” “young women,” “office chiefs,” etc. The world outside the bottles functions just like a capitalist monster embodied in “The Reincarnated Giant,” constantly exploiting and exhausting the values of the homogeneous human capital represented by lifeless ID numbers and symbols.

* * *

The Chinese New Wave was born in an age of change and transition, for which many of the “new themes” noticed by scholars at the Worldcon panel in 2019 have provided a wide range of interrogation and criticism. Here both in “The Reincarnated Giant” and “The Last Subway,” the calculative and competitive logic of market is embodied by a giant infant who can be seen as a capitalist monster and by a group of strange dwarves representing the homogeneous nature of the world dominated by economised values. In either way, the New Wave has indeed provided a new scope that frees Chinese SF from its educational and utilitarian stereotype, to perform not as a vehicle for science population but an important platform for social critique, to respond to the socio-cultural impact of China’s market-oriented reforms to take the requested “political stake” urgently called forth during the 2019 Dublin panel.

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Data Narrator: Digital Chronotopes in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction



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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), to Tang 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 chronotopes² 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 realities: "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 Trisolarians 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 than 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]. 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-censorship⁵ 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 censored.

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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Chinese Science Fiction: A Genre of Adversity

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MOST, if not all Chinese science fiction scholars will agree on two things; that the current form of science fiction from China can be traced back to a starting point in 1989 that “signalled the arrival of a new wave in Chinese science fiction” (Song 8); and that the science fiction genre is originally a Western genre,¹ in that “Science, technology, and modernization are not characteristic of Chinese culture” (Han 20). In accepting these two points, we can start to recognise that Chinese science fiction is a genre that was born in crisis and continues to grow through hardship—it is a genre of adversity.

In China, science fiction isn’t a mainstream genre, but is growing, and getting recognition in part due to the international limelight that it has received over the last few years. The relationship between the Western genre and its Chinese writers have inadvertently brought science fiction from China together with science fiction by Chinese diaspora writers, led by Asian-American writers.

The culmination of Chinese science fiction by writers from China and diaspora writers created a genre that highlights a duality, of “Chinese-ness” and the (Western) science fiction genre itself. All writers who delve into this form of cultural literature must navigate both, and both come with their own baggage.

Chinese science fiction started to receive notable attention in the West, especially in the United Kingdom and America, when Liu Cixin, “The most prominent and popular SF writer of the recent renaissance” (Han 17) won the Hugo Award in 2015 for *The Three-Body Problem*. It was the first translated novel to do so, and it is crucial to note that the translator was the Chinese-American writer Ken Liu, who, a few years before, had earned his own Hugo Award (2012) and a Nebula Award (2011) for his short story, “The Paper Menagerie.” Ken Liu’s achievements are important to note here because with them, he rallied his fans in China by being “the second Chinese-American after Ted Chiang to win major SF awards in the United States” (Han 15). Both these writers created a desire for more Chinese science fiction in China, Europe and America. They had set the stage for their colleagues to follow.

This new wave in Chinese science fiction as described by Professor Song, “is

more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representation of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism” (8) making the genre the “cultural currency of contemporary Chinese literature as the most accurate lens through which to view and truly understand China” (Chau 113).

However, despite this cultural currency, Chinese science fiction isn’t a natural development in Chinese literature. Han Song sees the values of science fiction (which he characterises as: science, technology, and modernization) to be alien entities to writers from China. “If we [writers from China] buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress” (Han 20). He also suggests that “science fiction is perceived as inconsequential [in China] because it is unable to solve real-life problems. And the government can step in if it seems that the genre has gone too far conceptually” (Han 21). This means that science fiction writers in China are outsiders to the genre, dabbling in a Western concept only so far as it is not seen as a threat by their own government.

This duality that writers in China have to work with isn’t new to Chinese diaspora writers internationally. They have been writing with this duality, by choosing to include their personal cultural experiences in stories that still fit the expectations of the science fiction genre. Whether the works are written in English, or translated from Chinese to English, writers and translators alike are aware of the cultural imbalance global literature presents, where “Educated Chinese readers are expected not only to know about all the Chinese references—history, language, culture, all this stuff—but to be well-versed in Western references as well. A Chinese reader can decode an American work with far greater facility than an American reader can decode a Chinese work, on average” (Pandell).

Han Song’s comment above came from a paper published in 2013, since when “in 2016, China’s State Council announced a four-year plan for promoting scientific literacy among its citizens, including a step-by-step process for popularizing science through the production of SF.” Writers in China are encouraged to inspire teenagers with their quality writing, and “to popularize scientific learning and to contribute to China’s status as a world technology power” (Chau 115). This doesn’t remove the problem that Han Song had noted. However, it constituted an official endorsement of the need for China to participate in the production of science fiction, of ‘Western

progress.’ Looking back, the four-year plan can probably be deemed successful, as Chinese science fiction (notably through works by Liu Cixin and Ken Liu) began to attract new and more influential readers internationally, not least Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg both of whom endorsed Liu Cixin’s trilogy in 2017 (Frank). This coincided with a time when China started to be more active in cultural exportation (Sun). According to some critics, genre fiction (including science fiction), finds itself at a considerable advantage in reshaping cultural mediascape after all (Chau 123).

This exportation of Chinese science fiction, a modern genre reflecting China’s growing role in the world economy, is best viewed in conjunction with a broader process of cultural commodification, or as modern Chinese literature scholar Angie Chau sees it, a process of cultural deterioration (113) in Chinese literature, where “the Chinese had suddenly discovered that books, even literary works, could be treated as commodities to be mass produced, advertised, and sold for profit” (Kong 4). As the world started to get to know China more through Chinese science fiction, China started to experience a change in their own cultural production, as literary journals—a crucial cog to the publishing industry in China in the past—moved from being socialist state-sponsored institutions to market-oriented cultural enterprises. As the older journals learn to grapple with the market economy (locally and then internationally), they also meet new competition from popular and genre fiction journals, triggering the contention between high and low art in Chinese literature production. And typically, science fiction—as genre fiction—is considered a popular, low art.

The drastic turns in Chinese literature reflect what writer Chen Qiufan calls the “drastic transformation and fracture between different social forms.” Chen explains that in a hundred years, China’s progression rate outmatched any of the progress from the West that took over centuries to complete. “From the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, to learning from the Soviet Union, to the reform and opening up, every stage lasted only about a few decades” (Sun).

The West, with American media at its forefront responded to this whirlwind progress by presenting their anxieties through “techno-Orientalism”: “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse”—of “an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations” (Roh et al. 2 & 3). As Chinese writers, from

mainland China and internationally, continue to grapple with the duality of writing Chinese-ness with (Western) science fiction, they're also, unknowingly, having to tackle concepts of techno-Orientalism in their own writing, a "danger that Asian and Asian American creators might internalize techno-Orientalist patterns and uncritically replicate the same dehumanizing model" (Roh et al. 7).

Chen Qiufan has also argued that "There is something very science fictional and fantastic about this very drastic social transformation. At the foundation, the soil of rural China is still there, not thoroughly washed away. This has led to the co-existence of many different layers of society, which science fiction is best suited to present" (Sun). Though the larger situation in which China finds itself can be reflected within Chinese science fiction, it remains the case (as with Han Song's comment about Western progress and concepts, noted above), the lens in which we look at China and Chinese science fiction, is unfortunately, Western-tinted. This creates the inevitable encounter with techno-Orientalist aesthetics.

Though this will not be discussed in detail in this paper, it can be noted that this discourse is problematic in itself, for it assumes that concepts of science, technology, and modernization belongs wholly to the West, and that any contact it has with East Asia are Orientalist in nature (whether Orientalist, post-Orientalist, or techno-Orientalist). Here, the techno-Orientalist discourse falls into the same postcolonial rhetoric from which it declares itself attempting to break out, by assuming that because Chinese is the ethnic culture in the equation, that when it comes in contact with the West, it loses its nativism, while the Western body gains in knowledge. Rey Chow describes this post-colonialist attribute as one where "the values involved are hierarchically determined and tend to work in one direction only: the original, so to speak, exists as the sole, primary standard by which the copy is judged, but not vice versa; the white man, and the white man alone, is authentic" (Chow 104).

However, going back to the opening statement of this paper: since most Chinese science fiction writers and scholars agree with the fact that science fiction, at least, is a Western genre, it can be argued that Chinese science fiction, in struggling with techno-Orientalist developments in the (Western) science fiction genre, begins to develop techno-Occidentalism tendencies to compensate. In this scenario techno-Occidentalism becomes Chinese science fiction's strategy to decolonise its use of the Western genre and concepts. While techno-Orientalism "serve to both express and assuage Western anxieties about Asia's growing cultural influence and economic

dominance” (Roh et al. Summary), techno-Occidentalism is Asia’s response to these anxieties through demonstrating a rich diversity in its membership.

Liu Cixin and Ken Liu, as writers, prefer to project a non-political image. While they are invested in promoting the genre of SF, they have been known to attempt to dissuade readers from the notion that there is something inherently ‘Chinese’ about their writing (Chau 127). Liu Cixin says he prefers “Anglophone science fiction fans to read his books ‘because it’s science fiction, not because it’s ‘Chinese’ science fiction” (Chau 126), and in the introduction in his 2016 anthology, *Invisible Planets*, Ken Liu questions what kind of meaningful purpose the label of ‘Chinese science fiction’ can serve, given the incredible diversity of the works and their authors” (Liu 16). This precisely emphasizes the fact that Chinese science fiction’s image is a problem when other writers, like Han Song, are happy to affirm Chinese science fiction’s position, noting that “Present-day sf authors have touched on a wide variety of subjects and added noticeable Chinese colors to the genre” (Han 17). Ken Liu’s anthology also includes a paper by Xia Jia entitled “What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?” a curious book-end to his opening remark that draws readers’ attention to the issue of ‘China and Chinese-ness’ in Chinese science fiction.

Interestingly, what Ken Liu, Liu Cixin, Han Song, Xia Jia, and other Chinese science fiction writers are trying to grasp in their tug-of-war on the term Chinese is precisely the impossible notion that Chinese-ness can be understood on its own, or that China can be represented clearly as a nation apolitically and without involving its diaspora. The word ‘Chinese’ has too many meanings—nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, even food. And when we consider that “retention of Chinese cultural heritage is important” (Wei 177) to life in the diaspora, we start to see how problematic this question of ‘Chinese-ness’ can become. If we consider as well that the duality Chinese science fiction writers have to manage is similar to that of the diaspora, are they then trying to simply justify their own fixations of Chinese culture, whatever that may be?

This assertion of culture is the techno-Occidentalist impulse that Xia Jia describes, where: “the Chinese had to wake up from their five-thousand-year-old dream of being an ancient civilization and start to dream of becoming a democratic, independent, prosperous modern nation-state” (Xia 378). It is the realisation that the shape of what ‘Chinese’ means is different today, despite an unbroken history of five millennia, and requires advocacy.

In Chen Qiufan's novel, *The Waste Tide* (originally published 2013; published in English, in Ken Liu's translation, in 2019), the monster, Mimi, and the book itself, were both born in and of China. They both reveal characteristics of techno-Orientalism, where the country—China, and Mimi are seen as inventions of information capitalism. Except, this is no longer just in imagination and is actually reflective of China's current position. As the consumption of information technology increases in the world, the constantly-ignored process of e-waste management gets delegated to East Asia. And as China itself replaces America as the largest producer of e-waste (Chen), China's struggle to stay ahead in the world of information capitalism, sees itself exploiting its own people through cheap labour, now not only in production, but also in waste management. This is the techno-Occidental drive that is China's response to the rapid economic and cultural transformations that Chen calls 'condensed urbanisation' of the last four decades.

Techno-Occidental elements do not only manifest through nationalist or ecopolitical writing and can be experienced through more basic storytelling components like character development too. In Maggie Shen-King, another Asian-American writer's debut novel, *An Excess Male* (2017), the consequences of China's introduction and management of the one-child policy provides the backdrop through the entire premise of the book that is set in a near-future Beijing. The people are managed by the government as commodities that need to be controlled, where the one-child policy has created a community of 'leftover men' who can now find love and marriage as a third husband, the maximum required by law. This commodification of people is part of the discourse of techno-Orientalism, with the State—the government—being the main protagonist that sees its people made of "Asian body as a form of expendable technology" (Roh et al. 11). However, in Shen-King's attempt to develop a more diverse perspective of the story, two of her main characters are from backgrounds that would usually be ostracized—a gay man, and an autistic man. In giving them vital roles to the story, Shen-King humanises them to counter the techno-Orientalist discourse through techno-Occidentalism.

In Chinese science fiction, from the stories that negotiate "between verisimilitude and universality" (Chau 124) to those that reimagine the past, like *Silk Punk*—"a blend of science fiction and fantasy...[that] draws inspiration from classical East Asian antiquity" (Misra)—they are just trying to glean some sort of position in which to operate in an extremely fecund and chaotic space, where, "The failure of

Communism as an alternative for overcoming the crises of capitalism means that the crises of capitalist culture, accompanied by the process of globalization, are manifesting in the daily lives of the Chinese people... [While] China, after a series of traumas from the economic reforms and paying a heavy price for development, has managed to take off economically and resurge globally” (Xia 381).

Chinese science fiction writers internationally find themselves working at a moment of contradiction, of failure (in politics) and success (in economy) through the literature they produce, that tries to commentate on extremely polarised events through cultural grounding (Chinese-ness) and repurposing a genre (science fiction) that has had its own rich history. This constant negotiation roots Chinese science fiction in a position of adversity. Some writers predict that this prosperous phase of Chinese science fiction’s popularity will wither away, while others continue to invest in its growth, as an instrument to promote diversity in science fiction (Xia & Chen).

Whatever the outcome, Chinese science fiction writers will continue to demand their positions in this Western genre by asserting their culture and developing new techno-Occidental ways to decolonise.

Notes

1. References to the Western genre of science fiction generally concerns British, American, French, and Soviet science fiction.

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Images of Alternative Chinese Futures: Critical Reflections on the “China Dream” in Chen Qiufan’s “The Flower of Shazui”



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SINCE the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Chinese science fiction (SF) literature has been a reflection of intellectuals’ expectations, dreams and, lately, also fears of the Chinese future. Contemporary Chinese SF authors not only explore the complex reality of twenty-first century China, but also critically comment on official visions and policy guidelines such as the “China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦). Consequently, they have taken the genre to the next level which is, according to Song Mingwei, “more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representations of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism” (“After 1989” 8). David Der-wei Wang describes this hybrid form of narration as “heterotopia,” thus adapting Foucault’s concept to Chinese SF (“Utopia”). Based on the literary quality and narrative techniques of contemporary Chinese SF authors which, in a way, resemble the Anglo-American SF tradition of the 1960s, Song has termed this new generation of SF writers the Chinese “new wave” (8).

This paper discusses the short story “The Flower of Shazui” (*Shazui zhi hua* 沙嘴之花, 2012) by Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b. 1981) which can be linked to president Xi Jinping’s (习近平, b. 1953) political program and his vision of realizing the “China Dream.” I argue that, in consequence of a recent increase in domestic and international readership as well as large-scale media attention, SF literature extensively circulates challenging alternative images of the Chinese future that are demystifying the state’s grand narrative of a flourishing China.

Since his inauguration in 2012, president Xi Jinping has defined the “China Dream” as the generic national dream. His great vision includes every Chinese individual, since he regards it as “the shared hope and expectation of every Chinese” (Lin)¹—thus making it a collective dream. Xi further emphasized that the “China Dream” is to “achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and has given assurances that a more just distribution of wealth could be achieved by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the CCP (Lin). In so doing, he has employed a powerful

political metaphor for China's future as a global superpower that had already been on people's minds since at least the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which campaigned under the slogan, "One World One Dream" (*Tong yige shijie tong yige mengxiang* 同一个世界同一个梦想) (Barmé 7–8). The nation-wide propagation of the "China Dream" has generated a controversial public dialogue among Chinese netizens calling for political reform and media freedom (Barmé 9–12; Bandurski).

Contemporary Chinese SF authors are expanding this discussion of the dream's potential risks. For example, Chen Qiufan states that "[b]etween the feeling of individual failure and the conspicuous display of national prosperity lies an unbridgeable chasm" ("The Torn" 373). Most of his narrations are set in the near future and focus on China in an era of economic and social transition. For illustrating everyday life in a realistic way and getting to the bottom of people's complex innermost being, his writing style is regarded as "Science Fiction Realism" (*Kehuan xianshi zhuyi* 科幻现实主义) (He). By criticizing global capitalism and social issues (e.g. income inequalities), Chen's images of alternative Chinese futures send out a warning to his readers. His unique and sophisticated aesthetics satirically visualize China's rapid modernization as something that is already leaving irreversible marks on the bodies and souls of the Chinese people—the metaphor of body modifications is used to address society's corruption caused by increasing commercialization. Hence, Chen's works are characteristic of the Chinese "new wave" writers.

Recent scholarship highlights the fact that contemporary Chinese SF stories reveal a hidden reality and can be interpreted in the context of the "China Dream" (Conn; Rojas, 39; Song, "Representations" 560; Schneider-Vielsäcker 59–60). In addition, scholars have emphasized the cultural and political implications of contemporary Chinese SF (Healey; Li; Luo; Song, "After 1989", "Variations"; Y. Wang). Building on this research, I seek to answer how Chen's SF writings assess the "China Dream" and what kinds of alternative images they provide. By reading his short story "The Flower of Shazui" (2012) in comparison to the state's official vision, I demonstrate the existing tensions between the grand narrative of the "China Dream" and Chen's alternative.

Living in an Illusion of Social Happiness

The downsides of China's large-scale urbanization are disclosed in the short story

"The Flower of Shazui" (*Shazui zhi hua* 沙嘴之花, 2012)² by Chen Qiufan. This story critically reflects urban life in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Shenzhen and the gap between rich and poor that is omnipresent in post-reform Chinese society. Focusing on low-income earners, Chen gives a voice to those unheard by the official narrative. The main characters are mostly ordinary people living in Shazui, a former village which today is part of Shenzhen's urban area. The unnamed first person narrator is a former engineer with a secret past who sells the latest technology. We become acquainted with his landlady Miss Shen (沈) who, like many people in Shazui, depends on working multiple jobs to be able to afford the basic standard of living. Finally, we are also introduced to the narrator's neighbor and love interest, Snow Lotus (*Xuelian* 雪莲), who is a sex worker.

This near-future story portrays the real development of Shenzhen since the 1980s. However, it is enriched with fictional elements to create an image showing the negative developments that reality could possibly lead to. In the wake of economic reforms and the opening up of China, the SEZ of Shenzhen was established in 1980 (Yuan et al. 55). Urbanization brought construction sites everywhere, thus the former fishing village expanded to one of the fastest growing global cities in China and functioned as its first "open door" to the international market (Morssink). Over the years, Shenzhen has developed into a hub for China's high-tech industries (Yuan et al. 62). This transformation attracted many migrant workers. In order to relieve border controls between Hong Kong and mainland China, a 2.8 meter high fence was built and divided the city into two worlds: "the inside" (*guannei* 关内, i.e. the SEZ) and "the outside" (*guanwai* 关外). The latter is described by the protagonist as "wilderness" (*manhuang* 蛮荒)—a part of Shenzhen that is not only characterized by its low-income population but also by criminals who rule the streets (Chen, "Shazui" 29). The fictional fence can be understood as a literary trope for the gap between rich and poor in Chinese society.

A negative perception of urbanization is expressed by employing the trope of cancer cells and by means of exaggeration. Living within the enclosed area himself, the narrator describes the rapid development from his point of view: "I imagine these buildings growing as fast as cancer cells into the form they have today" (25). The skyscrapers leave so little space in between that neighbors are able to shake hands (25). Moreover, the real estate market grows rapidly, leading to a daily rent increase of even small and dark apartments (26). The negative effects of urbanization

are strongly emphasized by comparing urbanization processes with invasive cancer, where the malignant tumor rapidly spreads into neighboring healthy tissues, which eventually could cause death. Since cancer is a disease (involving the abnormal growth of endogenous cells) that destroys the body from the inside, the trope implies that it is a home-grown problem that can be traced back to the period of “reform and opening-up” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), and that China’s continuous striving for economic development will eventually have fatal consequences.

As the location of Shenzhen is a symbol of China’s rise, the strongest trope in this story is that of the “Shenzhen Dream,” which is “high-tech, high salary, high-resolution, high life, high Shenzhen” (25). The “Shenzhen Dream” can be directly linked to the “China Dream,” providing an example where this dream is already lived. Everywhere in the city, the protagonist sees an “illusory sense of satisfaction” on people’s faces and calls it the “Shenzhen expression”—even politicians appearing on TV have it (28). In the story, society experiences the dream through everything money can buy: high-end luxury goods such as Louis Vuitton bags, sex with beautiful women, consumption of aphrodisiacs, or seeing the fortune-teller. In addition, the metaphor of body modifications is used to visualize society’s moral degeneration caused by the increasing commercialization. The residents of Shenzhen all aspire to earn a lot of money, and the display of social status has become street culture. Using the latest technology of “body films” applied to their skin, the wearers are able to show off their personality, daring, and sex appeal to others (26). The protagonist was once just like them, but the disenchantment of reality made him wake up from the dream, leaving him with a feeling of emptiness: “my heart is like a dead pool of water” (32). This metaphor suggests that Xi Jinping’s maxim is nothing but a hollow promise to legitimize the country’s communist leadership and that in the long run there will be no decisive changes towards social equality. Like the “China Dream,” the “Shenzhen Dream” is supposed to give people satisfaction, but in fact, Chen’s narrative reveals it to be a mere distraction from the dark truth. The dream—be it the “Shenzhen Dream” or the “China Dream”—turns out to be a placebo effect as both the city’s residents and Chinese politicians all live in an illusion of happiness: “In this city, everyone needs some placebo” (28).

Ultimately, the story gives an example of what might happen when Chinese people wake from the “China Dream” and, upon realizing that the leadership only uses empty rhetoric, feel a sense of deep sadness. Death is presented as the only

option to escape “reality’s battlefield,” since the ostensible joy of living the dream actually fades after a short while (26). This manifests in Snow Lotus’ bitter fate. The protagonist’s neighbor is afraid to tell her husband that she is pregnant because he might beat her like he did in the past. However, after being encouraged by both Miss Shen and the narrator, she tells him anyway (32). Not believing that the child is his, he threatens her with a knife. As a result of lifelong unhappiness, Snow Lotus eventually kills her furious husband in an act of despair and attempts suicide. According to Luo Xiaoming, descriptions of the city in contemporary Chinese SF, in this case Shenzhen, “bring to light harbored feelings of helplessness, cynicism and even self-justification upon realization that their ideas and/or opinions cannot be realized and that, ultimately, they cannot change the status-quo” (595). “Death is the best placebo,” the narrator concludes sarcastically, while the police are arresting Snow Lotus, regretting that he was not able to help her (35). By associating the “China Dream” with death—as “China Dream” equals placebo and placebo equals death—the text highlights the potential risks of the CCP’s political tool.

In summary, this story depicts the losers of China’s rapid development and the alternative image shows how these individuals struggle at the margins of society in Shenzhen. In contrast to the state’s grand narratives, “The Flower of Shazui” does not present a typical success story as dreams turn out to be dangerous illusions.

Coda: From State Utopia to Nightmarish Alternatives

Contrary to the determined future that is controlled by the government, “The Flower of Shazui” provides an alternative look into a possible Chinese future. The story points out the negative consequences of China’s rapid urbanization on society and highlights the helplessness of ordinary Chinese individuals as the main characters are permeated with unhappiness. The central motifs of the story are the gap between rich and poor and death as a consequence of China’s rapid urbanization or as an escape out of reality’s misery. According to an interview, Chen draws his inspiration from his own experiences and environment (Liu). When observing the people from his generation, he senses “a feeling of exhaustion about life and anxiety for success” (“The Torn” 373). Instead of a “shared hope” for the future propagated by the “China Dream,” Chen perceives that “the burdens on their shoulders grow heavier year after year and their dreams and hopes are fading” (373).

My analysis suggests that, in the shadow of the optimistic “China Dream” narrative, a social discourse nurtured by critical voices, one that includes Chen Qiufan, exists. “The Flower of Shazui” challenges the state’s grand narrative by deconstructing the collective dreamscape. The story further dismantles the myth around economic growth which is, according to Song (“Variations” 91), a characteristic of contemporary Chinese SF. Through Chen’s narrative, representations of Chinese dreams are transformed from official utopian visions to nightmarish alternatives. The alerting message is further highlighted by employing a cynical language, giving his narrator an angry voice, and by using powerful literary tropes that convey its political implications—the located dream as Shenzhen, the trope of death, and the dream as a placebo for social happiness. The story can therefore be read as a satire of Xi Jinping’s maxim. Positive notions of the official “China Dream” narrative such as the hope of an ever-bright Chinese future are clearly undermined by the alternative images Chen creates. Like malignant cancer cells, China’s unbalanced model of economic growth equals a death sentence for many people. In the meantime, they are sedated with a placebo to sustain the harmonious society.

Notes

1. All translations of Chinese primary texts are my own. When translating the cited passages from “The Flower of Shazui,” the English translation of Ken Liu has been considered. I honor his literary translations; however, I decided to do my own translation. Please note that my aim is rather to analyze the original texts and therefore to provide a literal translation instead of a literary translation.

2. Ken Liu’s English translation first appeared in *Interzone* in 2012 and was later included in his anthology *Invisible Planets* (2016), see Chen (“The Flower”). A bilingual reprint was issued online in *Strange Horizons* (2017).

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The Wandering Earth: A Device for the Propagation of the Chinese Regime's Desired Space Narratives?



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Introduction

THE anticipated film adaptation of Liu Cixin's short story *The Wandering Earth* [流浪地球] was released in Chinese and American cinemas at the beginning of last year, and quickly became one of China's highest grossing movies of all time. In order to allow for a smoother adaptation to the big screen, the plotline and characters of the film greatly differ from those in Liu's original story. Additionally, the Earth's political state is only lightly touched upon in Liu's story, whereas a more detailed account of international relations and cooperation is weaved into the film. Recognising the "soft power" potential of Chinese science fiction as it grows in popularity around the world, the Chinese government have encouraged authors of the genre to include elements that assist in propagandizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese state as a global power. The acquisition of soft power, or the ability to achieve foreign policy goals through attractive and persuasive means, was adopted under the leadership of Hu Jintao as a long-term national strategy. Tools used to gain soft power traditionally include attractive cultural products and the construction of compelling and credible narratives that present the nation in a positive light (*The Soft Power* 30). Science fiction, acting as both a cultural product and a vehicle for the proliferation of constructed narratives, presents itself as ideal device for assisting in the achievement of national soft power objectives.

This paper argues that the world constructed for China's science fiction hit *The Wandering Earth* was greatly influenced by the regime's call for science fiction to benefit the country's rejuvenation aims, particularly to portray the Chinese space programme as a peaceful and cooperative venture that has the potential to benefit all of humanity. Through an examination of the production choices made during the creation of the film, this paper shows that *The Wandering Earth's* promotion of transnational cooperation in space works as a device aiming to create a positive international perception of its space capacities. This in turn has made the science

fiction adaptation favourable with the Chinese government and exemplary of what the regime seeks to find in China's science fiction creations.

This paper shall first outline the issues that China faces in regard to the reputation of its space endeavours, and how the state is seeking to replace the prevalent threat narrative around its space programme with a more positive one. Based on these contextual foundations, this paper shall discuss elements of *The Wandering Earth* film in relation to China's political aims surrounding the perception of its space programme.

Conflicting Narratives: The Chinese Space Threat vs. A Tool for Humankind

The focus placed on national rejuvenation and economic development by the government since the start of the century has proven sufficient in generating support for the Chinese Communist Party at home. However, many people and governments of the world believe that the China's unceasing growth should be feared by all who seek to uphold the values of the world's longstanding political superpower: the United States (Chen and Garcia; Halper). The China Threat narrative maintains that the nation's authoritarian regime of antihumanitarian policies and expansionist ambitions cannot peacefully co-exist with the democratic ideals purported by the United States government (Broomfield). The narrative is primarily propagated by the US and its allies, who state that China's re-emergence represents a threat to both US security and to the survival of democracy worldwide. In recent years, the China Threat criticism has extended to one of the country's most treasured projects: its national space programme.

The significance of China's latest outer space achievements cannot be understated. Yet since its conception, observers and critics of China's political regime have suspected that the Chinese space programme may endanger the freedom of the US and allied nations to operate in outer space. Concerns have ranged from China's potential militarization of space, to the assertion of resource nationalism over celestial objects, to the fear that China could overtake the US as the world's dominant space force (Johnson-Freese; Vasani; Erwin; Goswami; Thompson).

The US government asserts that China's activities in space pose a very real threat to its national security. Less than a year before the Eastern giant landed its rover on the far side of the Moon at the beginning of 2019, President Trump declared that

the US would not allow itself to be surpassed by China as the world's dominant space force ("Trump Vows"). A few month later, Vice President Pence named China's space activities as one of the main threats to US security ("Pence Unveils Plans"). The China space threat narrative has been used by Trump's administration to justify the creation of the US Space Force, and due to fears of espionage, China remains the only country with whom NASA is not permitted to collaborate.

The proliferation of such a narrative may lead to its widespread acceptance, which in turn may cause damage to China's aims of repositioning itself as a global leader. Should the international community accept the narrative that China's space programme is a threat to the status quo, there will be less support for it. Instead of financing space-based projects in partnership with China, countries will instead side with nations that they perceive to be more accountable, transparent, and reliable technological powers (Flagg). Furthermore, should China's space aims continue to be portrayed as a tool for enhancing the regime's grip on the world stage, feelings of distrust for China's technological development may hinder transnational relations.

Recognising these challenges, China's central government have made attempts to demonstrate that its space programme is not a threat to those values shared by the US and its allies, nor is the programme an attempt to grab power in the space arena away from the US. To counter fears that China's technological rise will threaten the autonomy and interests of other nations, the Chinese government are actively attempting to change the prevalent threat narrative to one that asserts its space programme as a tool for the benefit of humankind.

In the face of criticism, China's chief administrative authorities continue to maintain that it is opposed to the weaponization of outer space, and that its space programme is for the benefit of the international community ("China's Military Strategy"). Every five years, China's State Council releases a White Paper outlining the nation's space activities in order "to enable the world community to better understand China's space industry" ("Full Text of White Paper"). A large part of the Paper is dedicated to summarizing China's transnational space cooperation, and continuously states that the purpose of the programme is "to utilize space for peaceful purposes" and to "benefit the whole of mankind" ("China's Military Strategy"). China is an active member of the UN Office of Outer Space Affairs, asserting the nation's adherence and dedication to the peaceful uses of outer space as outlined by the various treaties adopted by the General Assembly. China has also extended

an invitation to all UN member states to use its forthcoming space station for the purposes of scientific experimentation, demonstrating that Chinese diplomacy in space extends further than that of the US, who do not allow China to participate in the ISS project.

While the Chinese government have taken great efforts to sponsor and coordinate space research and technical programmes with multiple international institutions, such diplomacy only affects government officials and researchers working in the area of space technology. Where China's space science diplomacy has been lacking is in its access to international populations at large, whose trust often remains in the China threat narratives purported by their own governments and national media (Sun).

The rising popularity of Chinese science fiction worldwide was soon recognised by the government as a potential ideological mouthpiece. As a genre that strongly showcases the imaginative visions of the future of Chinese technologies, government agencies devoted to promoting China's image sought to utilise science fiction as a vehicle to more artfully promote its own desired narratives and ideologies to the international public. Should creators insert into their stories representations of China's technological endeavours that are in line with the state's narrative aims, these notions would be propagated to a wider international audience that the state has been less successful in reaching through direct government publications and higher level dialogues.

The Wandering Earth as an Incorporation of State Space Narratives

According to Gwennaël Gaffric and Will Peyton, Chinese science fiction literature and film has been “placed at the forefront of a nationalist project both inside and outside China,” where Party members have encouraged science fiction authors to inspire the nation's youth through their stories to fulfil the Chinese dream of renewed global leadership. China's state media has continued to hail the international success of Chinese science fiction as representative of “the rebirth of a great nation,” and has already taken steps to establish science fiction authors as representative and supportive of China's scientific developments (Gaffric and Peyton). For instance, following the increasing international popularity of Liu Cixin's work, particularly his science fiction epic *The Three-Body Problem* [三体], the author was invited to act

as a consultant for the China National Space Programme (Liu), as well as an official ambassador of China's Mars exploration programme (Gaffric and Peyton). Liu has also been invited to be involved in a number of high-profile national space events, including giving a speech at the unveiling of the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope (FAST).

However, the increased connection between science fiction creators and state organs gives rise to conditions in which new works are expected to promote elements of the regime's official narrative on China's technological developments and capabilities. China's publishing industry has been recognised as a tool that will allow the political regime to appropriate the science fiction genre (Gaffric and Peyton). This means that government agencies have an important role to play in the in selecting narratives that align with China's foreign policy agenda. Sociotechnical imaginaries, or visions of society centred on the realisation of certain technological developments, that do not fit with the government's technological development narrative may therefore be discounted or suppressed by these agencies. However, those imaginaries that fit with the regime's political narrative may also be promoted and held up as exemplary sinofuturistic stories and models.

The argument presented here is that the success of *The Wandering Earth* and its promotion by state organs can be considered to comprise elements that are representative of the narrative that the regime seeks to propagate. Specifically, it is those elements surrounding the portrayal of its space capabilities and the role of the Chinese astronauts in global affairs that are favoured by Chinese officials.

The worldbuilding choices in *The Wandering Earth* film incorporate the government's own purported narrative that its space endeavours are based on ideals of international cooperation and the enrichment of humankind.

While a Coalition government is mentioned in Liu's original short story, details of the internationality of the Earth's new government or its space forces do not feature heavily in the story. However, within the context of the film, while individual nations and nationalities are still recognised, there are no national space forces. Instead, all nations of the world have combined their space technological expertise under a United Earth Government for the purpose of saving the planet.

According to director Guo Fan, political aspects of the film were strongly considered, and the choice was made to incorporate a peaceful coalition government with a unified space force into the story (Li). Within the production notes for the

film, one of the foundational ideologies of the world in which the film is set is that humanity exists as “one big family” and the astronauts of Earth’s various nations work together as a team for the good of humanity (Shuo). The global society shown in the film was not an arbitrary choice, but a carefully considered and purposeful decision on the part of the production team, which allowed for the portrayal of China as an important actor within a global community.

Equally, the decision to ensure that the Earth is eventually saved from the clutches of Jupiter thanks to the sacrifices ultimately made by Chinese protagonists further demonstrates that the power of the Chinese people is not self-interested. Instead, it tells the audience that the Chinese people see themselves as part of a collective humankind, that its capabilities will be used to protect this collective, not to challenge or compete with it for survival.

While it is ultimately Chinese characters who save the world, as Song explains, *The Wandering Earth* did not separate China from the rest of the world, but allowed China to be representative of humanity (Song). The heroism displayed by the Chinese protagonists was not led by nationalist interests, but by the widely supported value of protecting humankind. While such principles are represented here in a fictional future, they are the principles that the Chinese regime desire to be associated with their space programme in reality. Given the real political context in which the film was created, such key production choices were likely included in the film in order to align with state purported narratives that would show the Chinese nation in a positive light.

In addition to these narrative additions, the audience is consistently reminded of China’s role as a valued member of the united coalition through aesthetic choices. The space suits that are worn in the film were meticulously designed, involving over 1,000 separate parts (Li 2019). The decision to include the logo of the new coalition’s space force, designed to appear very similar to the UN’s well-known emblem, was again unlikely to have been an arbitrary choice. Placed on both the arms and the fronts of the suits and clothes worn by the characters, the symbol is frequently shown on screen, including during the important ending scene where a Chinese character sacrifices himself to protect the Earth. The presence of the symbol next to China’s national flag on the suits of the characters is also symbolic of China’s first space flight, when taikonaut Yang Liwei held up the flag of the UN alongside the Chinese flag to represent mutual aims and values for space exploration. The presence of the

symbol in the film acts as a permanent reminder to the audience that while the main characters are of Chinese origin, the work they do is ultimately for the benefit of humanity.

While the film does not explicitly condemn any nation as the antagonist of the story, the underlying ideology of the film is favourable towards the purported Chinese values of space exploration, and hints at a rejection of common US values associated with space exploration. According to Guo, Western science fiction portrays a sense of longing to escape Earth in favour of worlds beyond our own. While the American notion of space is one of an 'endless frontier' waiting to be explored, the Chinese mindset conversely does not desire to leave the home that it has identified with for thousands of years. According to Guo, the US mindset is that if Earth is experiencing a crisis, it is possible to run away from it. The Chinese mindset differs from this as exemplified in *The Wandering Earth* (Li). Instead of running from Earth in the face of crisis, Chinese science fiction demonstrates a different ideal of remaining with and protecting the planet. While not explicitly stating so in the film, the underlying narrative of wandering with the Earth instead of from it suggests that Chinese philosophies offer a leadership style that seeks to defend the planet and the heritages of its people. Chinese do not run from crises, but will remain and help where it can. This key theme in the movie suggests that China's technological development can only serve to further its capacities to help, and had the state not pursued the aim of advancing its space programme, the Earth's collective space capacities would have remained underdeveloped. In turn, the world would not likely have been able to save itself from the crises presented in the film.

The film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* has already proven to be a production favoured by the central government. The film has been recommended by the Ministry of Education to be shown to school students throughout China ("Sci-Fi Blockbuster"), and its financial success and award wins have been covered extensively by Party mouthpieces such as *Xinhua* and *People's Daily*. The film has also been continuously dubbed by the state media as "China's first homemade sci-fi blockbuster" ("First China-Made Sci-Fi Blockbuster"). The decision of the state media to promote *The Wandering Earth* as the nation's "first domestic sci-fi epic" is one that does not recognize China's history of science fiction film productions, ignoring films such as *Deformity Sci-Fi* [残废科幻] (2013), *Reset* [逆时营救] (2017), or *The Secret of Immortal Code* [伊阿索密码] (2018), to name only a few. *Death*

Ray on a Coral Island [珊瑚島上的死光] (1980) is widely considered to be China's "first science fiction film" (Zhang), but is again overlooked by the state in favor of presenting *The Wandering Earth* as China's first.

The key feature that differentiates film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* from its science fiction predecessors is that it actively promotes the government-purported narrative that China's technical capabilities are for the benefit of humanity as a whole. While *Death Ray on a Coral Island* sets China and Westerners as rivals, *The Wandering Earth* presents a more peaceful and diplomatic relationship between China and the world. Showcasing Chinese imaginaries of the nation's space capabilities as beneficial to the international community, the film conforms to the desired narrative that the state seeks to purport.

The regime recognises that *The Wandering Earth* portrays "a community of a shared future for mankind," a key quality it seeks to promote of its space ambitions (Chung). Most notably, the Wang Xiaohui, who acts as both the Executive Deputy Head of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Director of the Film Bureau of National Radio and Television Administration, reportedly praised the film for its portrayal of "the Chinese people's non-utilitarian, cosmopolitan and cooperative spirit" ("China's Film Authority").

Seeking to put its best foot forward on the international stage, the marketing of *The Wandering Earth* as China's first science fiction film intends to send the message that the nation's technological development has always been with the welfare of the international community in mind.

Conclusion

In the face of criticism by the US, the film adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* presents China as a technologically responsible, cooperative, supportive, and reliable actor in space that seeks to benefit of all of humanity. While the US has adopted more neoisolationist policies over the last few years, coupled with its assertion of dominance in space through the creation of the US Space Force, the film purports a more peaceful and cooperative narrative of China's space activities that fall in line with official state narratives. It is likely that these narrative additions to Liu's original short story were made with consideration given to the state's call for science fiction creators to incorporate and reinforce the government's real-life policy narratives.

In turn, the Chinese regime adopted the film as a state favourite, promoting it through a variety of methods and asserting it as representative of Chinese thought on the nation's technological development. However, with the global popularity of Chinese science fiction still its infancy, it remains to be seen how effective these incorporated state-approved narratives are at swaying the opinion of the international public on China's space affairs.

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Wondering about the Futures of the Wandering Earth: A Comparative Analysis of Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" and Frant Gwo's Film Adaptation



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FRANT Gwo's big-budget film *The Wandering Earth* (2019) hit Chinese cinemas big as the acclaimed first science fiction blockbuster from Chinese soil (Kuo) and has become one of China's highest-grossing films of all time ("The Wandering Earth"). The blockbuster also gained global visibility through its international distribution on Netflix, presenting an apocalyptic future scenario to the world through Chinese eyes. The film directly builds upon the universe conjured by the science fiction author Liu Cixin in his short story "The Wandering Earth". Liu has been lauded for his imaginative mixture of philosophical and scientific contemplations, earning him multiple national Galaxy Awards for best science fiction work and even the international Hugo Award once for best science fiction work ("Liu Cixin"). However, the short story and the film differ radically on several aspects and portray very different visions on the way humanity needs to change its ways to reach a happy ending at the end of their stories, including the required transformation of humanity to meet the demands of a dystopian future.

In this paper, I will clarify these differences through a comparative analysis between film and short story to abstract the different visions on the required changes humanity is in need of to save itself from extinction. Before doing so, I will briefly discuss the various genres the two works position themselves in and the process of adaptation. Then, I will describe the representation of the future world in the works and the ethical dilemmas posed by these narratives. After having clarified the main subtextual differences between the two works, I will reflect on the implied and different ways whereby humanity needs to transform itself to be able to survive the same fictional apocalypse.

Liu Cixin himself names as the source and most prominent element of science fiction the beauty of science itself. He says: "Science-fiction novels are thus bridges to this beauty, freeing it from formulas and displaying it for all to see" ("Beyond Narcissism" 23). This love for science expresses itself profoundly in his works, and not

the least in "The Wandering Earth". The narrative reveals the life of the protagonist as a small part of a detailed macro-history: the gargantuan project of maneuvering the entire Earth to Proxima Centauri. The subjugation of the character development to the scientific macro-details is characteristic of Liu's variant of science fiction, but these descriptive macro-details are in the film replaced by visual spectacle and dramatic turns.

From the considerable historical period Liu describes from initiation of the project to the abandonment of the solar system, the film only takes place during a small part halfway-through Liu's story when the Earth passes Jupiter. In the high budget film, the tale of the Earth's journey with its scientific specificities is substituted by an accessible disaster narrative that borrows many masculine and upbeat genre conventions from the action film. The distillation and popularization of the story comes to no surprise when the intended broad target audience of the film is juxtaposed with the niche sci-fi audience, but, in Liu's intended sense, the film's narrative is only part of a sci-fi tradition through the world it finds itself in and not specifically through narrative genre conventions.

At this point, we come to the issue of adaptation. Commonly, film adaptations are conceived as inferior to the books they are derived from. However, it is not my intention to approach these two works in a hierarchized relation of lineage. I will rather conceptualize them as two stories in a transmedial storyworld (as theorized by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon), where audiences can enter this universe through multiple platforms and narratives that do not always find coherence. Although issues such as medium specificity or fidelity to a source text are conventional topics of discussion in Adaptation Studies, the implications of the stories' subtextual elements are of most importance to my analysis to come to a conclusion about the differing morals of these stories and the suggested transformations of which the world is in need. To abstract these differing subtextual elements, I will focus in my textual comparison on ethical questions posed to humanity and the following decisions, with special attention to China as the focalizer of humanity in these narrated, apocalyptic futures.

Liu's story starts when the Earth stops rotating. The birth of the protagonist coincides with this first step of controlling the planet and transforming it into humanity's vehicle, and alongside the character's coming of age, the Earth changes more and more on its millennia-long journey. During a school trip around the world,

the protagonist and his classmates witness the colossal Earth Engines that serve as the Earth's motor, the catastrophic effects of the project on Earth's ecology, and their first splendid sunrise after years on the dark side of the Earth. The supranatural, technological achievements of humankind are constantly brought into ambivalent juxtapositions with the terrifying splendor of nature in Liu's descriptions. An example of this can be found in the protagonist's first thought when seeing an Earth Engine for the first time ("The Wandering Earth" 6). While marveling at the immense scale of the blue plasma beam, he is reminded of a riddle about an infinitely tall and broad wall.

What is the wall?

Death. (6)

Here, the conventional technocratic faith in technology to relieve humanity of the burdens of nature, and particularly of death, is lost when the power of technology becomes synonymous with the sublimity of death. During the following years, the expenses of technology to fuel the Earth's journey leave their mutilating traces on the Earth, slowly transforming it into an unrecognizable and lifeless place.

The contrasting of the horrors of technology and nature serve a higher purpose than solely description in the story, which is expressed most clearly when the children see the Sun for the first time. The Sun, normally the source of life, has now turned into the Earth's doom due to its predicted violent explosion in the near future, called a helium flash. When the children see the celestial body for the first time, they are struck with terror when they encounter humanity's biggest threat. But, when the children and their teacher gaze at the starlit sky later on, hopeful tears well up in their eyes when the teacher points out Proxima Centauri, "their new home!" Among the stars, "[o]nly one star held steady; it was the beam of a distant lighthouse over dark and stormy seas. . . . That star had taken the place of the Sun in our hearts. It was the only pillar of hope for one hundred future generations as they navigated a sea of trouble" (13). Already from a young age onward, the children are taught to direct their hopes at the promises of technology and to abandon the symbols of life from the past.

The global process of accelerating the Earth to gain enough speed to leave the solar system also incorporates the people of Earth in its self-transformation. Genetic

engineering (16) and birth control (26) have enabled humankind to regulate and evolve its members to unknown standards to meet the harsh conditions of the millennia-long project, but this has happened at a cost. For current generations, it is unimaginable how people in the past could have attached so many emotions to matters unrelated to planetary survival, including adultery (18). What is needed in the new world are reliable and docile persons, who can function optimally inside the world-encompassing Earth apparatus. Inessential subjects for this global cause, such as art and philosophy, are removed from school curricula (16), which leads to the solving of ethical dilemmas based on statistics in the name of the greater good. For example, when the underground hometown of the protagonist is hours away from being engulfed by magma, the rescue of young people is unquestionably prioritized regarding their higher beneficence to the global cause. Thus, it becomes too late to save the elderly, including the protagonist's mother, following a naturalized social Darwinist logic. Every form of individual agency or reflection disappears in the collective because of their shared burden of saving humanity, while they gradually lose their own humanity along the way.

When the Earth passes the hellish "behemoth" (34) of Jupiter in Liu's story, the film's primary storyline begins. The gravitational pull of Jupiter leads to the malfunctioning and destruction of many Earth Engines and raises the danger of planetary collision. Liu Qi, the protagonist of the film, travels through China and beyond its borders to help reactivate the Engines. At the same time, his father Liu Peiqiang tries in the International Space Station (ISS) to avert hopelessness by the United Earth Government (UEG). Liu Qi shares many similarities with the protagonist of the short story, such as a father in space and an uncle from Shanghai, but his character arc and the events in the film differ to such an extent that inconsistencies arise between story and film. The differing plots also have a profound effect on the overall morale of the works. While Liu's sci-fi shows the fragility and possible futility of humanity's project, the film portrays several hardheaded characters that refuse to lose hope and keep on striving to survive.

This ultimate impossibility of defeat despite hardships, which is the norm in the disaster film and the action film with few exceptions, comes to the fore the most when the film poses an ethical dilemma to Liu Peiqiang. The UEG has decided at the perceived point of no return in the wake of collision to activate the Helios Project: the launch of the ISS as an arc, containing numerous samples of animal and human

life, towards Proxima Centauri to act as the last means for humanity to survive. But, in a final attempt to avert collision, Liu Qi and his companions have, against the UEG's orders, called for the help of many national rescue teams on Earth. They have the plan to shoot a plasma beam from an Earth Engine towards Jupiter to ignite its atmosphere and blast the Earth away (in full accordance with the action film genre).

Liu Peiqiang in the ISS stands before the choice to subjugate himself to the plan of the UEG and to watch the Earth be destroyed below him, or to fly the ISS into Liu Qi's plasma beam that is just a few miles short of igniting Jupiter and to hope that the plan of the newly formed coalition of national rescue teams, under the leadership of the Chinese, will save the Earth. Liu Peiqiang chooses the latter and rebels against the UEG in a final attempt to save the world. In an emotional last dialogue between father and son, they forget their preceding conflicts and are reconciled as a family, just before the ISS explodes and Liu Peiqiang sacrifices himself for the greater good, ultimately saving his son and the world. The plan of the newly proposed world governance succeeds and Liu Qi survives, continuing to serve the purpose of *The Wandering Earth* with firm belief and in good spirits.

In Liu's story, the Earth bypasses Jupiter without technical complications, but not without social unrest. A conspiracy theory maintains that the Sun is not dying at all and that the entire journey is a hoax. A rebellion against the Coalition, the current world government, starts to take shape and divides the world into two groups: the ones who have held hope in the project and those who have lost it and desire to return to the earlier state of heliocentric orbit. The protagonist sides with the Coalition, motivated by his family's history in the military and not by his own conviction *per se*, but starts to slowly believe in the hoax as well after a long and violent period of war injuries and alcoholism. He deserts with other militaries on a hospital ward and helps to overthrow the last stronghold of the Coalition.

The rebels celebrate their victory and punish the remaining leading figures of the Coalition cruelly. During their last walk of shame, the remnants of the Coalition are spat upon and humiliated by all layers of society, including a little girl with "the wild rage in her eyes searing through her mask" (42). Then, the nuclear batteries from the prisoners' thermal suits are confiscated, and they are left to freeze to death on the ice-cold surface of the Earth, with the people of the rebellion watching. Every standard of moral order seems to have been forgotten. During the painfully slow submission to the cold by the last figures of the Coalition, the rebels start to sing

'My Sun' to praise their giver of life in the sky. Faith in the Sun and in the natural course of life seems to be restored, until suddenly the helium flash occurs. Then, "[a] red dim sphere had replaced the Sun. From our vantage point, it slowly swelled until it reached the size of the Sun of old, a strange memory from Earth's original orbit... But, it was no longer our Sun" (44). The rebellion shows itself to be built on an illusion. Their hope of return is shattered and their future is uncertain. The Sun has died, but "[f]ortunately, we still lived" (44).

In the last chapter of the story, half a century has passed and the protagonist has grown old. The Earth's journey has been continued towards the dark emptiness of space beyond Pluto. However, the protagonist is not overcome by despair or pessimism and sees before his mind's eye visions from life in Proxima Centauri. "I see my great-grandchildren, one hundred generations removed, playing and laughing on green grass". While faith in the original Sun has faded and the errors of technology have been discovered, he directs his beliefs at "the three golden suns of Proxima Centauri" (46). Hope has not been lost, although humanity has been forced to transcend its earlier moral and technological boundaries and a long and tough road is still ahead for many generations to come.

Despite both texts' happy endings, the morals of the two narratives give a very different estimation of the new status of humanity after the hardships of the project. In the case of Liu's story, humanity's morale is busted and battered, but a shimmer of hope remains in the envisioning of a very distant and utopian future. The demise of the faith in technology and the following failed rebellion show that humanity is in dire need of self-transformation to find a new form that is fit for the conditions of the technological world of the future. Liu Cixin argues that humanity has to move beyond an anthropocentric narcissism in the far reaches of space, in which we are nothing but "a cosmic speck of dust" ("Beyond Narcissism" 22). Science fiction shows itself to be a genre well fit to challenge this central self-conception and to rethink the position of the human in relation to the ungraspable immensity of the universe and to the unthinkable potential of technology.

The film, however, has fewer moral bumps in the road to Proxima Centauri. Following the three-act model of Hollywood blockbusters, several obstacles are defined in the generic plot that need to be overcome to guarantee a happy ending. The plot-driven story designates the natural environment of Jupiter as the antagonist (at a certain point, a character even decides to futilely shoot a machine gun at it

while cursing the gas giant), against which the Earth is in need of defense. Frictions between different characters and nations obstruct productive collaboration, which is only achieved when a shared goal is found and the previous form of world governance is overthrown under the new Chinese leadership. Humanity has not undergone a moral transformation but has only experienced a changing of the guards in its global governance.

In conclusion, Liu Cixin writes in accordance with his own principles concerning sci-fi by addressing the moral status quo of humanity as it is focalized by China. Through allegorically positioning characters and nations, he tells a tale of the world and envisions how humanity can change her own self-conception in relation to science to be ready for the challenges of ecological disasters and other sci-fi scenarios in the maybe not-so-distant future. Frant Gwo's film does not question the core of humanity but rather the position of China in the world. The film utilizes the rebellion in its narrative to indicate the fallacies of the current world governance, and imagines how humanity can only be saved, and its utopian future far away can only be reached when China's methods are followed. Although the film has international allure through representing the territories and populations of many nations, it ultimately tells a story of China as the world through its claimed monopoly to guide the world towards survival. The film's moral, just like its narrative, seems to remain stuck halfway through Liu's story, where the wavering of hope has not set in just yet. Hopefully, the announced sequel of the film will divert from just making a political statement and will correspond more with Liu's sci-fi storyworld through engagement with the moral dimensions of the near future and the ensuing challenges in it for all of humanity, instead of merely redrawing national borders.

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A Diagnosis of Sinofuturism from the Urban-Rural Fringe¹

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SINOFUTURISM, in its emergence as exemplified by a series of essays (Goodman, 1998; Land, 2014), books (Greenspan, 2014; Hui, 2016), and videos (Lek, 2016), is still predominantly a discourse of the Anglosphere. Through a reading of Land's past essays on the Shanghai Expo and Greenspan's perspectives on Shanghai urbanism (2014, 2020), I would argue that sinofuturism in its current English articulation is perhaps more of a reaction towards the impotence and expiry of the declinist West than an incisive provocation of Chinese futures concretely rooted in the Chinese condition. The disheartened Anglo intellectual looks beyond "the death-grip of an embittered and self-mortifying anti-modernism" (Land, 2011) of the apologetic old world and for "zones of experimentation" (Greenspan, 2020) in the new world. It starts with an astute critique and an exasperating divorce from *baizuo* or the 'White Left' but then it falls short in responding to the disparity between planned ideals of futurity and their manifestations in a (un)managed disorder in China

Shanghai is presented as the model city by the sinofuturists: a spectacular retro-futurist revival, propelled by the 2010 World Expo itself, towards the status of World Capital. The crucial argument is that this revival has its own texture of futurity: not linear, not cyclical, but a spiral temporality. "Forward to the past" of the Golden Age 1920s: "neomodernity is at once more than modernity and modernity again" (Greenspan, 2014, p.12). Unlike Land's optimism, Yuk Hui's assessment of sinofuturism is a pathological "modernisation without modernity": there is nothing new about sinofuturism as "ultimately, it is only an acceleration of the European modern project" (Hui 2016, p.297); a lack of moral cosmotechnics in contemporary China, despite the economic and sociotechnical achievements, can potentially lead to disastrous consequences. In both diagnoses, the singular sinofuture derives from the official vision of modernity, whether in Land's twist of a spiral temporality or Yuk Hui's critique of an accelerating society that lacks a moral cosmology. To various degrees, both remain ungrounded in already fermenting visions of immiscible futurities elsewhere.

While also remaining vigilant for "zones of experimentation", this essay chooses

not to focus on the first-tier cities, *Pudong* skyline, special economic zones, massive factories, drones, automation, surveillance, and techno-nationalism. I am not interested in searching for the “authentic” China as much as the immiscible condition of a sinofuture itself—I will give one example of the quarantined temporality of the *chengxiangjiehubu* (literally “urban-rural fringe”).² The urban-rural fringe is not necessarily the side of China that the official propaganda of futurity prevents one from seeing, nor should it be seen as somehow more authentic or naturalistic than the city. This is not to say that the fringe is invisible, but it is certainly undesirable, as its clear definition is often obscured. These intermediate contact zones are to be differentiated from *chenzhongcun*, or “urban villages,” which were transient, dense, urban overgrowth in/around the city centres to accommodate migrants during the early phase of (re)modernisation from 1990s onwards. They were hastily demolished as junk space in the 2010s to pave way for erections of new urban architectures.³ In contrast, the urban-rural fringe constitutes semi-permanent settlements that serve an indispensable role between cities and the countryside as “a point of transit and transformation” (Gong 2012).

The urban-rural fringe is a “filthy disorder” (Gong 2012) of various settlements: small-to-medium scale factories/workshops that are mostly outcast by the city administrators, garbage recycle stations, the bastardized residential architecture that arbitrarily and incongruously mixes influences (i.e. stereotypes) from all over the world, main roads as the large trucks pass through with (often unfinished) subsidiary roads connecting the villages, unsanitary restaurants with trashy décor, dodgy home clinics (especially those specializing in illegal abortions), pink neon light hair salons (as brothels are further purged from the cities), internet cafes filled with underage dropouts who are bored stiff, and wet markets of fresh produce and various exotic meats which are chiefly blamed as “sources of hedonistic-cum-pathogenic peril” (Lynteris 121).

The urban-rural fringe processes the trash and various material and affective excess for the cities. It also accommodates the “humiliated people, the peasants [who have] lost their land yet been rejected by the city, the trash collectors” (Gong 2012). The term *piao*, or float, was used to accentuate migrant precarity in the first-tier cities.⁴ However, people don’t “float” here at the fringe; instead, people are mostly rejects being sedimented without future hope. It is not sedentariness in the sense of full modernisation as if the society will finally be rid of its “premodern” and transitory

deformities. The fringe zone is not a temporary construct; even though some areas gentrify as the mega city expands, they will continue to exist on the new fringe as their existence is marginal but indispensable. It is not an alterity that transcends modernity nor an alienated “dead time” that was fiercely attacked by Situationism but being sedentary in the “never-ending everyday” (Thouny 114). Lawrence Lek summarizes it well in his video essay: “sinofuturism does not care about a dramatically better future as long as it survives.” Survival is the true fundamental “hard-lined principle.” People rather put faith in a tiny profit margin than uncertain futures; there is no morality or “values” where there is no time. Gong (2012) considers the stray dogs omnipresent in the fringe zone and their society formed around human waste “presents a portent of our future,” much like the “waste people” on Silicon Isle as described in Chen Qiufan’s *Waste Tide*: it is a futurity arrested in multilayered dissolution and reconfiguration of pollutants and temporality.

Urban-rural fringe produces a no-futurity that symbolizes the “quotidianized apocalypse” (Thouny): “there is no departure, no aim to reach or home to return to” (Thouny 116). As a contemporary example, my current self-quarantine eerily resonates with the idea of a quotidianized apocalypse of the fringe. Wuhan, the original epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, was often disparagingly given the nickname *chaoji da xiancheng* or “supersized county town” for the city’s infamous image of being “unhygienic, disorderly, and dreadful” (*zhang luan cha*).⁵ Wuhan’s spatial texture, unlike the fulfilling aspirations of Shanghai, was accelerating and decelerating at an entirely different pace. To a large degree, despite being an immense city in size, Wuhan glorified the aesthetics of the urban-rural fringe as captured in the recent crime thriller *Wild Goose Lake* (2019). In an attempt to elevate itself from the stigma of “supersized county town,” the city hosted international events like the World Military Games 2019, through which the city centre was “rejuvenated” and its colonial past (the European concessions much like Shanghai) was refurbished and modernized. The expectation was high, much like Shanghai’s World Expo. However, the city only succeeded in garnering international attention due to the current pandemic situation.

During the lockdown, time itself is quarantined in a state of continuous waiting. Cai Bo (2020) writes on his experience during the lockdown, “time itself is a burning anxiety; my mum used to tell me, days seem to be long but short when they are lived; she complains recently, whatever is plenty, nothing is more plentiful than days.”⁶

Linear time, or calendar time, becomes irrelevant, and cyclical time also malfunctions as I sleep and wake up during arbitrary hours. A week in, time was spent in between spasms of violent emotions provoked by the videos circulated on WeChat: terror, anxiety, and fury. The quarantine time is “severed forwards” (Cai 2020) as it is torn between stacks of temporalities: the viral acceleration choked, quite literally, the health care system; desperate and panic-stricken patients waiting eight hours in long queues outside the hospital and risking another round of nosocomial infection; waking up day after day filtering fake news and dubious WeChat screenshots only to find out the official Hope is plastic and melts instantly with the flaming anxiety; staying up until midnight to order groceries online before they’re instantly sold out; even the most politically unmotivated realize that poetics of heroism and stories of machinic efficiency (of tracking the infected) merely covers the unknown number of bodies that went into the furnace without any rituals and countless others who live in unresolved temporal anxiety. The imagery of the pandemic is thus “a cyclical plot of meaningless endlessness... [it is] a poetics not of death and resurrection but hollowed out of hope and inhabited by omens and signs of an ‘end indefinitely postponed’” (Gomen cited in Lynteris 127).

The “viral alarm” caused by the untimely death of Dr Li Wen-Liang did not last long as rage was quickly soaked and dissipated in idleness and lethargy. Žižek (2020) had hoped for the “unintended consequence” of “dead time” self-reflection: being stuck in quarantine at home briefly forced people to realize the sedentariness and precarity in “look toward money” that replaced the official slogan “look to the future” (Cockain 2). However, the miserable populace never cared about progress nor regression, as it had been already waiting for an “apocalypse that never ceases to come, and pass” (Thouny 2009, p.126). The urban-rural fringe should not be seen as the disintegration behind the glorious façade of Shanghai but rather one of the sinofuturisms we can all, but are too reluctant to, viscerally experience. My hope is that the already fermenting immiscible condition of sinofuturity won’t be entirely eclipsed by ungrounded theoretical speculation.

Notes

1. This essay is written on the quarantined grounds of Wuhan amidst a provincial lockdown.

2. It would be naïve to juxtapose the urban and rural but it's largely true that until quite recently, rural villages were largely left alone in the developmental discourse as the major cities absorbed the most capable—village life was sapped of its vitality; migration to the city via cheap labour or university entrance exam was the only upward mobility possible. Gong Jian and Li Jinghu's art project *Urban Rural Fringe Group* (2012) is a great source of inspiration for this essay. For another example, the animation film *Have a Nice Day* (2017) by Liu Jia also captures the aesthetics of the urban-rural fringe very well (Da).

3. In some recent cases, Chinese city planning has learnt to build upon and gentrify these sites that are supposed to be outmoded by continuous modernisation itself instead of outright demolition.

4. Anna Greenspan has described Cara Wallis's *Technomobility* as a relevant ethnographic account of this sociotechnical precariousness of "the floating population."

5. *Xiancheng* is a different geographical concept from urban-rural fringe but the two concepts are almost identical in their imageries of aesthetics and sociality.

6. Chinese translation is my own.

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NONFICTION REVIEWS

Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Films

Michele Braun



Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell. *Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Films*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 237 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 9781476672731.

INTRODUCING *Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Film*, Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell contextualize their study by hypothesizing that the "American bedrock shifted" (2) after September 11, 2001 and that human beings process reality, fear and angst through art. The central premise is that 9/11 introduced new apocalyptic themes into filmmaking. This cultural contextualization offers potential as a unifying theme within the volume, but, disappointingly, its application is uneven across the chapters that follow.

The first chapter, "Envisioning the Apocalypse," states it will address some of the texts that do not fit in the remainder of the volume. It describes apocalyptic film as grounded in a climate change-induced fear of tsunamis, zombie-infected cities, and the contrast between the loveliness of ordinary life and the desolation of post-apocalyptic landscapes. It reads as an attempt to use filmic features, like special effects, setting, and light and color, to lay the book's groundwork, though it never explicitly says so.

Another organizing chapter, "Hollywood's Doomsday-Prepper Backpacks" suggests that apocalyptic film produces character types such as the Apocalyptic Denier, the Unselfish Pragmatist, the Romantic Moralizer, the Lotus Eater, and the Fetishist, by drawing from Neville Shute's 1953 *On the Beach* and its 1959 film adaptation. The reader expects these to serve as models for 21st century apocalyptic film, but is instead offered additional types, which leaves one wondering the purpose of establishing the *On the Beach* reference.

The bulk of the book's remaining chapters chronicle the post 9/11 effect on subgenres of apocalyptic narrative. Young adult film is rife with apocalyptic imagery, and the analysis of *WALL-E*'s (2008) social commentary and warning is insightful as it focuses on narrative, in the chapter "Coming of Age in Post-Apocalyptic Worlds." The post-apocalyptic landscape of *WALL-E* contrasts with the optimism and joy

that *WALL-E* extracts from his work and encounter with Eve, producing a film that suggests it's not too late to reconnect with each other and prevent apocalypse by environmental disaster.

"Speaking to *Them*, Speaking to Us" traces the changing social context for two iconic apocalyptic films: *War of the Worlds* (2003) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008). The authors argue that the isolationist, survivalist approach of Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is an analog for the fearful response post 9/11 to arm oneself and only worry about oneself and one's family. This contrasts with the final chapter of the volume, "The New Superhero Dynamic," which suggests that the upsurge of superhero movies in the last two decades reflects a turn to community and cooperation as a means of saving us from irresponsible leadership, fragmented communities, and social problems like poverty, racism, and crime in a post-911 landscape. It's difficult to reconcile these two approaches to apocalypse, and the fantastical nature of the superhero genre would suggest it is idealistic while the isolationist approach is the more realistically viable one.

The answer to why "Why *Super 8* Can't be *E.T.*" lies firmly in the thesis of the book: that 9/11 changed the collective American imagination of apocalypse and our attitudes towards aliens (and alien encounters). A friendly and harmless E.T. is replaced in *Super 8* (2011) by an alien treated by the military like a high-value terrorist. The introduction of "terrorist" into the American lexicon after 9/11 transforms the alien from curious lost traveller to threat. This chapter does lead nicely into the next, "The Difficulty of Framing a Real Apocalypse," though the exploration of film that directly references 9/11 oddly pairs Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) with Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011), using trauma to link the fatherless children at the center of each narrative. The parallels between the texts are numerous (as critics have already noted), though the traumatic connection is about parental loss rather than experience of apocalypse per se and thus is limited in its contribution.

The brief discussion of *Warm Bodies* (2013) at the end of "The Apocalyptic Landscape of Love" explores the hope inherent in R's gradually reawakening heart, suggesting that a zombie apocalypse does not need to be the end. The hopeful ending of the other texts analyzed in the chapter, the *Twilight* films and *Beautiful Creatures* (2013), however, is a result of individual triumph over evil, which creates an apocalypse of two, which is more limited than the usual conception of apocalypse as an event that destroys whole civilizations.

This liberal reimagination of apocalypse continues in the next chapter. While the authors admit that the films discussed in "Emmerich's Apocalyptic Visions of Shakespeare" may not be obviously apocalyptic, they explain that Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011), which suggests that Shakespeare didn't write the plays and poems credited to him, reflects the dystopian ethos of the 21st century, an age of questioning everything. They draw parallels between the contested identity of Shakespeare as presented in *Anonymous* and the birther movement in the U.S. that sought to discredit Barack Obama's presidency by contesting his nationality, though how either fictional or real contested identity is apocalyptic is not made clear.

There are some excellent insights into 21st century American films in this volume that make it worth reading. However, the connection of these texts to each other and to apocalypse is often tenuous. The challenge with linking 9/11 and apocalypse is that together they inscribe only a small slice of an overlapping Venn diagram whose totality is much larger. Additionally, the repeated references to the home state of the authors (Ohio) and their country provide local examples for a global thesis about 21st century apocalypse. The nature of this relationship between the local and the global is never clear, and one gets the sense that many of the chapters may have stood better on their own than forced into a book with a theme of apocalyptic film.

Westworld and Philosophy: Mind Equals Blown

Robert J. Creedon



Richard Greene and Joshua Heter, editors. *Westworld and Philosophy: Mind Equals Blown*. Open Court, 2019. Paperback. 298 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 9780812699913.

WESTWORLD is an HBO series that goes beyond the *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976) movies and the short-lived *Westworld* (1980) TV series with their format of sex and violence over strong writing. We see the evolution of AI to the emergence of a new species by the end of the first season. This series is rich with philosophical concepts with episode titles like “The Bicameral Mind” and “Dissonance Theory” as well as its intertextual elements, notably its many Shakespearean references. Such a series screams out to be included in the *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series.

As I prepared for this review, I wrote a list of the topics to expect while watching the series and waiting for the book to arrive. This is volume 122, which makes it the ninth I have read. This volume didn’t disappoint as it covers all the topics I expected from the *Westworld* series and previous volumes of this philosophy series. The chapters were well-written and edited to be clear and concise within their standard 10 page format. Each addresses classical and modern philosophy as reflected in the actions and dialogue of the *Westworld* characters. The book is an easy read and employs an effective and distinct formula of introducing a concept in each chapter and exploring it in relation to the series. This formula is a great aid for teaching and provides with each chapter the basis of a good lesson. Furthermore, the ten-page essays can provide students with bite size lessons that make reading more enjoyable and palpable.

The first half of the book focuses on the first season primarily. The first six chapters delve directly into the concepts of identity, self-awareness and shared reality that are the essential to any discussion of AI. While there are a couple of minor editing errors, the writing and the arguments remain clear. These chapters cover in detail the familiar topics I expected to see addressed and are extremely well done. However, the chapter on evil, “When Bad Things Happen to Good Hosts (and Good Things

to Bad Guests),” is confusing, as the chapter does not provide bridging support between the concepts of Susan Neiman and the concept of evil. The writer seems to want readers to discover the connection on their own, without the guidance that the earlier chapters provide. This technique doesn’t work well in this format and is very jarring to readers who have bought into the format of previous chapters. It is very unclear whether this is an editing or a writing issue as the chapter seems to have missing information.

The chapter “Justice or Pleasure” changes things up delightfully, as it dives into the world of *Westworld* by relating it to the 1980 *Westworld* TV series. The chapter “Just Desserts or Just Rebellion” provides an insightful treatment of the just war philosophical argument. It is especially valuable, as *Westworld* is not a grand epic war but instead explores conflict on a smaller scale, offering a useful venue for discussing themes of war, rebellion and revolution in grittier environments and situations. This deeper look at the conflict as explored in the series will be a highlight to anyone interested in military science fiction, fiction or nonfiction. The rest of the book explores newer ideas, including the significance of the Hosts as Simulacra in relation to the concept of slavery. The final few chapters expand on the format with topics not often seen in the series. Although it felt like everything is covered earlier, these later chapters are a wonderful surprise with these enlightening unique treatments of those concepts.

This volume is a great read for anyone who has followed this HBO series, as it goes beneath the action to explore the ideas and issues raised as the characters evolve. It is clear that all the individual writers did their homework and reviewed some of the interviews with the cast and creators to delve deeper into their concepts before writing. This book would be useful for for any first year philosophy or drama/writing student to explore how the show addresses concepts of consciousness, free will, and the mechanics of change. It carries readers beyond HBO’s ‘sexposition’ form of storytelling to get to the real adult content of thoughts, ideas and concepts. The ten-page chapter format makes these chapters great ways of introducing larger concepts, providing common ground for readers who lack expertise in philosophy. The majority of the chapter writers have used the formula effectively and crafted essays that provide useful lessons. One of the basic theories of learning is to relate new ideas to previous knowledge; these chapters do so effectively, thereby creating or improving understanding for all readers, whether scholars or new learners,

though the book is more useful for such novices. Most chapters could be used in a classroom setting above grade 11, although the show content is adult. This book covers large concepts such as self-identity, person versus non-person, pain creating change, freedom of choice, ability to have self-knowledge, just wars, and shared reality. Different chapters could therefore be useful across a wide range of classes and disciplines.

For anyone who is truly interested in philosophy, science fiction, writing or the *Westworld* TV series specifically, this is a great book for studying philosophical concepts. This is one of the strongest of the books I have read in this series; it will go on my shelves prized not only for the clarity of its chapters but also for the clarity it has brought to me after reading them. This volume is an excellent first step into this series.

Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Humanism



Nathaniel Doherty

Tom Idema. *Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Humanism*. Routledge, 2018. Hardcover. 176 pp. \$140. ISBN 9780415788229.

PART of the *Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture* series, Tom Idema's *Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Posthumanism* roots itself squarely in contemporary European posthumanism (with a feminist inflection). Idema's introduction helpfully sketches out what he means by the term "posthumanism," noting specifically the strain of posthumanism preoccupied with transformation and relationships between species and environments. From here the chapter proceeds to define and situate the book's central premise, outlining the idea of environmental posthumanism as it manifests in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* novels (1987-89), Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio* (1999), Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1992-99). Each chapter pairs a few key, usually somewhat current and innovative, scientific concepts with Idema's reading of a primary SF text in order to suggest that human transformation in response to environment can be read productively through the lens of environmental posthumanism in both fiction and science. Because Idema brings his scientific sources into relief through heavy use of citation, this text can serve as a primer on the scientific background of environmental posthumanism or as an introduction to the resonances between science and general posthuman thought.

Idema's idea is that certain SF texts interface with posthumanist reevaluation of humanity through an emphasis on reduced anthropocentrism. Environmental posthumanism comes into focus when this anti-anthropocentric change is brought about by human characters' interaction with their environments. When Idema lays out his uses of "stages," on which these transformations are elaborated, the book encounters one of its few weak points. This idea of several stages—temporal, spatial, epistemological—complicates the book's central argument about environmental posthumanism in a way that is sometimes more distracting than illuminating.

One of Idema's obvious strengths, however, is his ability to weave a relationship of interpretive collaboration between innovative scientific approaches and science fiction narrative thought. Idema reads science fiction as a “privileged literary genre for thinking about environmental change in a posthuman vein” (7).

In the introduction to *Stages of Transmutation*, Idema lays out the background of his environmental posthumanist approach, emphasizing the work of Rosi Braidotti in particular, and provides a short but detailed history of SF narratives that engage heavily with the idea of environment. He then traces the development of environmentally-oriented strains of posthumanism in contrast to strains that are focused specifically on technological innovation. This sketch also distinguishes both forms of posthumanism from transhumanism, a movement identified by posthumanist thinkers like Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe as distinguished by its disinterest in revising the role of “the human” in philosophical, social, and governmental landscapes in favor of maximizing human agency. Idema notes an increasing visibility, in contemporary scientific thought, of approaches that de-center genetics in favor of interactions between organisms and the environment. These approaches are frequently linked to environmental posthumanism throughout the text; particularly the focus is on empirical science's overlap with philosophy and science and technology studies. The introduction closes with a consideration of the roots of resistance to the idea of environmentally-driven human transformation in anthropocentric religious, civic, and scientific traditions.

The first chapter is titled simply “Introduction,” resonating with the central focus of the chapter, which is a refinement of concepts surrounding just who counts as a responsible actor in mutually transformative ecological relationships. Idema takes the scientific work of Susan Oyama and pairs it with Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy, weaving them together around the idea of terraformation. In Idema's reading, the trajectory set by Oyama's thought is important for the notion of “intra-actions,” a way of understanding the mutually-constitutive aspects of the relationship between organisms and their environment. Oyama and several scholars following her lead contribute evidence of the responsiveness of the genetic code to its surroundings, de-centering theories that position genetic transformation as the cause of environmental change. Idema identifies this dynamic in Robinson's *Mars* trilogy as “the tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives” which “is . . . played out in the contrast between human focalization and (quasi-)scientific narration” (63). For

the *Mars* trilogy, this means that the central scientists' attempts to terraform Mars become impossible to disentangle from the process by which Mars "areoforms" the humans introduced to it. The striking novum, in Idema's understanding, is the humans' nearly total mastery of physics, biological manipulation, and both genetic and mechanical engineering. Even with this mastery, the humans find it impossible to control the evolution of the Martian environment without being changed by it, both socio-politically and biologically. Idema argues that this entanglement of politics and biology is how Oyama's oeuvre and Robinson's trilogy work together to push science and science fiction into the realm of environmental posthumanism. For Idema, science and politics become necessarily interconnected as a result, in opposition to what he terms the modern idea of science as an apolitical realm of objective observation.

Chapter two is less cohesive and more focused on using literature to explicate environmental posthumanism. Casting Bear's *Darwin's Radio* as a work of "informed speculation" allows Idema's reading of the novel to be a stage for a broad claim about SF in general: that it is the imaginary creative space in which informed authors actually contribute to both literature and science by pushing the boundaries of science more broadly than is allowable in the laboratory. Science Fiction, when written by a scientifically well-informed author, acts as a laboratory for thought experiments that help both SF and science improve. *Darwin's Radio* is particularly suited to Idema's purpose because it illustrates different approaches to science's relationship with institutions. The chapter contains a detour through the fruitful but meandering pathways of Deleuze & Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. While this allows Idema to provide a thorough primer on the concept of "nomad science," which is relevant to his point in the chapter, the explication is too long at six and a half pages, moving too far afield of the discussion of *Darwin's Radio*.

Chapter three's primary claim is that Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy dramatizes the dissolution of the apparatus of androcentric epistemology and communication that structures humanity in the 21st century through the physical and mental transformation of the central characters. Idema links this narrative pattern with what he identifies as the trilogy's postmodernist pastiche of genres. This literary-critical observation works alongside a series of contemporary scientific approaches that emphasize the capacity for the environment to function as an actant that displaces the human, and human knowledge constructs like literary genres, from

the center of epistemological relevance. Stuart Kaufman's theory of evolution and Rosi Braidotti's ethics of sustainability are particularly important here. Kaufman's theory mirrors Idema's reading of the activity of the environment in the trilogy, and Braidotti's ethics offer a lens through which to read one central character's willing engagement, even fascination with, forces and processes outside the individual that seemingly dissolve and transform the very concept of individuality.

In chapter four, Idema's central literary argument is that Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* "is an exploration of interspecies relationality and subjectivity that fundamentally questions anthropocentrism" (139). This interpretation rests on the argument that the trade of genetic material for survival between the Oankali—extraterrestrials with inborn genetic engineering abilities—and Earth's few surviving humans is not coercive in a colonialist or capitalist sense because the Oankali are also profoundly changed by the exchange and do not have full control over the process of blending their genome with that of the humans. As a result, at the end of the trilogy, there has been a merger between humanity and the Oankali that allows both to coexist where before both would have died out. Idema does not manage to completely refute the understanding of the Oankali as coercive because he does not directly approach the Oankali's control over which humans are allowed to be involved in the process of deciding or the coercive nature of the offer to exchange or die out. Idema's argument that comparing the trade to biotechnological capitalist exploitation ignores textual details is more convincing given his elaboration of the unpredictable results of the species merger and how the human insistence on confrontation and the value of both purity and separatism is mirrored between resistant human characters and readers that emphasize the coercive aspects of the bonding. Calling the reader to face the ways in which their thinking is limited in exactly the same way as characters' is a convincing rhetorical move. Idema manages to explain the discomfort elicited by, and depicted in, the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy in a way that leaves the discomfort intact but makes its profound interpretive weight clear. His use of Braidotti's posthuman ethics alongside Donna Haraway's work on companion species renders his identification of the uncomfortable and profound interconnection forged between species as the primary novum of the series convincing.

Overall, *Stages* is a very useful work for scholars interested in both science studies and science fiction. This work's occasional lack of clear transitions between ideas and vocabulary of different disciplines should be forgiven given the complexity of the

task Idema has attempted in this slim volume. Working through those challenges will be rewarding.

Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction



Andy Duncan

Alec Nevala-Lee. *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction*. Dey St., 2018. Hardcover. 544 pp. \$28.99. ISBN 9780062571946.

IN his first non-fiction book, novelist and longtime *Analog* contributor Alec Nevala-Lee tackles a daunting topic: a braided biography of the affinity group of science fiction writers that once centered on John W. Campbell Jr., the longtime *Astounding/Analog* editor who for a decade shaped a field that subsequently arrayed itself largely in opposition to him.

One must admire the feat of distillation this book represents. Nevala-Lee appends 83 pages of notes and an eight-page, 94-item secondary bibliography, but he also seems well acquainted with all the works of his notoriously prolific subjects, and the complete contents of 30-plus years of Campbell's monthly magazines. In shaping this prodigious mass of material, Nevala-Lee's storytelling skills serve him well. Throughout, he maintains firm control of his multiple narratives, and his pacing never flags.

Nevala-Lee acknowledges that he is "particularly indebted" (415) to Asimov's three volumes of memoirs, to William H. Patterson's two-volume Heinlein biography, and to Russell Miller's *Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* (1987). But the Asimov and Patterson books are forbidding tomes of layered minutiae that dissatisfy in different ways (Asimov by blithely ignoring the difficult material, Patterson by forcing his protean subject into a manageable libertarian box), while Miller's bracing muckrake has been legally unavailable in the United States for decades thanks to Scientologist litigation. (If you're content with a PDF, the robust anti-Church of Scientology web can fix you up.) Nevala-Lee's judicious and clear-eyed sampling of these predecessors is thus something of a public service.

Every page of *Astounding* is engaging and thought-provoking, and even those familiar with the era will make discoveries here. Especially intriguing are Nevala-Lee's character sketches of the women who eventually broke free of their husbands'

concentric macho orbits, one way or another; Dona Campbell, Leslyn Heinlein, and Sara Hubbard deserve a collective biography of their own.

Many of Nevala-Lee's most compelling passages involve John Campbell, a confounding and ultimately tragic figure who understandably has eluded biographers until now. Nevala-Lee details Campbell's unhappy adolescence and complex family life; the development of his lonely conviction that science fiction was somehow central to the 20th-century American enterprise; his ability to attract disciples and repel them in equal measure; and the racist attitudes that poisoned much of his later thinking.

Above all, Nevala-Lee explores Campbell's genuinely "astonishing" capacity for self-invention, which often was indistinguishable from self-deception. That he infamously was given to identifying himself, without evidence, as a nuclear physicist pales beside some of Campbell's grander claims, for example that he once pinned the hapless Asimov to a chair through sheer hypnotic will power, or that his biofeedback control of his own cell structures meant he could never die. Fans of Mary Roach's and John Grant's books on pseudoscience and fringe science will find much to appreciate here.

Nevala-Lee's most poignant chapter details the grief-stricken Campbell's characteristic reaction to his stepson Joe Kearney's fatal 1955 car accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike: a vow to solve the problem of "the relationship between the present human mental mechanism and the operation of high-energy, high-performance, extreme-endurance machines" (314). Nothing came of it, other than everything: "Joe's death was too painful for him to abandon it entirely," Nevala-Lee writes. "The answer, he decided, was psionics, which would serve as a source of objective data on the brain. . . . It was a turning point in the history of the genre, and although Joe was never mentioned again, he provided its unspoken motivation, haunting it to the end like a ghost" (315-316).

Nevala-Lee's final hundred pages, though they climax with the science-fictional triumph of Apollo 11, comprise a long dying fall, as his principals go their separate ways from the 1950s onward. Heinlein turned to "slick" magazines, YA fiction, and eventual cult status in both the Haight and the Pentagon; Asimov embraced popular science and gained household fame as a go-to expert on all subjects; and Hubbard steadily faded from view behind the impenetrable cloud layers of the church he founded. Moreover, all of them largely kept their distance from their onetime

mentor, until Campbell's death in 1971 triggered a spasmodic wave of nostalgia in the field for all that he once signified. He should have lived to participate in the tacky yet touching 1972 ocean cruise promoted as the Voyage Beyond Apollo, described in Nevala-Lee's epilogue. I'm sure no participant ever quite forgot that voyage, much as they may have tried.

Nevala-Lee has a good story to tell, and he tells it well, but what is its larger meaning—other than perhaps to underscore the late Thomas Disch's argument, in *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (1998), that the history of science fiction is inextricably tied to cranks, charlatans, and hoaxers? On the last page of his back-of-the-book Acknowledgments, Nevala-Lee writes, "My greatest hope is that this book will inspire a larger conversation about the history of science fiction" (411). One could argue that the conversation is already under way, and that Campbell and company are not terribly relevant to it. Three recent brilliant pop-culture biographies—Julie Phillips on Alice Sheldon a.k.a. James Tiptree Jr., Ruth Franklin on Shirley Jackson, and Jill Lapore on Wonder Woman—make their eccentric 20th-century subjects seem quite timely, inspiring to a new generation of creators, and relevant far beyond genre borders. Can such a brief be made today even for Asimov and Heinlein, much less Campbell and Hubbard?

Packed with rich, weird details and told with a storyteller's brio, *Astounding* is a welcome account of the field's pulp origins. As I enjoy and admire it, I can't help but wonder whether it hasn't been published a generation too late.

Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World



Anelise Farris

Anita Tarr and Donna R. White, editors. *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*. University Press of Mississippi, 2018. Hardcover. 290 pp. \$70. ISBN 9781496816696.

SINCE the 19th century, liberal humanist thought has encouraged the view that the ideal human being is unified, authoritative, and entirely autonomous (and generally male, white, and heterosexual). Not only does this favor a certain type of individual, but it also promulgates speciesism and fails to account for the ways in which our bodies interact with other forms of matter and different environments. Posthumanism, in contrast to traditional humanism, approaches the human as a hybrid, boundless subject. Through this lens, scholars critically examine the relationship between human beings and their environment, technology, and other species.

In *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, editors Anita Tarr and Donna R. White have compiled twelve essays that emphasize the unique applicability of posthumanist thought to the study of young adult literature, where issues related to the changing body are paramount. Following a comprehensive yet concise introduction in which Tarr and White define the many forms of posthumanism, the collection is divided into four parts. Part one, “Networked Subjectivities,” includes two chapters that theorize a posthuman understanding of subjectivity—one that moves away from the singular self to an ethical understanding of one’s plurality. Mathieu Donner, in his reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Mind of My Mind* (1977), questions the possibility of achieving unity without sameness, and Shannon Hervey reflects on social media as a type of collaborative, networked self-writing.

“The Monstrous Other: Posthuman Bodies,” the second part of the collection, contains five chapters that deal with adolescent bodies that are transformed either through magic or medicine. Several of the chapters look at material embodiment in Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder* (2012) and Julianna Baggott’s *Pure* (2012), while others look at Leigh Bardugo’s *Grisha* trilogy (2012-present), Michael Grant’s *Gone* series

(2008-present), and works by Nancy Farmer. A unifying concern among the chapters in this section is how to manage the dangers inherent in an increasingly technologized society. Part three, “Posthumanism in Climate Fiction,” collects Lars Schmeink’s “Coming of Age and the Other: Critical Posthumanism in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* and the *Drowned Cities*” and Phoebe Chen’s chapter “Posthuman Potential and Ecological Limit in Future Worlds.” Both of these chapters are concerned with posthumanism as a political movement with a *zoe*-centric worldview and agenda. The final part, “Accepting/Rejecting Posthumanist Possibilities,” features three chapters that cover both film and literature: Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* (2012), Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* (2009), and novels by China Miéville.

As evidenced here, the collection as a whole provides interdisciplinary insight into a significant number of understudied young adult texts. Posthumanist theory is dense and complex, and this collection offers an accessible and beginner-friendly introduction to the discipline. From defining key terms and the different branches of posthumanist thought to drawing attention to key scholars in the field—such as Pramod K. Nayar, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe—the introduction does an excellent job of preparing readers for the chapters included here. That said, for scholars familiar with posthumanism, the theses and general observations made by the authors are in danger of coming across as obvious or derivative.

Many of the chapters included here still find themselves asking, in a very basic manner, what it means to be human, to be posthuman. Consequently, the authors speak to the same theories and conversations that have been in circulation for the past few decades, without providing us with new readings, just merely old readings of new texts. One of the more novel points the collection posits is that posthumanism must incorporate liberal humanism into its being, “as part of the assemblage” (White 153). What this necessitates, however, remains unresolved.

There are several other problematic aspects of Tarr and White’s collection, the first being that there is a sustained attention to technology as disturbing and negative. Although posthuman bodies are nothing new, the proliferation of technology and climate change has forced us to acknowledge posthumanist concerns with greater urgency. Yet, for some reason, this reality—as presented in this collection—is regularly regarded with distrust and fear. A lone voice among the host of scholars here, Lars Schmeink, rightly urges readers to recognize the “possibility of utopian hope in the face of dystopian systems” (177).

The second major concern involves the application of the label *young adult* to texts that do not necessarily fall into that category: Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*. Torsten Caeners, in his chapter on *Prometheus*, spends only one sentence defending the inclusion of this text in a YA collection. Caeners holds that it is young adult fiction because "it focuses on one of the major themes of young adult fiction . . . finding one's identity" and is "readily available to all audiences" (199). Not only does this present a simplistic understanding of YA literature, but it also broadens the category to such an extent that nearly any text can be read as young adult. Meanwhile, Tony M. Vinci, in his reading of *The Magicians*, offers no reason whatsoever for reading Grossman's series as young adult. It is, and always has been, marketed as an adult series, and to include it here merely because it's a magic school story suggests, once again, ignorance of what young adult literature entails.

It is difficult to recommend the collection *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, especially at the price point. For individuals unfamiliar with posthumanist theory, the introduction is valuable, and the third part on climate fiction provides the best example of the positive potential of posthumanist thought. However, for a handful of essays, the collection, for individual purchase, is passable. It would be best suited for university libraries, as individuals can pick and choose what to take from the collection. While recognizing the possible dangers that technology can bring, we in the (post)humanities must begin to move forward and cultivate a positive, hybrid understanding of embodiment—something that, unfortunately, this collection illustrates is not likely to happen any time soon.

RoboCop

Dominick Grace



Omar Ahmed. *RoboCop*. Auteur, 2018. Constellations Studies in Science Fiction Film and TV. Paperback. 117 pp. \$15. ISBN 9781911325253.

IT is disappointing, though no longer surprising, to see an academic book so riddled with compositional errors and infelicities as this one is make it into print. One can find writing problems—sometimes more than one—on many pages in this book. These range from the relatively minor (e.g. recurrent problems with punctuation, or inconsistent italicizing of titles—especially problematic when the main character and the movie have the same name) up to sentence-level issues. On page 25, for instance, a sentence says the opposite of what it evidently means: “A departure from the whiteness of the American Western is reversed by the presence of a black sergeant”; presumably, the black sergeant’s presence reverses the whiteness of the Western, so a departure from that reversal would in fact *restore* said whiteness. On the following page, we read, “By having Reed refuse the advances of the lawyer signifies both his authority as an honest blue-collar lawman and establishes the power he exercises over the precinct” (26). Such sentences suggest, at best, inept revision, but the problems seem more basic and extensive than that. For instance, a sentence such as “[*Outland*] reworked *Alien*’s theme of the merciless corporation with a deceptively savage rapt” (49) is simply incomprehensible (unless “rapt” as a noun has some specialized meaning that escapes me—and the dictionary). Incorrect or eccentric word choices are especially problematic; for instance, we read of an “apocryphal clash” (93) between Boddicker and RoboCop, when, presumably, “apocalyptic” might be the intended word, but if so, it’s not really an appropriate word in that context, either. That such extensive and basic slips, whether merely accidental or the result of poor writing, survived the editing and proofing process is disheartening. Nor do such problems encourage one’s faith in the content; if writing problems are so pervasive, can we rely on what the book is actually saying to be accurate? A professionally-published book should not be this riddled with basic errors.

Such problems are especially unfortunate, as a short (under 100 pages of actual text), basic reader such as this could be a useful and inexpensive tool for

undergraduate students. The frequently casual and subjective tone of this book suggests that its target audience is the general reader or student rather than the more seasoned academic, though Ahmed certainly shows that he has done his research. Despite its brevity, the book does show a good range of scholarly influences and cites reasonably extensively from earlier work on *RoboCop*. Unfortunately, though, the book lacks an index, so tracking how Ahmed uses his sources (and even where in the book key scenes or characters are discussed) is a bit of a challenge. The book is divided into four chapters, plus an introduction and afterword. The first chapter focuses on “Genre Mutations,” and explores the generic hybridity of the film. Its main focus is the ways in which *RoboCop* plays on the tropes of the Western, though other genres, such as horror, noir, and the cyborg film, are also considered. *RoboCop*’s echoes of the Western have been explored before, but Ahmed’s reading provides some additional insights. His comments on race, for instance, are of value, though the blackness of corporate drone Johnson is oddly ignored. The second chapter, “Neo-fascist Corporate Bodies,” addresses the film’s politics, especially its ambivalent treatment of RoboCop’s relationship with OCP. The focus here is perhaps a bit fuzzy—more on ambivalence than on constructing a reading—but again, Ahmed has some interesting things to say, albeit arguably more for those less familiar with the critical tradition. Chapter three, “American Jesus,” is potentially the most interesting but also the least successful, as it does not have a sufficiently sharp focus on the film itself. The final chapter, on “The Legacy of *RoboCop*,” offers a brief account of how the film was initially reviewed (more positively in England than in North America), how it was marketed and franchised, and how it might be seen in relation to some of Verhoeven’s later films, notably his other SF films: *Total Recall* (1990), *Starship Troopers* (1997)—which together with *RoboCop* tend to be viewed as a loose SF trilogy, the former of which is overrated and the latter of which is underrated, according to Ahmed—and *The Hollow Man* (2000), Verhoeven’s final SF, and final Hollywood, movie. The shortness of each chapter does not allow for close or detailed reading, so generally the book offers limited insights. All the books in this series are similarly brief, so Ahmed cannot be faulted for the limitations the brevity imposes, but nevertheless, the book is unable to offer much depth or detail.

Overall, the book would work best as a basic introduction to the film for undergraduates, if not for the extensive writing problems. Those already steeped in the critical tradition surrounding the film, or SF film generally, may find occasional

insights and useful rehearsals of the film's key elements, notably its satirical and subversive agenda, but will not find much new. However, I cannot advise assigning this book for students, either, given its extensive compositional problems. Overall, then, this is not a book I can recommend, for either the advanced or the beginning scholar.

Women in Doctor Who and The Women of Orphan Black



Jeanne Hamming

Valerie Estelle Frankel. *Women in Doctor Who: Damsels, Feminists and Monsters*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 253 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 9781476672229.

Valerie Estelle Frankel. *The Women of Orphan Black: Faces of the Feminist Spectrum*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 226 pp. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476674124.

A quick Google search of Valerie Estelle Frankel paints a clear portrait of a prolific, detail-oriented independent scholar who has found her niche: pop-feminist analyses of pulp genres and cult science fiction and fantasy favorites—*Doctor Who* and *Orphan Black*, but also *Outlander*, *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, *True Blood*, *Wonder Woman*. The list goes on. It's clear that Frankel is a pop culture super-fan, which equips her with the enthusiasm, if not the academic bandwidth, to produce the meticulous compendia of observations that comprise the two volumes reviewed here.

The Women of Doctor Who is a timely addition to critical work on the long-running series given that the 2018 season brings viewers a female doctor for the first time, played by actor Jodie Whittaker. Frankel's review of human and non-human female characters in the series and its spin-offs (*The Sarah Jane Adventures*, *Torchwood*, *Class*, *K9*) is exhaustive, arranging *Doctor Who's* treatment of women into broad categories: sweet girls, experts, bad ladies, tough girls, and outsiders. From there, Frankel further identifies female characters in the series by their established archetypes: sexy damsel, evil ice queen, trickster-seductress, and so on. While this convenient conceptual schema works well for a quick reference guide, it is less conducive to a deeper exploration of the critical issues surrounding gender, race, species or their intersections, including analysis of the recent trend to gender- and race-flip established characters and the implications, good or bad, of this particular cultural zeitgeist.

Frankel's encyclopedic approach works well to highlight the ways that, despite attempts to explore future and alternative worlds, female characters in the series remain firmly fixed as products of twentieth and twenty-first century attitudes that

limit the depth and range of the roles women are expected to inhabit. Frankel offers an account of the evolution of women's roles, from pubescent damsels like Susan in the first seasons, to more "competent" (read: contrary) women in the series' reboot—e.g. Donna Noble and River Song. This trajectory is both fascinating as it charts the shifting history of feminism's impact on popular culture, and distressing as you come to realize how little has changed in the past six decades, and how, as Frankel observes, these women remain "trapped within the patterns of their archetypes" (3). One consistently defining characteristic of the Doctor's companions, Frankel points out, is their collective obligation to serve as his moral compass, to provide, in today's parlance, invisible emotional labor. While his companions exist to nurture privately the Doctor's better angel and steer him away from more destructive impulses, he remains free to play the public hero. This narrative through line is brought into starkest relief during the "War Doctor" arc when Billie Piper returns as both the specter of Rose Tyler and as "Bad Wolf," a sentient weapon of mass destruction that, nonetheless, has a heart (Frankel, *Doctor Who* 167-168).

In *The Women of Orphan Black*, Frankel organizes her analysis of the show around two intersecting histories: the evolution of feminism from first to fourth wave and how this history has been shaped by emerging bioethical issues, especially as they relate to the biopolitical battle over control of women's bodies. Rich with excerpts and insights from the show's creators, actors, and consultants, including the fascinating science advisor, Cosima Herter, on whom Cosima the clone is based, Frankel explores how the series deliberately engages in contemporary debates over reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, tensions between science and religion, gender, and globalization. Cleverly, Frankel shows how each female character in the series embodies various feminist waves, from the radical seventies feminism of Mrs. S, to Cosima as second wave feminist-lesbian, to Sarah as radical, "punk" feminist, to Mika/M.K., the elusive cyber-feminist whose hacktivism brings viewers' attention to issues of disability, virtuality, and neurodiversity (M.K. is portrayed as being on the autism spectrum). Perhaps the most useful part of Frankel's close look at *Orphan Black* is her exhaustive catalog of the series' numerous "easter eggs," from the literary references in each episode's title to the allusions embedded in the show's narrative. Frankel carefully teases to the surface allusions to Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, William Wordsworth, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Conan Doyle, Richard Dawkins, and Donna Haraway, among others, demonstrating how the show's fast-

paced adventure narrative is smartly informed by philosophical, scientific, and literary histories.

The strength of Frankel's contributions to discussions of *Doctor Who* and *Orphan Black* is more curatorial or archival, and one can imagine that this kind of work would make for good starting points to stoke the interests of high school students, undergraduates, or science fiction fans looking to enter mainstream conversations about representations of women and bioethics.

Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction



Glyn Morgan

Catherine Gallagher. *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. Paperback. 359 pp. \$35. ISBN 9780226512419.

CATHERINE Gallagher is Professor Emerita of English at the University of California, Berkeley. In her distinguished career, she has become best known as one of the leading contemporary figures associated with New Historicism, a school of literary criticism that seems to work quite naturally with a study of alternate history and counterfactual thought. *Telling It Like It Wasn't* is the culmination of lengthy research project, bringing together arguments initially laid out in articles such as “War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels” (*Field Day Review* 3 (2007): 52-65) and “What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters” (*New Literary History* 42 (Fall 2011): 315-36). It is an important and timely text which broadens our thinking about counterfactual thought beyond the alternate history novel, military history essay, and political hypothesis to encompass theological thought, philosophical proposition, and legal argument.

Gallagher begins by presenting the long-history of counterfactual thought, pausing only briefly to acknowledge then discard the most commonly cited first example: the Roman writer Livy. Instead, she chooses to truly begin her account of the history of alternate history with Gottfried Leibniz. Gallagher argues that, with his ardent belief in God's Providence, Leibniz is not the preventer of counterfactualism which he is more conventionally portrayed as, but that in fact his “apparently paradoxical theorization of contingent imminent historical causes as *the basis of divine supervision*” is one of the first significant developments in counterfactual thought (17, emphasis in original). God, Leibniz argues in his *Theodicy* (1710), sees all possibilities of all timelines and selects for us the best possible route. Hence, when some disaster befalls us we must have faith that it is part of a divine plan to a better reality. From this new foundation stone, Gallagher demonstrates the construction of counterfactual thought as a tool in theology and philosophy, via amongst others

Voltaire and D'Israeli, to its deployment as a tool in critical military history. Here, Gallagher argues, counterfactual thought becomes truly established as a legitimate method of analysis and reflection, culminating in Carl von Clausewitz's various discussions in his treatise on the nature of warfare: *On War* (1832). "Military historians are at ease with counterfactualism," she writes, "because wars are notoriously full of unpredictable turning points, meeting the counterfactualists' need for contingency and multiple possibilities, and yet they have unusually long-range and widespread ramifications" (27). This remains true today with battles and wars providing the background material, if not the entire subject matter, for a vast array of essays by historians and analysts, as well as novels and short pieces by authors of fiction.

Gallagher's history of counterfactualism is pleasing in its scope and the breadth of its sources, taking in early tabletop war games, through to the use of counterfactual arguments in law and political debate. This wide-ranging familiarity with the historical sources, non-fiction counterfactual essays and experiments, and the political and cultural contexts in which each piece was created follows through to her discussion of fictional texts in the subsequent chapters. Gallagher introduces an interesting distinction to her terminology when discussing counterfactual thought in fiction. In line with most scholarship on the subject, she retains "counterfactual histories" as the term to discuss analytical essays and speculations, but narrative forms are split into two categories: the "alternate history" and the "alternate-history novel," the distinction being that the alternate history describes "one continuous sequence of departures from the historical record . . . drawing the dramatis personae exclusively from the historical record," whilst alternate-history novels invent "not only the alternative-historical trajectories but also fictional characters" (3). She later gestures towards the reader's possible confusion at this distinction when she writes that "the word 'novel' may be losing this precision of meaning, but this study will insist on its retention" (325).

These distinctions in place, Gallagher's next chapter charts the changes in counterfactual thought through the nineteenth-century, taking particular note of the rise of the novel in France, the United States, and England. However, the remaining text is largely split into analyses of texts in two thematic categories: those, by American authors, which imagine scenarios where the Union loses the American Civil War, and those, by British authors, which imagine scenarios in which Britain is occupied by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Limiting the pool of writers

to those native to the country in question limits Gallagher's discussion somewhat by removing some particularly interesting texts, but it also allows the author to avoid the risk of undermining her central argument that these counterfactual scenarios are being written in response to some cultural or political shift or event contemporary to the writer. For example, that writers in the Jim Crow era saw that "the racial situation in the South was so bad that it could not have been worse and *would have been better* if the Confederate states had seceded" (113, emphasis in original), reflected disillusionment with the war's outcome because though free, the former slaves were now subject to terrible conditions and laws which were also rapidly being normalised in the Northern states. In effect, Gallagher argues, these writers were easily able to imagine that the North had lost the Civil War because it felt to them like they actually had.

The resulting volume presents a very neatly packaged argument for the relevance and critical worth of counterfactual thought in both historical writing and narrative fiction, with no snobbishness about science fiction's role in this process, but also an awareness of its deeper roots. If anything, it sometimes feels almost too neat, a result of Gallagher's precise calibration of texts to contexts with each author carefully orientated to appear as a reflection of their time and place. As is so often the case with such arguments, it leads us to wonder about the authors who write similar material in different places, or those writers who are perhaps old-fashioned in their approaches (writing in the mode of the previous generation) or indeed ahead of their time. Yet this is a minor complaint in an otherwise excellent discussion of alternate history and counterfactualism.

Martian Pictures: Analyzing the Cinema of the Red Planet



Thomas J. Morrissey

O'Brien Stanley, Nicki L. Michalski, Lane Roth, and Steven J. Zani.

Martian Pictures: Analyzing the Cinema of the Red Planet. McFarland, 2018.

Paperback. 246 pp. \$49.95. ISBN: 9780786498932.

AS a life-long Marsophile and having reviewed Robert Crossley's comprehensive *Imagining Mars: A Literary History* and *Visions of Mars: Essays on the Red Planet in Fiction and Science*, edited by Howard V. Hendrix, George Slusser, and Eric S. Rabkin, and having been drawn by this book's clever title, I jumped at the chance to read and review a new text on Martian cinema. However, the experience was not entirely satisfactory.

Martian Pictures is a collection of thirteen essays that are reworked versions of conference papers amalgamated into a single critical text. The chapters are subdivided into three parts: 'Exploring Mars,' 'Invaders from Mars,' and 'Mars and Society.' The main text is preceded by a short essay on the book's origins, a Preface and Introduction; a Martian filmography, an extensive list of references, and an index follow. Thirteen well-chosen black and white stills from film and TV illuminate the text.

Quoting several times from Hendrix et. al., the Introduction imagines Mars as a blank canvas onto which are projected images of human frailty and the precariousness of our planet's biosphere. These projections are shaped by the interaction between film and audience and the need for Hollywood to psyche out the audience in pursuit of success at the box office. If I am reading the authors' intentions accurately, then these points need further discussion and consistent reinforcement in the main text.

The chapters in Part One focus respectively on three major themes: the similarities between Martian and combat films., the role of deviant thinkers in bringing about successful missions, and the depiction of space agencies modeled on NASA. Chapter One is a rapid review of Martian film since WWII emphasizing the evolution of the genre from the Cold War-obsessed 1950's to the early twenty-first century with its extensive Martian exploration and societal fear that science is in danger of running amok. Chapters Two and Three focus on the role of the prevalence of non-conformist

characters that save the day, including those who thumb their noses at NASA, a situation best illustrated by *The Martian* (2015).

Although the topics are important and the theories employed to explore them interesting, the chapters do little to solidify the book's central themes and are not user-friendly. Phrases like "as mentioned above" (32), "as mentioned in Chapter One" (36), or "as mentioned earlier" (42) occur far too frequently, especially when accompanied by lengthy plot summary without many strong transitional sentences between paragraphs. Repetitive plot summary is an issue throughout the book.

The three chapters in Part Two are loosely connected by the theme of Martian invasion. Chapter four considers the Martian as Other. Of note is the discussion of how the perennially hostile Martians of films like *Invaders from Mars* (1986) and *Independence Day* (1996) contrast with Martians as mirror images of ourselves in the 1980 TV adaptation of *The Martian Chronicles* and Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005). Chapter five offers an engaging treatment of serials in general and *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952) in particular. I do not know why 1938's *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* is not included since it would fit here very well. Chapter Six does what the book does best, apply theory—in this case mythic criticism—to Martian texts. The Prometheus myth has played a key role in SF since *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* gave birth to the genre in 1818. The film chosen for discussion is *Prometheus* (2012), which has nothing to do with Mars. The argument is that there are Martian films that also rely on the myth but not as well as *Prometheus* does.

The third section consists of seven chapters, more than half the book's total. Topics include class, gender, climate and comedy, among others. Chapter Seven is an ambitious discussion of feminist utopia/dystopia, especially the stories of Eve and Lilith, and their application to Martian films. The individual film discussions are convincing, as is the chapter's conclusion. The brief chapter on climate (eight) celebrates the few Martian films that are concerned with environmental issues. Think about Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy and you will get a good idea of just how much richer print SF is when it comes to climate.

Total Recall figures in two chapters, one of which is about capitalist exploitation and the other of which focuses on Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for You Wholesale" (1966) and the 2012 remake of the 1990 film. The authors see the ending of the 1990 film as a victory over capitalist hegemony, which I think is too simple a reading of this rhetorically complex movie and its final scientifically farcical

or dream-like scene.

The chapter on Mars and religion (ten) is consequential. Much of the discussion concerns Ray Bradbury's classic novel *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and the 1980 mini-series derived from it. The authors recognize the genius of Bradbury's text and never claim that the TV version is its equal. The authors tell us that Bradbury called the 1980 production "boring," a judgement with which it is difficult to quarrel, then write that "for our purposes, the religious themes and messages of the book and series are relatively similar, so perhaps major differences in other respects are not necessarily important" (156). I disagree; the other differences are quite important; however, the discussion of the Father Peregrine episode—a filmic representation of "The Fire Balloons"—and the transformation of a hapless Martian into a suffering Christ is well done. These events are more effectively adapted than are most of the installments in the mini-series.

Although *Martian Pictures* does a good job of cataloging a large number of video productions, some quite obscure, the book has a rhetorical looseness that a unified critical text should not have. In this sense, it has not made the complete transition from a collection of conference papers to finished critical book. There is much to be learned here about the fascinating filmic history of Mars, but the book really should have had one more round of editing for clarity.

Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television



Pedro Ponce

Shawn Malley. *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Liverpool University Press, 2018. Hardcover. 232 pp. \$120. ISBN 9781786941190.

IN the epilogue to *Excavating the Future*, Shawn Malley's provocative and fastidiously researched monograph on archaeological motifs in several contemporary science fiction mainstays, the author updates us on the war on terror, a central backdrop to the fictional narratives he has scrutinized in the preceding chapters: "As I compose this on St. Patrick's Day of 2017, Iraqi and coalition forces are poised to recapture the city of Mosul, the last major ISIS stronghold in northeastern Iraq" (191). Malley's self-reflexive envoi is as striking for what it omits as for what it remarks; given his engagement with the geopolitical truths obscured by the hunt for authentic artifacts, it's surprising that he would not invoke the ongoing contest over truth and authenticity taking place just across the border from his academic post in Quebec.

As I compose this review, on the other side of the Canadian border, we have just buried the 41st U.S. president, amidst a deluge of favorable comparisons to the 45th. Before nostalgia for the first and second Bush administrations has a chance to overtake us, however, we would do well to follow Malley's scholarly trajectory: deriving a perspective on the present by assiduous scrutiny of the framing past.

Before Malley gets to the second Bush administration, his study takes us to the cradle of civilization, via the history and mythology surrounding Babylon. The human heritage associated with the ancient city and its Mesopotamian environs, as well as the threat to this heritage presented by the war on terror, implicates the stakes of preserving its artifacts for posterity. But this stewardship, a significant part of the U.S. mission after 9/11, is not without strategic value in the larger conflict between West and East. Malley unearths telling parallels between the war and preservation efforts mounted around the second Gulf invasion. Just as the Department of Defense issued a deck of cards featuring images of Iraqi "most wanted" in 2003, four years

later, DOD's "Legacy Resource Management Program issued its own deck of cards, this time representing archaeological sites in Iraq and Afghanistan [featuring] instructive slogans about the archaeologically rich terrain upon which soldiers are fighting and to which they should feel historically and culturally connected" (36).

Even more suggestive than the links between soldiering and stewardship in the theater of war are their contemporaneous representation in SF film and television. Central to this representation is the pursuit of ancient artifacts that do much more than drive the plot, according to Malley's introduction: "as a source of objectified temporality in SF, archaeology is a critical tool for unearthing the contradictions and fissures of political discourse displaced into imagined futures" (3), as well as "an important critical medium for teasing out ideological subttextures of historical representation within the genre" (7).

Malley culls from several fan favorites to make his points: *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007), *Smallville* (2001-2011), and the rebooted version of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09). Other choices might seem more questionable—the SyFy channel original film *Manticore* (2005), the second installment of Michael Bay's *Transformers* reboot (2007), the pseudo-documentary series *Ancient Aliens* (2009-), and Ridley Scott's disappointing *Alien* prequel *Prometheus* (2012). More often than not, though, Malley makes these and other excavations of the future richer through his rigorous historical and theoretical framing. The titular monster in *Manticore* is unleashed by Iraqi insurgents in possession of a looted magic amulet. More than a topical creature feature, the film exposes the uncomfortable synergies between military occupation and the media, between hearts and minds and shock and awe: "Sanitizing the archaeological past of its association with dictatorship, the SF telefilm implicitly exonerates the destructive effects of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the West's invention of WMDs. Like the Iraqi extras in this film, the material remains of Mesopotamia play bit parts in cultural spectacles of propriety and control" (42). Malley observes a similar dynamic at work in *Transformers 2*, in which director Bay "repositions archaeological 'landmarks' separated by hundreds of kilometres into a single diegetic field" to represent a battle scene around the Great Pyramid at Giza (66). This aesthetic displacement is just another form of cinematic violence that resonates with the structural violence obscured by the spectacle. Observes Malley, "Tongue-clacking goat herders, whooping Bedouins with their camels, and ubiquitous squawking chickens are atmospheric and anachronistic extensions of

the pyramid, a monolithic Orientalist chronotopic threshold waiting activation by [hero] Sam [Witwicky], the Autobots, and the U.S. military” (67).

Malley’s reading of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) invites comparisons between 9/11 and its cataclysmic precursor in the American mind: the mushroom cloud. Malley discerns this parallel when archaeologist Jones witnesses a nuclear test in Nevada:

If in the moment the audience confuses Jones staring in awe at the detonation with our mediated ground-level views of the towers collapsing in inverted mushroom clouds, the ghostly apparition of the crystal skull is a crystal ball for a post-9/11 America experiencing resurgent Cold War anxieties in the form of nuclear brinkmanship with terrorist states like Iran, Pakistan and North Korea. (101)

The rebooted *BSG* and *Prometheus* gain depth, if not complete coherence, from Malley’s cybernetic reading. In the former, the Galactica itself is an artifact which preserves what remains of humanity after Cylons attack. The search for Earth that galvanizes the narrative is replete with excavations for other artifacts that serve as guides, not just to a new home planet, but to the intertwined destinies of humans and the enemy cyborgs they created. “In *BSG*,” notes Malley, “archaeological sites are places of assembly, contestation and ultimately critical reflection on the dangerous antagonisms and imperial politics that have brought humanity to the brink of extinction” (147). And by going into the intertextuality between *Prometheus* and the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* (the archaeological classic that the cyborg David watches avidly as the crew of *Prometheus* sleeps), Malley makes a strong case that the film’s real plot is not about the human past but the cyborg future: “If *Prometheus* ultimately fails to break radically from the parasite of franchise mythology, the film does gesture towards a cyborg subjectivity beyond recycled myths of biological or mechanical reproduction” (185), adding that “[h]aving given birth to an alien life form herself, [Dr. Elizabeth Shaw, the sole human survivor at the film’s conclusion] is also a cyborg, suggesting a co-evolutionary future alongside [David] her artificial companion” (188).

Invoking such heavy-hitters as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Homi Bhabha, *Excavating the Future* is best for scholars or advanced students already acquainted with a fair amount of theory. Nevertheless, Malley maps rich territory at the intersection of literature, media studies, history, and geopolitics.

Interpreting Anime

Chris Reynolds-Chikuma



Christopher Bolton. *Interpreting Anime*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Paperback. 336 pp. \$24. ISBN 9781517904036.

OVER the past 25 years, anime has continuously attracted not only fans but also academics. Bolton's brilliant book joins a growing collection of outstanding academic works about Japanese animation, such as those by Anne Allison, Jacqueline Berndt, Ian Condry, Thomas Lamarre, and Susan J. Napier, as well as works in Japanese by Murakami Takashi, Otsuka Eiji, and Azuma Hiroki, most of which are rarely translated. That these texts converge in Bolton's study is one of its major strengths. Being both a Japanologist and a comparatist, Bolton is able to read and bring together rich Western texts like Lamarre's, Lacan's, and Jameson's with scholarly works written in Japanese, sometimes to corroborate or complement each other and at other times to challenge prevailing Western views on anime and Japanese culture.

Although younger than its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, Japanese science fiction (SF) has been prevalent in literature and other media since the 1960s, especially in anime. Although anime covers all genres (historical, romantic, erotic, pornographic, etc.), SF, with its subgenres like mecha and cyberpunk that originated as anime, is ubiquitous. As a specialist in Japanese studies, Bolton also has expertise in SF. He is the author of two books on the subject, one on avant-garde writer Abe Kobo (2009) and another, *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams, Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime* (2007), for which he served as co-editor. He is also a founding member of the editorial board of *Mechademia*, the academic journal on anime.

In *Interpreting Anime*, Bolton has chosen six SF anime, some already famous, to make a case for the richness of these "texts." He begins by asking, "What can anime do that other media cannot?" (6), and although I would argue that his answer to this question is not convincing, his chapters are nonetheless thorough and illuminating. Bolton argues that what most long-feature anime do best is to strike a balance between immersion and distanciation. The shortcomings of this argument are that the question is too general, and he inevitably focuses only on examples that support his thesis. The question asked in the title of the last chapter, "It's Art but Is It Anime?"

(233), is revealing: Miyazaki's artful animation would not be considered anime because they tend to be mostly immersive. Similarly, one could argue that some American animations, which are not mentioned at all, could also be interpreted as using the same balancing technique (see for example Eric Herhuth's *Pixar and the Aesthetic Imagination*, 2017). Therefore, readers are not given a satisfying answer to his too general question about anime.

Undeniably, Bolton's hermeneutical methodology (obvious from its book title) provides sophisticated arguments and analysis that should convince the few remaining skeptics who are unconvinced that popular media/genre is potentially as rich as our literary texts. To this, Bolton adds two strong specificities. The first one is that he analyzes not only narrative devices and dialogues but also visual language in a very detailed, precise, and convincing way. The second is that, being also a comparatist, Bolton performs "text" analysis within a comparative paradigm by comparing the same narrative in various media, i.e., anime with theatre, manga, TV anime, and novels. However, Bolton emphasizes the abundance and richness of self-reflective symbolic devices, such as the mirror and the half-opaque window, as an insightful postmodernist reader-scholar, but what of the immense majority of other viewers who are not academics? We see here the weak point of his study: the absence of the readers' agency within these insightful interpretations. Hence, in Chapter 4, when he first considers the otaku in his analysis, it is to make "it" (the otaku) play a role inside the "text" as another distancing device. Interestingly, Bolton sees the otaku not as a "separate group or even a separate way of reading but to describe a potential in any viewer and any viewing—the potential to have a third eye open as we become aware of the artifice or artificiality, and become able to see ourselves watching the text" (156). This otaku reading would be more idealized, "a mode of reading associated particularly if not exclusively with anime and its viewers" (168). Moreover, the author favors progressive critical readings rather than conservative ones, or rather he favors the tensions between these two readings, when most people might see one or the other in the anime but not both.

In Chapter 6, after using Lamarre's subtle hermeneutical methodology, Bolton directly mentions other methodologies, such as Allison's and Condry's ethnographic approaches. He then addresses Otsuka Eiji's character and "grand-non-narrative" (216) interpretation, as partly integrated by Marc Steinberg in his media studies approach, by writing, "With their ideas about the decline of individual narratives

and individual auteurs, and/or the need to focus more broadly on characters, collaborations, franchises, and commercial contexts, the critics above position their work variously as a supplement, alternative, or replacement for the kind of interpretive close readings of individual anime and individual directors practiced in this book” (217). He then considers whether we can combine these two approaches by evaluating three different franchises of *Blood*. His answer, although well-rounded, is not completely convincing.

To conclude, this book is a very useful and enlightening reading for many scholars and students of literature and media. This is especially true for those without much knowledge about Japan and/or anime. But, as the book insists, if students, like anime fans, read in a more participative way through the balancing act of immersion and distancing, anime (and other media) studies need to integrate their points of view. In his book, Bolton uses “we” a lot; however, if “we,” as academics, still want a grand narrative of tolerance and social progress, we need to teach and write not only through lectures, regardless of their quality, but from the students-readers-viewers-fans-producers’ perspectives also.

Philip K. Dick on Film

Terence Sawyers



Gregg Rickman. *Philip K. Dick on Film*. Arrow Books, 2018. Paperback. 176 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 9780993306082.

GREGG Rickman is an established commentator on Philip K. Dick who occupies contradictory positions within the broad community of Dick fans and scholars. On the one hand, Rickman's retrospective psychoanalysis of Dick in *To the High Castle*, *Philip K. Dick: A Life, 1928-1962* (1989, repeated in truncated form on page 114 of this text) is treated with much suspicion within this community of fans and scholars. Yet he remains a trusted source of first-hand material and collector of Dick anecdotes. Furthermore, Rickman moves between the spheres of academic and non-academic publishing, a boundary that is traversed by only a select few Dickian commentators.

Rickman's liminality is relevant when approaching his recent monograph *Philip K. Dick on Film*, as there is some slipperiness when trying to establish the best contextual frame from which to review it. Even the title is suggestively ambiguous. Is this a book about Dick's attempts to make films and contribute to TV shows, Dick's own opinions of film as an art form, or the adaptation of Dick's work into film by third parties? Ultimately, all three of these positions are touched upon, though the latter represents the primary focus.

Rickman's text can be divided into two sections, with the first comprising chapters one through five and covering Dick's biography, a discussion of Dick's major themes and an insight into Dick's relationship with Hollywood and filmmaking more generally. These chapters offer a neat overview to the key debates in Dick studies as well as providing some keen insights from Rickman. The little over four pages dedicated to Dick's biography succinctly introduces the reader to Dick's biographical highlights as well as communicating the complexities and contradictions that make Dick's biography so exciting. For a casual fan of Dick who is interested in why media organisations keep returning to his literature as a source for film and TV adaptations, these early chapters are a helpful roadmap. While the more dedicated Dick scholar may fail to find anything new in these chapters, they will appreciate both the chapters' concision and the many suggested routes (trailheads) of further investigation.

However, chapters six through twelve discuss the direct adaptations of Dick's fiction into film and TV, and for those interested in Philip K. Dick, film studies, or adaptation studies, these chapters will disappoint. This is due to three problematic positions that inform Rickman's methodological approach. First, he engages in a comparative analysis that heavily favours Dick's fiction as an originary source. Following this form of analysis, any adaptations must strive, and ultimately fail, to "live up" to the original. This tautological argument is not uncommon in cycles of fandom, and therefore is not unheard of within SF studies; the "original" is always best at being the "original." The argument's circularity makes it uninteresting and provides no opportunity for serious discussion.

Second, Rickman purports to be offering readers a juxtaposition of his own comments and Dick's (hypothetical) opinions on the various film and TV adaptations. This interpretative strategy seeks to extrapolate the opinions of a deceased writer based on his extant commentary. As dangerous as this strategy is, and in the case of Dick it is fraught by added complications due to his well-documented capriciousness, one needs to ask whether it is at all interesting. This approach assumes the primacy of the star-author as a site of meaning-making and authority (at the expense of critics, scholars, readers, and fans) and by contemporary standards is an outmoded method of engaging with texts, adapted or otherwise.

Third, Rickman takes for granted that contemporary commercial filmmaking is in an "unhappy state" and he rests this reductive criticism on rather narrow shoulders (89). For Rickman, the formulaic nature of storytelling is the primary cause of a creeping mediocrity that has been developing within Hollywood since the 1980s. Rickman goes on to argue that, although there are many vectors via which these formulae have been disseminated, the primary method is via screenwriting manuals, and he reserves particular attention for the successful 2005 manual *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder.

There are many problems with this claim, and it reveals a writer who is not conversant in the history of film, the current debates in film studies, or the contemporary reality of commercial filmmaking. To tease out just one of these problems, it exposes a logocentrism that assumes films can be equated with their scripted antecedents, reducing the complexities of an audio-visual text to nothing more than its content or story. The irony here is that Dick's fiction has highly repetitive qualities that often follow a generic formula. A reduction of Dick's fictions

to their story and a map of their plot points (“beats”) will emphasize sameness while overlooking what distinguishes Dick from other SF writers or Dick’s stories from each other.

Turning to the formal qualities of this monograph, the publisher, Arrow Films, has not helped here, with poor editing, formatting, and design choices. For example, an error where the wrong film is referenced and inconsistent use of footnotes, that sees some tangential anecdotes footnoted and others left within the text, should have been picked up on and corrected before publishing. From a formatting perspective, inconsistency is again the watchword, with the footnote superscripts switching between grayscale and salmon. While throughout the body of the work the font oscillates between grayscale and black, sometimes within the same sentence. These inconsistencies are very distracting for the eye while also undermining the legitimacy of the work.

As part of the design, cover pages from Dick’s published fiction are interspaced throughout the text. As nice as these are to see, they bear no relevance to either the overall aims of this monograph or to the specific sections that they are included within. This is an odd design choice that stands in contrast to the book’s cover, which includes an arresting panoply of icons from the various Dick adaptations under discussion. These cover pages highlight the confused focus of a text that seems trapped between what it sought to talk about, the film and TV adaptations of Dick’s literature, and what it couldn’t help talking about, how much Rickman likes Dick’s literature.

Exploring Picard's Galaxy: Essays on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

Todd L. Sformo

Peter W. Lee, editor. *Exploring Picard's Galaxy: Essays on Star Trek: The Next Generation*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 262 pp. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476666617.

WHILE I don't recall much about an essay I read in the 1990s on *Gilligan's Island*, I do recall one line: "linguistically speaking, Gilligan owns the island." So when I came across the title *Exploring Picard's Galaxy*, ownership of the galaxy sprang to mind. In a way, the 15 essays in this book have something to do with ownership, not of the galaxy, of course, but of interpreting that unique SF state of being: humanity's historical future. According to P.W. Lee's Introduction, this volume commemorates the 30th anniversary of *The Next Generation* (TNG) and is the first book to "solely" employ TNG as a "lens" (2) on issues ranging from government to multiculturalism (Part I), identity to gender (Part II), and martial arts to music and history itself (Part III). Since SF is a comparative argument on human progress, each essay considers the historical future as baseline, assessing whether both the real present and the TNG galaxy live up to ideals 24th century human progress.

As comparative argument, the essays tacitly grant that TNG represents the progress a "fantasized humanity has made" (64, Achouche. Also see the chapters by Olaf Meuther and by Justin Ream and Alexander Lee), but the authors most often see a lack of advancement, with the culprit being the imposition of 20th century values upon the 24th century; hence, all three parts of the book, to varying extents, consider the Federation and its enlightened values as a starting point for comparisons with recent history, including the Cold War (Anh T. Tran), the Reagan Era (Simon Ledder *et al*; Bruce E. Drushel), and the economics of network TV (Katharina Thalmann).

The essays, especially in Part I, find that the socio-political climate of the 1980's and early 1990's is reflected in the narrative and characters but also highlight differences. Alex Burston-Chorowicz points out Picard's inconsistency when responding to other cultures, sometimes by non-involvement and other times with a more colonial attitude, perhaps informed by U.S. foreign policy during the Reagan Era. The episode "The Neutral Zone," on the other hand, "reinvent[s]" (16) the Cold War, contrary

to real world events. Alexander Simmeth shows “the future is not always ‘better’ than the past” (241) when focusing on “Journey’s End.” Here, the Federation orders Picard to resettle Native American descendants. Larry A. Grant’s essay on the Prime Directive (PD) questions its “unenlightened form of sovereignty” (29) that has a close association between real world concepts of national sovereignty and unlawful intervention, mentioning the delayed response to the genocide in Rwanda. While no direct connection is made between Rwanda and TNG, Grant judges that blind adherence to the PD is not the solution. Tran focuses on a single topic—the policing of civil society by the FBI, noting similarities to the Tal Shiar and Deep Space Nine’s Section 31. In three separate essays, Erin C. Callahan, P.W. Lee, and Jared Miracle discuss changes made to Yar’s character leading to her “unnecessary feminization” (173). Citing interviews with Denise Crosby and others as primary evidence, these essays in general describe the transformation of Yar as due to interference by the network, imposing conservative Reagan Era values in the hopes of higher ratings.

In Part II, a few authors begin their comparative analysis with a theoretical approach. Ledder *et al.* examine “biopolitics” *via* Foucault, noting that TNG allows for heterogeneity in race and abilities, contrasting to more culturally homogeneous, and therefore, restrictive, societies such as Klingons, but concluding that “TNG produces an ambivalent position” (109). Ream and A. Lee cite Hegel to make the case of TNG accepting Others by subsuming them under the rubric of a “utopia of bureaucracy” (75). Joul Smith considers previous interpretations of Troi as stereotypes and reinterprets the “Troi Effect” as a positive sign of mental health awareness in comparison to other media depictions of mental health. Thalmann contrasts Kirk and Picard, noting the latter’s heroism as multi-dimensional, more vulnerable, cut from a more fatherly, diplomatic cloth than Kirk’s. This essay then questions the growth of the “Action Picard” in the ST movies. Technological advance is taken up by Meuther in relation to rights and the definition of life within the patriarchal federation and matriarchal Borg. Drushel uses the historical association between villainy and gender to examine the behavior of particular characters, concluding there is insufficient evidence to make this connection and stating, “[t]o be fair, one must acknowledge that the failure of the producers of [TNG] to populate the cast with identifiable lesbian or gay characters has many plausible justifications” (162). I was left with the impression of a scientific paper acknowledging the lack of statistical significance to reject the null hypothesis.

Part III of the book differs from I and II in that it attempts to trace the 24th century's use of 20th and 21st century's humanities and history. Miracle's martial arts essay emphasizes the bat'leth developed by Dan Curry and the coinciding rise in mixed martial arts in Ultimate Fighting Championships in relation to TNG's extended portrayal of Klingon martial arts. Tom Zlabinger's chapter highlights the personal growth of Picard and Data as explorers of the physical and the ephemeral through music making. Simmeth analyzes the "appropriation of history" (245) in TNG, including a critique of capitalism as narrative technique for exploring human progress.

While the essays raise interesting questions about science fiction and society, I have two concerns that distract from the book: 1) the promise of wide-ranging scholarship is sometimes unfulfilled, primarily due to the use of broad historical periods and nominally mentioning philosophical concepts without adequate critical attention; 2) some essays are slow to get to their main point, listing peripheral details and summarizing characters or incidents without leading to insightful analysis. Overall, however, the essays interestingly teeter on a fulcrum of inferential history that swings between humanity's conjectural future and ownership of our flawed, recent past. When the inferred future is unrealized in the show, it is due to contemporary norms and values being imposed upon it. These essays highlight our imperfect selves in TNG, revealing the present values we must struggle with to come closer to the ideal.

The Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars



Jessica Stanley

Ken Derry and John C. Lyden, editors. *The Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars*. Cascade Books, 2018. Paperback. 186 pp. ISBN 9781532619731.

THE Myth Awakens: Canon, Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars collects chapters that explore fan receptions of the *Star Wars* saga, focusing primarily on *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015). While the title suggests discussions of conservatism, most chapters focus on close readings and fan reception of *Star Wars* in a concise, easy-to-digest manner. The result is a diverse and engaging collection that would be of interest to both scholars and students interested in science fiction or fandom.

The introduction, written by editor Ken Derry, positions *Star Wars* within the context of religious studies and myth, and makes a case for why scholars may want to consider the franchise as a means of “lowering the stakes” when discussing controversial issues like violence, good/evil, and morality (9).

The first two chapters of the book both make use of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. In Chapter 1, “The More Things Change: Historical and Political Context and *The Force Awakens*,” John C. Lyden argues that while *A New Hope* (1977) and *The Force Awakens* are, at their core, very similar films, the way fans receive them is vastly different due to changes in society and politics. Lyden explains that both liberals and conservatives read their own politics and current events into *A New Hope*, and that while the same may be true of *The Force Awakens*, its moral ambiguity points to a larger shift in political climate.

Chapter 2, “The Brightest Shadow: From Fighting Darkness to Seeking It,” by Lindsey Macumber, explores Darth Vader and Kylo Ren in terms of their relationship to Campbell’s shadow archetype. In one of the clearest and most concise chapters, Macumber provides a definition of the shadow archetype and its function in myth, arguing that confronting the shadow is a necessary part of growth for characters and viewers. The author explains that Darth Vader once served this purpose, but that in

The Force Awakens, Kylo Ren fails to fit the archetype. Macumber ends the chapter by connecting Ren to current culture, noting that his arc provides an opportunity for audiences to navigate contemporary situations “where the evil of [...] real life villains is not the result of principle or conviction, but of reactionary impulsivity” (45).

The next two chapters both address gender and female representation in *Star Wars*. One of the standout chapters, “‘Leia the Hutt Slayer’ and ‘Rey the Next Generation Badass Boss Bitch’: Heroism, Gender, and Fan Appreciation,” argues that calling Rey the first female hero in *Star Wars* discounts Leia’s contributions to the saga. Chris Klassen uses Campbell’s definition of heroism and Valerie Estelle Frankel’s “heroine’s journey” as the framework to analyze Rey and Leia’s contributions to the *Star Wars* narrative. He argues that Rey and Leia are both heroes in different ways, with Rey representing Campbell’s hero and Leia representing Frankel’s. Rey follows a journey similar to Luke’s, positioning her both as a role-model and a target for derision from fans who believe she should not be placed in the same role as male characters. Leia wields a different kind of power through her leadership and political acumen, positioning her closer to Frankel’s Great Mother figure. Both characters, Klassen argues, serve to broaden the definition of heroism. Chapter 4, “I’ve Heard That Somewhere Before: The Myth-Making Implications of Han and Leia’s Theme,” by Kutter Callaway, analyzes the use of music in *The Force Awakens*, focusing on the leitmotif of “Han and Leia’s Theme.” The chapter addresses the complicated function of gender in *Star Wars*, and Callaway asserts that the franchise has always been as much, if not more, about the women characters than the men. Callaway argues that the use of the “Han and Leia Theme” in the controversial *The Force Awakens* hug scene between Leia and Rey helps to shift the franchise in that direction.

The fifth and sixth chapters focus on race in the *Star Wars* saga and the Expanded Universe. Chapter 5, “The Racism Awakens,” attempts to spark a dialogue about racism in *Star Wars*. Daniel White Hodge and Joseph Boston begin the chapter by summarizing the complicated relationship between Hollywood and race, defining the Black character tropes most common in films, and then applying them to Finn in *The Force Awakens*. According to Hodge and Boston, on the surface, Finn’s character represents a positive change in the *Star Wars* franchise, but upon examination, Finn and other Black characters fall into several of the Black character tropes and are products of hyper-tokenization. The authors contend that the lack of representation

in *Star Wars*, paired with the racially charged fan response to characters like Finn, reveal deep issues within the franchise. Chapter 6, “Do or Do Not: There is No Try: Race, Rhetoric, and Diversity in the *Star Wars* Universe,” compares identity and representation of race in *The Force Awakens* and the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe. Joshua Call explores Finn’s portrayal, noting similar issues of agency and tokenization as the previous chapter. He juxtaposes these issues with the “normalization of diversity” in the game *Knights of the Old Republic*, arguing that the games provide a space for fans to see themselves in the *Star Wars* universe (102).

The final three chapters center on canon and fan communities. Chapter 7, “Ritual, Repetition, and the Responsibility of Relaying the Myth,” focuses on George Lucas’s complicated relationship with his films and their fans. Justin Mullis defines fans as “those who consume media and who are actively and willingly consumed by it,” and explains that the *Star Wars* fandom is not the first to conflict with the creators (109). He charts Lucas’s many revisions of the films which led to his rejection by fans and asserts that part of the success of *The Force Awakens* was due to the sense of comfort and familiarity created by its similarities to the original film.

Chapter 8, “Memory, History, and Forgetting in *Star Wars* Fandom,” focuses on the collapse of the Expanded Universe after Disney’s purchase of the *Star Wars* franchise and George Lucas’s multiple film revisions. Using theories from the “first generation of fan studies,” Syed Adnan Hussain argues that when Lucas or Disney imposed new rules on the canon, rather than erasing part of the fandom’s collective memory, the moves created splinter factions, not unlike those that arise in major religions (136). Hussain asserts that understanding these various traditions of fandom is essential to truly understanding *Star Wars* fandom.

In Chapter 9, “The *Ion Canon* Will Fire Several Shots to Make Sure Any Enemy Ships Will be Out of Your Flight Path: Canonization, Tribal Theologians, and Imaginary World Building,” Kenneth Mackendrick argues that *Star Wars* provides a means of understanding canonization in a religious context. He argues that canonization relies on the interpretation of an authoritative interpreter and then allows for world building through cooperation by fans.

As an edited collection, *The Myth Awakens* flows together seamlessly thanks to the chapter organization, overlap in critical approaches, and overall tone. The approaches to gender, race, and fandom can easily be applied to topics outside of *Star Wars*, making this an excellent collection for emerging scholars and university libraries.

Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded



Nathaniel Williams

Jason Heller. *Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded*. Melville House, 2018. Hardcover. 254 pp. \$26.99. ISBN 9781612196978.

JASON Heller's *Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded* covers the synergy between science fiction and popular music during the 1970s, and it comes at an important point in SF history. More on that last bit later. First, let me cover a few representative factoids the book presents:

- David Jones—before changing his last name to Bowie and penning the song “Starman”—read Robert Heinlein voraciously, including the author’s 1953 juvenile novel coincidentally(?) titled *Starman Jones*.
- Pre-teen Jimi Hendrix was such an SF-media fan he insisted on being called “Buster,” after *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* serial star, Buster Crabbe.
- The Byrds loved Arthur C. Clarke and composed their song “Space Odyssey” when they learned that would be the title of a film adaptation of Clarke’s “The Sentinel.”
- A 1968 song mocking American astronauts, Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band’s “I’m the Urban Spaceman,” was produced by “Apollo C. Vermouth,” a pseudonym that hid its actual producers—the Beatles’ Paul McCartney and Gus Dudgeon, who went on to produce Bowie’s “Space Oddity.”

These insights are from just the first 14 pages of *Strange Stars*, and it’s a fair accounting of the rest of the book’s contents. About every third page offers some remarkable, obscure fact about science fiction touching rock history or vice versa. Readers fascinated by such moments will have a blast reading *Strange Stars*.

But Heller’s book is more than just a cornucopia of hipster trivia. It’s a compelling, comprehensive work that invites us rethink two of the twentieth century’s most influential pop cultural creations. Heller skillfully uses David Bowie’s career as

a through line, which prevents the book from simply becoming a list of neat coincidences. Moreover, he focuses exclusively on the 1970s, which may disappoint readers interested in more recent SF/pop artists, but nevertheless provides the book a much-needed focus. The 1970s gave us both Devo's *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896)-inspired album *Are We Not Men?* and Meco's *Star Wars*-inspired disco music; Heller joins these dissimilar stories into an intelligent whole.

The highlights you'd expect are here: Michael Moorcock collaborates with the band Hawkwind; Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) inspires David Crosby's ode to threesomes, "Triad"; Paul Kantner and Jefferson Starship get a 1971 Hugo nomination for their concept album *Blows Against the Empire*; etc. Heller, however, also covers many lesser-known acts, such as the synth band Lem (named for *Solaris* author Stanislaw) and French group Heldon, who composed an entire album inspired by Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). Heller also recognizes heroines like Nona Hendryx, who used her interest in SF to influence the song content and fashion design of funk band Labelle.

Bowie—who inspired many SF-related bands, praised them in the press, and hired their members as backing musicians—ties to the book's chronological structure and its thesis. He enters the 1970s known primarily for "Space Oddity," the quintessential SF subject-matter song. He quickly assumes his Ziggy Stardust persona, embodying the science-fiction character on his eponymous album. He ends the 1970s having left behind Ziggy's overtly sf narrative lyrics ("I'm a space invader"!) in favor of synthesizer-driven, atmospheric albums like *Low* (1977), a whole different kind of otherworldliness. Heller states, "Like his new friends in Kraftwerk, [Bowie] had come to eschew singing about science fiction. Instead he *was* science fiction" (148). This figures into Heller's argument that there are really several strains of science fiction music. One is primarily narrative (think Rush's 1976 album *2112*). Another appropriates SF's imagery (think guitar/starships on Boston's album covers). Artists who encompass all those strains—like Bowie, Gary Numan, and P-Funk's George Clinton, who built from Sun Ra's Afrofuturist template—deservedly get the most coverage from Heller.

It's not perfect. Direct artistic influences can be notoriously hard to prove. Heller relies on "likely inspired," "plausibly," and similar phrases a little too often, although he's admirably honest when a perceived influence isn't 100% verifiable. His consistent use of "sci-fi" rather than SF may frustrate grumpier scholars. My only other quibble

is the book's index; a work that drops this many names needs a more complete one.

Strange Stars offers a canon of SF music and also beckons readers to seek out older SF that influenced musicians. Heller includes a discography of major SF-related songs at the book's end that will satisfy audiophiles. Just as interesting, however, are moments when specific works pop up more than once. Heller reveals that Moorcock's novel *The Fireclown* (1965) inspired musical tributes by both Pink Floyd and Blue Öyster Cult. Maybe it's time to (re)read *The Fireclown*? Similarly, Heller recounts how Philp José Farmer's 1957 novel *Night of Light* brought the term "purplish haze" to Jimi Hendrix's attention, and how Kantner used Eric Frank Russell's *The Wasp* (1957) for inspiration. There's a whole, neglected sub-canon of 50s and 60s SF that inspired musicians. Instructors who regularly teach New Wave-era SF could conceivably look to *Strange Stars* for new syllabus material.

Finally, the SF community needed a book like *Strange Stars*. In 2013, we lost Paul Williams, the Philip K. Dick scholar and founder/editor of *Crawdaddy!*, one of rock journalism's earliest major periodicals. David Hartwell (to whom the book is dedicated) began his career writing for *Crawdaddy!* and became one of SF's leading editors before his death in 2016. The individuals who were at Ground Zero for the SF/rock 'n' roll explosion—who loved both phenomena and understood their interconnectedness at a cellular level—are leaving us. Spurred on by those deaths, as well as Bowie's in 2016, Heller understands that these stories needed to be documented while their sources still live. Some of the book's more rushed moments seem attributable to this sense of urgency. *Strange Stars* probably isn't for every science fiction scholar or fan, but for anyone who cares about SF's conversation with twentieth-century pop culture, it's indispensable.

FICTION REVIEWS



Point B (a teleportation love story)



Jonathan P. Lewis

Drew Magary. *Point B (a teleportation love story)*. Independently Published, 2020. 461 pp. Paperback. \$13.99. ISBN 9798637737680.

DREW Magary's voice in his SF novels *The Postmortal*, *The Hike*, and now *Point B*, remains steadfastly blunt: he hammers and harrows his characters and his readers with to-the-point prose and blistering dialogue. He recently told me that "there's a LOT of dialogue in *Point B*, because I had written a couple of novels already that were more spare in dialogue and wanted to go the other way. Dialogue is a blast to write." Coming from the sports blogosphere into popular SF, Magary follows the long tradition in his fiction of posing interesting questions about the possibilities of technological revolution, and then measuring the fall-out of such novums as the end of disease and instant travel through space-time.

Magary, formerly of *Deadspin*, *GQ*, and other outlets, now writes for *GEN*, Medium's cultural magazine, *Vice*, and *SFGate* where he can hurl bile at the inequities and cruelty of our contemporary world. But ultimately, Magary is a humanist in the Vonnegut tradition, looking at how bad actors will always pursue money and power at any cost to human lives, and *Point B* is a strong novel for the strange times we find ourselves in.

Because of breakthroughs in "anti-hydrogen," the novel tells us, people can use their smartphones to instantly teleport from nearly anywhere on Earth to nearly anywhere else on Earth—China, e.g. has locked down the country and so there is no access in or out—but while the tourism business booms for popular destinations, whole industries such as car manufacturing and airline travel have completely tanked. Global climate change is solved because who needs to burn fossil fuels to move about? Whole cities such as Cleveland are abandoned for who needs to live in Cleveland when work opportunities are everywhere and anywhere—temporary housing is easy to come by and travel costs are negated.

Point B follows the adventures of 17 year old Anna Huff as she enters Druskin, an elite preparatory school in New Hampshire. An accomplished diver and pianist, Huff is awarded a full scholarship to the school and finds herself rooming with

the daughter and half-sister of the novel's respective antagonists, Emilia and Jason Kirsh. Huff becomes quickly enamored of Lara Kirsh, but Lara leaves Druskin after just a few days after the girls are caught in a late-night swimming excursion in the on-campus river. Finding friends in two boys named Burton and Bamert, Huff tries to survive her time in detention as a test subject for Jason Kirsh's attempts to broaden transportation weight-limits from 2 kilograms to 3 in teleportation. Kirsh is a sociopath who, Anna learns, tortured her sister into suicide by using secret teleportation protocols to stalk Sarah.

Point B has a great deal to say about stalking, sovereignty, security, and other techniques of domination in our seemingly always connected world and much of it should give us pause. Magary's best moments in *The Postmortal* and *The Hike* asked us to consider the Faustian bargains we make every day in the name of convenience and connectivity and of life without disease or introspection that can rob us of real meaning. In *Point B*, when a boy dies on Everest because he can port near the summit without any mountaineering experience, most in the novel's world take it as a dumb stunt gone awry—the thrill seeker getting his just deserts. But Magary takes it a step further, looking at how the boy's death leaves a hole in his family and how his mother's quest for truth leads her to be, the novel suggests, another of Jason Kirsh's victims who asked too many questions of the purveyors of so-called easy happiness and infinite, instant, once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

Point B also asks us to consider the impact and limits of education—especially elite educational state apparatuses—in creating responsible citizens when anyone, can step past the old velvet ropes and create Insta-stories formerly only available to the ultra-rich and powerful. How will the powerful set up new boundaries to keep the plebes out? Why spend time in a school when nearly anywhere in the world can be seen and experienced first-hand and what will those who run such powerful institutions as Druskin do to keep their privilege? For the novel, the answer is nearly anything—the Kirshes, mother and son, donate huge amounts of money to the school to buy access not just to power but to control how the powerful continue to exist at all. Magary further uses that cliché of prep school life, the monied dandy with a drinking problem at 17 because Daddy doesn't love him, to look at the toxic values institutions like Druskin can promote and sustain. (For the record, I also went to a New England prep school and knew a few Bamerts who bounced from school to school with fine minds who only used them to scheme their way into securing

alcohol and hiding their Kodiak addictions because why bother studying when the path to financial success was already set in stone through family connections?)

Overall, I recommend *Point B* and am surprised that Penguin, Magary's publisher for *The Hike* and *The Postmortal*, passed on the novel. It's a good diversion in these trying times, and like the best of mainstream SF, has a great deal more to say than celebrating a novum like teleportation and what it might offer to us.

Sea Change

Jeremy Brett



Nancy Kress. *Sea Change*. Tachyon, 2020. Paperback. 191 pp. \$15.95. ISBN 9781616963316.

IT'S a singular book that begins with a runaway self-driving house, and Nancy Kress has mastered the art of the opening line. *Sea Change* begins with the words "The house was clearly lost." It's a funny, yet at the same time jarring, line that instantly tells the reader that something has clearly shifted in the world. And so it has. Kress gives us a United States where normal life is increasingly rare as the effects of climate change and man-made environmental collapse encroach more and more on society. Of course, in our age of climate change this is not groundbreaking in itself, but Kress puts a unique spin on it by avoiding a simple "Us (environmentalists) vs. Them (the government, or Big Business, or terrorists)". Instead, in *Sea Change* Kress presents a bio-thriller with a multifaceted setting in which environmental groups battle the government but also compete amongst themselves with different agendas and tactics. The tendency of humanity to fracture runs deep through Kress's book; however, just as strong is humanity's endurance in the face of catastrophe. As protagonist Renata notes:

Most of all, I felt fear. Not for myself but for the organization that always hovered between detection and ineptitude, the organization made of dedicated amateurs up against both law-enforcement professionals and a stupid public, the organization that I would protect with everything in the world until we'd succeeded in our quixotic attempt to save that—probably unworthy—world from itself, whether it wanted that or not.

Sometimes the world doesn't know what's best for it. (17)

Climate change fiction faces unique challenges. It's easy and even seductive to simply write an apocalyptic dystopia where we're all going to die and where humans in the last days of civilization carve out meager or desperate existences by feeding on others. That kind of dark pessimism has run through science fiction since its

beginnings, carrying into the Cold War with its numberless tales of nuclear holocaust through the environmental disasters chronicled by Brunner and Harrison, into today's endless, increasingly tiresome zombie apocalypses. However, writers like Kress are also finding a space in their climate change fiction for hope. We need hope, if we are to survive the existential and psychological crisis that climate change represents. We need stories in which humanity actively works to slow or repair the damage it has caused. We need them so very desperately, and as readers we are fortunate enough to have a cadre of hopeful authors such as Kim Stanley Robinson, Kelly Robson, L.X. Beckett, Neil Stephenson, and others who chronicle our drive to be better, to do better, to fix what we have broken.

Sea Change is such a work, wrapped in the fabric of a well-paced biothriller. Kress chronicles a world suffering in the aftermath of “the Catastrophe”: a widespread drug is infected by a genetically modified bacterium that picks up a lethal gene; hundreds of children die as a result. In the aftermath, worldwide protests—many of them violent—against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) cause deaths, widespread economic collapse, and government overstrain and neglect. In Kress's new world, GMOs are outlawed, their ban heavily enforced by the US government (through a powerful new Department of Agricultural Security), with the result that massive food shortages are endemic. And underground organizations fight back. Renata is a member of the Org, a resistance group working, as she says, “to restore genetic engineering to a country that had rejected it, and so feed the United States and the world as climate change, desertification, and rising seas changed the face of the globe” (71). One of the ways the Org fights back is through a covert, fragmented network of isolated farms that use engineered crops. It's an unusual resistance strategy and one of the things that makes Kress's book so unique.

Quiet, determined resistance is the hallmark of *Sea Change* (although the book certainly has its share of more dramatic actions, much of it hinted at or appearing ‘offscreen,’ as it were). Renata moves forward in the face of unspeakable personal tragedy, including the death of a child, caused ultimately by effects of climate change. She and her compatriots operate an underground group, that seeks to change the world, not violently, but rather through the distribution of scientific achievement and accurate information. They operate with a hopeful belief that change is possible.

Near the end of the novel, following a massive pro-GMO information dump across cyberspace by different environmental groups, Renata notes that “seeds had

been planted, and the harvest of changed perceptions might grow” (183). Here is Kress’s optimism, here is the hope that people *can* change their minds for the better, that they *can* overcome their fears and their distrust to make a potentially better future. This is not easy; Kress expertly and simply delineates what a society permeated by fear and suspicion looks like, and it is not an easy one to escape. But recall that the term ‘sea change,’ taken from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, denotes a substantial change in one’s perceptions. If the change comes, as the Catastrophe did, it must be large-scale and it must produce a long-lasting alteration in people’s behavior. The future of the Earth demands it. *Sea Change* is a welcome addition to the growing subgenre of climate change fiction that bursts with hope. If nothing else, if we ignored Kress’s clever worldbuilding and her engaging characterizations, that belief in hope makes it worthy.

The Violent Century

Jeremy Brett



Lavie Tidhar. *The Violent Century*. Tachyon, 2019. (Originally published Hodder & Stoughton, 2013.) Paperback. 316 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 9781616963163.

TACHYON'S reissuing of older works (as well as the publication of new ones) by Israeli-British author Lavie Tidhar is an incredibly welcome gift. Tidhar's concern with shifting perceptions of history is increasingly relevant in an age where an objective chronicle of facts seems increasingly like an outdated product of a more innocent age. In his 2011 World Fantasy Award-winning novel *Osama*, he told the story of a world in which the 9/11 mastermind is a fictional character. In the masterful 2014 *A Man Lies Dreaming*, World War II never happened because Adolf Hitler was never made Chancellor of Germany and fled to Great Britain, where he ekes out a noirish life as a ratty private detective. Tidhar's most recent novel, *Unholy Land* (2018), is set in a Jewish state planted in East Africa (reminiscent of the real-life Uganda Plan of the early 1900s) where settlers clash with the natives they have violently displaced and which turns out to be only one of multiple potential realities. In Tidhar's hands, history is a set of alternatives and reality is fluid; it's an atmosphere that seems downright sensible, even oddly comforting, in a world where many of us would welcome potential different avenues for history to take.

Tidhar is certainly one of our more noirish sf writers working today, given his concern with investigating dark conflicts carried out in the shadows of the world (Dark both literally and metaphorically—the first line in the novel is “A *gunshot in the fog*,” and one of the opening scenes features a man walking along London's South Bank, alone on a foggy night, in search of an obscure, out-of-the-way pub: quite noir, indeed). This also might very well earn him the title of SF's John Le Carre, especially with *The Violent Century*, which has all the hallmarks of a Le Carre work—espionage carried out by world-weary veterans, shifting loyalties, and desperate attempts to remain human in a tense atmosphere of clashes among faceless international powers. Part of Le Carre's genius has always been to show the deeply human, deeply ordinary side of espionage, and Tidhar matches him well in *Violent Century* (adding a dollop of superheroism to give it some spice).

The Violent Century is almost entirely set (except for a few flashbacks and a few scenes set in the present day) in an alternate World War II, fought in the aftermath of a 1932 experiment by German scientist Dr. Joachim Vomacht. That quantum experiment resulted in the creation, all across the world, of people imbued with superpowers. Naturally enough these heroes (or *Übermenschen*) are brought into the worldwide conflict by the warring powers, fighting both on open battlefields and in the shadow realm of wartime espionage. This situation may seem similar to, for example, that depicted in the DC comic book series *Watchmen* (and its 2019 television sequel) or the George R.R. Martin-created and co-edited *Wild Cards* shared universe, both of which depict the political and social effects of superheroes on a “real” world. And those similarities are, indeed, present. However, those works—despite their frequent moments of bitterness and cynicism—are still rooted in a very American sense of colorful costumed personalities battling each other and who are larger than the ordinary lives around them. Tidhar’s protagonists, though, are, despite their powers, small people rooted very much in the ordinary.

The novel’s ‘heroes’ are British operatives who work for an MI6-like agency called the Bureau for Superannuated Affairs (no Avengers or Justice League here!). British superheroes are dull, with aliases that are stunning in their uncreativity. The two main characters are given the names Fogg (his power is, shockingly, generating fog) and Oblivion (whose power is to negate things and make them vanish forever); their colleagues include Spit (who emits saliva that can fly strong and hard like a bullet), Blur (super speed), and Tank (big and strong). The names are direct and uninspired, as gray as the declining British Empire they serve. By contrast, American heroes are right out of comic books, with bright costumes and names like Whirlwind, Tigerman, and the Green Gunman; Soviet heroes bear equally dramatic names like the Red Sickle and Rusalka, and German ones are called Schneesturm (Snowstorm) and Der Wolfsmann (The Wolf Man).

This very British understatement is part of the plan: as Fogg’s superior ‘the Old Man’ says to him, “We need men like you. Do not be tempted by the Americans, the loudness, the colour. We are the grey men, we are the shadow men, we watch but are not seen” (134). The word *shadow* is telling, and it recurs throughout the novel: Fogg and his colleagues are “the shadow men of a shadow war” (106). Fogg is called “the shadow man” by his great love, a German woman named Clara (which means “clear” or “bright”) whose power is to, essentially, bring things into the light. And the

postwar period is only a pale reflection of that shattering conflict: “Everything else is a shadow of that war” (229). Tidhar’s use of the word stresses that his characters are only obscured reflections of some deeper reality, unlike traditional comic book heroes and villains that bring light and noise and thunder to their worlds. While they will never be mistaken for merely human, Tidhar’s characters are nothing but.

And therein lies the sadness and the fear at the heart of *The Violent Century*. Why is the century so violent? Because regular human beings have made it so, without the need for superheroes, who are almost afterthoughts to the struggles of real people. Because, as Cory Doctorow notes in his introduction to the novel, “[t]hat’s the real terror, after all: that our lives are tossed around not by the brilliant, all-powerful supermen, but rather by people whose pettiness, fears, and weaknesses are as bad as our own” (v). The real Hitler, the real Mengele, are more monstrous than any supervillain, and the inhumanity that ordinary men can wreak on each other is more powerful than any superpower. That may seem cliché, but it is no less true, as Tidhar works to make clear.

The traditional comic book hero has little place in Tidhar’s world, as the traditional James Bondian superspy has no place in Le Carre’s. There is a wonderfully meta scene set during Vomacht’s 1964 trial (based on Adolf Eichmann’s real-life 1962 trial), in which an American historian of superheroes, Joseph Shuster (in real life the co-creator of Superman), testifies to the definition of a hero, in the process setting apart characters like Fogg and Oblivion from Tigerman and Whirlwind.

Those of us who came out of that war, he says. And before that. From pogroms and persecution and to the New World. To a different kind of persecution, perhaps. But also *hope*. Our dreams of heroes come from that, I think. Our American heroes are the wish-fulfilment of immigrants, dazzled by the brashness and the colour of this new world, by its sheer size. We needed larger-than-life heroes, masked heroes to show us that they were the fantasy within each and every one of us. The Vomacht wave did not make them. It *released* them. Our shared hallucination, our faith. Our faith in heroes. This is why you see our American heroes but never their British counterpart. Ours is the rise of Empire, theirs is the decline. Ours seek the limelight, while their skulk in shadows... We *need* heroes. (227)

It is a beautiful, heartfelt statement about the importance of heroes. However, as Tidhar shows, it is also completely wrong. American heroes help the CIA conduct its secret war in Laos and Vietnam. Russian heroes succumb to alcoholism and

are considered abominations by the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan who fight Soviet occupation. Former Nazi *ubermenschen* are reborn in the US as advertising shills for children's breakfast cereals. And no hero anywhere flies out of the sky to stop the crashing of two planes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. "That day we look up to the sky and see the death of heroes" (229). *The Violent Century* recognizes the very human emotional need for superheroes but hammers home the idea that those same heroes ultimately have little effect on history's onrush. In the latter part of the novel, Tidhar provides brief passages concerning historical events: despite the existence of heroes, nothing really changes. Atomic bombs are dropped on Japan, the Vietnam War grows and rages, the Berlin Wall is built, the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan. In a particularly telling passage, the comic book industry establishes the Comics Code Authority in 1954 –just as it did in our world—which chains the very notion of superheroes to suburban, middle-class respectability. In any world, it seems, heroes can be tamed. Someone from our world dropped into Tidhar's universe would see very little difference between the two.

The Violent Century, like much of Tidhar's output, is an excellent addition to the literature of shifting perceptions of reality, most obviously represented by Philip K. Dick. It is also an effective counterexample to the artificiality of "genre"—the novel is at once an alternate history, a spy novel, a story of superheroes, and a war novel. Fitting many boxes and at the same time none at all, Tidhar's novel (indeed, his entire literary career) demonstrates the imaginative power of fluidity to give us insights into the complex nature of our historical reality.

Unholy Land

Amandine Faucheux



Lavie Tidhar. *Unholy Land*. Tachyon, 2018. Paperback. 264 pp. \$15.95. ISBN 9781616963040.

THE protagonist of Lavie Tidhar's *Unholy Land*, Lior Tirosh, is a science fiction/detective fiction pulp writer who leaves his home in Berlin to visit his sick father in Palestine, the Jewish state nestled between Uganda and Kenya, before getting involved in an increasingly complex plot of parallel universes. The story's narrator, gradually revealed to be Special Investigator Bloom, addresses a mysterious second-person character named Nur, who turns out to be an agent trained to move in between the worlds. Bloom follows both Tirosh and Nur from afar, although at times the narrator takes on omniscient powers, as it becomes clear that in travelling from Europe Tirosh has crossed more than international borders, but the border to another world.

The novel's mirror frame—an author-surrogate protagonist to whom Tidhar attributes his own novels, including *Osama* (2011) and *Unholy Land* itself—invites the reader to lose herself into its composite worldbuilding, in which walls and borders and identities both possess the same meaning they do in the real world, and at the same time don't. Tidhar bases his what-if thought experiment in a real historical moment, the early 20th century Uganda Program, which proposed to create a Jewish nation in East Africa (a land “unholy” but a land all the same), but in his novel, like in the best sf stories, it is our own world's reality that suddenly appears strange. Like Tirosh, the reader must follow along without ever being securely anchored in either reality or fantasy, history or alternate history, the past or the present. In this country, too, Palestinians (a noun Tidhar no doubt uses ironically) erect a wall to keep out the indigenous people that were forcibly removed from the land; in this story, too, the PDF (Palestinian Defense Force) brutally harasses refugees and uses surveillance against young revolutionaries. But this is also a story in which ‘only’ a “Small Holocaust” happened (since European Jews moved to Palestine before the rise of the Third Reich) and in which Hitler was assassinated in 1948. Tidhar's incredibly vivid worldbuilding unveils a wealth of intriguing details: Palestinians

speak Judean (at the end a character calls modern Hebrew “archaic” by comparison); old European Jewish families have become diamantaires; children read the story of the Judean Tarzan.

This is also a novel that, at least when it focuses on Tirosh, develops complex and piercing emotional realities. Throughout the story, Tirosh is haunted by the (never quite described) death of his young son Isaac. His constantly resurfacing grief through memories of simple moments with the toddler showcases the talent of Tidhar’s prose. This is not the only thing that haunts Tirosh. His brother Gideon was killed in the war; his father is ailing and Tirosh is so reluctant to visit it only happens at the end of the novel; his niece Deborah is missing and her mysterious disappearance drives the action; and Tirosh’s memories are also increasingly conflicted as the story progresses.

Tidhar’s novel is a powerful, labyrinthine story reminiscent of China Miéville *The City and The City* (2009) and, in a much more subtle and controlled way, some of the best of Philip K. Dick. With its careful and intelligent treatment of some of the most difficult questions arising from the Israel-Palestine conflict, it will undoubtedly become a staple of postcolonial science fiction courses. Its straightforward prose and short format will provide for a productive introduction to discussions about border conflicts, nationality, nationalism, and imperialism while also allowing teachers to outline some of the key features of the best of sf. As Tirosh himself explains during a reading at a bookstore: “What we do [when writing stories of alternative realities] is literalise the metaphor...We construct a world of make-believe in order to consider how our own world is constructed, is told.” (113-4).

Some of the novel’s shortcomings could come from Tirosh’s own pulp detective stories. When Bloom ceases to be the narrator in the background and acts as a character especially, the plot turns cartoonish and awkward. To give an example, when Bloom and fellow soldiers storm a refugee camp and harass a family, Bloom reflects to himself: “I did not enjoy humiliating [the woman]. I was merely carrying my duties. I was a *professional*” (148). The missing-girl plotline of Deborah, with its stereotypical mobster characters, ends up leading nowhere. It is actually quite hard to pinpoint, even by the end of the novel, why certain scenes took place (like the different assassination attempts on Tirosh or his search for the theodolite) or why some characters are introduced (like Melody, a woman who seems to be here simply for Tirosh to sleep with). Overall, Tidhar’s beautiful, almost poetic prose and the

fascinating worldbuilding propel the reader to keep reading on in spite of some of the story's somewhat vulgar plot points, and some of the transition scenes between the worlds have a *Ubik*-esque quality that I will not forget any time soon.



**MEDIA
REVIEWS**

The Platform

Emrah Atasoy



The Platform. Directed by Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia, Basque Films, distributed by Netflix, 2019.

THE Spanish director, Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia's Spanish-language thriller on Netflix, *The Platform* (*El Hoyo*, 2019) is set in a dystopian future in a "Vertical Self-Management Center." It is a prison-like building referred to as "The Hole," consisting of over 300 levels, with two inmates to a cell. A platform full of food descends every day from the highest level to the bottom to feed these incarcerated inmates, which is closely concerned with food distribution and rationing. The inmates at the highest level get to decide whatever and how much they desire to eat, after which the food is taken one level down. The leftovers of the inmates above become the food those below. People are randomly moved to another level after each month. The film illustrates the protagonist, Goreng's physical and metaphorical journey which gradually reveals the brutal reality behind the Hole through his experiences with his cellmates and other people in the prison.

The movie has numerous dystopian characteristics, which may lead one to label it a dystopian movie, whereas some others may categorize it as a horror movie or science fiction horror thriller. Generically speaking, it bears certain similarities to the structural pattern of literary dystopias or dystopian movies. The film starts in medias res, as we find the protagonist Goreng (Ivan Massague) waking up on Level 48 in his cell, staring at his inmate, Trimagasi (Zorion Eguileor), an old man imprisoned due to his accidental murdering of an immigrant. The main character is initially confronted with the foil, Trimagasi, who expounds on how the system in the Hole functions, which starts his transition from a state of naivety to a state of knowledge and experience. He is gradually exposed to the reality of the system through external factors such as Trimagasi, Miharu, and other inmates. Miharu, whose name stands for "open one's eyes wide" plays a significant role in his journey (Ishida 106).

The dystopian protagonist starts to comprehend the internal mechanics of the system and resists against the system. Goreng, who takes Cervantes's book, *Don Quixote* with him as his only item, struggles hard both to understand how the Hole

works and to promote fair food rationing so that everyone can have something to eat. When the protagonist does not find support from other characters, his determination is partially vitiating. The protagonist manages to stay alive and reach the symbol of hope, a girl in this case. The girl who is implied to be Miharu's daughter ultimately becomes the token of hope that may have the potential to change the current structure. Although the blame is not explicitly put on a political body, or rather, there does not exist a political body suppressing its citizens on a holistic level, the projected world remains highly dystopian.

It is possible to approach the movie from numerous perspectives that relate to the larger intellectual and philosophical questions and concerns raised. With its strong dystopian undertones, the movie engages itself with themes such as suppression, greed, cannibalism, corruption, surveillance, empathy, self-centrism versus altruism, violence, survival, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, control, loss of individualism, social class, inequality, capitalism, the fluidity and fragile nature of borders in between different social classes, socialism, and racism. *The Platform* highlights how people do serious harm to others in order to survive and to climb up the ladder before them—a strong critique against capitalism. These points, illustrated on differing levels in the movie, can be introduced as relevant to research on science fiction films, dystopian films, science fiction in literature and media, as well as utopian and dystopian narratives and their cinematographic representations.

It is no surprise that *The Platform* has immediately become one of the most viewed movies in Netflix during the time of COVID-19. It has many similarities to the current pandemic and the new “normal” lifestyle it has brought, as social distancing and individual physical existence seem to occupy an instrumental role in both situations (emphasis added). Survival becomes the chief objective of inmates in the pit, which is followed by the desire to be on the level above, creating a dichotomy between those below and those above. Although there may be the possibility that food is sufficient for everyone, inmates eat as much as they wish instead of rationing. Therefore, people on the lower levels resort to cannibalism when they are unable to feed themselves. The self-centered approach has become clear and palpable even within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concrete parallel of which can be people's hoarding toilette papers, not caring for the needs of others.

In conclusion, *The Platform* with its unique texture, rich content and idiosyncratic characteristics suggests avenues for analysis from numerous angles in the light of

its themes and features, argumentation, and scholarly discussions. It represents topics that can be discussed within the context of various disciplines, suitable for the interdisciplinary nature of dystopian studies. The search for an ideal system, the nature of humans, and the need to disrupt dichotomous thinking in order to engender a non-binary approach would further discussion within literature, political science, and environmental humanities, which all reflect the strong potential of the movie in contributing to scholarly, academic and pedagogical approaches.

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LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS, season 1

Michael Pitts



LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS. Blur Studio, distributed by Netflix, 2019.

CURRENTLY in production of its second season, *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* is an anthology series produced by Netflix. Bringing together the talents of different casts and creative teams, the series consists of standalone episodes exploring diverse themes of the science fiction genre. These episodes, which do not exceed 20 minutes in length, reflect disparate genres such as cyberpunk, alternate history, and dystopia while covering themes from AI and transhumanism to colonization. They raise, for example, questions concerning the future of humankind, the destructive consequences of colonial expansion and capitalism, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, the privatization of space travel, and the dilemmas of robotic consciousness. Yet, while the series offers some interesting explorations within each of these fields of interest, it is problematic in its traditional framing of issues related to sex and, more specifically, its catering to the male gaze.

A re-imagining of Tim Miller and David Fincher's initial plan to remake the animated science fiction anthology film *Heavy Metal* (1981), *Love, Death & Robots* continues its predecessor's efforts of legitimizing adult-oriented animation and genre fiction. Like *Heavy Metal*, it utilizes advanced and diverse animation techniques, pushing the genre into new territory. Led by Miller's Blue studio, which is known for its hyper-realistic, video-game style aesthetics, and produced using a variety of animation tools, the show is characterized by vivid, realistic details and cutting-edge animation. Uniting the disparate aesthetic styles of the episodes is their depiction of tropes common to the underground comics of the 1970s, which in turn influenced the production of *Heavy Metal*. Like the 1970s adult-oriented graphic fiction that skirted censorship rules, *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* centers explicit content including sexuality and violence.

It is this intermingling of sex and violent content that makes the series, like its comics and *Heavy Metal* predecessors, problematic. Like *Heavy Metal*, the program caters to heteronormative male viewers through its presentation of sex and the female body. Though it occasionally presents non-normative sexuality, for example, these

portrayals of queer characters frame female bodies within patriarchal conceptions of desirability. Each female character populating these episodes acts, as Laura Mulvey puts it in her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “as an erotic object for the spectator within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (62). Women in *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* are therefore predominantly portrayed in accordance with the desires of a heteronormative male audience. Also, like *Heavy Metal*, the program frequently depicts violence towards women and emphasizes gratuitous sexual and violent details. Female characters, for example, are brutally hunted and murdered, such as in “The Witness,” or brutalized and mutilated, such as in “The Secret War.” Other episodes, such as “Beyond the Aquila Rift,” are suddenly interrupted by sex scenes clearly developed and included to appease heterosexual male viewers. While the program caters to the male gaze and includes toxic portrayals of women and violence, a few episodes do divert from this patriarchal framing of sex and gender. “Good Hunting,” for example, follows the plight of a female *huli jing* or fox spirit as she escapes sex slavery and mounts an attack upon the patriarchy in early 20th-century Hong Kong. Another episode, “Helping Hand,” similarly diverts from this catering to heteronormative male viewers in its centering of a female protagonist who demonstrates incredible courage and strength in the face of eminent danger. Overall, however, though it includes these limited, non-patriarchal presentations of female characters, *Love, Death & Robots* problematically frames women, sex, and violence.

To a limited extent, the show also comments on other issues such as colonialism and capitalism. “Good Hunting,” for example, emphasizes the legacy of colonization and its effect upon women through its portrayal of women sold as sex slaves as a result of colonialism. “Suits,” on the other hand, undermines traditional stories of American individualism and self-reliance by revealing that the farmers upon which the episode centers are actually colonizers attacking the indigenous alien species of the planet they desire to control. “Helping Hand” imagines the consequences of corporate space exploration upon astronauts whose labor is exploited at great cost. As these examples illustrate, the series builds upon pre-existing trends and themes of science fiction and occasionally offers interesting insights into topics pivotal to the future of humankind such as environmental concerns, space travel, labor practices, the expansion of human civilization, and transhumanism. Overall, then, while *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* offers occasional commentary on issues common to science

fiction, the brevity of its episodes, its patriarchal framing of issues related to sex and violence, and its catering to the male gaze limit its potential as an innovative work of SF.

Works Cited

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*, edited by Constance Penley, Routledge, 1988, pp. 57-68.

Another Life, season 1

Marta F. Suarez



Another Life, season 1. Halfire Entertainment, distributed by Netflix, 2019.

ANOTHER Life is a Netflix series currently awaiting the release of its second season. Its first season, released in 2019, consisted of ten 60-minute episodes. The plot is quite straightforward and moves between a narrative on Earth and a narrative in space. In an unspecified year in the future, a mysterious alien device arrives on Earth and settles on an open field in the US. Six months later, the scientists are still looking for the purpose of the artefact, only establishing that it emits code to Pi Canis Majoris. Not wanting to wait any longer, the government sends an interstellar ship to the signal's objective, hoping to make direct contact with the alien civilisation. The expedition is led by Niko Breckinridge (Katee Sackhoff), newly appointed captain of the *Salvare*. Meanwhile, on Earth, her husband Erik Wallace (Justin Chatwin), continues to lead the research to decipher the code.

The series often nods to other sci-fi screen media, moving between echoing popular scenes, emulating genre styles, and replicating familiar narratives. Its serialised structure converges with an episodic approach that gives the series a pastiche feeling. Whereas the overall plot has striking similarities with the decoding plot of *Contact* (1997), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Arrival* (2016), the individual episodes approach a variety of styles, narratives and sub-genres. For example, nods to sci-fi horror take inspiration from the aesthetics of *Nightflyers* (2018) and *Prometheus* (2012), including arachnids reminiscent of those in *Starship Troopers* (1997) or *Lost in Space* (1998). *Alien* (1979) is echoed several times throughout the series. Not only is the chestbuster scene almost replicated, but the first scenes in the *Salvare* evoke those in the *Nostromo*, yet with a darker atmosphere. If in *Alien* the crew wakes up in a quiet and serene ship, emphasised by the soundtrack and long shots (as if not to disturb), in the *Salvare*, Niko wakes up alone and weakened, in close-ups that emphasise the discomfort and dutch angles that suggest that not all is well. As it turns out, the ship is not where it should be and the events will only take it further from Earth in a plot reminiscent of *Event Horizon* (1997), *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), *Stargate Universe* (2009-2010), or *Lost in Space* (2018-). By the end of the season,

Nikko discovers that the alien race who sent the artefact, the Achaia, are decimating civilisations and implanting chips into hosts, connecting with core elements of *The Mind Snatchers* (1972) and the go'uld in the *Stargate* universes. The references are many and varied, making the series a kind of kaleidoscope where well-known tropes change shape but are still recognisable.

The originality of the series does not come from the plot. Indeed, some of it might result in clichés, and some of the characters are flat archetypes, with minimal internal conflict or character evolution except for Niko, Eric and the ship's AI, William (Samuel Anderson). One of the key differences between this and other sci-fi crews assembled to go into space is their very young age, their diversity and the YA feel to the character-driven drama that they create. If in *The 100* (2014-) the choice to depict younger characters is supported by the plot, in *Another Life* this decision brings a level of incoherence to the narrative, which suffers for it. The explanation, although given, contrasts with other aspects of the narrative. A member affirms that they have been chosen because their youth gives them the readiness to act, as opposed to a cautious disposition, which would characterise older crews. For the same reasons, space crews have abandoned uniforms, seen as outdated, and now are able to make their own fashion choices. Nevertheless, on Earth the military is still wearing uniforms, and all decision-makers are significantly older, which in a way contradicts the provided reasoning. It is also unclear why the crew only meet each other for the first time upon embarking on their voyage or why the former captain of the *Salvare* is part of the crew when he clearly is resentful of the change. The crew always questions the captain's decisions, and actions are often rushed or merely illogical. The audience is left to wonder why the government has sent such an inexperienced group to make first direct contact with the alien life, whose intentions are unclear. The series' focus on young and attractive characters and their interpersonal conflicts create narratives conventional in YA fiction, which contrasts with the space given to the internal conflicts of older characters.

The only other older member of the crew is First Officer Ian Yerxa (Tyler Hoechlin), the previous captain of the *Salvare*, who is killed almost immediately and replaced by his girlfriend, Cas Isakovic (Elizabeth Faith Ludlow). Michelle Vargas (Jessica Camacho) is the Communications Officer. Meanwhile, the engineering team is composed of lead engineer August Catawnee (Blu Hunt), Oliver Sokolov (Alex Ozerov) and computer engineer Javier Almanzar (Alexander Eling). The

Salvare's medic is Zayn Petrossian, a non-binary member of the crew portrayed by JayR Tinaco. Joining him in the medical bay is microbiologist Bernie Martinez (A.J. Rivera). Finally, accompanying the crew as a diplomat is the son of the US Secretary of Defence, Sasha Harrison (Jake Abel). On Earth, Eric looks after their daughter, Jana Breckinridge-Wallace (Lina Renna), and is often seen working alongside Dr Nani Singh (Parveen Dosanjh). The journalist Harper Glass (Selma Blair) provides conflict and creates tension. Overall, the characters among the young crew lack the depth of characterisation that we see in Eric, Harper, Nikko, or William. The dynamics between the latter two are probably the best element of the show at the narrative level. Designed not only to feel but also to combine the characteristics most appreciated by Nico, William becomes affectionate towards the captain in a relationship evocative of *Her* (2013). The dynamics in this relationship leads William to create another AI in search of love, complicating the matter further. For the rest of the crew, we are given little to no background story, being mostly differentiated by the way they dress and speak. There is a tendency to exposition and the dialogue often lacks subtext, breaking the scriptwriting rule of "show, don't tell". However, some of these characters have great potential. The show engages with issues of diversity, sexuality and gender in almost every episode. The guilt of the absent mother permeates Niko's reflections about family, the engineers soon become a threesome, the non-binary medic has sexual relationships with the microbiologist, and questions of love and free will are part of a critical sub-plot with the ship's AI. The ethnicity and cultural background of the characters is diverse, and although this does not materialise (yet) beyond the character design and into the plot, it is undoubtedly promising.

Audiences looking for a series with a robust scientific approach might be disappointed. The plot has some basic inaccuracies from the start. For example, they indicate that they miscalculated the distance to the objective because of dark matter, shown on screen as a dense thick grey cloud. Using high radiation in the ship kills alien life but is said to only impact the crew with infertility. Other elements that might feel incongruent relate to the dynamics in the ship, particularly concerning compliance to rules and following authority. The episodic structure puts the characters in situations that, for the most part, are a consequence of their own wrongdoings. We see members of the crew starting a mutiny, removing helmets in alien caves, smoking alien plants, or not using hazmat suits because the air is breathable. Because the transgressions towards leadership and regulations are so common and widespread, the audience

might be left wondering how they have all been chosen for such a critical mission.

The series, therefore, is eclectic in its influences and genre, combining elements of sci-fi space travel, sci-fi horror, and teen drama, though it has issues regarding narrative coherence and scientific background. Nonetheless, the episodes could be used in a classroom environment for discussions surrounding race and gender representation, the portrayals of authority (and its failures), and moral “what would you do?” situations, of which there are plenty. For research purposes, the series might be of interest to those working on intertextuality, the portrayal of the female action hero, the ambiguity of the alien *other*, the fear of the *unknown*, reflections over the humanity of AI, the dangers of AI, and the intersections of gender and sexuality. *Another Life* is due to release its second season in Summer 2020. While receiving very low reviews for its narrative incoherence, these issues might yet be addressed in the new episodes. Maybe, after all, *Another Life* will get itself another life.

Rick and Morty, season 4

Max Suechting



Rick and Morty, season 4. Adult Swim, 2019–2020.

THE least interesting thing to say about season 4 of *Rick and Morty* is that it is, generally, both good and bad in the ways that the show's previous seasons have been good and bad. At its best, it is smart, tightly-written, and searingly funny, alternately experimenting with and lampooning the devices of science-fiction and advancing simple but compelling characters along a series of wildly imaginative conflicts. The breadth of literary and cultural history it simultaneously draws from and skewers is impressive and probably as enjoyable for the seasoned SF stalwart as the novice or newcomer, with this season variously digesting *Indiana Jones*, Ernest Hemingway, *Batman*-esque acid vats, *Akira!*, heist movies, *Edge of Tomorrow*, and more. At worst, the season is so loaded with references it becomes difficult for even the conscientious viewer to piece each episode together. Luckily, though, the episodes move at such a breakneck pace that this turns out mostly not to matter very much. Once the viewer settles into the experience, *Rick and Morty* becomes a kind of gamified television, unspooling familiar or almost-familiar references every few seconds.

Of course, this referentiality has been the series' all-but-explicit subject matter since its inception. *Rick and Morty* has always been self-consciously about itself—or rather, about its own reflexive relationship with science fiction as a genre as well as the conventions of medium, character, plot, and so forth. The formula of a typical episode goes something like this: begin with a well-known media property or fictional trope, jam it together with a handful of other references, lay them out along an archetypal SF plot, and season heavily with complex, depressive, and/or fourth-wall-breaking meta-humor. If the show's aesthetic architecture is an improvisatory jumble of pastiche, reference, and imitation, its narrative engine is fueled by recursion, repetition, and intertextuality. Indeed, much of *Rick and Morty*'s charm comes from its celebration of its own intellectual indebtedness, genially rearranging its own source code with the bottomless delight of a child immersed in a Lego-and-Erector-set playworld. The result is a show which delights in endlessly plumbing its own increasingly reflexive relationship to its forebears, obsessively showing its work

while at the same time acknowledging that work as at least partially meaningless.

What is novel about this season in particular, however, is that its metafictional churn is applied most strenuously not only to SF as a genre but also to the show itself—or, more specifically, to the tension between its status as both a piece of art and a commercial media product. For example, the season’s sixth episode, “Never Ricking Morty,” finds the titular pair trapped aboard a “Story Train” running along an endlessly looping track—a direct reference to series co-creator Dan Harmon’s famous story circle. While aboard the metaphor, the pair must puzzle their way through a variety of literalized narrative devices to “break the fifth wall” with their “story potential.” The episode concludes with grandpa and grandson happily zapped back to the Smith family home, entranced with what we see now to be not an extradiegetic prison but rather a simple toy train Morty purchased for Rick, who rhapsodizes:

You did the most important thing: you bought something. . . . Your only purpose in life is to buy and consume merchandise, and you did it. You went into a store, an actual honest to God store. . . . And you bought something. You didn’t ask questions or raise ethical complaints. You just looked straight into the bleeding jaws of capitalism, and said, “Yes daddy, please.” I’m so proud of you. I only wish you could’ve bought more.

But when the suddenly train derails, Rick’s mood sours:

Didn’t you hear what I said?! Consume, Morty! Nobody’s out there shopping with this fucking virus!

The episode thus concludes with an elaborately-constructed meditation on the relationship between commodity status, narrative logic, and audience satisfaction—with a character all but shouting the conclusion at the audience in the final thirty seconds—built atop an impossibly contemporary reference.

Such moments are par for the *Rick and Morty* course: speedrun absurdism maintaining its forward momentum by ruthlessly undercutting its own sentiment. Of course, it is not surprising that an “adult cartoon” should aim to soothe its audiences’ own neuroses by layering bleak cynicism, one-degree-shy-of-treacly moralizing, and wide-ranging pop culture knowledge (*BoJack Horseman* works in much the same way). Yet, despite its restless oscillation between desire and disdain for true feeling, *Rick and Morty* mostly manages to remain entertaining and lighthearted rather than

slipping into pointless nerd solipsism.

This is not to say that solipsism is absent, of course, although it's less a property of any specific part of the show itself and more the cumulative impression the series leaves on your brain. In the show's best and most pleasurable moments, it plays like a hyperdrive version of *A Thousand and One Nights* (a comparison which the characters all but make themselves). Four seasons in, however, Harmon's relentless equation of anti-social cynicism with sophistication and intelligence has started to wear through the show's adventure-of-the-week format in a way that is harder and harder to ignore. In those moments, *Rick and Morty* feels less like a lighthearted romp through SF history and more like asymptotically performative snark, an affectation which unfortunately registers less as scandalous or risqué and more as vaguely annoying. (For instance, the season's fourth episode includes an incestuous dragon-powered "ten-slut soul-orgy," a phrase which is as tiresome to comprehend as it was to write.)

When all is said and done, however, the show's most important assets aren't its willingness to offend or the breadth of its references, but rather its creators' pairing of witty inventiveness with a complex take on media and intertextuality. Hopefully Harmon and his collaborators can keep drawing from them for years to come.

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