**51/2** Spring 2021



EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE



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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 three 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 named 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 wReview 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.

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## FROM THE EDITOR

# Spring 2021



# Ian Campbell

During the last few weeks, I've experienced William Gibson's unevenly-distributed future. My wife was in a motorcycle accident last month, and as of a few days ago now has a knee supplemented with metal and polymer parts and ligaments from a cadaver. My father, who at 93 was still running on a treadmill up until quite recently, experienced tremendous pain from sciatica and is now re-learning how to walk: the surgery that inserted artificial spacers between his lumbar vertebrae and metal rods to hold them together has temporarily confused his spinal cord. My daughter and I are now the only family members who aren't cyborgs, though both of us wonder how long that will last.

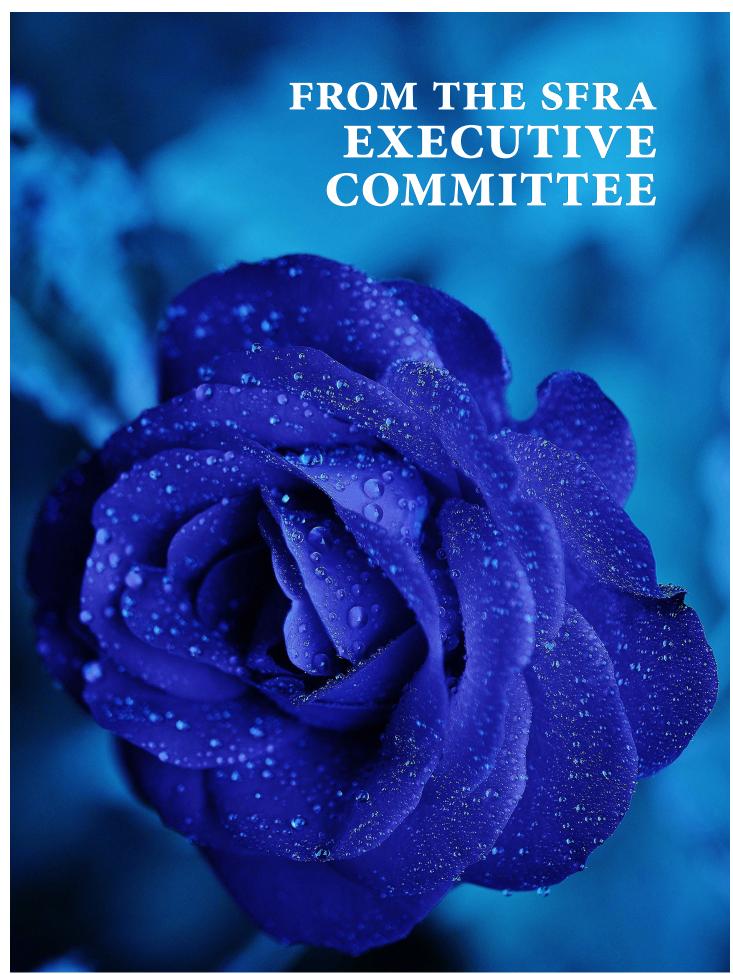
In this issue of the *SFRA Review*, we present to you at least three distinctly different versions of that future. First, we have a new Fiction section, inaugurated by the Chinese writer Tang Fei: we will be henceforth accepting fiction submissions, as delimited by the call for submissions at the beginning of the new section. We also have two symposia addressing the future. The first, Sinofuturisms, gives perspectives on the past, present and future of the rapidly-growing discourse around Chinese SF. Our other symposium consists of selected papers from the "Living in the End Times" conference, which detail a rich variety of takes on the slow-motion apocalypse many of us have found ourselves in: SF enables us to examine and critique the causes of and responses to the changes presented to us by the Anthropocene. We also have, in addition to the usual panoply of reviews, a call for papers relating to Indigenous SF, which will be one of the primary subjects of our November 2021 issue.

Finally, we bid farewell to one of our Associate Editors, Amandine Faucheux, whose competence and collegiality will be greatly missed. Please pass to your friends and colleagues our call for a new Associate Editor. In the words of Dine herself:

In collaboration with the Editor and Associate Editor(s), the Associate Editor is generally responsible for special issues and symposiums. However, duties and responsibilities are generally negotiated with the rest of the editorial team as befits the Associate Editor's interests, skills, and experience. The overview of responsibilities includes:

- Participate in regular meetings with the Editor and other Associate Editors
- Propose, organize, and/or take charge of special issues and symposiums
- Be the point of contact with authors, conference/panel organizers
- Edit and copyedit essays (about 20-30 per quarter)
- Occasional other responsibilities

Interested parties should send an email to <a href="mailto:sfrarev@gmail.com">sfrarev@gmail.com</a>, outlining qualifications and interests. This would be an ideal position for an early career scholar or late-term doctoral student.



# FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

## From the President



# **Gerry Canavan**

After a year without a conference, I couldn't be more excited for SFRA 2021—though of course I wish the event could be in person. We are hoping to build a flexible virtual format that will produce the lively encounters we are used to without asking too much from our presenters or audiences and without producing Zoom fatigue; we are learning from what other organizations have already done and from what IAFA is planning to do, but if you have ideas that could help us make this unusual conference format a success, or just want to help, please don't hesitate to get involved!

On behalf of both the planning committee and the entire executive committee, I want to express again our collective regret for the way the lack of diversity on the original conference keynote let this community down, and our dedication to making repair. Without belaboring the point or adding any caveats, special pleadings, or explanations: We screwed up, and we are sorry. And the conference will be better and stronger because people had the courage to let us know and hold us accountable to the commitments we have made. The full, expanded keynote lineup will be released soon (and may even beat this President's Note to press), as will additional details of some of the antiracist pedagogy workshops we plan to hold at the event. My home department held a version of these workshops with the Black Student Council at Marquette last summer and the dialogue was truly transformative for our program; I hope this can be the start of similarly productive and generative conversations for SFRA. Thanks again to those who reached out and called on us to live out the mission of the organization; we know that wasn't easy, and we're sorry it was necessary.

As always, let me know about events and CFPs I can promote on social media; best way to reach me is an @ or direct message to <u>@sfranews</u> or an email to <u>gerrycanavan@gmail.com</u>. See you in July!

### From the Vice President



# Sonja Fritzsche

The draft program for the annual conference SFRA 21 will be coming soon; its title "The Future of/as Inequality." The conference host Graham Murphy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada has been working hard on organizing the virtual conference and is looking forward to greeting you from Friday, June 18 to Monday, June 21, 2021. Keynotes speakers include Madeline Ashby (author of Company Town, How to Future: Leading and Sensemaking in an Age of Hyperchange, and the Machine Dynasty series), Dr. Joy Sanchez-Taylor (*Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color*), and Dr. Lars Schmeink (*Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society and Science Fiction*; The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture, Cyberpunk and Visual Culture). Special guest Aisha Matthews (*The MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* and Director of Literary Programming for the Museum of Science Fiction's annual Escape Velocity Conference) will speak as well. The virtual conference is expanding opportunities to present more globally and SFRA is no exception! We missed you last year, so we are looking forward to great conversations as we catch up on the most recent debates in science fiction studies. Don't forget to renew your membership. Conference registration is open now and a low virtual rate!

Look soon too for more information on SFRA 2022, which will be hosted by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay at the University of Oslo, and also for the location of SFRA 2023. Consider attending the business meeting at the conference to find out ways you can get more involved in the organization or e-mail me if you have questions or an interest for the future. Make sure to check the SFRA Facebook and Twitter pages and the website for recent cfps, events, and other announcements of interest to those who do research on science fiction. If you have a call or an event that you would like to circulate, please send me an e-mail or feel free to post it yourself. If you are looking for a resource, consider contacting the relevant SFRA Country Representative for help.

# THE REVIEW AT FIFTY



INTERROGATING OUR HISTORY

# THE REVIEW AT FIFTY

# The SFRA Review at Fifty: Interrogating Our History



### The Editorial Collective

The SFRA Review has published continuously for fifty years now. SF has grown through this period, accumulating a broad, deep, complex and sometimes problematic history of texts and films, creators, critics, scholars and fans. We here at the Editorial Collective would like to invite the creators, critics, scholars and fans of 2021 to examine, reflect upon, and interrogate the concerns and preoccupations of the year 1971, which was a very different time, especially in SF. The creators, critics and scholars who have been canonized were almost without exception white or male, and usually both;. The Internet did not exist: discourse and publishing were in the hands of a few gatekeepers, who were diverse neither in demographics nor opinion on what was worthy of publication. Things we view as necessary or even take for granted today, were still unthought-of, or inchoate, or sometimes actively suppressed.

Yet the texts and discourse of 1971 are one stratum among many of our accumulated history as creators, critics, scholars and fans of SF: we ought not to dismiss them simply because they're often unrepresentative by our own standards. The texts and discourse of that year influenced those of later years, and thus still influence, though indirectly, the texts and discourse of today. In 1971, Larry Niven's *Ringworld* was the Hugo award winner. In 1971, John W. Campbell passed away while he was still the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, but as recently as two years ago, his name was still on major awards, despite his extensively documented history of problematic beliefs, statements and editorial decisions. In 1971, the SFRA and the *Review* were brand-new: SF as the subject of and respondent to serious scholarly criticism was in its infancy, and most theories of how we might understand works of SF yet unformed.

It is in the spirit of interrogating our history as creators, critics, scholars, and fans of SF that we at the *Review* invite scholars and fans of all generations to consider the history that was laid down for us fifty years ago in 1971: to critique that which deserves critique; to acknowledge that which stands the test of time, even though it may still deserve critique; to bring to light that which was ignored—or suppressed. The call for papers below encourages a wide variety of writers and a wide variety of topics, on purpose, because we wish to expand rather than limit our understanding of our own history as people who love SF. Ultimately, our goal is to create an ongoing conversation about our history: to place different generations and different perspectives at the same metaphorical roundtable, in order better to comprehend the forces and discourses that shaped and continue to shape the much broader, deeper and more complex understanding(s) of SF that we have today.

We urge creators, critics, scholars and fans of all backgrounds to visit the call for papers for this initiative and to submit a paper or abstract. We look forward to an ongoing, frank and fruitful conversation about our history.

### THE REVIEW AT FIFTY

# Call for Papers: Interrogating Our History



### The Editorial Collective

The *SFRA Review* requests papers centering on texts, broadly defined, that were considered influential fifty years ago in 1971. As a jumping-off point, we suggest consideration of one or more of the Hugo and Nebula nominees for Best Novel, listed here:

#### Hugo Award nominees:

Ringworld • Larry Niven (winner)

Star Light • Hal Clement

Tau Zero • Poul Anderson

Tower of Glass • Robert Silverberg

The Year of the Quiet Sun • Wilson Tucker

#### Nebula Award nominees:

A Time of Changes • Robert Silverberg (winner)

The Byworlder • Poul Anderson

The Devil is Dead • RA Lafferty

Half Past Human • TJ Bass

The Lathe of Heaven • Ursula K. Le Guin

*Margaret and I* • Kate Wilhelm

While we view as questionable and often problematic the concept of a "canon," and note that the groups of fans and critics that nominated and awarded the following texts were demographically unrepresentative by the standards of 2021 (as were their authors), these works were, nevertheless, considered worthy of attention and esteem at the time, though most have fallen into comparative obscurity by now. You are free to choose a novel that wasn't nominated, or a shorter work, or film, television, comics, etc., or a work from 1970 or 1972, if that is where your interests lie. We suggest, but do not demand, one of the following approaches:

For younger scholars, critics or fans: Choose one of the listed texts, read it carefully, and write a paper detailing your experience of this work of "classic" SF. This could take any number of formats, including but not limited to a personal memoir, an academic examination, or an examination in light of previous reviews or academic work on the text. If you are a graduate student, or even an undergraduate student, this could be a great opportunity for a first publication.

# THE REVIEW AT FIFTY CFP: Interrogating Our History

For more-established scholars, critics or fans: Choose one of the texts you have not read and write a paper on it following the above instructions. Give us the benefit of your experience living through times that have changed in terms of literary elements such as plot, style, characterization, etc., as well as in terms of society and politics. Or, alternatively, choose one of the texts that you remember reading and reread it with an eye toward interrogating the nostalgia or memories you have of your previous experience with the text.

**For anyone:** Choose a text not on this list, something more obscure: something you believe was ahead of its time or otherwise worthy of our collective attention. Write a paper arguing why it ought to be included in a "canon" of influential texts. What is it doing or saying that stands out as exemplary, and what might have prevented it from gaining the attention you believe it deserves?

For EVERYONE: These papers should include a cogent summary of the novel's plot as a courtesy to readers; they *must* include close readings of the text of the novel as support for the argument you make. The style guidelines (MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition) can be found on the *SFRA Review* website. Because this call for papers is intended to spark a conversation, we ask that the papers be kept relatively brief, with a maximum of 4,000 words. You are welcome to send the paper itself or a brief abstract to <a href="mailto:sfrarev@gmail.com">sfrarev@gmail.com</a>. Please use "The Review at 50" as the subject header for the email. While the *Review* is not a peer-reviewed publication, your abstract or paper will be evaluated by at least two members of the Editorial Collective, and you may be asked to make revisions.

We very much welcome participation in this project by creators, critics, scholars and fans of SF from all parts of the world and all walks of life.



# **FEATURES**

### The SF in Translation Universe #11



### **Rachel Cordasco**

Welcome back to the SF in Translation Universe! It's supposedly Spring here in Madison, Wisconsin, but it actually snowed for about five minutes this afternoon, so I don't know anything anymore.

Wait, I do know one thing, and that's the fact that 2021 is giving us a lot of fantastic SFT. So much, in fact, that since I wrote the previous installment of this column, I've discovered even more novels and collections that came out between January and March. Thus in a first for this column, I'll include a paragraph about SFT that came out in the first three months of this year, and then I'll jump into what this installment is supposed to be about, which is SFT coming out between April and June.

Somehow *The Lunar Trilogy*—a famous series of science fiction novels by Polish author Jerzy Zulawski—slipped under my radar at the time of my last writing, though it is now not just on my radar but also my website. Written between 1901 and 1911, and published in English in January of this year, these books tell the story of Earth astronauts who get stranded on the Moon and establish a colony, one that goes on to develop in many ways like the civilization they left behind. February brought us *Rabbit Island*, a collection of magical realist stories from Spain, and *In the Company of Men* (Côte d'Ivoire), which explores the Ebola outbreak through a fabulist lens. In March, we were treated to German SFT from Julia von Lucadou—*The High-Rise Diver*, a story about the cost of ubiquitous surveillance—and Markus Heitz (of the *Dwarves and Alfar* fantasy series), who is out with the *Doors* trilogy, an alternate-history thriller about a mysterious cave system to another timeline. March also brought us *Zabor*, or *The Psalms* (about writing as a way to achieve immortality), the fourth installment in Jin Yong's wuxia series *Legends of the Condor Heroes*, plus Italian SF author and editor Francesco Verso's collection *Futurespotting* and the ecologically-focused (and quite excellent) anthology *Elemental:Earth* Stories.

Which brings us to April, May, and June, when flowers should be blooming and snow should not be falling...but I digress. Korean SFT continues to roll in—which makes me very happy—this time in the form of a collection of interconnected stories by Kim Bo-young (*I'm Waiting For You*) and a novel by Choi Jin-young (*To the Warm Horizon*), about a group of people trying to move forward literally and metaphorically across an apocalyptic wasteland. From Japan, we're getting Izumi Suzuki's first stories translated into English—*Terminal Boredom*—a collection described as "at turns nonchalantly hip and charmingly deranged." Sign me up.

Staying in Asia, we have a Chinese novel and anthology to look forward to in June. Chi Ta-wei's The Membranes is a near-future tale about humanity living in undersea domes after climate devastation. Sinopticon, edited by Xueting Christine Ni, offers readers thirteen newly-translated stories from some of China's most engaging science fiction authors.

# FEATURES The SF in Translation Universe

French post-exotic author Antoine Volodine shows up in May with *Solo Viola*, where a viola player might just save his compatriots from the suffering they're experiencing at the hands of an authoritarian leader. From Mohamed Kheir comes a magical story about Egypt's hidden, magical spaces and life after the Arab Spring. And surely most of you reading this column know about Lavie Tidhar's latest anthology of world speculative fiction—*The Best of World SF*—with stories about time travel, aliens, and everything in between. With authors like Taiyo Fujii, Cristina Jurado, Francesco Verso, and Nir Yaniv, you know this'll be good.

"But what about short fiction?" I hear you asking. So far in April, we've gotten two excellent stories available for free online: "The Final Test" (*Future Science Fiction Digest*), translated from the Chinese, about a machine that must prove its worth by facing a virtual reality human in a test of wills; and the disturbing Icelandic story "The Sea Gives Us Children" (*Words Without Borders*) about a community without adults living on an island, where the sea periodically deposits babies for the children to care for.

Thanks for reading, and I'd love to hear what you're reading now and what you're looking forward to: <a href="mailto:rachel@sfintranslation.com">rachel@sfintranslation.com</a>.

Until next time in the SFT Universe!

# **FEATURES**

# SFRA Country Report: India



# Vishnu Prasad Thandassery Radhakrishnan

This is my first contribution to the *SFRA Review* in any format and I am deeply humbled and honored to write the country report for India. The report features an Introduction to the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS) and our activities including the organization of an International online conference in 2020 and proposed activities for 2021, followed by an overview of the Indian SF films and literature released in 2020 and 2021 until now.

IASFS is a non-profit association established on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1998. The association's headquarters is in Bangalore, Karnataka State. This is the only registered association in India which promotes the research in science fiction and fantasy. The association promotes research in the field of Science Fiction, organizes conferences and conducts SF short story writing workshops for Indian citizens of all ages and levels of education. IASFS has organized 14 National and 5 International Science Fiction conferences at different locations in India. The Association has collaborated with many Colleges, Universities, Local Bodies and Institutions in organizing conferences. Hence, it was able to bring together hundreds of academicians, scholars, students, scientists, writers, publishers, critics, movie makers, journalists, fans, industrialists, technologists, farmers and readers. So far the Annual Conferences of IASFS were held at Chennai, Coimbatore, Gandhigram, Gudiattam and Vellore in Tamil Nadu, Bangalore, Yelahatti and Mysore in Karnataka, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Aurangabad and Pune in Maharashtra, Pondicherry, and Ernakulum in Kerala, my home state. Each conference had plenary sessions and story reading sessions by respective authors in addition to the paper presentations. IASFS had also arranged a SF Story Writing Workshop conducted by Eric Miller and story reading sessions by respective SF writers. The association was also able to organize a video conference with Professor James E Gunn, Director of the Center for Science Fiction Studies at Kansas University.

Dr. Srinarahari is the Secretary-General of IASFS and he plans and distributes all the duties and activities of the association including memberships, roles of members in association and conference related activities. I am a life member of the association since 2019. The 19th Annual or the 5th International Science Fiction virtual Conference of the association was held in collaboration with Bangalore University, from December 7 to 10 in 2020. This conference was entitled "All Roads to Science Fiction". A unique feature of the conference was that all the 52 departments of the Bangalore University, SF fans, media and the general public had converged at "ISFC 2020". Themes of the conference varied from myths to advanced technology and to the life in other worlds. The conference was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Karnataka State, and the Deputy Chief Minister, the Minister for Higher Education, the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education, the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University, and the Physics Nobel Laureate of 2019 Professor Didier Patrick Queloz had made their esteemed presence. Some of the highlights of this conference include plenary sessions from SF experts and scholars from different

# FEATURES SFRA Country Report: India

countries, paper presentations, special lectures, interviews, panel discussions, and the narration of SF stories. Guest Speakers of the conference included science fiction writers from Czech Republic, Julie Novakova and Lucie Lukacovicova. The conference also hosted guest speakers from different disciplines including Neural Engineer Dr. John RoLacco from Singapore, NASA scientist Ravikumar Kopparapu, and Dr. Ashish Mahabal, Astronomer and Data Scientist from Caltech.

The Association publishes a quarterly magazine entitled *Indian Journal of Science Fiction Studies*. It comprises of papers and stories presented in the previous conferences, review of books, and an interaction by the readers. As part of the conference, we had also prepared a collection of all the abstracts received for the conference and it was released as an E-book after the conference. Selected papers from the conference will be published in a peer reviewed journal maybe later this year. IASFS proposes to hold Regional, National and an International Conferences during 2021-22. This year's National Conference may be held at Shridi in Maharashtra.

As for the recent developments in Science Fiction novels, films, and TV shows from India, there is very little to mention from the year 2020 till now. One SF novel worth noting is Samit Basu's Chosen Spirits. This is a dystopia set in a near Indian future and has all the elements of a traditional dystopia like surveillance, an exploitative government, and the manipulation of technology. It was featured in the short list of the JCB Prize for Literature in 2020. Other honorable mentions include *The Wall* by Gautam Bhatia, *Analog/Virtual: And Other Simulations* of Your Future by Lavanya Lakshminarayan, Star Daughter by Shveta Thakrar, and Hunted by the Sky written by Tanaz Bhathena. S.B. Divya, who is known for her SF short stories, published her first SF novel Machinehood in March 2021. When it comes to SF films and TV shows, the trend is no different in the number of production. Only two SF films were released in theatres after the pandemic. It is to be noted that both of these are Telugu-language films. Disco Raja directed by Vi Anand was released on 24th January 2020 before the lockdown phases started in India. Zombie Reddy directed by Prasanth Varma was released on 5th February 2021 when the theatres partially reopened amidst the pandemic. This film is considered as the first zombie film in Telugu language and it is also based on the COVID-19 pandemic. Two Hindi language SF web series were released in 2020, Betaal and JL50. Betaal is a zombie horror series directed by Patrick Graham and it was released on Netflix. Even though it received mixed to negative reviews, it is still India's first zombie web series. JL50 is directed by Shailender Vyas and it is available on the streaming platform Sony Liv. OK Computer is the only Indian SF series released in 2021 till now. This SF comedy drama series is directed by Pooja Shetty and Neil Pagedar and it was released on Disney+ Hotstar.

# FEATURES SFRA Country Report: India

I feel that this is the ideal time for me to write a country report for India. Because India is going through the worst second wave of COVID pandemic and people are dying from the lack of oxygen supply in hospitals all over the country. It feels like we are living in a dystopia on the verge of apocalypse which also reflects our common interest in this venture, Science Fiction. Let us hope that the pandemic will be over very soon so that we can survive this trial and get back to our normal lives.

Vishnu Prasad Thandassery Radhakrishnan is a Ph.D. Student in the English department of St. Thomas' College (affiliated to the University of Calicut) in Thrissur, Kerala, India. His MA dissertation was on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. In his Ph.D. thesis, he is working on Young Adult Dystopian literature which tries to look into the genre's impact on popular culture, film adaptations, and social media discussions all over the world. Vishnu is a lifetime member of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS) which promotes science fiction research both in English and India's regional languages and organizes an International Science Fiction Conference every year. He is also the current country representative of India for the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA). Vishnu is also a member of the YA Studies Association and his research interests include Science Fiction and Fantasy, Utopias and Dystopias, Children's and Young Adult Literature and Media, Gothic Studies and Popular Culture Studies.

# **FEATURES**

# Call for Papers Trans-Indigenous Science Fictions: Imagining Beyond Settler Colonialism



#### The Editorial Collective

Indigenous peoples, and indigeneity in general, have always been central to sf. As scholar John Rieder has argued, a colonial ideology and colonial history are endemic to sf, shaping the genre since its inception. Indeed, the history of exploration and settlement seem central to common notions of the genre, especially in Western texts. Yet it is precisely this way of considering the relationship between indigeneity and sf—a Euro-American approach—that continually relegates Indigenous peoples to the "primitive." According to Grace Dillon (Anishinaabe), "Indigenous sf is not so new," and the relationship between indigeneity and science fiction is one where material effects are felt in both directions. She writes, "Writers of Indigenous futurisms sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably change the parameters of sf" whether in the ruined return of boarding school ideologies in Cherie Dimaline's (Métis) The Marrow Thieves to the metaphorical, interspecies re-telling of colonization in Claire G. Coleman's (Noongar) Terra Nullius. A futuristic outlook is embedded within Indigenous decolonial thinking, which encourages seeing past the confines of settler colonial ideologies. Scholarship in the past twenty years has taken up exploring the way Indigenous of "changes the parameters of sf." It is this conversation this special section for an issue of the SFRA Review looks to continue and expand upon.

This special section will examine the depths of not just Indigenous sf, but Trans-Indigenous sf. Trans-Indigenous scholarship, as introduced by literary scholar Chadwick Allen (Chickasaw), works to think across and juxtapose Indigenous texts. As Allen argues, "My goal in staging purposeful Indigenous juxtapositions is to develop a version of Indigenous literary studies that locates itself firmly in the specificity of the Indigenous local while remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the relevant Indigenous global." Indigenous sf is rooted in particular places and particular communities that must be considered, even while we acknowledge the often inter-tribal, global, inter-planetary, or cosmic messages at the heart of these works. From foundational novels like *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* by Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) to more contemporary works by Cherie Dimaline (Métis), Daniel H. Wilson (Cherokee), and Blake Hausman (Cherokee) and through video games, films, comics, and multimedia artworks by Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinabee/Métis), Cole Pauls (Southern Tutchone), and Skawennati (Mohawk) Indigenous sf is not only expanding into the future but drawing from communal and ancestral pasts.

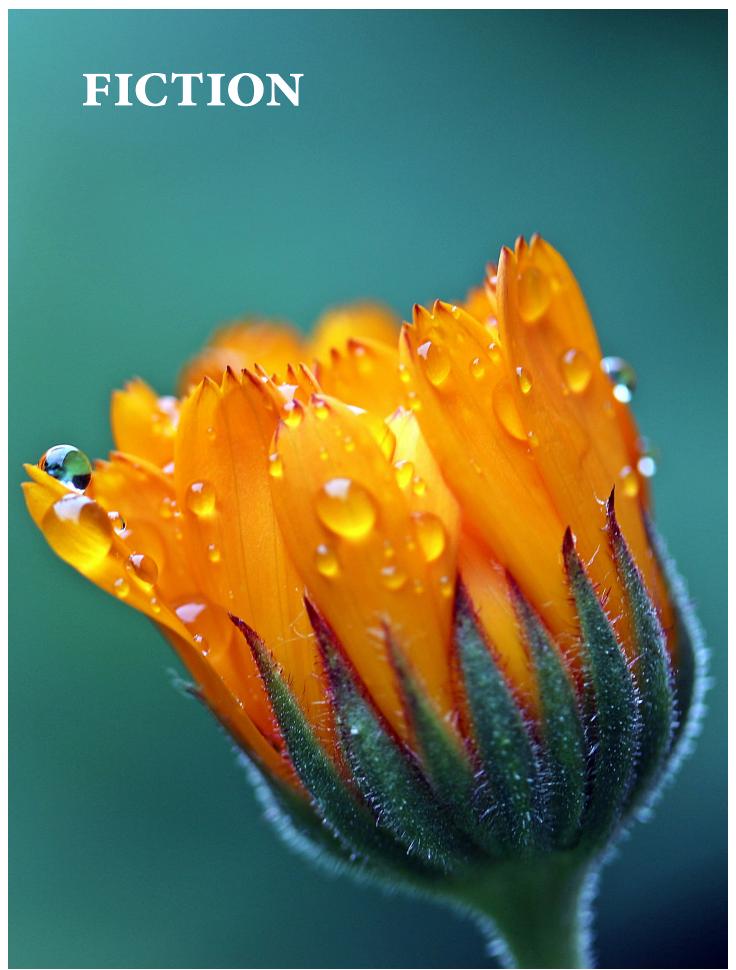
# FEATURES CFP: Trans-Indigenous SF

It is in the spirit of this long-running communal, global, and cosmic tradition that we are inviting abstracts relating, but certainly not limited, to the following areas and topics:

- Activism
- Art/art history
- Comics/Graphic Novels
- Decolonization
- Gaming and/or digital narratives
- Indigenous futurisms
- Indigenous scientific knowledges
- Indigenous slipstream (time travel and alternative futures/realities)
- Landback (contemporary activist movement for reclamation)
- · Languages and revitalization
- Media Culture
- Posthumanism
- Sf contact narratives, particularly from an Indigenous perspective
- Specific Indigenous sf authors or texts
- Teaching/Education
- Two-Spirit/LGBTQ texts
- Treaties
- Water protection

Please send your abstracts (250-300 words) describing your provisional 3000-4000-word essay accompanied by a brief bio (50-100 words) to <a href="mailto:jeremy.carnes@ucf.edu">jeremy.carnes@ucf.edu</a> by 15 June 2021. Authors will be notified with 2 weeks and first drafts of selected papers (prepared in MLA Style with a Works Cited in MLA 8th Edition) will be expected by 31 August. Essays will be published in a special section in the Autumn (November) 2021 issue of the *Review*.

If you have any questions regarding this project, please reach out to guest editor Jeremy M. Carnes at the email address above.



# **FICTION**

## **Call for Submissions: Fiction**



## The Editorial Collective

The *SFRA Review* welcomes well-written and carefully-edited pieces of short fiction that conform to the following guidelines:

- Stories (or poetry, drama, etc.) should be no more than 4000 words
- Submissions must be original work that has not been previously published; if, for
  example, it has been previously posted on a blog or similar medium, please include a note
  explaining when and where.
- Submissions should be clearly recognizable as SFF
- Submissions should not be thinly-disguised social or political rants
- Submissions should be clearly germane to the issue's topic
- Microsoft World .docx files only. If you are unable to access Word, please use Google Docs.
- All files must include a brief (<100 word) bio of the author and proper contact information
- All stories must be sent as attachments to <u>sfrarev@gmail.com</u> with the subject "Fiction Submission: Summer 2021".

Stories will be read and edited by at least two members of the collective. We will be much more likely to reject submissions out of hand than to request revisions, though we may do the latter.

The Summer issue's symposium is on Mormonism and SFF, so for the Summer issue we are requesting submissions that are related to one of the following:

- religion
- · pilgrimage/migration
- societies/states that are theocratic or otherwise dominated by religion
- conquest/erasure of Indigenous populations by settler colonialism

Subsequent issues will have different topics: each of these will be revealed in the immediately previous issue.

# **FICTION**

#### 1761



# Tang Fei Translated by Xueting Christine Ni

Α

61

He was fleeing; he slid the SIM out of his phone, snapped it and ground the pieces under his foot before throwing the handset into the westward torrent of the river. Using a mirror in the supermarket bathroom, he cut open the epidermis of his neck and dug out the social security chip. Then into the back of his thigh to find the extrasensory jammer and the low-frequency capillary sanitizers which lay along the arteries. He wrenched them all out, and hurled them all in a bundle through the window and into a passing rubbish truck. Relying on natural instincts, he dived into the maze-like world of the Metro, and found his refuge on a long stretch of disused walkway.

All of this, I saw.

I watched him remove everything that could be used to track his location from about his person and throw them away, forming beautiful trajectories against the dusky scarlet clouds of the northern sky.

Like the others, he naively believed that by removing these tracking devices, they would never have to worry about being traced, that they would truly be invisible in this metropolis. Provided there is no incident, I would let them live on in this kind of illusion.

If several years pass without them harming man or beast, I would remove their names from the watch list. Their illusion would no longer be an illusion. They could lead the ordinary lives they thought they already had.

No one would know they were Neumodded. Like damaged products that have been refurbished in accordance with strict quality control, they would be discretely replaced on the shelf. And I, unbeknownst to the products, am that quality controller.

I watched him dash into a disused suburban subway. It isn't much safer in DiXia than above. He was very alert, picking his place on an unoccupied platform on the periphery of the station, sleeping in a hidden recess where the tracks join the platform, setting up a fake bed two to three metres away from his actual sleeping place, even setting up simple booby traps: the kind that can be found in encyclopedias, using found tools like rat traps and beer cans. Virtually every moment, this man is taking the highest of precautions. The occasional shadow that strays into his territory, some by accident, others for opportune gain, would invariably trigger his defenses or be frightened

away by the flash grenades he'd formulated. Those who choose to live in DiXia, usually don't want trouble; or I should say, they'd already had a big enough dose to last them a lifetime.

The camouflaged infrared sensor constantly streams images. This is how I watched him making his nest in the darkness. I've even begun to admire him.

He is only a basic Neumodded, having undergone just a small, routine operation. His files state very clearly: slight lowering in sensitivity of the NE/5-HT receptors in the cerebrum. Among the several hundred monitor screens in the surveillance car, about 60 to 70% of subjects tracked have had that operation.

Yet he is like no other.

A born fugitive, he is agile, decisive, cunning and crafty.

Nearly all Neumodded want to hide the fact they have been modified. But not all of them can confine themselves to a life in DiXia.

It was remarkable, removing every single implant from his body. Even though the Neumodded know that implants would render their location traceable, exposing their movements, very few go through with that. When I saw him come out of the supermarket, his trousers stained with blood, I froze in shock. It is said that before wars were all nuclear, old soldiers would open their wounds up, extract bullets from within, and stitch up the holes, all without the aid of anesthetics. I had never believed those tough guy legends were true, until that instant.

Was it really necessary to go to this length? I have monitored countless Neumodded, yet only this one has chosen the life of a fugitive. It's as if he's not only running from his past, running from his Neumodded status, but in doing so, running from humanity and civilization. I've started to become attached to him, and perhaps more than a little fascinated. I have to admit, I spend more time on him than on the other subjects, even if it wasn't that obvious at first.

Theoretically, I am responsible for several hundred Neumodded. Every monitor in the surveillance car constantly broadcasts their every action: the main computer is programmed to immediately alert the nearest controller or hospital, if there is a problem. In order to prevent the Neumodded from using interference devices or hacking the machine (and someone before had succeeded in doing so), the company employs human controllers to monitor the screens. Controllers select a random subject every hour to follow in forensic detail.

Things getting out of control were sometimes inevitable, hence the "belts and braces" approach. It gets tedious. The ways that people run and hide are more or less the same. But I like this job, leaping from one subject's life to another's, but watching from the outside, objectively. Until I saw him.

By the time I became aware of this attachment, it was too late. Every day, I spend over half my time, totally focused on watching him on his screen. I tried to change my position, but no matter

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where I am, out of the several hundred screens, my attention would be involuntarily be drawn to his. Even if I intentionally move it away, it would drift back to him before long.

Oh yes, his number is 17.

I don't know his name.

It's difficult to work out how he learned all these survival tricks and strategies: setting up snares, using old batteries and junk he found in rubbish to make those flash grenades. He wasn't born with these skills and had no net tutorials to rely on. His files say that he doesn't have that background. Through careful observation, and putting these observations into practice, he seems to have acquired the skills that would ensure his survival. There is a kind of process there, but something remains hidden.

In the beginning, he was dreadful. He woke up from the operation into utter confusion, exhibiting extreme reactions to stimuli, staring malevolently at a passerby. He looked at people with a horror that words could not describe. I have never seen such a gaze from another living thing. A gaze that seemed to pierce through the world of the living, all the way to hell. It was as if he were confronted with tens of thousands of megabytes of information from humanity's history, his whole face twisted under the weight of all this data. Whenever I replay those clips, I focus the camera to his face, zoom in and zoom in, until those eyes fill the entire screen. Those beautiful brown irises, the molecule-scatter ray penetrating the stroma, shining onto the black pigment and into the pupils. Those mysterious, pitch black pupils. In what distant deeps or soaring skies were those retinas burned so deeply?

That data is unavailable.

Even if the image is so zoomed in that the pigment inside every cell of the iris is visible, the visuals cannot tell.

What exactly does he see? Or think he sees?

I want to know.

The pedestrian he glowered at was startled. I was just about to stun the subject, my finger curling round the trigger—this was the first time I'd had to take extreme safety measures against a Neumodded—but he suddenly leapt up and darted away, half stumbling, half crawling. His escape was pathetic to watch, collapsing into every possible thing he passed. About fifty or sixty metres into his run, he began to recover. I wrote my analysis on the form, my conclusion concurred with that of the mainframe: the Neumodded's condition was stable. Continue observation.

Not long after that, he found his hideout in the abandoned metro station, and sank into the world of DiXia, the hole where hoodlums go to disappear. He has adapted very well, for a newcomer. He has no physical prowess, by any account, nor does he have weapons or money, yet he manages to stay out of anyone's control by his sheer wits.

Once, deep in the night, he stalked the city's top eating places, in search for some high-calorie food, rather than the usual left-over junk in discarded paper bags. He came across a leather coat at the entrance of a car park. The coat was huge, not his size, but would make a warm blanket for the winter. Just as he pulled the coat on, a tramp, towering two heads taller appeared behind him. "That's my leather coat," he said to 17.

"Oh, and you just happened to lose it?"

"I left it outside the bar, took it off before a fight. The little bastard took a lot of punches." The big fellow pressed towards him slowly.

"Outside the bar"? 17 eyed him quickly before stating emphatically, "This coat's not yours."

He shifted his gaze to everything he could possibly focus on, avoiding looking directly at the tramp.

"Kid, you lookin' for a fight?" His companion was losing patience.

17 raised his gaze slowly to meet the tramp's. Instantly his eyes became vacant, his body trembled in pain, but he bore it, or should I say, he seemed to welcome it, as if something had entered his body. He face looked lost: the empty look that one only assumes when one puts all their focus, spirit and energy into one single thing. During the last few playbacks, I grasped the bewilderment and dejection that crossed his face. On the whole, it feels as if this person has shifted away from any dimension where he was physically present.

The tramp clearly didn't notice this change, nor did he sense the strange scent of danger emanating from 17. If I were him, I would have.

To the tramp, 17 was just another luckless vagrant, who looked skinny, weak and way under his weight class. So he made the first move. He took a swipe at 17's collar. 17 couldn't dodge it, and he was pulled in close. The tramp was about to rip the coat off his back, but all of a sudden, his arms went limp and fell to his sides.

The tramp started to howl, dropping 17, and collapsing into a heap, both hands shielding his left knee.

"Bastard, hand that over." He attempted to snatch something from 17. This time he wasn't after the jacket, but the humming photon interceptor in 17's hand.

17 stepped back to get out of his range.

"How did you know about my knee?"

Had the vagrant not mentioned it, it would have taken extensive digging for me to find out that he had a bionic actuator. This kind of prosthetic is usually highly stable and wouldn't normally glitch, unless there was interference on the exact wavelength from a nearby device. Which was precisely what 17 was holding.

The giant had asked the question I wanted an answer to. How did 17 know his attacker had an actuator in his knee, and happened to have an interceptor set at the same frequency as the actuator? The tramp couldn't figure it out, but his puzzlement didn't stop the pain. His huge bulk completely folded up, he begged 17 to switch off the interceptor.

"It only works within 500 metres: look, I'll test it myself." 17 glanced at the device in his hand, his expression complex. There a mixture of pride, and concern. I would guess it was his first time using it. "Don't come any closer."

17 backed away at a near run, and once out of range, turned to face his attacker. With the device now deactivated, he carefully approached the tramp who now sat slumped on the ground. His hulking mass was no longer threatening, but 17 still avoided looking at him, a slightly guilty expression passing his face.

He held out his hand to the tramp and mumbled something which the vagrant didn't seem to hear. 17 was obliged to repeat it, his averted gaze filled with a few more degrees of shyness. "Give me his number." He yelled.

The tramp was stupefied. He probably had no idea he'd be counter-robbed. "What number? Whose number?"

17 held up the photon interceptor. "Every DiXia doctor gives their patients a contact number. The one who did your knee would have done the same. Like their patients, unlicensed doctors live a vagrant's life to avoid constant danger. The contact number lets you put in a request for the doctor's location at any time. The doctor can consent or decline, according to their circumstances at the time. Apart from this, the number has charging functions, when you top up to a certain amount of money there will be discounts and offers on medical fees. It keeps doctors' and patients' fates tied very closely together."

"He didn't give me a number, really, he didn't give me any contact details. I'm telling the truth."

The big man said that his doctor isn't on the move, keeping his practice at the same place. He seemed as though he was going to keep the location a secret, but his eyes flicked to the interceptor in 17's hand, he sitated for a moment, and he made a choice between further suffering and betraying his doctor.

"You know why I'm asking." The hint of a smile emerged on 17's slim face.

"Yeah." The big tramp nodded and gave him the address of the underground hospital.

The next day, 17 found that underground surgery, or at least the address the tramp had given him. It was more of a puzzle than an address: according to the tramp's spoken instructions, the location was on a overhead walkway on a fly-over in the Port District. There was nothing on the walkway. This area is mainly deserted during the day. 17 stood in the blazing sun, staring at the rust-mottled railings in a daze, feeling a little exposed. He hasn't been in sunlight for a long time.

A soft graphene ladder rose up from the base of the walkway, climbing up until it hung on the railing to the right of 17. This was a kind of invitation. 17 stepped over the railings and grabbed hold of the rungs. The ladder slowly retracted, taking 17 into the structure suspended underneath the walkway. Incredible.

An underground surgery hidden in plain sight, slung below an overhead walkway in a part of town where you never looked up.

The automatic doors close behind 17, almost clipping my sensor.

"How did you find us?' An old man emerged from the shadowy depths of the room.

No, not actually an old man. It's hard to tell someone's age from their outward appearance, especially when their face has been operated on. Everything from the elusiveness in his gaze to his crooked gait spelled out "old, an age that connoted "harmless". 17 lowered his head and gazed at his shoes.

"A tramp told me."

The old man eyed him and detected the trace of embarrassment on his face.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"I want a spectrometer scan." 17 took out a tidy pile of money from his pocket.

The old man took it. "Of what?"

"My brain."

The main computer was already on red alert. The red light on the top of the surveillance car was flashing urgently, flooding the entire interior of with a glaring red, making it resemble a murder scene. My blood pressure soared, my arteries about to explode. For some time after I'd unplugged the alarm, it still reverberated in my head, but even that was better than having to go through the damned post-report checking procedures.

Until then, no Neumodded has ever requested a brain scan. What did he want to know? What was the problem? Every day, I check his behaviour against strict criteria; all calculations show that his statistics fall within the boundaries of normal. The operation was a definite success. Several days of trailing him proved that he was recovering well.

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What happened? I wanted to know what it was that he wanted to know. They say to never let the opponent get the upper hand, but 17 wasn't my opponent. At least until now.

Does he want to undergo reverse operations, and cancel the effect of the previous one? According to the Neumodded Monitoring Code, the monitor must take extreme measures against the subject in this situation.

So what on earth are you trying to do, 17?

I stared at a screen that was really no larger than my hand, not missing a single detail. carefully manipulating the position of the sensor's camera, adjusting it to the exact angle I wanted. I was staring so hard my eyes nearly bled.

The old man said as he switched off the scanner. "The results are out."

In that instant, I almost felt my heart, synchronized with 17s, leaping out of our mouths.

"Nothing abnormal. Only this, you see," The old man pointed at the shadow over the occipital lobe on the cerebral hologram, and said "the number of neurons here is unusually high: your brain needs a much higher oxygen intake than normal people, so you've been feeling exhausted, and have difficulty breathing. Just don't do any extreme sports. Like fucking." The old man smirked. He obviously liked this part of his job. "Only joking."

"I'm into animals, anyway." 17 replied to the floor, before squeezing out a wry smile. "Only joking."

The old man chuckled, suddenly he rushed towards 17, pressed down on his shoulders. 17 was quick to retaliate. They struggled for a while, their faces almost touching. "What happened to your eyes? Can't you look at people?" The old man extracted a hand, grabbed 17's chin and forcibly pointed it towards his own face.

17 twisted his head left, but it was twisted back by the doctor's hand. He closed his eyes, shrieked and begged the old man to let go.

"You can take it for a little while. Don't you want to know the answer to that question?"

As soon as he heard this, 17 calmed down. He seemed to use all his might to lift those eyelids that seemed so heavy, a drop of sweat trickled down his face. He opened his eyes, and slowly and turned his gaze towards the old man.

Then came another scream, it was hard to tell whether it was caused by pain, horror, or both.

They looked at each other, faces almost touching. Two men so intimately losing themselves in each other's gaze. Fixed in the posture of two barons from an opera classic, but with none of the humour or romance.

17 was trying his hardest to move his body backwards, as if he wanted to merge into the wall behind him, to escape this invisible monster. He was obviously in a lot of pain. Veins pulsed explosively on his forehead, he gritted his teeth, but eventually, he shut his eyes, and the doctor moved away. When 17 opened his eyes again, I zoomed in. The entire screen filled up again with that pair of milk chocolate brown irises. Those wondrous capillary lines. I had never examined a person's eyes so closely. It felt mysterious that I could see his eyes so intimately, but could not see a thing that they saw.

"What did you see?" I hovered close to the screen, the tip of my nose almost touching it.

"It's alright. Everything's fine." The old man's voice came out of the speaker.

I leant back, zoomed the camera out to a normal distance. In the upside-down room, the old man had already returned to his previous position. He spoke nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened before.

"Tomatoes and Parma cheese."

"What?" 17 was bemused.

"Eat more of these things, and spaghetti bolognaise. Nothing to worry about. Your body needs more glutamic amino acids and calcium ions. To put it simply, they're good for your brain."

"Got it..." 17 hesitated.

"I saw the microsurgery wound. It's very visible under the microscope. Don't worry, I can confirm it was a routine modification." The old man was soothing the concerns 17 hadn't voiced. A profound understanding of human nature is also the professional remit of an underground doctor.

"So, I'm totally fine?"

"You can't be any more normal." The old man shrugged.

Explosion. Shrapnel. Both figures were thrown across the floor. Documents, receipts, small items and pieces of wallpaper were hurled through the hole torn by the charge, falling under the walkway.

A masked figure emerged from the smoke and dust. Hanging upside down, the image resembled a mirage. Facing the surgery, he lifted both arms, curled his body into a ball and somersaulted at high speed towards the walkway. All performed in one smooth balletic act, which you couldn't help but admire. The graceful agility and imaginativeness of this exit. By the time we reacted, it was too late. The masked figure had been carrying a gun. And he had fired a single shot into the room.

It all happened too quickly.

17 stared at the blood that flowed over the back of his hand in a stupor. The old man had collapsed into his arms. The bullet seemed to have hit his heart. The killer was an excellent shot.

With blood gushing out like that, it looked as though the doctor was beyond saving. The old man grabbed hold of 17 with an energy that seemed to come from a final urge to survive; there was a mumbling which could hardly escape his throat. 17 started up: he knew he had to put distance between himself and the incident. Just as he freed himself from the old man, there was a flurry of footsteps. From a door he hadn't seen before, a pack of burly male nurses rushed in, and immediately surrounded the old man.

"I didn't do it. I was a patient." 17 steps to the side.

They ignored him, carrying the old man into the next room, and beginning emergency rescue procedures. I could tell they were experienced. Fortunately, the old man's heart was crooked, and the bullet only found a main artery. Any hospital would stock Cell Regeneration Serum, which would rapidly repair the damage. I looked back at the nurses, only to find their faces ashen, and their bodies slumped in despair.

"You've got CeReg, right?" 17 threw a glance at the freezer.

"It's no good."

"Why not?"

"We don't know his blood type. So we don't know which type of serum to use."

"But his Social Security Chip! He's still got one."

"All the old man's records, his name, age, blood type. All fake," one of them informed him hesitantly.

"He got a hacker to ghost him," another of them added.

Yes, any sensible underground doctor would find a way to change or delete their personal details. The mere thought of this info being stored by the state archives would be like sitting on a bed of needles. It wasn't just DiXia's doctors, but many who have forsaken the light have also forsaken their identity under the sun. For them, even death is better than being caught. Your true identity must, under no circumstances, be discovered.

"Can't you do a cross-matching to find out?"

"There's no time." The male nurse burst into tears.

I watched him. Forgetting day and night. At first, it was for work, then it was out of curiosity, and now--I don't know. Watching through the tinted windshield of the surveillance car, or from of the monitoring screen, a day at a time. Despite this, I still don't understand, how things had got to this stage.

They gambled with life.

They won.

The old man was saved.

This is only one version of the story. One among the many different narratives that have spread across DiXia. 17 didn't use weapons, nor did his body "glow with a halo that subdued all before him". He was just as stunned as everyone else, just as helpless. The only difference is that he seemed to know something, yet couldn't be sure. He acted as if he was compelled to blurt out the old man's blood type, compelled to act like he knew. And in turn, everyone else had been compelled to believe him and act on it.

"B, RH minus P," 17 yelled at those nurses. I replay the moment again and again. The way he shouted it out. I rewind it and fast it forward, infatuated with his expression. In that instant, his face revealed some kind of pain, but also a mysterious resolve.

What did this expression mean for the masses? Did he show the air of calm and self-possession they hoped for?

That isn't important. What is important is that the blood type he shouted was correct.

The story of 17 soon spread. DiXia thirsts for blood and legend. Many flocked to find him. They wait at the places where he might appear, intercept him, politely or rudely. The first two were just curious, they wanted to see him with their own eyes, or soak up a bit of good luck. And then someone couldn't help but ask questions, probing ones, and 17 would choose which ones to answer. He knew those questions were important, and that at least they didn't come out of malice or boredom. He told those people where to find food, long-lost belongings, explained to them that actions from enemies that hurt them many years ago were merely due to misunderstanding, and were worth forgiving, he dissipated conflict, and helped them shape their lives.

He knows things, that no one except the perpetrators know, or things that even they were unaware, but no one knows how.

No, he is not a psychic.

He explains this to those people. No, he's not a prophet. But it's no use.

Within 48 hours, 17's existence became known to the entire DiXia. They relentlessly watch at junctions he might pass, brazenly relaying him messages by hook or crook via unsuspecting acquaintances. The more extreme ones go into 17's territory, carrying weapons.

I saw with my own eyes some hardened villain who came looking for him, whose eyes brimmed with tears the moment he saw him. Some follow him silently, protecting him from the shadows. Women give him clean clothes; children bring him stolen fruit.

He explained to them again and again, it was purely coincidence. If they have a good memory, they would know that he too has made mistakes. He has a 35% probability of getting it wrong. But apart from him, no one remembers the failures.

I don't know how all this happened, how things have careened down this path. The disconcerting thing is, deep down, I don't feel these people are being foolish.

When you come face to face with another frail human being just like you, and you throw him a question that has tormented you half a lifetime, when his downcast gaze slowly rises meet yours, and you look into those beautiful brown eyes, eyes that surround you alone, like the warm sun, the kind of wholesome sunlight that can only found in the Finance District; and then you feel his agony, and his resolve to withstand it, to hide those thistles and thorns below that pale skin. His eyes penetrate you, and you realize that he is alone in a darkness that drowns even himself, like the chaos before the Big Bang, time and space cease to exist, along with everything we know, there is only him. The only thing left is that gaze, the way it penetrates everything, detached and yet at the same time, full of yearning. Then you realize... you finally realize, that he is suffering for you, suffering for your petty distress.

When you are facing all of this, would you not, in a heart beat, like the people of DiXia, fall in love with him?

I would.

The tenth day after the shooting at the surgery.

News came that the old man is recovering quite well, and that he wanted to see 17. So, 17 came.

The surgery has been restored to the way it was. The old man, in bed at his own home, looks quite well. Maybe it was an illusion, but when the sensor connected to the room, I thought I saw the old man darting a quick glance at it.

17 directs his gaze to the "empty" corner of the room and waves his hand in front of the old man's eyes. "Doctor, are you all right now?" Having asked that, he smiles at himself.

"Has anyone been bothering you?" The old man's demeanor seems graver still than the first time.

"Your friends came round asking me what the assassin looked like."

"Yes, they told me, you fobbed them off."

"I said it was a masked figure. It's the truth." 17 defended himself.

"You'd better stick to that line. My problem, I fix it myself. You fix your own problems. Everybody's got problems, but they fix it themselves." The old man stops and flicks a glance over to the sensor from the corner of his eye. "This time is an exception, though. You saved my life once, so I'll give you one piece of advice. You must remember it. This is advice that can save your life."

"What is it?"

"Never ever tell anyone the truth. When you came here the first time, you didn't tell the truth; of course, neither did I. Even if you told the truth, I wouldn't have. But now, things are different." The old man looks at the wound on his chest, flicks the switch by his bed, changing it to walk mode. Reacting to the commands from the old man's brain, it carries him into the depths of the surgery. "Come in. Let's talk."

Another set of doors 17 hadn't noticed slide open quietly. The bed carries the old man in and disappears.

17's facial expression shows more fear than puzzlement. He is afraid of what the old man will tell him, even before he knows what it might be. But still he follows him into the room.

The sensor transmits the image of him entering the room. His back. Shadows crawling up his pale neck, about to swallow him up.

This is when I lose him.

As it flies into the room, the sensor loses power, falls to the floor, and is crushed to powder by the closing titanium alloy doors.

Restless noise explodes across the screen, then leave it in darkness.

Out of habit, I change my line of sight over the wall of monitor screens.

The pathetic thing is, no matter where I direct my vision, across the several hundred glowing screens, that small black one pierces my eyes like a needle.

I should have realized this would happen much sooner, All high-end hospitals have antibugging systems. This doctor must have been someone in the medical circles, to attract a professional sniper, and to keep his calm even after being shot. If an old man like this solemnly tells you something, this thing must be very important. Important enough to be discussed in total secrecy.

I stare at the little back screen in a daze, biting my lips viciously. This is the first time I've lost contact with 17. Even though currently there are only two streets between us. Through the glass of the surveillance car, I can see the overpass where the underground surgery hangs. But I can't see him, can't hear him, don't know what he's doing, nor can I go and seek him out. What is he seeing, what is he saying, what is he doing? I don't know. A minute ago, his every expression was imprinting on my memory.

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The emptiness, this immense, unfulfilling, insatiable emptiness. My palms fill with cold sweat.

17's screen flicker and flicker again with his image, along with snippets of conversation between him and the old man. I leap up, rummage for my pills, which I take in a dry gulp, and wait for them to take effect, suppressing the overactive neurons in my head, even though it's a full hour before my next scheduled medication time.

Waiting.

Waiting for me to regain the ability to function as a whole.

Waiting to become normal again.

The pills slowly do their job. The optical and audio illusions fade and things become more bearable.

I begin to think, find a way to solve the problem. The bug has to work in conjunction with the subject's DNA, but there's no sample of 17 to hand. To wait for a droid delivery from the company, would be at least 15 minutes. If the conversation lasts that long...

Someone is knocking on the car. It takes me a while to notice and react. I open the window.

The tea-coloured glass glides soundlessly and elegantly into the body of the car, like an inverted theatre curtain.

From the curtain emerges the downcast eyes and face of 17, so close that I can almost feel his breath. My left eye begins to twitch uncontrollably.

He says, "I know you."

I make a nonplussed gesture with my hand. "What does that mean?"

"I know everything about you." A distinct smile floats onto his lowered head.

I smile too. "Oh? And what do you know?"

17 bends down, putting his lips to my ears and whispers something very slow and deliberately.

I tremble all over. It is a long time before I can open my mouth to say, "What do you want?"

"I want you to let me in, so I can explain properly."

I open the car door. I have no choice.

I can only let one of the several hundred subjects I have been covertly monitoring, in, and sit next to me.

I have no other choice.

Not just because I love him, also because of the secret he whispered in my ear.

"61, I know you're a split-brain".

В

17

Yes, I became a fugitive, destined for a life of vagrancy, misery, never to know another day's peace. I threw away my mobile, tore out my implants, and now hide out on a disused subway line, becoming just another of the nameless wandering ghosts of DiXia.

And it started with a joke.

On my twenty-second birthday, I got a position at Club 27. Although it was called a "club", it was a public welfare organization, whose aim was to help the manically depressed find happiness again, through the benevolence of human care. They were opposed to the use of "unethical" technologies such as ECT, antidepressants and DNA editing.

At the time, I didn't really appreciate the founder's goals. For one reason or another, I just really needed to feel like part of a group, and if there was money to be made, then all the better. My job was very simple, to keep the patients company. I was to chat with them and talk about "fun things" with them. Before I formally started my work, there was a training period, to teach us how to chat. Every day, I had to tell our coach a joke.

My coach wasn't bad at all. Apparently she'd been a patient there, who re-discovered her place in life through the help of the organization.

She was really inspirational. Every time I saw her, it was like watching a Mao-era propaganda movie. I almost used that as a topic for chatting with the patients.

That morning, I came up with a new joke. But the coach didn't seem to like it.

"So this is the joke you are going to tell me today?" The coach's plump face hovered directly above my head, the fat flesh on her usually sunny face hung so low that I felt it could have flowed off the bones and dripped onto me at any moment.

Maybe the coach thought I was making insinuations at her. But it wasn't until that night that I knew how much I would pay for that joke. A group of people broke into my room in the middle of the night. I was on the sofa. Before I could react, my nose was filled with a mixture of the smells. Formaldehyde. Vanilla ice cream. The distinct smell that comes with artificially grown cow hide. It lasts for ages, and somewhere in the middle of it, I lost consciousness.

Before I woke up, I had a very long dream. It was black, furry, warm and moist. You'd say, oh please, use some other adjectives, but how else can I describe it. Except for a word that conveys an absolute nothingness beyond empty, oblivion, void, or, to use a verb: falling.

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But none of them is quite right. My dream was black and furry and warm and wet. I have never had such a dream, so can't give a name to it. My dream didn't take me anywhere, or show me anything. Nothing happened. It was just there, and then I woke up.

Ha! I was on the street. I had some cuts and bruises. I must have been worked over pretty well whilst I was out. The coach must really have had enough of me, to have said goodbye like this. I was a little upset. Because I couldn't amuse her with my joke, even though the tests showed she had recovered from her depression.

It was dawn, not many people on the streets. The lamp posts were still glowing. Not long after, the shops began to open, and in rapid succession tourists came to occupy the arcades. The whole world comes to see this. The last remnant of the Floating City, with its old-fashioned, crammed architecture that had been deemed unsafe, and a public transport system with zero convenience ratings. Apart for the nanoprint machine on the street corner, it was like being completely transported back to the twentieth century. It was a good season. The snow had just melted, the fog had yet to arrive, and the continuous wall of graffiti was clearly visible in the post-winter sunlight. Yes, graffiti, neon lights, and of course body mod parlors and Tattoo festivals. This city absorbs all sounds, all words, all impulses that are hard to put a name to, like a giant radioactive beast. And then regurgitates it, reconstructing it as an unimaginable whole, the causes and effects of which become indistinguishable. There isn't another city like this in the entire world. There was another Tattoo Festival soon. When that day arrives, the whole street would be so packed as to be totally impenetrable.

The faces, filled with yearning, pressed tightly against the body of strangers, visible hot breaths occasionally streaming out of the crowd, looking up at the dancing mirages in the air, imploring to be basked in them, like a kind of blessing.

A bunch of happy little idiots.

I drew back my thoughts, and carefully stretched out my body, hearing the clicking in every joint, and surveyed my surroundings. I hadn't seen the sky and streets at this hour for a long time. Soaked in the quiet mercurial light, they looked solid.

I hadn't felt like this in ages. I had almost forgotten what quiet felt like.

A nanoprint repairman walked hurriedly past me. Blue uniform, hat of the same material, black round-toed shoes, medium build. I didn't really see him. When he walked out of my line of sight, I felt something weird. Like the unsettling premonition people often get when they are about to lose something. I replayed the scene of the workman walking past me in my head and felt as if something was added to it.

"Hello, young man." A middle-aged jogger waved at me from across the street. His enthusiasm infected me. I waved back with both my arms but couldn't utter a word.

It was as if someone had grabbed my head and repeated rammed it against a wall, or giant waves were hitting me one after another. An unknown giant object had crashed into my eyeballs and hit my brain. I couldn't breathe. I waved my arms in futility. The old man turned his head and returned a full and warm smile—when someone told me about this later, I laughed until I cried.

That's when they first appeared, though it's probably more accurate to say that I fell into a sea of them, coming out of nowhere, giant "screens" seem to emerge from the sky, layer upon layer, surging and leaping, the smallest one was half the height of a person, the content contained all sorts of pictures and texts, before I could see all the information on one field, the next one leapt out to cover all the others that came before. I felt trapped, drowning in this tidal wave of uninvited electronic data.

(It was like accidentally clicking on a malicious link, and countless webpages leaping out.)

I closed my eyes, squeezing the muscles so tightly that they were almost cramping. I was scared that those crazy webpages would force open my eyelids and slam into my eyes.

My head was about to explode. I doubled over to hold it, my whole body collapsing on the ground.

I was relieved to see the screens quickly disappear, and the pain they brought gradually fading, too.

What happened to me?

Were these screens, these Infofields just my imagination or were they real?

Maybe the world we exist in had always been made up of virtual scenes simulated by the brain? Had the people at the club moved my consciousness into a simulated life? These were the only ways I could understand how those Infofields could leap out of the sky like real objects.

How could I be sure that the current me was the real me, and not a virtual image made up of code? If this was virtual, then the level of virtual simulation was very high and very close to reality. From the racing of my heart, to my body temperature to the feel of my injuries, including the terror I was feeling that was like falling into a cave of ice. It was impossible to differentiate from reality.

I did what any normal person would do under these circumstances. I went nuts and vandalized the public facilities. I found the nanoprint machine. With most of humanity's material needs now dependent on these tiny robots I couldn't think of anything realer. No matter how high tech they are though, breaking them was still easy. There's at least a hundred ways I could think of, and I used the most crude. I opened the case and tore out the circuits.

I stood on the same spot and waited. If this was virtual, then some yellow security light would leap out on the video screen, to remind me how close my antisocial personality ratings are

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to exceeding the limit, how close I am to being placed on the list of dangerous individuals, also providing the location of the nearest police officers coming to arrest me, as well as the best routes for escape.

None of this happened.

No flashing lights. No alarm.

There were still policemen though, but by the time they got there, I was long gone. What the security camera recorded would have been a blurred figure with its back towards the camera, its face covered. Of course I covered my face. I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

In the city archives, my records would still be clean.

Without a doubt, I was in reality.

Only here, does evil go unpunished.

So, I didn't really have to go to DiXia. For damaging a nanotech machine, the punishment would probably have just been a little time in community service. But something didn't feel quite right. It was instinct that drove me underground. I think you would understand, -considering those violently surging, relentless windows of data.

In my mind, there was something very wrong.

Yes, it's true that there is probably only an indistinct chaos in the depth of the human brain, deep down everyone is cross-wired, everyone is mad. But what happened in my mind, was far beyond madness. I would rather that something had been done to me, than be truly mad. The mad are so lonely.

The most frightening thing in this world, is being mad in a different way to everyone else.

In the darkness of the metro, the Infofields don't appear. I wanted to work something out from this clue. I failed.

But the darkness has its own way of telling you things.

About five or six days in, I'd gone through all the food I could find. Don't ask me what I found: you don't want to know. I had to go above ground to try my luck. Two o'clock in the morning, I bypassed an automatic street lamp, and found a Chinese restaurant that looked quite good. I shooed away a couple of stray cats, opened the bin, what a treat. It may have looked like shit, but the freshly cooked vegetables, fish and meat dishes thrown away together still smelled mouthwatering. That scent alone left me feeling energized from head to toe, I'd hit the jackpot.

"Kid, do you know whose territory this is?"

I turned around, and guess what I saw.

To a casual observer, I was standing under the streetlamp facing another lost soul, just like me, but those Infofields rushed at me like a tsunami, almost overflowing my vision. I could see nothing except them. Yes, this time was painful too, but you get used to pain.

"Didn't you hear me, little bastard?" So he was an older man. Of course, I heard him. If it wasn't for the Infofields, he probably wouldn't have been my match. I reluctantly let go of the food and backed away.

I was meticulous in not let him notice that I couldn't see.

Footsteps drew near. A foul stink rushed towards me. Without thinking, I ran down several streets without stopping: it wasn't until I saw the traffic lights at a junction that I realized I could actually see again.

That night, I got nothing. I returned to my hideout trying to suppress the hunger in my stomach and lay down exhausted. When my spine touched the ice-cold floor, it quivered, I suddenly had an idea. Because I ran away in a panic, I had not realized that when I turned my head to run, the Infofields disappeared. Remembering how they appeared and disappeared over the last few times, I found a basic pattern: they appear whenever I run into people. To be more precise, when I am looking at someone. When my line of vision moves away from them, the fields disappear. The delay is less than a second.

I also remembered, that although I could only capture a very small amount of information in them, the content seemed to be completely related to the person I was looking at. In other words, at the same time as I am looking at a person, I also "see" all the information related to them. They are all displayed to me in the format of these windows, which open and overlap each other continually. They not only cover up the older fields, but also my normal vision, and to a large extent disrupt the my ability to deal with what's in front of me. Such an enormous amount of information was far beyond the receptive capacity of the retina, the visual part of my brain and all neurons connecting them. This is why the surge of windows cause me agony.

If someone else told me this, I'd think they were mad.

The best way to test my hypothesis was to look at someone. One at a time, to consciously control the appearance of the Infofields, and then to observe.

There was no better ground for experimentation than DiXia.

My earliest test subjects were my fellow vagrants who accidentally ran into me. I concealed myself in dark corners and waited patiently for them to appear. I only needed a little light. They would hesitantly approach the light, and in the dull rays, show their faces. The names they had abandoned, their lovers, happy memories, shameful ones, debts accumulated together with things they themselves had forgotten, appeared before me in rapid succession, chaotically sweeping past my brain at high velocity. Most of it was gone, before I had a chance to take it in, but I seemed to

vaguely feel it, like smoke from the tips of a flame. I couldn't read it, but I could feel it.

After several observations, I proved my hypothesis. I can browse other people, skim-read them. Whether I wanted or not. Most of the time, I didn't want to.

How can I explain it? It's sort of like, one day you discover that the strangers you went to a music festival with, whose names you don't even know, have suddenly spilled into your bedroom and made you their soul mate.

Yes, that verb, spilled.

But it wasn't all bad. I got some new skills out of the blue. When the need arises, things I have never done before naturally come to me, as though I'd done them many times before. Of course, the body and muscles need to learn these processes by practice before the brain could command them to do them accurately.

For example, where to find nutritious food that doesn't go off, how to avoid getting caught by the city patrol, how to build a comfortable nest with rubbish you find, how to set traps, and make basic defensive weapons. By scanning the homeless, I inadvertently took in a lot of their survival skills.

Of course, there was information that wasn't so useful. Like how to identify the gender of dolphins. Why bicycles can stand upright. The effect of genetically modified crops on the soil. The league of a hundred genre fiction writers of the last century.

This all sounds exciting, but what does it entail?

When I see someone, not only are their biometric readings, personality makeup, all their memories and dreams completely exposed to me, all the knowledge they have ever learned, everything they knows, can be accessed by me.

If I could get over this damned headache and master how to manipulate these Infofields, then everyone in the world would become my moving pawn.

Why am I not excited?

Firstly, I'll never be able to handle this agony, never be able to figure out how to control these leaping fields, I don't know how to focus and gather the information. Besides, even if I could? So what?

I am not interested in saving humanity or even myself. If I could lead a tramp's life adequately with these skills, I'd be satisfied.

I like this rotten darkness.

The world is a mess. Curled up in the cold and wet of this cave-like DiXia, darkness is the only thing that surrounds me, I even feel its warmth. The only warmth I need.

The warmer it is, the heavier it gets, the heavier it gets, the sweeter it feels. It's hard to break away from it.

Why should I open my eyes?

The story would end here. If it wasn't for 61.

I know he's watching me. I've known all along.

He doesn't know I know, nor does he know I've been watching him all along too—with his eyes.

The night outside the Chinese restaurant when I got so scared I nearly pissed my pants, I didn't go home empty handed. That night, I ran into 61.

I was running frantically along the backstreets of a bar, until I ran out of steam. I was leaning against a lamppost to catch my breath, when I saw a car in a dark alley, just out of the corner of my eye. The window was half open and I saw him sitting in the driver's seat, head titled back, taking a nap. His lips were slightly open. He was clearly very young, but had the look of middle age.

The screens began to spring up, and I fled.

This was how we first met, brief and sudden, because one of us slacked for a moment.

He shouldn't have let me see him. That way, I wouldn't get suspicious if I saw the same car again. Next time I saw him ducking into the car with a sandwich. This time, I scanned him. I only had a moment, but luck was on my side, I grasped some key information.

His name is 61, he is 27 years old, and he works for Club27 as a security controller.

He was sent to monitor me, among others, using infrared molecular sensors. Oh, and he really likes this job.

I didn't understand why the club wanted to track me, but the answer wasn't hard to find. The answer was in the security controller's memory. As long as I had enough time to read it, I could find the answer. If I was lucky, I could uncover the ins and outs of the whole business.

Enough time, enough opportunities, and enough stamina to withstand the agony in my head.

There is nothing easier than tracking your tracker. As long as you pretend not to know anything and continue to let him track you. You don't have to do anything. He'll follow you.

Very soon, I became familiar with the routines of the security controller. He spends most of his time in the surveillance car behind one-way windshields. The car is parked on a street not far from me. Every day, about five o'clock in the afternoon, he would go to the bar, order a hamburger with chips, and two bottles of beer, and then unwind there for half an hour.

Four-fifty in the afternoon, I walk into that bar and find a seat. Even if he saw me, he would dismiss it as a coincidence. A few minutes later, he came in and found his regular seat. I looked at him. The only time of the day he wasn't snooping on others, he was being spied on himself. He was totally unaware of this, eating his meal alone peacefully, emanating an air of calm. His uncoordinated hand movements were even endearing. In a second, the fields opened, refreshing at super speed. The information was no longer in waves, but giant, concrete slabs, dense, heavy, viciously crashing onto my retina, I could almost see the sparks they caused, and the bloody pulp that was my brain. I bit my lips, to stop myself from screaming, gripping the table, white-knuckled.

61's Infofields were different from others', the quantity being several times higher.

I was like a dog trying to chase a space shuttle, pathetically pawing at the rapidly zooming windows.

I couldn't even see the fields themselves, let alone read their content. I could only feel their weight and speed. And catch a few little bits of information.

61's childhood, his favourite colour, what happened in high school.

Why would I want to know these things?

Sweat trickled down my neck. I felt dehydrated. I no longer had the energy to face the barrage of data. There was something very unusual about this guy. Too fast, too much. I couldn't work it out.

I gave up.

As with so many other things, I gave up halfway.

Shifting my vision, all the Infofields now safely fell to the floor. I was panting and shaking all over.

There was a distinct difference between the information acquired by chance and the specific data I'm looking for.

If I was willing to spend the rest of my life on this person, then I might find what I'm looking for. This was a question of probability, and I didn't want to gamble with my life. So, I gave up.

I can do "giving up" with my eyes closed.

I staggered out of the bar as if I'd drunk it dry.

Around this time, I also began to feel my body rapidly weakening, I couldn't run for long, I couldn't lift things. My sight was deteriorating, too. Sometimes I got so tired just foraging for food. Despite this, my appetite grew, and I found myself in a constant state of hunger. As the weather got warmer and warmer, my limbs still felt cold, till I had to put on every rag of clothing I'd scavenged just to stop from freezing.

Only the darkness was warm. But it wasn't enough. For some unknown reason, I'd picked this kind of life, including the way it would end.

I lay on cardboard, the damp of the ground seeped through all the wastepaper and old clothes into my bones. And suddenly, I thought of 61.

To know that there was someone always watching you was a bizarre feeling.

If he wants, he could repeatedly watch your every move. Zoom into every subtle change in your expression. There was something very wrong with this guy called 61. His windows were opening much faster than the average rate. The strangest thing about his fields was that they actually felt different from other people's, and almost all of them had an incompleteness. Some of them contained contradictory information. It's like he's thinking with two brains.

I couldn't help but think there must be a connection between the content on these incomplete and dense slabs of data, the stark contrast between the contradicting ones, and the way he watched me.

I could feel tiny fragments of his memory: him looking at me on the screen. Me curled up on the cardboard, staring at something in the darkness in a stupor.

Yes, that's me. Small and withered, with a pair of light brown eyes that could be extinguished at any time.

Back then, I was ready to welcome the embrace of death. My only enjoyment, was scanning 61, and retrieving his memories from my mind in the dark. Sometimes I felt shy, about the way he watched me, if only 61 would behave himself.

Robbing the leather coat was an accident. I read that the guy had an artificial knee, I switched on the interceptor that disrupted the actuator and successfully put the enemy down. I was very lucky to be able to pull the right trick out of my trivia-filled head at the right time. Heavens know why I didn't give up then. Finding the underground hospital via that poor guy, I ran into a shooting, and was again lucky to be able to read the doctor's blood type and save his life.

This was coincidence. To be able to get the right information out of this unquantifiable sea of data at the right time. It was almost impossible. But I did it twice. If I could do that, I didn't want to pursue the reasons too deeply.

But things were getting complicated. One by one, people found me. They asked me questions. Questions about them. Hoping I would have an answer.

Who's my mother?

Where did the cargo end up?

Did I really kill someone?

Did he betray us?

Where's the money hidden?

Which one should I choose?

What's the success rate of this operation?

Is the shadow I see on the fly-over south of the city every night a ghost?

What is the ultimate mystery of the universe?

I should have known that the DiXia would be the home of so many questions, every one like an undercurrent. When I met the first stranger who stopped me with a question, I couldn't help laughing. I roared with laughter. I thought of 61 who was watching the monitor. He must be laughing with me. They expect someone who hasn't even worked out what's going on in their head to answer their questions.

I told them I don't know. They said yes, yes you do know. You saved that old man. I told them I might be able get it right, they said yes, yes you will. You saved that old man. I told them I could only try, they said, thank you. Please try, help us like you helped that old man.

I couldn't help but laugh, but didn't know why my eyes felt sore and puffy, like a weeping that should have happened but never did. You just can't turn those imploring faces away. They have been locked up by their troubles for too long. If I take one look, however brief, those sad windows hurt me. But you just can't turn those earnest faces away, especially when they couldn't even see their sadness themselves.

For most of these people, even if I get the answer right, I can't help them. This is what I tell them. They say it doesn't matter, we just want the answer.

They just want the answer. So I lift my eyes, and I read.

Every time it finishes, I feel like I'm falling from the sky. As I gained more experience, the process seemed to feel a little less dangerous each time. One day eventually, I would land safely. My recovery from reading extended from a half an hour at the beginning to half a day, I would be in a complete in a state of dehydration. The good news is, people look after me. I'm not sure when but they began to gather around me and care for me as one of their own. They followed me around all day. Some people are not even there for answers. They just want to be by my side. When they find a chance to look after me, they darted at it without hesitation, as if it's an instinct.

The funny thing is, I haven't even seen the faces of lot of them properly. Except for scanning, my eyes were becoming increasingly poor at the job of actual sight.

Something was wrong. I want to know if my answer is correct, but I know it's no use asking them. Perhaps I can ask 61. He would be able to see more clearly than I can.

Once, in my dream, I went to seek him out, I open the door of the surveillance car, sit next to the driver's seat, and then ask him questions, just like these people have asked me.

I ask, 61, what did you do to me?

Even if it was a dream. I could still feel 61's eyes watching me from somewhere outside his body.

61 watches me sleep. 61 watches me wake up.

I read his memories, I see him watching me sleep, see him watching me wake up.

I open my eyes.

Someone was nudging my shoulder, urging me to hurry and wake up, he said, the old man wants to see me.

I open my eyes. This is not a dream...

The moment I entered the secret room, my skull felt numb. The doctor's bed spun 180 degrees and rushed towards me. I imagined the old man looking at me.

"Interference," he said to me.

I nodded.

"You're going blind." The old man announced my future in the same tone of voice.

I put my hands in my pockets. It's very cold here. There are no chairs.

"You've got something to say?" he asks me.

"The first time I saw you, I thought you had just the right face to announce such misfortunes."

"Did you already know you were going blind?"

"No. That's why I came to see you. I wanted to know what happened to me. Do you want to tell me now?" I lean against the wall.

"Humph, others seek answers from you. But you come to me. You don't even know about yourself." The old man sneered.

"Listen, thank you for telling me I'll be blind in a few days, but I'm starving now. I need to go and eat." I was about to walk out of the house.

"A month ago, someone performed microsurgery on your brain, the effect of which was to stop the conducting of stimuli in your optical nerve. Who did you piss off? They were also worried you might cause trouble, so they didn't cut the optical nerve, but edited a section of your DNA, which stops the synaptic function of the nerve membrane. The chemical transmission of an

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impulse from one neuron to another, is like one of them passing a ball to another, the next neuron must hold out its hand to catch it. The post-synaptic membrane is like this hand. What they did was to try and freeze the action of a neuron's hand, so it can't catch the ball. Doing it this way makes it more discreet: you won't go blind immediately. You may not even know what made you lose your sight."

"If I can't catch it with my hand, I'll do it with my feet". It was a clumsy joke along the lines of his analogy. What did he expect me to do? Cry? Break down?

The old man doesn't speak.

"Your silence gives me hope that you've got have some good news. Can you cure it?" I mock.

"There are people who can do it, if you've got enough money. The question is, do you want it?"

I couldn't help looking at the old man. In an instant, electric sparks. I felt the opening of his windows.

"What do you call those things?" he asked me, narrowing his eyes.

"Infofields."

"I've been in Club27. They offer operations for all sufferers of depression who had no hope of being cured by their little chats, or more conventional psycho-technological treatments. Maybe out of social responsibility, probably out of the pride in their 100% cure rate. I was one of them. They cured me and released me back into society. And then these "Infofields" appeared out of the blue. What you have experienced, I have: the terror, the pain. I nearly died. Because I'm an optimist, I wanted to get back into society, to offer help where it's needed in the depths of DiXia, and you know how that works out. But on the third day, like a miracle, they disappeared. So I lived. When I met you, I felt a strange inkling. After the spectrometer scan, I knew you'd been through the same optical nerve transmission interception operation, but I didn't know about the Infofields. No device can detect them. It was only when they told me what happened after I passed out that I knew.

"So the Infofields weren't what the coach and her cronies intended?" I asked.

"The interception was them. The Infofields were not." the old man said.

"I didn't think it was them either, those people... lack imagination." I nodded in agreement.

We both laughed.

I breathed in and plucked up the courage to ask. "So what exactly are they?"

"If I say to you that some things have happened in your consciousness but you are not conscious of them, you'd think I was bullshitting. It's widely believed that under the conscious is the preconscious, and underneath that what Freud called the "Unconscious of eros and thanatos".

But a hundred years before him, there had already been a hypothesis on a different system of the unconscious. The appearance of Infofields, proved this theory. This system of the unconscious manifests itself in sight: when the light simulates your retina and triggers the chain of nervous impulses in your brain, your visual system would carry out complex calculations on the data it receives. Through a series of multi-staged processing of the image produced by the light on the retina, a three- dimensional perception of the outside world is emitted. In the multitude of unconscious coding and processing, you are aware only of the final result. You are born with an information-processing mechanism that turns the vibrations on your eardrum from sound to the instinctual knowledge that these are words someone is trying to say to you. All this happens beneath consciousness."

"You mean, what we see, is actually much, much more than we are conscious of, but the conscious only feeds back a very small part of it?"

"This very small part is more than enough for human usage. It's the result of evolutionary selection."

"And the Infofields?"

"Oh, that's the rest of it. It's there, only we've never been conscious that we see them."

"What exactly are they?"

"The information inherent within us as individuals, that accumulates with age and experiences." The old man suddenly sighed in dejection. "I don't know...don't believe a word of what I just said."

I almost collapsed. "What?!"

"The Infofields are only my theory. Although I've spent my whole life studying them, I was only able to see them for three days. Can you think about the ones you see?"

It's like he said. Carefully avoiding looking at the content, I could tell that the format of the text and images are the same, all the information is related to the person they come from. At least the ones I've read.

Imagine a world like this, where everyone walks around carrying with them information that can be seen but not perceived. All this information congesting all the space around us. Yet even this dimensional space around me may not be the three-dimensional projection my sensory organs are telling me.

"Howcome I can see them?"

"When you came the first time, I did a little experiment while you weren't looking". The old man's voice sounded a little odd, but soon recovered. "It's really nothing. I used pico-tech."

"And?"

"To use our previous metaphor, your neurons have caught the ball using their feet. Your body can no longer produce the protein that transmits impulses in the receptor, but has opened up another rarer path of transmission, usually meant for support and supplementary functions, another kind of slow-functioning receptor. These receptors usually combine with Protein G, and operate via cAMP and phosphorylation of proteins. The reaction is slow, but it can magnify the microsignals between messenger receptors by a thousand. When they suppressed the composition of transmission proteins in the neuron, they stimulated the low-speed receptors, elevating them from amateur extras to playing the lead. This is possibly why you can see the Infofields."

"This is the story of a volleyball player who loses the function of his arms, and trains himself to master control of the ball with his feet, becoming a footballer. It's a true story of unstoppable resolve triumphing over a physical handicap. My old coach at the club would have loved it," I commented. "But I'm going to be blind very soon, aren't I? How can a handicapped athlete kick the ball blind?"

"You may go blind, but you'll still be able to see."

Having heard the old man's words, I thought he was mad, or perhaps I was. I let my body slide slowly down, to the ice-cold floor.

"Yes, sit tight. What I'm going to say next could take a while." The old man approved. He really did take ages.

He began "Do you know of the Superconcious?"

"Experiments of the last century found that animals, including humans who lost their sight after suffering damage in the specific region of the visual cortex, were not necessarily completely unable to see. Although their sight was blank, they were still receiving stimulus in some manner. Impulses from the outside world were still being filtered by what remained of their capabilities of assessing their surroundings. For me, the interception of impulses actually opened up my awareness of the Infofields."

"Blindness is not a problem. The important thing is to learn to how to see, or should I say, how to inforead. The Infofield is an enormous information stream with its own vast quantifying units, displaying itself in images and text. As demonstrated by my plight and failure, the brain still doesn't know how to receive this much information, let alone sort through it selectively. This must be achieved through conscious practice, like going through physiotherapy after getting a prosthetic limb."

I tried to process this. After all, the old man had said these were just his conjectures and probings. He had only seen the Infofields for three days, but if I needed help, he would help me.

I said all right. The old man asked me to recount to him in detail all the encounters I've had

with the Infofields, which I did. He was silent for a long time. But I wasn't surprised. I was pretty much beyond surprise, after my experiences. I was very lucky to have saved this old man's life, and very grateful that now, and in the future, he would be there to help me.

That day, we spent an age in the room, the old man taking great pains to ensure I had a firm grasp and a proper understanding of my new sense. We must have been in there for a long time; I was dizzy from lack of oxygen in the air. Although many puzzles were solved and the mysteries within them revealed, I did not feel relieved. I wasn't sure if I was capable of utilizing or even comprehending this knowledge.

"It's not just your sight that's the problem. Your brain is using four times as much oxygen as the average person: this will greatly affect your other organs and their functionality. Your body will weaken more over time. This is why..." The old man paused prudently, in order to hold my full attention. I leaned in, my ear towards him, ready to receive his prescription. "...you must have someone by your side."

C

17

Rays of sunlight fell like knives: white hot, ruthless and raw. I descended the rope ladder, trembling, waved at the male nurses at the entrance of the underground hospital, to signal that I've touched down in safety. If they hadn't sedated me, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to leave the hospital.

I look down again, the anxious faces on craned necks have gone. I lie on my stomach on the walkway, unable to move, like a lost swimmer who had been struggling to reach the shore.

The old man said I must have someone by my side. I need someone to take care of me, someone to see the world on my behalf. I looked around me, the night was just creeping up the horizon. The wind was moist, mingled with the scents of the sea and the port. The abandoned industrial site, now dappled in the colour of rust, appears in my eyes, to be a picture of grace and serenity. No people, no deluge of data, no information streams. Objects in their own place. Every atom and molecule showing themselves in a manner my five pedestrian senses understand them. This is beauty.

However, I am going to lose them all really soon.

And then, I will completely lose all the sights I have known for all so long. Only the windows, the infostreams, or the void.

The old man said I need someone: I need to borrow his eyes, and then I'll live. Even now, I know that there is a pair of eyes watching me, in their strange, relentless way.

The car is parked at the corner of the street. A hand came out of it with a lit cigarette; it

# FICTION 1761

remains there for an age. It seems the smoker is merely content for the cigarette to be lit. I head down the fly-over, take a turn to another street towards the car. This way, I am directly facing the car and can see the person inside.

From 61's point of view, I am just taking a casual stroll, and happen to walk past. He probably never thought anyone would become aware of his monitoring. Slowly, I approach. From less than three metres away from the car, I look up at him.

Almost, immediately, an Infofield leaps out. Perhaps it's been waiting for me all along. This time, I don't let myself get drowned in the flood of information, nor do I struggle to dig for information that might relate to me. As the old man deduced, the data we can read is limited by the brain's capacity to process information; most of it is omitted. But some Infofields would pause for longer, or appear at a higher frequency, to render themselves to be read more easily. This is highly likely to be linked to the desires and inclinations of the individual being scanned.

The information they long for you to know.

So, this is what you want to tell me. I lower my gaze.

As I predicted, 61 lets me in the car.

This is what people are like. You tell them their secret, something they have keep deep within their hearts, secrets that have tormented them for years, and they will trust you.

They want to trust you.

I told 61, he's a split-brain, born without the Corpus Callosum, the fibre bundle that connects the left and right hemispheres. Technically, he doesn't have a cerebrum, that whole mind we use daily. Just left and right hemispheres, doing their own thing. This explains his bizarre hand gestures and the way he looks at people. They let him live and trained him to do this job. Still, his hands can only master actions they have been trained and practiced in doing.

Both hemispheres working at the same time also means that he doesn't have a conventional sense of morality. His attributes are a perfect match for this job. For 61, this was the only place that would give him a job. He hopes to earn enough money to get an osso-data processor implant. The advert says that this implant will connect two halves of an artificially grown brain to the corresponding halves of the patient's own grey matter, providing a split-brain patient with two complete and functioning brains.

He has dreamt about this implant. His desire for it grows stronger every day. That's why I could scan the Infofield with billboard clarity.

"How are you doing, 61?" I lowered my head and addressed the floor of the car. Very soon, I would no longer need to avoid people's faces.

"I'm all right."

# FICTION 1761

"We don't need to introduce ourselves. I know you've been tracking me, so you know what's happened to me, probably better than I do."

"The club performed some mind-reading operation on you."

No, you are too naïve. 61. What they did to me isn't what you think. "Do you know I'm going blind?"

He froze, I felt his breath stop too. For an instant, I suddenly came to the belief that this individual might be willing to take care of me. "The club played a nasty trick, maybe it was just on the coach's orders. Do you want to take care of me?" The words fell out of my mouth.

The left hemisphere of his brain must be in chaos right now. But I feel too exhausted to beat around the bush or play mind games.

"I'm going blind very quickly: my body is becoming weaker and weaker. If I don't have anyone, I'll die on the streets. You just need to keep the oxygen flasks stocked up and give me injections of calcium ions and glutonic amino acids." I paused for breath, also to slow down my speech. "You have two choices, abandon everything and come with me, or abandon me."

He was trembling.

He must be frightened to death. What can I expect a total stranger to do? To love me more than this world?

Perhaps. I decided to try again.

"You know what I can do, right?"

This time, he spoke. "You can answer questions."

My lips started to tremble. Did he really think I was psychic? "Listen, I over-exaggerated before. I'm really tired today. I went to the doctor's. He told me a lot of things. It's ok, maybe I'll explain to you properly later—maybe I won't. But the important thing is..." I reached for his shoulders, he voluntarily moved his body towards me. I took hold of him, very tightly. "The important thing is... I was being too dramatic before, you can still continue to do your job, monitor other people, but take me with you."

61 became silent. He needed time to think. But I was already burnt out. Stretched to my limit. I let go, opened the window, and let the wind blow away the despair in the air. From this side, I could see the park across the river. In the misty fog, the lights looked particularly dim that day.

I realized that it was the Tattoo Festival. They are getting ready for it, misting the air with nutrified water, to help the ink spores grow.

"Oh, today's the Tattoo Festival." My own voice comes from somewhere far away.

A month ago, I wouldn't have felt like this. Like an old man.

61 coughs. "Can you answer one question?" His body is now rocking back and forth anxiously.

"Please ask."

"There was a time, when twenty or so homeless kids in the eastern suburbs asked you to have a word with a landlord, to let them keep their shanty town up. How did you persuade the guy? What did you say to him in the anti-bug chamber?"

"Oh, that guy was getting into much deeper trouble, and I offered him a more reliable suggestion."

61's gaze paused on the side of my face. "But actually you weren't 100% sure?"

"I deduced, the key thing is that I have a lot of information, which allows me to work things out. Why else do you think he would believe a crazy old stranger who's been living a subway? When the bodyguard held me back, I shouted something to him that he really wanted to know, something that has always been troubling him."

"Which was?"

"When he was little, he loved the work of a novelist, who excelled everyone else in his eyes. But one day, he reads that this novelist wrote a short story with someone. He could never understand why the novelist deigned to collaborate with someone of lesser skill to produce an ordinary piece of work. The question clung to him and has always plagued him. He just didn't understand."

61 nods. He doesn't ask about the writer's motive in the collaborative short story. This made me admire him more. He understands the point of this story. The point is that if I had access to the secrets of the local gangster's heart, I would have a good answer to the question. He believes me.

The engine starts, making an annoying noise. I lean back in the seat and close my eyes.

61 turns the wheel, and the car speeds down the motorway.

We slide into silence. The gigantic, tender silence that belongs to all exhausted dusks. At this moment, I feel both cold and warm: a place inside me, I'm not sure where, feels ticklish. I notice a slight lethargy. That mysterious sense of oppression, is flying away. I feel I can do anything. My fingertips feel numb, but my senses feel very acute. Sight, hearing, touch, they all feel as if they are exceeding their previous functionality. It's as if I'm entering a new world.

The cannons sounded across the river. I open my eyes. Night has come.

Multicolored fireworks are blossoming in the sky. Countless excited silhouettes below. Men and women almost half naked, opening their bodies to scattered petals floating and swirling in midair, exposing even more of their flesh to meet the ink spores in the falling firework ash.

When the spores encounter skin, they will immediately pierce the derma, and squads of nanobots will complete the tattooing process, trailing dyes behind them. As to the pattern, this is entire dependent on algorithms, completely up to the nanobots inside the spores. But it's OK. The dye and the nanobots degrade in three days, leaving not even a trace of a trace. And those people who are madly screaming to be tattooed, will have completely purified bodies, new as freshly born babes: that is why people are obsessed with the Tattoo Festival.

Three more sky flowers bloom. These beautiful botanic night scenes only exist for an instant, but in that instant, they blossom with all the splendor of time. In the next moment, their pink petals fall like snow, carried by the sea breeze, the whole city trembles in ash. Pedestrians now occupy the whole city. Our car is marooned in the midst of these euphoric half-naked bodies and can only move forward with the pace at which they are chasing the spores. Another breeze sent a petal flowing through the car window, landing on my arm. I try to brush it away, but too late. The spore has entered my skin. Nearby, the sky erupts with another fire blossom, screams of joy coming from below. I look up at the night sky, it's beautiful and serene like black velvet. I rub my eyes, and turn over my hand to observe. There is so much dye in that single spore, spreading across my whole arm in just a moment, my whole arm, my whole body, the whole night. It all becomes velvet black.

"When you look at other people. You can see what they can't see. Can you tell me about what you see?"

"Later, if there's time."

"Have you ever scanned yourself?"

"You mean, in a mirror?" I asked. "Maybe tonight, I can try; after all, it's not as if my eyes have anything better to do."

I try to remember the last joke I told my coach. The one I got blinded for. The funny thing is, I paid such a big price, but the content of that joke? Seriously, I can't remember a thing. But it doesn't matter, I'm about to see a ready-made joke.

I fumble, find the rear-view mirror and flip it down. I point my face to the mirror in my imagination.

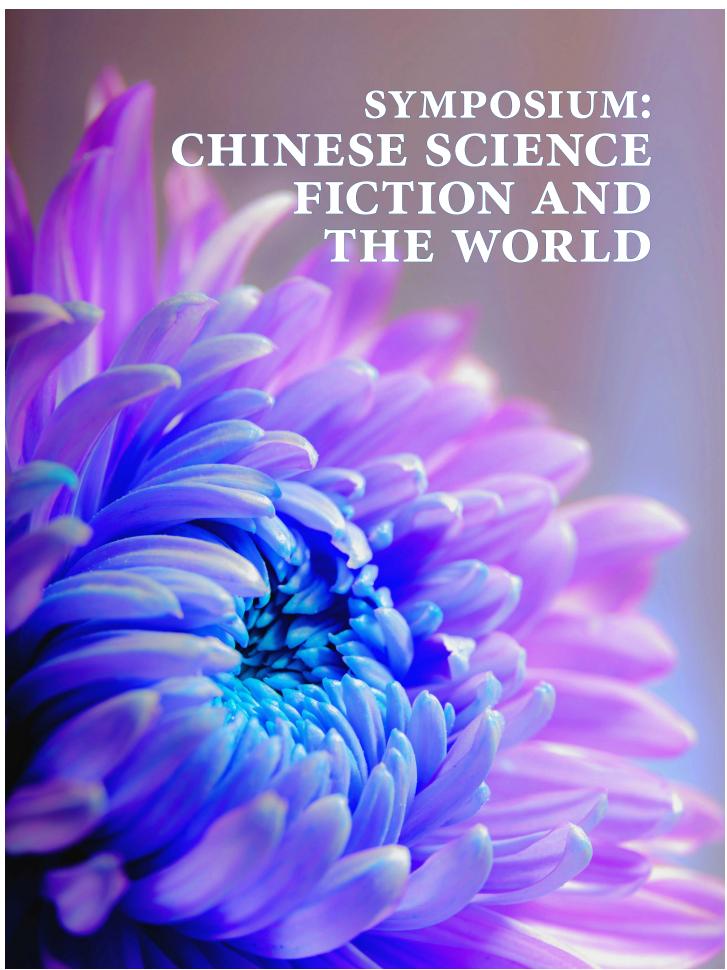
I will see myself. Every little drip and drop of the past, all my desires and longings, all that I love and hate, all the gnawing regrets, all the potential and possibilities, all my future realities and achievements.

I take a deep breath, lift my blind eyes, and face myself in the mirror. Here they come, gushing into my vision like water from a spring. Blacker than black, emptier than empty. Every Infofield the same. Nothing. Even light has been engulfed.

This is me. A darkness that can never be illuminated, transcended or redeemed.

Tang Fei is a writer and commentator. Member of the Shanghai Writer's Association and the SFWA, having published such works as include *Paradise in the Clouds, The Person who Saw Cetus* and *The Anonymous Banquet*. Since 2013, ten of her works have been translated and published around the world; her novella *The Panda Keeper* won Best Microfiction at 2019's Smokelong Quarterly, *Wu Ding's Journey to the West* won the Silver Prize for Most Popular Deduction Fiction at the Speculative Fiction in Translation Awards, and *The Robe* won Best Short Story at the Yinli (China Reader's Choice) SF Awards. Apart from writing, she also dabbles in other art forms such as literary criticism, poetry, installation art and photography. Her commentary pieces have been published in *The Economics Observer* (China), *Hong Kong* and *Shenzhen Literary Review*.

Xueting Christine Ni was born in Guangzhou, during China's "re-opening to the West". Having lived in cities across China, she emigrated with her family to Britain at the age of 11, where she continued to be immersed in Chinese culture, alongside her British education, realising ultimately that this gave her a unique a cultural perspective, bridging her Eastern and Western experiences. After graduating in English Literature from the University of London, she began a career in the publishing industry, whilst also translating original works of Chinese fiction. She returned to China in 2008 to continue her research at Central University of Nationalities, Beijing. Since 2010, Xueting has written extensively on Chinese culture and China's place in Western pop media, working with companies, theatres, institutions and festivals, to help improve understanding of China's heritage, culture and innovation, and introduce its wonders to new audiences. Xueting has contributed to the BBC, Tordotcom Publishing, and the Guangdong Art Academy. Her new book, Sinopticon: A Celebration of Chinese Science Fiction, which she as translated and edited, will be published by Solaris Books in November. Xueting currently lives in the suburbs of London with her partner and their cats, all of whom are learning Chinese.



### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### Chinese Science Fiction in the Global Context



# Yan Wu, Jianbin Yao and Jinyi Chu

According to the 2020 China Science Fiction Industry Report, the gross annual output value of China's science fiction industry in 2019 was 45.635 billion yuan. This cultural industry consists of hardcopy books, film and TV series, video games, and peripheral products. Since 2016, the Chinese Association for Science and Technology (CAST) has begun organizing the annual conventions. The Vice President of the People's Republic of China, Li Yuanchao, participated in the first convention. He called himself a science fiction fanatic. His brief appearance brought lots of media attention to the cultural industry of Chinese science fiction.

Chinese science fiction has been developing exponentially since the completion of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* in 2010. In 2015, Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award for best full-length novel at the 73rd World Science Fiction Convention. Now Chinese science fiction is being translated into Arabic, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and many languages all over the world. Since then, more Chinese writers have become globally renowned, including: Han Song, Wang Jinkang, Chen Qiufan, Hao Jingfang, and Xia Jia, among many others.

The international fame of Chinese science fiction has also created a new wave of the fascination with global science fiction in China. The names of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Isaac Asimov, and Strugatsky brothers have never been obscure to Chinese readers. Now their splendid works continue to receive significant attention in the 21st century, far beyond their birthplace.

It is timely and necessary to reflect on how science fiction connects the world. The goal of this special issue is to investigate the latest developments of this two-way reception of science fiction and to reflect on relevant methodological issues. The contributors of this special issue ask: can we study science fiction as world literature? Can science fiction teach us, human beings, how to better interact with the environment?

Thanks to all contributors and editors who made this timely special issue possible!

### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### The Wind of the Future Blows from China



#### Francesco Verso

For years science fiction seemed to have lived in a suspension state, even a slow death, an agony of ideas caused by the fact that it has come mostly from a single market, a single language, a single lifestyle and thus a limited point of view to represent the immense diversity of the future. Then, all of sudden, 5 years ago, Liu Cixin's Hugo Award (the first ever Non-English speaking author to win in more than 70 editions) changed the situation. Still, nobody knew about Chinese sf and at conventions in the West people were commemorating the death of sf and complaining about the rising of fantasy (except for commercial sales claims and big-industry blurbs which don't necessarily mean quality of books).

I've come across Chinese SF thanks to Ken Liu's translations in English on the magazine Clarkesworld, and then to Chiara Cigarini and Professor Wu Yan, who have introduced me to this "new futuristic world."

Indeed, it was a true revelation, mostly because I was scouting non-English stories for my small press Future Fiction and because I wanted to prove that science fiction doesn't belong to any culture but it emerges as a social necessity and a tool to imagine possible scenarios to tackle human problems through imagination and creativity even before technology and politics in all the countries of the world.

Reading Chinese sf gave me a feeling of freshness and cautious optimism—even among the shadows and pitfalls of the incredible transformation and acceleration the country has experienced during the last 30 years—but in general a unique "sense of wonder" permeated many of the stories I've read: from climate-change, intergenerational scenarios in Liu Cixin's "Yuanyuan's Bubbles" to android caregivers employed to support an aging population in "Tong Tong's Summer" by Xia Jia to the blessing app Buddhagram developed by a stressed marketing geek in Chen Qiufan's "Coming of Light" or the use of a sign language to express what is missing from the Web in Zhang Ran's "Ether." All these ideas are coming straight from a rapidly-changing society that is living them on its own skin, sucking the essence of the future from a privileged point of view. To paraphrase Han Song, "you simply need to open a window in China to see a preview of the future."

These stories were too good and innovative–blending cutting-edge innovations developed by Chinese tech-companies with old traditions, philosophies, spiritualism and a popular folklore that dates back to more than 3000 years ago–not to appreciate them.

No other country can benefit from such a rich past and an innovative present like China.

# SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD The Wind of the Future

No other country–from fandom to scholars, from conventions to academic meetings–is investing so much energy and passion in science fiction like China.

No other country has the level of support–including public sector grants and private institutions funding–like China.

That's an incredible leverage to use for boosting the storytelling of a huge, highly populated country that has come to realize the power it holds in its hands and imagination to shape the future awaiting the whole world.

Science fiction writers are well aware of this; that's their virtue and vice, like fortune tellers they are sometimes praised for their intuitions and wild guesses while most often, like Cassandras, they are ignored or criticized. The old generation of Chinese sf writers were shyly trying to imitate Western canons, ashamed to represent their reality and to offer their own identity to the judgment of the outside world, while the new generation—namely "balinghuo" — speaks English, has travelled or studied abroad, reads books in original language and is proud to sit among the so-called developed countries.

Nowadays Chinese sf writers can speak for themselves and don't need to look at the West to produce excellent ideas and contents.

I even think they could lead the way to show what's behind the corner for humanity in the stories of the latest generation of writers, called "linlinhuo," born in the new millennium: geoengineering projects, socio-technological mass experiments, biotechnological breakthroughs, the raising of AIs and algorithms biases, Big Data-driven virtual relationships, a self-sustainable industry running on solar energy and renewable resources, a 5G low-latency and environmentally friendly metropolis of 20 million people... In China these concepts are science fiction and mainstream at the same time, and are being used to build future case scenarios and matrixes for projecting long-term policies into the future of mankind.

I've visited China 6 times in 3 years and I've published in Italy three anthologies of Chinese sf(in Chinese and Italian language), Nebula (星云), Sinosfera (汉字文化圈) and Artificina (赛博格中国)and collections of stories by Han Song, Xia Jia, Chen Qiufan, Regina Kanyu Wang and soon Mu Ming.

China has welcomed me with interest and generosity. I have been invited to many sf cons, I have been appointed as Honorable Dean of the Chongqing Fishing Castle Workshop of Science Fiction, I've signed contracts—as writer and editor—for Guangzhou Blue Ocean Press for an anthology of international sf called "What's the future like?" and Bofeng Culture to publish two of my novels, Nexhuman and Bloodbusters, and a series of books about sf in translation.

I believe we need to include as many futures as possible to embrace more realistic visions of the direction where the world might go.

# SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD The Wind of the Future

I believe we need to diversify voices, backgrounds and cultures to be sure that we will not leave something relevant behind.

I believe the evolution of the genre passes from its ability to mingle with the "other," wherever it comes from, however it looks like, because sf is fiction of transformation and it's about overcoming barriers and limitations, often posed by language, politics and economy.

The future is like the wind, it blows in all directions. Now it's blowing from China and we should welcome it and enjoy it.

#### **Notes**

1. Science Fiction Studies, v. 40, March 2013, p. 18.

Francesco Verso is a multiple-award Italian Science Fiction writer and editor. He has published: *e-Doll, Livido*, *Bloodbusters* and *I camminatori* (made of *The Pulldogs* and *No/Mad/Land*). *Livido* and *Bloodbusters* – translated into English by Sally McCorry – have been published in the USA, UK and soon in China. He also works as editor and publisher of Future Fiction, a multicultural project, publishing the best SF in translation with authors like James P. Kelly, Ian McDonald, Han Song, Ken Liu, Liu Cixin, Pat Cadigan, Vandana Singh, Chen Qiufan and many others. He may be found at <a href="https://www.futurefiction.org">www.futurefiction.org</a>.

## SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

# **Sino-American SF: Trans-national Participatory Culture and Translation**



#### Nathaniel Isaacson

A certain set of clichés, especially in popular discourse, has emerged in discussions of Chinese sf--namely, the notion that China's ascendance to global prominence in the realms of science, technology, economy and politics explains the rise of Chinese sf. To put it more simply, China has mastered science and technology, and these are the necessary conditions for the genre to flourish. This is doubtlessly true, and as the global COVID-19 pandemic progresses, this process seems to intensify the feeling that real life is stranger than fiction, and to trouble longstanding figurations of authoritarian states as irrational dystopias and western democracies as utopian bastions of freedom and reason. At its most strident, this discourse conflates national strength and literary creativity, using the vocabulary of weaponry to hail a flourishing genre. Henry Jenkins has suggested that the anxieties of media imperialism that anticipate the threat of cultural homogenization brought about by the ubiquity of American media, "[blur] the distinction between at least four forms of power: economic (the ability to produce and distribute cultural goods), cultural (the ability to produce and circulate forms and meanings), political (the ability to impose ideologies), and psychological (the ability to shape desire, fantasy, and identity)" (156). A similar blurring informs the discourse of Chinese sf as a sign of national might, eclipsing the significance of fan cultures. Behind the rise of Chinese-language sf, other critics have pointed to the complementary roles of corporate entities and the political organs of the PRC. While this too is indisputably an important aspect of the present visibility of Chinese sf, I would like to encourage consideration of how shifts in American culture and global fandom have also played a role, often at a very personal level and with rather unforeseen consequences.

As a trans-national genre in a world of instantaneous global communication, translation and global fan cultures have made important contributions to the global popularity of Chinese sf. I argue that contemporary Chinese sf and sf studies have been profoundly shaped by transnational circulations of knowledge in the digital era. Second, I argue that the position of Chinese sf in the American cultural field differs from Chinese sf in the PRC, and that points of contention in American political and popular culture have helped shape the global reception of the genre. Henry Jenkins' discussion of "pop cosmopolitanism" is useful in understanding how Chinese sf resonates in academia and popular culture in the United States and beyond. Jenkins argues that, "global convergence is giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience. The first cosmopolitans thought beyond the borders of their village; the modern cosmopolitans think globally" (Jenkins 155-156). Examples of this phenomenon include cultural products like Japanese anime and manga, south Asian films

and music, and Hong Kong action films. Chinese sf could well be included as a new wave in this phenomenon. This cosmopolitan media landscape is characterized by "the rapid flow of images across national borders in an age of media convergence, a flow that is facilitated by commercial strategies... and by grassroots tactics...those media flows are apt to be multidirectional, creating temporary portals or 'contact zones' between geographically dispersed cultures" (154). In the case of Chinese sf, personal networks of communication between authors and translators, and ease of publication online constitute one such set of "contact zones" and "grassroots tactics." This essay offers a preliminary consideration of how academic knowledge, cultural production, and fandom are part of this trans-national cultural ecosystem.

Alongside what is to me the "new" approach of examining sf fandoms and networks of translation, this paper would not have been possible without the generous participation of a number of translators and authors, including Ken Liu, Regina Kanyu Wang, Andy Dudak, and Emily Jin. Their observations were vital to my argument, and in many cases, because I have found their observations and opinions about Chinese sf to be more novel or quite different from my own, I have included their thoughts, occasionally quoting them at great length. Outside of a few instances where I found those I interviewed had interesting critiques of the genre to share, I limit definitions and discussion of sf as a genre or form to a few comments offered by those I interviewed for insight into how Chinese sf is perceived in the US.

In an interview with author and translator Ken Liu, he suggested that grassroots efforts in promoting sf as a global genre have been more impactful than the corporate and national models alluded to above. Liu argues,

I want to draw a distinction between the effort to promote Chinese SF in the PRC by (1) various governmental entities; (2) commercial interests; and (3) fandoms. I think (1) and (2) have largely not been all that impactful, for reasons that should be obvious to anyone involved in the arts. Three is something I'm genuinely interested in and happy to see. But only time will tell if this interest is sustainable and can generate more interesting works. (Ken Liu)

The PRC has been hard at work engineering its own version of the Korean Wave-a popcultural engine for exporting soft power and a sense of global cool that complement its national standing in science, technology, military and economic might. Observing that states and corporations can only do so much in terms of promoting the arts, Ken Liu argues that the more inspiring (if potentially also unsuccessful) aspect of this occurs outside of commercial or official channels. Sf seems to have more cachet than ping-pong and pandas, but it is the fans who decide if they are interested, not corporations or bureaucracies.

Jenkins argues that "grass roots intermediaries" profoundly influence the ways in which Asian cultural goods are transplanted and translated into Western markets (162). Jenkins names "the role of the South Asian diasporic community (the "desi") in preparing the way for Bollywood films and Bhangra music, and the role of western fans (or the "otaku") in insuring the translation and

circulation of Japanese anime and manga" as examples of such intermediaries. In the case of both, Jenkins argues that informal networks of translation brought these cultural products to American audiences before they were seized upon as potential sources of profit by any corporate entity. Initially through diasporic fans, and later pop-cosmopolitan cultural outsiders served as conduits through which new cultural forms and linguistic competencies took hold in US consumer culture (Jenkins 162-166). A similar process has taken place with the rise of Korean popular culture in the form of serial television dramas and popular music. This could also be identified in the "kung-fu craze" with the popularity of Hong Kong martial arts cinema in the 1970s, and is well underway in the introduction of Chinese sf to American audiences.

In the case of Chinese sf, one of the most important relationships, and clearest examples of a grass roots intermediary would be Chen Qiufan's relationship with translator and author Ken Liu. I quote him at length here, because his reflections on how his original work came to be published in Chinese, and how he began to translate contemporary sf into English speak to the deeply personal nature of the global circulation of Chinese-language sf:

Chen Qiufan reached out to me because I was gaining some international attention for my fiction, and he had read some of my stories on the web. He liked them and wondered if I might be interested in having them translated into Chinese and published in China in the world's biggest sf magazine, *Science Fiction World....* He put in so much effort just to help another writer reach a new audience. I was deeply moved. It was, I think, not just a demonstration of his selfless character, but also an act that encapsulated the warmth, generosity, and dedication of sf writers and fans across the world in helping one another to gain access to more literature of the fantastic.

When I found out that he was a writer, I asked to read some of his stories.

I was immediately struck by Chen's unique voice and powerful imagery, and how he was making Modern Standard Written Chinese do things that I hadn't thought was possible. This impression would later be further enhanced as I read his other stories that sought to stretch and redefine the potential of writing, including a story written in Classical Chinese and stories that showed the full polyphonic range of contemporary Chinese vernaculars. Moreover, he was making so many keen observations about futurism, about our uneasy relationship with technology, about our struggles as actors of conscience against impersonal authority... I felt like I had found a kindred soul, a writer who was passionate about the same things I was, but was doing so from a different perspective.

I wanted to help Chen find readers outside of China, and especially wanted to introduce his work to my fellow Anglophone readers. Such beauty must be shared! So I offered to help translate his story into English and find a market. Since I had no prior interest or experience with literary translation, I had to cram translation theory and apprentice myself to skilled experts to learn the craft until I learned enough to do his story justice. (Ken Liu)

Two of the most important voices in contemporary Chinese sf found a connection over the world wide web, and resonances in one another's fiction. Other academics and fans-myself included- were working on translation at roughly the same time, but Ken Liu's translation is acknowledged as some of the most capable, and he has been by far the most prolific and popular translator of the genre into English.

In his request for financial backing from fans, editor Neil Clarke's Kickstarter campaign for the Clarkesworld Chinese science fiction translation project stated, "Clarkesworld Magazine has always aspired to publish stories from a global pool. It's our opinion that different perspectives make the genre stronger" (Neil Clarke, Kickstarter). Clarke notes on the Clarkesworld editor's notes page, "In August 2011, we published our first translation, "The Fish of Lijiang" by Chen Qiufan, translated by Ken Liu. Over the next few years, we published a few more, thanks to Ken and John Chu. Unknown to us, those translations were generating some attention in China and one day, I woke to find an email from StoryCom in my inbox...with StoryCom and our Kickstarter supporters, we launched our translation project exactly five years ago this month. Since then we have featured nearly fifty works of Chinese science fiction" (Clarke, Editor's Desk: A Bucket...). Once the deal with StoryCom was reached, the team of consultants was broadened to include Liu Cixin, SF World editor Yao Haijun, educator and author Wu Yan, and China Film Group scriptwriter Zhang Zhilu.

Among these many translations, the most significant is doubtlessly Liu Cixin's *Three Body*, which won the 2015 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Liu Cixin winning the Hugo Award represents a seismic shift in American sf fan culture at a moment of profound contention about access and inclusion in genre fiction and fandom. This was the first time a Hugo Award was given to an author from outside of the US, Canada, or Great Britain. The Hugo Awards, hosted by the World Science Fiction Society Convention, have selected the "best" in sf since 1953, but these awards have been by default Anglophone, American, white and male (Aidan Walsh, "Whose Rocket"). A statistical analysis by James Nicoll in 2015 found that Hugo Award finalists and winners are predominantly male, and American (Nicoll).

In the tumultuous early decades of the United States' 21st century, fan communities have become a site for political struggle resulting in, for example, "a strong connection between the men's rights movement and fan communities" (Wilson 431). Originally conceived as a fan site, platforms like 4chan grew into internet subcultures, and influential in the spread of political movements like the alt-right and Anonymous. Fan consumption and criticism of popular culture is imbricated in the United States' contemporary contestation of the legacies of social inequality. In the wake of *Three Body* being named Best Novel, African American author N. K. Jemisin won the award three years in a row, in 2016, '17, and '18. Jemisin, whose works deal directly with themes of cultural conflict and oppression, was notably the first African American woman to win the award (she is also the first author to win three years in a row). Her successes seem to represent the end of a backlash among aggrieved Hugo Award voting fans anticipating the loss of what they perceived

as the exclusive provenance of a de-facto white male space that decried multiculturalism and politically critical writing beginning in 2013.

I contend that the rise of Chinese sf outside of East Asia can be understood in part as the product of a serendipitous development (and minor victory) from within the confines of the ideological contradictions of the United States. Acknowledging that this argument is highly problematic, potentially conflating fiction written originally in Asian languages with Englishlanguage fiction by American authors of Asian descent, I would like to suggest that the success of Chinese sf and recent successes of minority-written genre fiction in the US are part of an overlapping cultural shift. This shift has taken place in the context of a fierce debate in fan culture regarding the value of diversity in representation and political messaging in popular culture. This is visible in the Sad Puppies-a contingent of Hugo voters emerging in 2013 and led initially by Larry Correia, an author who opposed the political content of what he saw as "heavyhanded message fic" (quoted in Wilson 441). The Sad Puppies were soon joined by the more strident Rabid Puppies who made no bones about their racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Another debate along similar cultural lines was Gamergate, a term of "used as a rallying point for a few different movements," accusing game developer Zoe Quinn of trading sexual favors for positive reviews, and attacking blogger and gamer Anita Sarkeesian for her vlog "Feminist Frequency," which criticized misogynistic representations of women in video games from a number of different perspectives (Wilson 439-440). It is in large part because of an American fan backlash against perceived favoritism for diversity and political correctness that Liu Cixin's novel was even able to win the award. The entire slate of nominees the year prior was notable for its unprecedented diversity,

In 2014, more women were nominated than men than ever before. Among the winners were Ann Leckie's novel experimenting with an alien race that does not distinguish between males and females (*Ancillary Justice*), John Chu's short story celebrating homosexuality ("The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere") and Kameron Hurley's essay on women in science fiction ("We Have Always Fought"). More than in any previous year, the 2014 Hugos honored people of color, LGBTQ people, and women. (Schneiderman)

Distancing himself from the politics of the moment, and wanting to be judged purely on the merits of his novel, Kloos wrote, "the presence of *Lines of Departure* on the shortlist is almost certainly due to my inclusion on the "Rabid Puppies" slate. For that reason, I had no choice but to withdraw my acceptance of the nomination. I cannot in good conscience accept an award nomination that I feel I may not have earned solely with the quality of the nominated work" (Kloos). Wanting to avoid association with the affair entirely, author Marko Kloos withdrew his novel *Lines of Departure* from the best novel category, allowing Liu Cixin's *Three Body* to replace it. Deirdre Saoirse Moen's "puppy-free Hugo Award voter's guide" helped those opposed to the puppy agenda overcome the attempted manipulations of the Sad Puppies voting bloc. At the same time, vote manipulation and voters electing to vote for no winner meant that "many of the Hugo Award

categories for 2015 did not name a winner and the awards went unclaimed" (Wilson 441). This is not to detract from the quality of Liu Cixin's work, but to contextualize the political climate in which it was assessed in the United States.

The affirmation of the Hugo Award led to increased sales of Liu Cixin's work in the PRC, such that his novel was one of the top sellers in hard copy and e-books for 2013-2018, a full decade beyond its original publication. The success of Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang in the Anglophone market in turn led to increased interest in Chinese sf, part of a circulation of cultural capital by which China's national literature operates in the context of national language, but is often concerned with its validation as world literature. Private investment has led to further efforts to promote Chinese sf in translation and to capitalize on the push for multiculturalism in publishing in the US. Regina Kanyu Wang states that, "foreign magazines/publishers are in need of stories, led by the 'diversity' needs of the US market, followed by other language markets" (Wang). Wang adds that later media coverage identifying Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg as fans also played a role in helping recirculate the image of Chinese sf as a member of the clique of global cool.

The Chinese publishing industry is definitely happy to see Chinese sf being translated into other languages. In one aspect, if it's a state-owned publisher, it's a way to do cultural exportation, which is usually occupied by non-fiction books. In another aspect, if the book is translated into other languages and even win some awards, it will bring more attention to the book and the author domestically, like the saying: "出口转内销 chukou zhuan neixiao" – exportation turns into domestic sales. (Wang)

Paradoxically, Chinese literature and cinema have long sought the affirmation of the international market but these same works may be accused of pandering to foreign audiences. Ken Liu states that this, "to me is emblematic of the problematic ways in which aspects of contemporary China's self-narrative is enmeshed in and codependent on external validation" (Ken Liu). It would seem that even as American diplomatic, military and economic influence wane, American consecration of popular culture continues for the moment.

Chinese sf in translation is a very different entity occupying a very different cultural field than its original ecosystem. Translations made for Anglophone audiences occasionally alter the stories to reflect contemporary American sensibilities regarding gender and political correctness, and some of these edits have made their way back into the Chinese-market versions of the books. In my communications with translators, many questioned the coherence of Chinese sf as a genre, and noting that beyond sharing a common source language, they represent a highly diverse category of fiction. Ken Liu interrogated the value of the label Chinese sf, pointing out differences between authors, arguing that their works "have different political, social, and aesthetic stances and engage with Power and Privilege from different vantage points. I don't see any value in trying to lump them in together and make claims about them collectively" (Ken Liu). Andy Dudak likewise noted, "the Chinese view of their own sci-fi must be way more nuanced and complex than the American view seeking common defining Chinese sci-fi characteristics" (Dudak).

Although I personally have chosen to avoid a lengthy genre definition in this essay, I find Ken Liu's thoughts on the question of Chinese sf and its popularity among American audiences refreshing and challenging:

I'm not convinced that "Chinese sf" is a coherent category (analytical, marketing, or otherwise), and neither am I convinced that there's a coherent, sustained interest among Anglophone readers for the category. I tend to resist all generalizations and categories, and this ideological commitment drives my analysis.

I don't think "Chinese SF" is as useful a description of a marketable category of literature the way a genre label is (though as I've often said, I don't even think genre labels are helpful and use them only reluctantly and under protest). "Chinese sf" basically seems to mean speculative fiction written in China by Chinese writers. But just as no one can coherently claim that all speculative fiction written in the US by American writers all adhere to some model, no one can claim such a thing for "Chinese sf" either.

Rather, I've always approached Chinese sf as a diverse collection of individual works by individual authors, with no interest in pushing some collective label or uniform analytic framework on them. (Ken Liu)

Liu goes on to enumerate a number of authors he has translated, noting that despite their vastly different literary styles and thematic content, many have moved him to tears. Which is to say, regardless of the specific nature of the genre, he translates what resonates with him.

Nevertheless, Chinese sf has resonated with American fans. This is perhaps because sf is an inherently global genre, born in an era of intense economic and technological globalization; one that speaks even more strongly to a set of struggles shared globally in the present moment. Regina Kanyu Wang, author and Market Director and StoryCom-a startup that helps sell Chinese sf to foreign publishers-posits that this global appeal is based in globalized interests and concerns, pointing to "artificial intelligence, psychological diseases, climate change, electronic wastes, alien invasion" as themes that resonate beyond national borders (Wang). Like literature more broadly, good sf will presumably transcend the ideological confines of the nation state, speaking to a universal human condition.

French translator, editor and professor of Chinese studies Gwennael Gaffric has explained how Liu Cixin's *Three Body* series "has now been translated [either in whole or in part] into some fifteen languages. The vast majority of them-with the exception of the Korean translation-were done after the English release of the first volume" and that the novel being awarded the Hugo Award had "undoubtedly contributed to a massive editorial impulse [...] In addition, the English-language version of the novel (or novels) continues to serve as a reference for literary agencies that hold the translation rights of Liu's trilogy, whether in terms of the content of the translated version or the paratextual architecture [...] The Italian translation was thus made from the English version. [It is] notable that in several translated versions, (French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese

and Turkish), the name of the extraterrestrial planet located on Alpha Centauri and which is at the core of the trilogy has been translated as "Trisolaris," as in the English version." Gaffric goes on to note other instance of paratextual standardization included reusing the English-language cover design, and transcribing Liu Cixin's name surname last, contravening editorial policy for translated work in German, Italian, and Spanish that preserves author's names like Yan Lianke as they appear in Chinese (Gaffric 118-119).

This activity takes place in the context of a vibrant atmosphere of translation and scholarship that I am ill-equipped to address in any comprehensive form. To my knowledge, this includes PhD students, scholars, and research groups funded by national programs in the UK, France, Belgium, and Switzerland. This also includes numerous conferences, fan magazines, podcasts and blogs in Germany, Italy, the UK, and the Czech Republic. Finally, this also includes concerted efforts in translation by publishers in many of the above countries. As the field of Chinese sf studies grows in global prominence, further consideration of the role of fan communities will play a vital role in understanding its global significance.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

# Chinese Science Fiction in Contemporary Russia



# Jinyi Chu

In 1998, Russian literary scholar Evgenii Viktorovich Kharitonov wrote, "though the popularity of science fiction is growing exponentially in China, China's own science fiction is still not a solid phenomenon. The time of a serious conversation on Chinese science fiction has not arrived yet" (Kharitonov). The rising global fame of Chinese science fiction today certainly has rendered Kharitonov's statement outdated. Kharitonov, who surveyed the history of Chinese literature with fantastic elements from the Zhou dynasty to 1970s, must be glad to witness the recent development of Chinese science fiction. How do Russian readers, critics, and scholars today interpret Chinese science fiction? What are the available editions on the Russian market?

While I do not attempt to enumerate all Russian translations, reviews, and studies of Chinese science fiction, in what follows, I highlight three aspects of burgeoning Russian interest in contemporary Chinese science fiction. First, the existing English translation plays an intermediary role in the Russian reception of Chinese science fiction. To my knowledge, the majority of Russian publications of Chinese science fiction is translated from English. Second, Russian readers tend to focus on the social critique in Chinese science fiction in which they find an alternative to the Western counterpart. Third, while there is still a paucity of Russian scholarship on contemporary Chinese science fiction, the recent publication of the Russian translations of the works of major Chinese science fiction writers suggest that the situation will be improved in the foreseeable future.

In 2015, the Estonian journalist, writer, poet, and cartoonist Nikolai Karaev took over what Kharitonov left behind. Karaev published a short history of Chinese science fiction on the Moscow-based journal *Mir fantastiki* (The World of Fantastic Literature). Karaev's article is entitled "Fantast v Kitae bol'she, chem Fantast. Istoriia nauchnoi fantastiki Podnebosnoi" (Fantastic Writer in China is more than a Fantastic Writer: A History of Science Fiction in the Celestial Empire). The title implies that Chinese writers offer an alternative vision of the role of science fiction in a society. Karaev laments that Russians barely know anything about Chinese science fiction, apart from Lao She's Cat Country, the Russian translation of which was published in 1969 by Molodaia Gvardiia (Young Guards) in the series of *Biblioteka sovremennoi fantastiki* (Library of Contemporary Fantastic literature) (Karaev 7). In this well-written and comprehensive account, Karaev introduces Russian readers to celebrated Chinese science fiction writers, e.g., Zheng Wenguang, Ye Yonglie, Wang Jinkang, Liu Cixin, Han Song, Chen Qiufan, and other names rarely known by the Russian public. He seeks to place that contemporary Chinese science fiction in the Chinese literary tradition, e.g., the works of Pu Songling, Lu Xun, Lao She, with which Russian readers are more familiar.

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This 2015 issue of *Mir fantastiki* also features Nikolai Karaev's extensive interview with Liu Cixin. Though the content of this interview may resemble what Liu Cixin has expressed elsewhere, it still presents an image of Chinese science fiction in the eyes of Russophone readership. Karaev's main interest lies in how Liu Cixin sees himself and his Chinese peers in the global genealogy of science fiction. The eleven questions that Karaev asks Liu Cixin are all about "How Chinese is Chinese sci-fi?" and "How sci-fi is Chinese sci-fi?" It seems that Karaev seeks for a statement on the Chineseness of Chinese science fiction in Liu Cixin's answer. However. Liu Cixin stresses that contemporary Chinese science fiction is more influenced by the Western science fiction than Chinese national tradition. Karaev becomes a little disappointed, thus he follows up by asking "but what about your story 'The Cloud of Poetry' in which feature Tang-dynasty poet Li Bai and other mythological figures?" Liu Cixin simply answers that "The Cloud of Poetry" was an exception.

Karaev's advocation of translating more Chinese science fiction soon became reality. It was in this issue of *Mir fantastiki* that Il'ia Sukhanov's Russian translation of Liu Cixin's "Shanyang shangdi" 《赡养上帝》 ("Taking Care of God") was published (Liu Cixin). The editors of *Mir fantastiki* also introduced Russian readers to the Chinese journal *Kehuan shijie* 科幻世界 (The World of Science Fiction), which they called the Chinese *Mir fantastiki*. From this perspective, readers who are more familiar with contemporary Chinese science fiction can also see Mir fantastiki as the Russian Kehuan shijie.

The survey, interview, and translation published on *Mir fantastiki* in 2015 are only preludes to a new wave of Russian translations of Chinese science fiction. In recent years, the Russian publisher "Fanzon" has been actively promoting and publishing Chinese science fiction. Fanzon was established in 2016. The editor-in-chief of Fanzon Natal'ia Gorinova sees the mission of the publisher as "reestablish the status of science fiction as grand and serious literature (Bol'shaia literatura)," rather than as merely genre fiction (Fantlab). Fanzon's ardent promotion of contemporary Chinese science fiction is motivated by its aspiration to revitalize the Russian interest in global science fiction. The description of Fanzon's series *Sci-fi Universe* indicates, "this is a series that includes contemporary science fiction and space opera. In the framework of this series, we publish the cult texts (*kul'tovye texty*) in the West that previously have not yet appeared in Russian before, and those loud debuts which won the recognition of critics and readers. We recommend you to read Stanley Robinson, Liu Cixin, Nile Stevenson, and etc." (Fanzon).

Since 2017, Fanzon has published eight volumes of Russian translations of Chinese science fiction in the series Sci-fi Universe. All of these volumes are available in the formats of hard copy, digital version, and audiobooks. In December 2017, Fanzon released the Russian translation of the first two instalments of Liu Cixin's trilogy Diqiu wangshi 《地球往事》 (Remembrance of Earth's Past): Olga Glushkova's translation of Santi 《三体》 (The Three Body Problem) under the title Zadacha trekh tel and Dmitrii Nakamura's translation of Heian senlin 《黑暗森林》 (The Dark Forest) under the Russian title Temnyi les. Glushkova and Nakamura collaborated on the translation of the third volume Sishen yongsheng 《死神永生》 (Death's End) which was released in February 2018 under the title Vechnaia zhizni smerti (The Eternal Life of Death). The popularity

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of these separate editions led to the publication of the single-volume edition of Liu Cixin's trilogy under the title *Vospominaniia o proshlom Zemli. Trilogiia* (*Rembrance of Earth's Past: A Trilogy*) in early 2019. This edition also includes two separate forewords by the Russian translators Glushkova and Nakamura, and the Russian translations of the two different afterwords by author Liu Cixin and English translator Ken Liu. The Russian translation of the anthology of Liu Cixin's shorter works *Qiuzhuang shendian* 《球状闪电》(Ball Lightning) under the Russian title *Sharovaia molniia* was also published in 2019.

The popularity of Liu Cixin's works led to more Russian publications of other splendid contemporary Chinese science fiction. In November 2019, Fanzon published the Russian translation of Chen Qiufan's *Huangchao* 《荒潮》(*Waste Tide*) under the title of *Musornyi* priboi. Following this trend, in 2020, Fanzon published the Russian translation of Baoshu's Santi X: Guanxiang zhi zhou 《三体X: 观想之宙》(The Redemption of Time) under the title Vozrozhdenie vremeni (The Rebirth of Time). In July 2020, the popular American anthology of Chinese science fiction Broken Stars edited and translated by Ken Liu will be published by Fanzon under the title Slomannye zvezdy (Broken Stars). These eight books introduce Russian readers to the science fiction of Chinese authors Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, Baoshu, Xia Jia, Tang Fei, Han Song, Cheng Jingbo, Hao Jingfang, Fei Dao, Zhang Ran, Wu Shuang, Ma Boyong, Gu Shi, Wang Kanyu, as well as a scholarly essay by Song Mingwei. The Russian translation Xia Jia's short story "Baigui yexing jie"《百鬼夜行街》("A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight") under the title "Ulitsa prizrakov" ("The Street of Specters," translated by Il'ia Sukhanov) was included in the anthology Stranstvie trekh tsarei (The Journey of Three Kings) edited by Vladimir Arenev published in Kharkiv, Ukraine (Arenov). Not long after this publication, Ukrainian scholars L. S. Pikhtovnikova and A. I. Motrokhov chose Xia Jia's story as a case study for the "composition and style" of contemporary Chinese prose (Pikhtovnikova and Motrokhov 24-28).







Top Left: Russian cover of Chen Qiufan's Waste Tide; Top Right: Russian cover of Liu Cixin's Three Body Problem; Bottom: Anthology edited and translated by Ken Liu, Broken Stars

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To my knowledge, the majority of the Russian editions of contemporary science fiction is translated from English. However, this does not indicate that Russian translators do not care about accuracy. Russian translators also consult with Russian Sinologists in the process of translation. Ol'ga Glushkova wrote in the translator's foreword to the Russian edition of *The Three Body Problem*, "When I first finished reading the English translation of the novel *The Three Body Problem* by Chinese writer Liu Cixin in 2014, especially after he won the Hugo prize in 2015, I came up with the idea of translating it for the Russian readers. I do not know Chinese, so I translated it from English" (Glushkova). Using Ken Liu's "remarkable" translation, Glushkova worked with Sinologist Al'bert Krisskoi, on the final draft of the Russian translation of *The Three Body Problem*. In the translator's foreword to *The Dark Forest*, Dmitrii Nakamura also remarked that working with Sinologists, he and Glushkova even reconstructed some excerpts omitted in the English translation (Nakamura).

Unsurprisingly, Russian readers tended to use Western and Russian science fiction as a frame of reference in their interpretation of Chinese science fiction. Scholar E. Iu. Potapchuk compared Liu Cixin's Three Body Problem with Stalnislaw Lem's "The Star Diaries." (Potapchuk 72) Karaev found the parallel between Han Song's Ditie 地铁 (Subway) and Russian writer Dmitrii Glukhovskii's Metro 2033 a little far-fetched (Karaev 16). However, when the two writers met each other in 2013 in Beijing, they told journalists of Chinese magazine Xinzhoukan 新周刊 (New Weekly) that many aspects of Chinese Ditie and the Russian Metro 2033 were comparable, especially, their political allegory. (Zhang) After reading Chen Qiufan's Waste Tide in Russian translation, Russian writer Zhanna Poiarkova wrote, "Chinese science fiction has its own characteristics, the most important of which is that they are always social novels, not genre fiction as a simple person would understand it. Thus, it is very interesting to read how it addresses the economic problems of silicon island and the spread of digital narcotics... I don't see the calls for rebellion which is quintessential in their western counterpart" (Fanzon). Reading Liu Cixin's Three Body Problem, Sergei Sirotin found "the social" element strikes him the most. Sirotin wrote, "Liu Cixin's fantastic plot, similar to all the good social science fiction e.g., the works of the Strugatsky brothers, follows the concerns in reality. The portrayal of aliens is not an idle imagination of the writer, but an attempt to sharpen the terrifying realities that reign on Earth." These accounts show that Russian readers seek to find an alternative possibility of science fiction in China.

Contemporary Chinese science fiction still remains an understudied field in Russian Sinology, compared with the consistent scholarly interest in Chinese fantastic literature since the early twentieth century. In the 1910s, when the young Russian Sinologist Vasilii Alekseev was conducting research in China, he faced criticism from his Chinese *xiansheng* (teacher). They told this future Russian academician that one should focus on the Confucian canons rather than the low-brow texts, e.g., Pu Songling's *Strange Stories*. However, Alekseev believed that fantastic literature was "the literature of the people," and later published four volumes of Russian translations of Pu Songling which had become popular books since the Soviet era. Russian Sinologists of later generations, e.g., Pavel Ustin and Boris Riftin carried on studying classical

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Chinese fantastic literature. I believe that the publication of the aforementioned translations will certainly foster more academic projects on contemporary Chinese science fiction in Russia.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### Chinese Science Fiction in the Arabic World



### Linyao Ma

In recent years, Chinese science fiction authors have been internationally awarded many times. Among them, Chen Qiufan won the gold award for best novel in the fourth Nebula Award for Global Chinese Science Fiction for *The Waste Tide* in 2013, Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem*, was recognized by the Hugo Awards as Best Novel at the 73rd World Science Fiction Convention in 2015, which made the author the first Asian winner of this prize. In 2016, Hao Jingfang won the 74th Hugo Award for Best short story for *Folding Beijing*. During this time, the Chinese-American science-fiction novelist Ken Liu played an important part, for he translated Liu Cixin's "Three Body" trilogy and other works of Chen Qiufan as well as Hao Jingfang, etc. into English. These English translations of which he is in charge could be regarded as the first step of Chinese science fiction toward the international literary field and worldwide recognition.

#### The Chinese science fiction novel in the Arabic world

Take the currently most well-known Chinese science fiction work "Three Body" trilogy as an example. It has been translated into more than 20 languages including English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Turkish, etc., thereby accumulating readers from diverse regions. Nevertheless, this translation hasn't reached the Middle East and North Africa region, as none of the novels has been translated into Arabic yet. However, this does not mean that there are no readers of Chinese science fiction novels in the Arab world. First of all, due to the widespread bilingualism/multilingualism in the Arab world, Arab readers can read Chinese science fiction through English translation, French translation, or any other translation according to their language proficiency. Meanwhile, Arabic media's report on Chinese science fiction can be found amongst our references. In August 2016, the site of al-Sīn bi-l- 'Arabī (China in Arabic) reprinted from Xinhua News in Arabic the news that Hao Jingfang had won the Hugo Award. The electronic daily newspaper *Elaph* ( $\bar{l}l\bar{a}f$ ) published in 2019 an annual science fiction review in which was mentioned Broken Stars, an anthology of Chinese science fiction short stories selected and translated by Ken Liu, which also included three review articles on Chinese science fiction. Furthermore, the Arab International Tourism site published an article pinpointing that Chinese science fiction is going through a golden period. It introduced briefly Liu Cixin's "Three Body" Trilogy and Hao Jingfang's Folding Beijing. Then it attempts to explore contemporary Chinese society in order to illustrate China's dual attitude towards foreign countries (especially western countries and capitals) reflected by the characters in the novel when they encounter extraterrestrial creatures.

Moreover, the Arabic version of Xinhua News also promotes the circulation of Chinese science fiction in the Arab world by covering not only awards-winning news but also popularity

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gained by this genre in other countries. For example, it reported in 2019 the success achieved by Chinese science fiction in Japan. In addition to news, it also published in Arabic a dialogue with Liu Cixin that allows Arab readers to deepen their understanding of Chinese science fiction and to not only understand the novels themselves but also to understand the author's implicit intentions.

#### Chinese science fiction film in the Arab world

Besides novels and short stories, films can be seen as another important way for the Arab world to know Chinese science fiction. The Wandering Earth, adapted from Liu Cixin's novel of the same name was screened in theaters around the world in 2019 and is now streaming on Netflix (availability on every Arab-speaking country Netflix is to be verified). Undoubtedly, this allowed the film to accumulate a certain number of audiences worldwide including Arab subscribers. Meanwhile, the phenomenal success made by the film attracted the attention of some Arab journalists who are based in China. On February 20th, 2019, al-Yawm al-Sābi' covered the film with an article entitled "indamā takhdim al-sīnamā l-siyāsa." ("When cinema serves politics"), which argues that the film is different from the mainstream Western science fiction that usually advocates fleeing the earth in order to survive, while The Wandering Earth argues for saving the earth because it reflects Chinese patriotism and a unique Chinese sense of romance. Furthermore, the article also points out that the film embodies China's political ideals of protecting the one earth as well as the relationships with Russia and the United States. Middle East Online also reported on the film emphasizing the rapid development of Chinese science fiction films and its outstanding North American box office. Hānī Muhammad believes that the film is compatible with Hollywood sci-fi blockbusters and speaks highly of the shooting of the film and its post-production technology. In addition, the author also points out that the film embodies cooperation between China and Russia.

#### Chinese science fiction and Arab science fiction

Facing the success achieved by Chinese science fiction, the Arab-speaking journalists begins to review and reflect on their own science-fiction creation. For example, *Middle East Online* published in 2018 un article entitled "Al-Sīn wa-l-khayāl al-1ilmī wa-'ayna l-' Arab?" ("China and science fiction, where are the Arabs?") that pinpoints the status quo of the marginalization of Arab science fiction at the beginning, and interrogates when shall the Arab countries pay enough attention to sci-fi creation that can affect the development of science and technology and the difference that Chinese government's promotion has made in this process. Then the author takes China as an example to argue that the importance attached to science fiction by the Chinese government is of long vision decision and uses the "Three Body" trilogy as an example of success. In one word, the author hopes that Arab sci-fi can see Chinese sci-fi as a model and find its own path rapidly, so as to catch up with the increasing development of science and technology around the world.

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Generally speaking, Chinese science fiction has had a certain influence in the Arab world, either with the help of novels translated into a third language or through pop culture movies adapted from the novels. At the same time, some Arab people make a positive evaluation of China's science fiction and affirm the achievements of China's science fiction on an international scale. Some of them believe that the Arab world should learn from China, encourage the creation of science fiction and provide authors with policy guidance and support. However, we must acknowledge the fact that no Chinese science fiction novels have been translated into Arabic. We look forward to the imminent publication of "Three Body" trilogy, of *Folding Beijing* and other novels' Arabic version, and hope sincerely that Chinese science fiction will find its Arab readership and become a new cultural bond for the Sino-Arab relations.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### Studies of Sci-Fi Film in Mainland China



### Xin Wang

European and American films had long dominated the Chinese market (until the "movement to clear away Hollywood films" in the early 1950s) since their entry in the late 19th century. Like other genres, sci-fi films, born and initially developed in Europe and the United States, were at the same time shown and spread in China's big cities. In the 1920s and 1930s, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Frau im Mond, and James Whale's *Frankenstein* were well-received in China. According to Jia Liyuan, Chinese filmmakers produced such films as *Visiting Shanghai after Sixty Years* and *Exchanged* in 1939, modeled on European and American counterparts (Jia 32-35). The discourse around sci-fi films, however, was absent from China then in spite of the fact that several of them were already made . Phrases like "fantasy blockbusters," "science blockbusters," "scientization" and "idealist schools" were frequently combined with words such as "sensuality," "sentiment," "mystery" and "horror" in cinematic advertising in the 1930s and 1940s. In other words, "sci-fi films" saw no formalized production modes, conventions, or cultural implications. They were regarded as a genre or form only after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese market that just banned Hollywood films greeted a number of Soviet sci-fi films including *Flight to the Moon* (Полёт на Луну), *Battle Beyond the Sun* (Небо зовет), *Roads to the Stars* (Дорога к звездам), and *I Was a Sputnik of the Sun* (Я был спутником солнца), and Czechoslovak ones including *Journey to the Beginning of Time* (Cesta do praveku) and *The Deadly Invention* (Vynález zkázy). These films were translated by Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio and Changchun Film Studio.

In 1955, the translator Yu Guantao, and Zheng Wenguang, later known as "Father of Chinese Sci-fi Literature," presented Journey to the Beginning of Time and Flight to the Moon as "kexue huanxiang yingpian" [科学幻想影片science fiction films] in Dazhong dianying (G. Yu 30; Zheng 18). The former, a combination of puppet show, animation, and live-action shots, was made by Karel Zeman, a puppeteer from Czechoslovakia. The latter, produced by Soyuzmultfilm, was the first sci-fi animation of the Soviet Union. The two films opened up the imagination about time and space and explored new techniques, which exactly characterized the genre when it was thus named and introduced to the Chinese audience. In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched its first artificial satellite. Since then, the related Soviet sci-fi films had been considered as "a solemn herald of journeys into the universe" and sort of documentaries in China (Permyak 50-53). On November 26, 1959, Xi Zezong's article "The Great Dream - On the Soviet Science Fiction Film Battle Beyond the Sun" was published in Renmin ribao. Xi is an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the pioneer in China's history of science. He linked the Soviet Union's achievements in space exploration in the last two years with the story in the film about a flight to Mars. To him, sci-fi films represented the technological prospect of a socialist society, the Soviet

Union in particular, and a rehearsal for a near future. He commented, "Human beings will step on the moon, Mars, and Venus within this century. (Xi 8)"

Different from Xi who saw sci-fi films as a record and prospect of science and technology in the Cold War era, Yang Xianyi, a professor in foreign literature, analyzed the Czechoslovak sci-fi films from an aesthetic stance and treated them as a medium. The article "Outstanding Achievement in Science Fiction Film - Comment on the Czechoslovak Feature Film The Deadly Invention", published in Film Art in 1960, set a precedent for sci-fi film studies in China in its true sense. He pointed out that Karel Zeman's Journey to the Beginning of Time and The Deadly Invention are based on the novels by Jules Verne, the former adapted from Journey to the Center of the Earth (Voyage Au Centre de La Terre), and the latter from Facing the Flag (Face Au Drapeau) and Seabed 20,000 Miles (Vingt Mille Lieues sous les Mers). In Yang's opinion, Karel Zeman endowed the works with greater relevance to reality, unlike other western directors who dealt with these novels in an excessively realistic manner or as shoddy spectacles. In Zeman's films, "Puppets worked well with real people. Scenes were inspired by the original illustrations. The fantastic air of novels was, therefore, recreated in the films" (Yang 48). Yang touched on the core issues in sci-fi film studies, namely, the difference between science fiction novels and sci-fi movies (given their limitations as different media), and how science fiction novels should be adapted and transformed into sci-fi movies.

It was also during this period that calls for making China's own "science fiction films" were heard. In 1961, *Film Art* published "Talking about 'Science Fiction Films," a short review by a worker named Lan Wei. Revolving around the Soviet films *I Was a Sputnik of the Sun* and *Battle Beyond the Sun*, the author stated that sci-fi movies evinced the desire to conquer nature, depicted a communist future, and helped young boys and girls to nurture a thirst for knowledge, and thus encouraged Chinese film artists to start trying (Lan 42-43). As a response, Shanghai Scientific and Educational Film Studio made *Little Sun*, with Wang Minsheng as the scriptwriter and director.

Literary and artistic studies in China were suspended during the Cultural Revolution. Only after its end were sci-fi film studies revived. Capitalist sci-fi films (from the US, Europe, and Japan), especially those made by Hollywood, aroused the interest of Chinese scholars and researchers. Stills from *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, along with the article "Western Sci-fi Movies and Prevailing Craze for the Galaxy," came out in the first issue of *A Collection of Translations about Film Art* (later renamed as *World Cinema*). It is worth noting that despite the term "Meiguo kexue huanxiangpian" [美国科学幻想片US science fiction movie] was still seen beside the stills, the abbreviation "kehuanpian" [科幻片sci-fi] already used in the article, which indicated the recognition of "sci-fi movie" as a general concept and a specialized research field in Chinese society. The article made the first systematic review for sci-fi movies and discussed the historical connection between sci-fi movies and science fiction stories, and between sci-fi comics and cartoons, the impact of the Cold War and nuclear threats on sci-fi movies, the fusion of disaster movies and sci-fi movies, and the "craze for the galaxy" that *Star Wars* produced in the past year (Hanbo 273-287). George Lucas's *Star Wars* caused an unprecedented sensation in the

United States and Europe (which changed the film industry on the whole, and even marked a "big event" in the western world), and forced a demand for sci-fi movies in China that just launched the reform and opening-up policy and became curious about the Western popular culture. It was against such a background that Shanghai Film Studio made *Death Ray on a Coral Island* in 1980.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Movie Review and other publications introduced to readers various domestic and foreign sci-fi movies such as Star Wars, Futureworld, The Empire Strikes Back, and Death Ray on a Coral Island. Xiao Mei held in "Fantasy - Soul of Sci-fi Movies," published in Film Art in 1980, that fantasy is the core of sci-fi movies and should be free of political, artistic, or technological censorship. The fantasy in sci-fi movies should not only be about natural science, but refer to the influence of technology on human thinking, psychology, and ethics. It should also serve to expose defects in reality and explore the future (Xiao 34-36). Unlike previous ones, the article no longer focused on how sci-fi movies functioned as the mouthpiece for bourgeois ideology. Liu Lizhong divided the popular science films into several types in "A Preliminary Study on the Style of Popular Science Films" in 1981. He proposed that the sci-fi film is a kind of popular science film in a fictional form. He opined that Little Sun produced in 1963 is a sci-fi film, and that popular science films (including the science fiction form) prospered during 1958 and 1963 (Liu 59-61). This view laid a foundation for later writings in the academic circles of China on the history of sci-fi movies. Although David Lynch's Dune was premiered in Beijing on November 9, 1984 (Chen 35), the "movement to clear away mental pollution" that began in 1983 dealt a heavy blow to sci-fi creators and sci-fi film studies in China, which were restored in the late 1980s. Luo Huisheng's "A New Synthesis of Science and Art" that was published in Film Art in two issues deserves a mention. By analyzing the synthesis commonly seen in film giants including the Soviet Union, Japan, the United States, and Europe, it proposed a theory and possibility of integrating art films, documentaries, and popular science films into a whole. Susceptible to the prevailing "system theory, cybernetics, and information theory," Luo emphasized the synthesis and integration of "scientific aesthetics" and "artistic aesthetics," for which Nine Days in One Year (Девять дней одного года), Taming of the Fire (Укрощение огня) and Poem of Wings (Поэма о крыльях) directed by Soviet filmmaker Daniil Khrabrovitsky, Kaikyô by Japanese director Shirô Moritani, The China Syndrome and Silkwood made in the United States, and even sci-fi movies by George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Peter Bogdanovich were shoveled under the same analytical umbrella (Kexue shang 28-28; kexue xia 54-62). The paper presented a large picture of worldwide cinemas and was an unprecedentedly ambitious theoretical gem, (although it aimed to structure a "science-art film" as different from the commercially valuable feature film and did not deal with existing sci-fi movies.)

China Film Press translated and published *Der Science Fiction Film* by East German scholar Christian Hellmann in 1988, following which child-oriented sci-fi movies such as *Wonder Boy*, *The Ozone Layer Vanishes*, and *Magic Watch* came out. The World Science Fiction Convention was held in Chengdu in 1991, where the academic circles expressed their desire for sci-fi movies (Zhu 63). In 1992, Shen Dong at China Film Art Research Center wrote a master's thesis, the

first of its kind on sci-fi films in China, entitled "On Sci-Fi Film Writing Patterns," in which sci-fi stories unfold following four modes - robot/Frankenstein, utopia/anti-utopia, interstellar war/ extraterrestrial, and space exploration/time machine. Each movie has a motif, that is, the conflict between individuals and groups, or personal desires and social regulations (Shen 25). Sci-fi film studies has since become an academic subject. 1 Chinese versions of contemporaneous theses on sci-fi films were published such as Postmodernism as Folklore in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema (Landy 57-62). For a long time afterwards, domestic academia vigorously advocated for the production of Chinese sci-fi films, and at the same time followed up on those made in the United States and Europe.. Among them, the exposition of movies inherently as spectacles based on sci-fi films by Georges Méliès and the United States (J. Yu 66-68), the study of the relationship between sci-fi films and teenagers (Zeng 40), and the analysis of the skeleton of Hong Kong sci-fi movies stand out (Xu 51). Some scholars argued that Hong Kong sci-fi movies should be part of its greater Chinese family before Stephen Chow's CJ7 was released in 2008, because Hong Kong had been handed over to China for many years by then. Those ranging from *The Super Inframan* produced by Shaw Brothers in 1975 to current sci-fi movies should all be included in the Chinese list (Jin 58). Wang Zhimin, Jiang Xiaoyuan, Wu Yan and other scholars wrote about sci-fi movies from the 1990s to the 2000s. The 2009 blockbuster Avatar triggered another round of sci-fi movie fervor and broad discussions in China's academic circles.

The amount of articles and dissertations on sci-fi movies has increased dramatically since 2010. The phenomenal success of the *Three-Body* trilogy by Liu Cixin and the exponential growth of the Chinese film industry have further stimulated the demand for China's own sci-fi movies. Chinese sci-fi film industry and its possibilities has become a hot topic in film research. Renowned film scholars such as Dai Jinhua and Chen Xuguang published wide ranges of papers on sci-fi movies. According to incomplete statistics, there were only 11 theses and dissertations on sci-fi movies in Mainland China from 1992 to 2009, but the number rocketed to over 170 from 2010 to 2019. Upwards of 1,500 articles were released in the past decade (far more than the sum of previous numbers), including both theoretical and historical studies of sci-fi movies, as well as critical practice on both classic and new films. *The Wandering Earth* and *Crazy Alien*, both on during the Spring Festival holiday in 2019 and based upon novels by Liu Cixin, scored a hit in China, for which the year of 2019 was reputed to be "the start of the Chinese sci-fi movie era." For *The Wandering Earth* alone, hundreds of papers were produced. The sci-fi film studies in China has since shifted to thorough analysis on local sci-fi movie practice and further exploration into its history.

#### Notes

1. Mainland China has provided postgraduate education in film studies from the 1980s, and the first Masters of film studies graduated in 1985.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### China's Pluralistic Studies of English Science Fiction: Doctoral Dissertations as Examples



#### Chan Li

In globalized sf culture, sf in English has been dominant ever since the birth of modern sf in the 19th century. As a popular genre, sf development relies heavily and inevitably upon the marketplace, where academic studies would help explore and establish the values obscured by commercial shrouds. In the field of English-language sf study, Chinese scholars have published numerous significant papers, many of which are extracted or extended from their doctoral dissertations, which have got or would be published in book form, constituting in turn the major part of the book publishing in this field. And in terms of academic strength, in China Master's theses are incomparable to doctoral dissertations, due to their different program requirements. The brief review of this paper thus focuses on doctoral dissertations, together with relevant academic books, as they stand out not only as crystallization of existing relevant research interests, but representing the most comprehensive and highest level of standards.

Searching science fiction or sf as the keyword in the ChinaInfo (万方) thesis database, the results are 293 Master's theses, 12 doctoral dissertations and 1 post-doctoral report from 2001 to 2019. The results of the same word as the subject in the CNKI (中国国家知识基础设施) thesis database show that, from 1992 to 2019 there are 641 Master's theses and 45 doctoral dissertations. The results combining these two major academic engines are by no means complete, as studies in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are not included, and even in the mainland some dissertations choose non-disclosure for up to 5 years upon submission, which means they could only be accessed via university internal libraries. For these inadequacies in statistics, the survey tries to compensate with the author's knowledge. Generally, studies of English sf in China involve scholars not only of English literature, but also of Chinese, art, and history, presenting an overall picture of interdisciplinary study, and highlighting the increasingly widened academic attention to the genre.

#### **Studies on SF Translation**

Among the search results, many have low or no relevance to the subject. For example, the earliest result of doctoral dissertations is the one by Wang Hongqi (王宏起) in 2002, which is a study of Mikhail Bulgakov's writing, just mentioning there is influence from H. G. Wells' books. The earliest dissertation with high relevance appears in 2006, details as below:

Studie	es on	SF T	rans	lation

Author	Title	Date	Language	Major	University	
Jiang Qian (姜倩)	Fantasy and Reality: A Cultural Study of Science-Fiction Translation in Twentieth- Century China	2006	English	English Language and Literature	Fudan University	

This debut is not overdue, as the first doctoral dissertation on Chinese sf by Wang Weiying (王卫英) is completed in the same year. And translation study is a proper beginning, as sf appears in China first as Western import in the early 20th century. The dissertation takes a descriptive mode of translation studies, the main part including an introduction of the genre and its developmental phases in China, the case study of the translation of five sf stories, three being English, and their impact on the selection and translation of sf, and subsequently upon Chinese sf writing. The analysis centers on the socio-cultural, literary, and translation norms of different historical periods, confirming the turn from linguistic to cultural approach in China's translation studies since the late 1990s. During that period, some scholars have turned to the translation of Western popular fictions since the late Qing Dynasty and focused on the working of translation in the target culture, including Kong Huiyi (孔慧怡) from Hong Kong Chinese University, Yang Chengshu (杨承淑) from Fu Jen Catholic University, and Guo Jianzhong (郭建中) who has co-edited with James Gunn the Chinese six-volume The Road to Science Fiction (1997-1999) and published the monograph Translation of Popular Science Works and Science Fiction: Theory, Technique and Practice (2004). Guo is Jiang's MA supervisor and one advisor of her Ph.D. dissertation.

#### Studies with Focus on SF Utopianism

As utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia are significant classic achievements in intellectual and literary history, quite a few dissertations have taken these angles to cut in sf studies, as listed below:<sup>1</sup>

Studies with Focus on SF Utopianism						
Author	Title	Date	Language	Major	University	
Li Xiaoqing (李小青)	Eternal Utopia: A Study of the Transmutation of British Utopian Literature	2006	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Sichuan University	
Ou Xiangying (欧翔英)	A Study of Contemporary Feminist Utopias in Western Countries	2007	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Sichuan University	
Gu Shaoyang (顾韶阳)	Dream and Reality: Human Nature Reflected in Utopian and Anti-Utopian Work	2009	Chinese	Foreign Language and Literature	Shanghai Int'l Studies University	
Mai Jinghong (麦静虹)	The Art of Daily Life in Nowhere—An Artistic Interpretation of <i>News from</i> <i>Nowhere</i>	2011	Chinese	Art Theory	Nanjing Normal University	
Tan Yanhong (谭言红)	Environmental Imagination and Narrative Strategy in North American Dystopian Novels	2011	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Sichuan University	
Yu Yunling (于云玲)	Impossible Balance: Textual Instability in <i>The Republic, Utopia, Brave New World,</i> and <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	2011	English	English Language and Literature	Shanghai Int'l Studies University	
Wang Yiping (王一平)	The Origination and Multiform Expression of European and American Anti-Utopian Fiction	2012	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Sichuan University	

As Sargent identifies the three broad directions of utopianism as "utopian thought or philosophy, utopian literature, and the communitarian movements"(222), a lot of dissertations with the keyword utopia are theoretical studies of utopian philosophy, and even the literary study of Utopian Thought in Some British and American Fiction (2008) by Niu Hongying (牛红英) is

actually a study of utopian thought in some classical non-sf writers, and thus they are not included in Table 2. Mai Jinghong's dissertation, though included in the table, has weak relevancy to sf, as it interprets Morris's work as a daily artistic theory.

Li Xiaoqing's dissertation was completed several months earlier than Jiang Qian's, but its focus is on establishing and sorting the British tradition of utopian literature, with no awareness of the overlapping and converging of sf and utopia. It mainly outlines the development and variation of this tradition, tracing its origin back to the ballad *The Land of Cokeygne* in the 14th century, and including not only many proto- and modern sf works, but many classical works like William Black's poetry, Philip Sidney's pastoral romance, and William Shakespeare's drama into the tradition. For the representative works of eutopia, dystopia, critical utopia, and female utopia, it offers brief interpretations mainly in terms of their historical contexts.

Ou Xiangying's dissertation takes the feminist utopian sf in Europe and America between 1950s and 1990s as its subject, and its method is an integration of literary criticism and cultural studies with a focus on political critique aided by content and form analysis. After expounding how the second wave of feminism influenced utopian writing, and how feminist utopias reformed sf tradition, it goes to a systematic account of significant feminist utopias in terms of single-sex worlds, two-sex worlds, and feminist dystopias, and then sums up the views of science and ethics, political design, and female subjectivity in those feminist utopias.

Gu Shaoyang discusses some utopian and anti-utopian literature, but the differences are simply relegated to the abstract opposites of ideal and reality, freedom and bondage, good and evil. Tan Yanhong studies the environmental narratives of Oryx and Crake, The Year of Flood, The Hunger Games and Uglies, all published in the 21st century in the US and Canada, and her approach is more a literary criticism than Ou's with one focus upon the point-of-view narratives in those "dystopias." Tan generally regards dystopian fiction as a subgenre of sf, but she equals dystopia to anti-utopia. About the notoriously controversial disagreement over the uses of utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia, etc., under the umbrella term utopianism, Yu Yunling and especially Wang Yiping have made detailed clarifications based on discussions of some prominent utopia scholars like Lyman Sargent, Darko Suvin, and Krishan Kumar, which makes their argumentation more solid and forceful. They both follow the specific definitions of the several textual forms of the literary utopia made by Sargent in his famous "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994), and hold that literary anti-utopia is a parody of utopia, depicting a nightmare world with utopian agenda put into practice, while dystopia is not necessarily a negative extension of the previous utopia. Accordingly, Wang regards Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a dystopia, the same as Yu does, while classifying her Oryx and Crake, which Tan labels a dystopia, as an anti-utopia in the tradition set by Brave New World.

Wang Yiping's dissertation aims to study anti-utopian literature as an independent tradition as she deems that in the 20th century it has become the mainstream imagination of the future, replacing utopia with its alerting attitude to "social progress." In order to establish such a tradition,

she first expounds the transition from utopia to anti-utopia, and defines the responses to the scientific and high-tech world state by H. G. Wells as tide-turning, then goes on to explore the multi-development of the basic themes established in the early 20th century. For literary studies as a whole, doctoral dissertations in China are usually combinations of historical, theoretical, and textual studies to different degrees, and the latter two approaches are foregrounded respectively by Wang's and Yu Yunling's dissertations. Wang finds that the anti-utopian writings are congruent with modern anti-utopian thought, and she draws upon the anti-utopian philosophy, political science and sociology of Karl Popper, F. A. Hayek, Isaiah Berlin, and J. L. Talmon for her fiction analysis. Yu Yunling focuses on the devices intended to achieve textual stability including allegories, authoritative text, monolithic text and patriarchal text, and the counteraction in the process of interpretation which ultimately leads to textual instability. Whilst Tan Yanhong makes use of narrative strategies in her textual analysis, Yu intends to explore some general narrative principles underlying utopian and dystopian writings, which is more narratology oriented. It is not accidental as Yu's supervisor Qiao Guoqiang (乔国强) is a renowned scholar of narratology in China.

Yu Yunling's study represents one tendency in contemporary narratology studies, scholars in this field being increasingly interested in sf especially when addressing issues of postmodern narratives, world building, possible worlds, unnatural narratives and narratology itself. One example is David Wittenberg's Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of the Narrative (2012), which argues that time travel fiction can be viewed as "a narratological laboratory," literalizing many of the basic theoretical questions of storytelling (2). Among many reviews of this book, the renowned sf scholar Adam Roberts made several harsh but pertinent criticisms, one of which is that "Whilst Wittenberg engages with a good spread of primary texts, his knowledge of the secondary criticism of science fiction is thin," since he positions Bellamy's Looking Backward as the first time travel fiction, born of Darwinistic prognostication of utopian romances, but his Darwinian thesis "relates less to the 'utopian' and rather more to the 'scientific romance' mode of the late century" (732-733). Insufficiency in comprehensive knowledge of sf and its criticism, if I might say so not without prejudice, is not uncommon in some narrative studies of sf, as most of their concerns fall ultimately on narrative norms or theories, which likely results in using SF texts as simple exemplifications for their argumentation as well.<sup>2</sup> But still, such studies would benefit sf studies by offering different perspectives.

#### Studies with Focus on Science and Technology Narratives in SF

The third type of English SF studies highlights science and technology narratives, as the following table shows:

Studies with Focus on Science and Technology Narratives						
Author	Title	Date	Language	Major	University	
Mu Yunqiu (穆蕴秋)	Science and Fantasy: A Study of the Extraterrestrial Civilization Exploration in the History of Astronomy	2010	Chinese	History of Science and Technology	Shanghai Jiaotong University	
Yu Zemei (余泽梅)	Cyberpunk Science Fiction—A Study from the Perspective of the Body	2011	Chinese	Cultural Criticism	Sichuan University	
Guo Wen (郭雯)	Ethical Reflection on Scientific Choice: A Study on the Science Fiction of Human Cloning	2015	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Central China Normal University	

Mu Yunqiu's dissertation holds that sf could be regarded as a part of scientific activities because of extraterrestrial exploration constantly involving interstellar fictions, some astronomers having authored sf works, and some astronomical theories containing imaginary content from the 17th to the early 20th century. The underlying position of re-establishing a new history of science based on cultural narratives, is expanded in her postdoctoral report *The Study of Science Fiction in the Perspective of the History of Science* (2012), which focuses on the narratives about Mars and the Moon, and sf works on the journal *Nature*. Mu's cultural perspective of science comes from her supervisor Jiang Xiaoyuan (江晓原), who has published *Are We Ready: Science in Fantasies and Reality* (2007) and co-authored with Mu *A New History of Science: A Study of Science Fiction* (2016). In terms of sf study, they explore major themes through the lens of scientific discourse construction.

Yu Zemei's dissertation argues that cyberpunk fiction is the convergence of SF writing in a postmodernist context and a theoretical turn to body concern. Its five chapters deal with two major issues, the postmodernist characteristics of cyberpunk fiction, and the ideological change of human subjectivity and selfhood brought about by the hybrid fusion of body and technology. Its merit and demerit are equally noticeable. It is a hard-edged study with an extensive literature review of the academic scholarship on cyberpunk. In 2012, Fang Fan (方凡) of Zhejiang University also published a literary study on cyberpunk titled *American Postmodern Science Fiction*, which is relatively weak in its theoretical grounding compared with Yu's dissertation. But alongside Yu's acute observations, there exist some mistakes of negligence. For example, she makes the inaccurate statements "Science Fiction is the genre of technological impact," and "Body starts occupying increasingly important status in SF since the 1950s" without supportive argument or notes (2-3).

Guo Wen's dissertation is quite lucid in language and thinking. She has noticed science and technology has changed the traditional definition of the human, but unlikeYu Zemei focusing on posthumanism and cyborgism, she is mainly concerned with the ethical reflections of technological alienation and human materialization in 16 sf works on cloning from Europe,

America and Asia, including *Never Let Me Go*, *Cloud Atlas*, *Brave New World*, etc.. After elucidating the relationship and influence between the development of biotechnology, genetic engineering, and sf writing, her dissertation addresses three ethical situations: individual clones' copy-of-the-origin status, group of human cloning with individual clones reduced to simulacra and signs, and the failure of utopias of human cloning to solve technological and ecological crises. Her main methodology is "ethical literary criticism", a paradigm of literary criticism grounded in Western ethical criticism and Chinese moral criticism, first proposed by her doctoral supervisor Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊) in 2004. Recently Liu Xiaohua (刘晓华) of Cangzhou Normal University, has published *Science and Technology Ethics in Anglo-American Science Fiction* (2019), which discusses ethical problems in sf depictions of life intervention, cloning, cyberspace, robots, cyborgs, and the environment, on a much broader scale.

#### Studies on SF Writings of Individual Writers

The fourth type of studies is on sf writings of individual writers. Among the search results, quite a few studies on George Orwell, William Golding, Kurt Vonnegut, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood are not relevant to their sf writings. The below table shows the studies of high relevance to sf:

Studies on Individual SF Writers

Author	Title	Date	Language	Major	University
Ye Dong (叶冬)	Ursula K. Le Guin's Quest for Dao in Her Science Fiction and Fantasy World	2011	English	English Language and Literature	Xiamen University
Liu Jing (刘晶)	Taoist Influence on Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction	2012	Chinese	English Language and Literature	Beijing Foreign Studies U.
Tao Shuqin (陶淑琴)	Colonial Writing in the Post-colonial Era: A Study of Doris Lessing's Space Fictions	2012	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Beijing Normal University
Zhang Qi (张琪)	On Cultural Identity in Doris Lessing's Space Fictions	2014	Chinese	Comparative Literature and World Literature	Xiangtan University
Cheng Jing (程静)	A Study of the Technological Writing in Ursula K. Le Guin's Fiction	2014	Chinese	English Language and Literature	Nanjing University
Yin Bei (殷贝)	Conceptual Metaphors and Innovative Utopian Fables in Doris Lessing's "Space Fiction"	2016	Chinese	English Language and Literature	Sichuan University
Li Chan (黎婵)	Science and Technology, Ideology and Utopia: A Study of H. G. Wells's Science Fiction	2016	Chinese	English Language and Literature	Sichuan University

Studies on individual sf writers start with Ursula K. Le Guin, who has contributed admirably to the genre development, and who, far from denying connection to sf by some writers of similar literary prestige like Vonnegut and Atwood, had a deep sense of identification with the genre. In 1981, "The Diary of the Rose" (1976) is translated in the namesake collection of sf short stories, and in 1982, an sf introductory anthology translated from the 1978 Japanese original includes introductions to the Earthsea trilogy and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.<sup>3</sup> During the 1990s, translations of her short stories and novel excerpts appear in the magazine *Science Fiction World* (《科幻世界》). The first full-length translations of her novels are in mainland China the

Earthsea stories in Jan. 2004, and in Taiwan *The Left Hand of Darkness* Dec. 2004. Le Guin starts to attract academic attention in the late 1990s. Ye Dong's doctoral supervisor Yang Renjing (杨仁敬) includes sf into classic literary history in *A History of Twentieth-Century American Literature* (1999), and offers a special part on Le Guin in the co-authored *A Concise History of American Literature* (2008) (Ye 16-17).

Ye Dong and Liu Jing both take some sf and fantasy stories of Le Guin as their subjects, though Liu's title calls it sf inaccurately. Both hold the basic claim that Taoism constitutes one constant influence on Le Guin's thought and writing, and she is unique in using distinctly Western art forms to communicate primary tenets of Taoism, such as Non-action (无为), Mutual Generation (相生), Balance (均衡), Yin and Yang(阴阳). Liu discusses representations of Taoist influence from man-nature relation, political ideology, and individual life value, whilst Ye from gender relation, social collective relation, and human-nature relationship. Two out of three their discussions roughly overlap in terms of perspectives, but Ye Dong argues with more clarity and force, in that she consciously discusses Taoist influence in interaction with feminist sf, utopianism, and ecocriticism. And to further fortify her proposal, she adds a chapter on Le Guin's translation of *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》) against the background of the Western understanding of Taoism.

Wang Shouren (王守仁), Cheng Jing's doctoral supervisor, devotes a chapter to elucidate the contemporary development of popular literature such as western fiction, crime fiction, sf, and high-tech thriller in *The New History of American Literature Vol. 4* (2002), where he mentions that Le Guin is one representative of the New Wave Movement. This might be one reason for Cheng Jing to choose the subject, since research subjects usually have to be permitted or supported by supervisors. Compared with Ye Dong and Liu Jing, Cheng Jing limits her study to Le Guin's sf writings, and proposes that Le Guin opposes techno-determinism, technophobia or misuse of technology and advocates for a Taoist deference to the natural development of technology.

Doris Lessing is introduced and translated in China as early as in the 1950s, with full translations of *Hunger* (1953), *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and *A Home for the Highland Cattle* (1953) published respectively in 1955, 1956 and 1958, and academic study mainly starts in the early 1980s (Wang 172). There are 20 doctoral dissertations or so on her writings since 2005.

All three in Table 4 focus on Lessing's five space fictions. Tao Shuqin thinks, somewhat simplistically, that Lessing claims colonization as the real drive of and path to civilization, and the genre "Space Fiction" itself is also a failure, since historical narrative, critical realism, and science fiction are contradictory to one another. Zhang Qi also takes postcolonialism as her major approach, and interprets Lessing's depiction of the colonial, the female and the diasporic Other as profound revealing of identity crises, which are influenced by her traumatic family experience, life in Africa and identification with Marxism. As she discovers, Lessing's attention to S&T, her reading of sf works, and conscious adapting sf for social criticism, would explain why she writes those space fictions (180-181).

Generally, Zhang Qi reads those space stories mainly as reflections of power operation in politics, military affairs and culture in the 20th century, and this implicit interpretation strategy is clarified and defined by Yin Bei as allegorical metaphors, a position foregrounding and also conforming the thought-experiment features of Lessing's space fictions especially compared with her earlier writings. Yin Bei focuses on Lessing's innovative use of sf for cultural and philosophical pondering over the historical interaction of language, cognition and reality, and accordingly she draws on the conceptual metaphor theories proposed by George Lakoff and others. Yin Bei goes deep to explore Lessing's sophisticated thought-experiments. For example, after examining the two metaphoric paradigms on morality of "The Strict Father Model" and "The Nurturant Parent Model" in Chapter Three, she goes on in Chapter Four to analyze two overlapping but different rationalist ethical views derived from the first paradigm, namely, the Lamarckian Evolutionary Metaphor and the Social Darwinistic Evolution Metaphor. And she concludes that Lessing has revealed some metaphoric paradigms once derived from concrete life experiences have become entrenched in subconsciousness and cultural norms.

Graduating together with Yin Bei, Li Chan mainly studies H. G. Wells's sf against the contemporary culture and the sf tradition. Her dissertation is built up on the basis of Wellsian studies, Western Marxist sf criticism, and literature and science studies, with the main body addressing the evolutionary imaginations in Wells's sf, the historical isomorphic imaginations of anthropology and Wells's sf, the two-dimensional depiction of the machines as the symbol of technology and that of mechanism, and the cultural development of Well's dynamic utopia and its failure. One merit of her dissertation is that the textual analysis is embedded in the discussion of (pseudo-)scientific and cultural construction of evolution discourses and their transmutation into a diachronic model of progress.

#### Theoretical Studies of SF

The fifth type is theoretical studies of or related to sf, with two dissertations as listed below:

Theoretical Studies of SF							
Author		Title	Date	Language	Major	University	
Ran Dan (冉)	聃)	Cyborg and Posthumanism	2013	Chinese	Philosophy of Science and Technology	Nanjing University	
He Xinye (贺卮	欠晔)	Research on the Science Fiction Poetics of Darko Suvin	2018	Chinese	Theory of Literature and Art	Liaoning University	

Ran Dan's research is a philosophical study, and it is included here as it could help to understand the broad context of related discussions. Ran thinks cyborgism has become one of the most influential cultural thoughts in Western academic circles, and it enters the field of posthumanism with its breaking of dualism and challenging of the ontological purity of human subject. The main body discusses the theories of Andrew Pickering, Donna Haraway, and N. Catherine Hayles with an attempt to establish an internal logical connection among them. He Xinye focuses solely on the sf poetics of Darko Suvin, as she finds Suvin is widely referred to but in

China there is no in-depth and systematic expounding of his theories. Actually the first chapter of Li Chan's dissertation interpretes three key concepts of Western Marxist SF study, namely, utopia, estrangement, and cognition, for which Suvin is the cardinal representative. Li's discussion doesn't enter He's investigation, because, as explained earlier, the author chooses non-disclosure. One chapter might be sufficient for the study of Suvin's theories in relation to sf writing, but it needs a full dissertation to establish its position in the related theoretical history. For example, one section of He's dissertation is on Suvin's continuation and development of the classical Marxist concept of cognition, truth and practice.

In the aspect of theoretical study, Wu Yan (吴岩) has made significant contributions in spite of the fact that his major concern is Chinese sf. Under his national research project, he has organized the translation of sf theories by Suvin, Brian Aldiss, and Isaac Asimov, and published *Literary Theories and Discipline Construction of Science Fiction* (2008) and *An Outline Study of Science Fiction* (2011). The first book offers a comprehensive review of basic theories, critical perspectives and practices, teaching methods and resources of sf study, and the second studies major sf groups of different identities and argues the genre's legitimacy arises from its cultural marginality.

In this brief survey of doctoral dissertations and related books on English sf in China, we can find the overall research evolves with increasing force. With profound and innovative studies along with some mistakes and limits, what could be strengthened, in the author's view, is first studies of more significant sf writers. The present studies all engage in those writers canonized in mainstream literary history, but it will take time to expand the scope. Secondly, sf narratives of S&T could be further explored based on more pertinent theoretical study. For in the contemporary techno-scientific world, S&T is no longer restricted to laboratories or factories, but in Bruce Sterling's words, pervasive and utterly intimate (xiii), and sf is almost the only genre of abiding interest in S&T embedded in value-loaded social life. Besides, with such studies, the academic stereotype of sf as minor and idiosyncratic might get dispelled.

Academic study is never independent of its institutionalization, as shown here by how Jiang Qian, Yu Yunling, Mu Yunqiu, Guo Wen, Ye Dong and Cheng Jing were guided or inspired by their supervisors in their writing. Most of the doctors discussed in the paper have gained the positions of associate professor or professor at universities, and are supervising graduate students now. With years of intensive research on sf for their dissertations, they have laid a sound foundation in the field and most probably developed genuine devotion to the genre. With these advantages, a promising future of study might be reasonably expected.

#### Notes

1. For the dissertations and books discussed, I follow their original English titles or translate the Chinese when there are no English ones.

- 2. Another typical example is Jan Alber's *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016). According to Alber, the unnatural narrative in sf becomes "a bona fide concern," different from the postmodernist "illusion-breaking" unnatural narrative, and the conventionalized sf impossibilities could be explained "through technological progress or simply by associating them with a potential future." See Jan Alber. *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*. University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 42-43, p. 107.
- 3. See Shao Bo (邵柏) and Fu Shen (符申) eds. Meigui Riji 玫瑰日记 [The Diary of Rose]. Chongqing Branch of Science and Technology Literature Press, 1981, pp.1-30; Takashi Ishikawa, Norio Ito eds. Shijie zhuming kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo xuanjie 世界著名科学幻想小说选介 [An Introductory Anthology of World's Science Fantasy Masterpieces]. Trans. Gao Qiming (高启明), Pan Liben (潘力本), Wang Lian'an (王连安), Shan Yang (山杨), Su Zhengxu (苏正绪), Jilin People's Press, 1982, pp. 204-208, pp.341-345. This information is gained from Wang Wen (王文), a big sf fan, who is currently building a comprehensive Chinese sf database.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### Finding Missing Pieces of the Jigsaw Puzzle: A Survey of Japanese Science Fiction Studies in China



Jin Zhao

1

China's first encounter with science fiction dates back to the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. At that point, science fiction, as a genre of literature, like science and technology and modern industry, was extensively influenced by Japan. A lot of western science fiction classics were translated into Chinese from the Japanese versions rather than from the originals. Many of the translators were Chinese students who were studying in Japan, among whom were Lu Xun and Liang Qichao, to name just a few. For instance, Lu Xun, who at the time was studying at Kobun Institute in Tokyo, translated Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) into Chinese from Tsutomu Inoue's Japanese translation, and renamed it *Journey to the Moon*. This book was later published in China in 1903. Meanwhile, a number of Japanese science fiction works were introduced to China, which also played an important role in the early development of Chinese science fiction. In a sense, we can regard Japanese science fiction as an early mentor of Chinese science fiction.

Academia believes that Japanese science fiction began in the second half of the 19th century. Perry's Expedition<sup>1</sup> not only ended Japan's 220-year-old policy of isolation, but also brought about the beginning of Japanese science fiction. Gesshu Iwagaki's Seisei Kaisin Hen (1857), which was stimulated by this event, is considered to be the first work with science fiction nature in Japanese history. Forty years later, Shunro Oshikawa wrote Undersea Warship: A Fantastic Tale of Island Adventure (1900), which marked the real birth of Japanese science fiction. Although Japan suffered unprecedented failure in World War II, the post-World War II period witnessed a rapid recovery and development in its industry and economy. At the end of 1960s, Japan became the second largest economy in the world. In the meantime, its science fiction too experienced rapid development that later brought about the golden age of Japanese science fiction. Entering the Heisei era<sup>2</sup>, along with the Japanese economic recession, Japanese science fiction went through a long period of decline. Since then, Japanese science fiction, while extending its traditional forms of literature, film and animation, has tried to expand into new areas such as games and art, presenting a more diverse look. Today, when we look closely at Japanese science fiction, while observing its rise and fall, we can also clearly see the development of Japanese science fiction studies in China that intertwined with it.

Many years after the founding of New China, studies focused on science fiction were rare. Considering the political reasons, this scarcity of scholarship is understandable. Along with the reform and opening-up in China, Chinese scholars and critics began to pay attention to Japanese science fiction. Even before Japanese science fiction works could be extensively translated into

Chinese, some far-sighted scholars began to make their first attempts at Japanese science fiction. In 1980, Tong Bin published *The Recent Developments of Japanese Science and Fantasy Literature*, expounding systematically on the development of science fiction in Japan, which can be regarded as the beginning of Japanese science fiction studies in China. Thereafter, large numbers of Japanese science fiction works were translated into Chinese. Translators like Li Dechun, Meng Qingshu, and Li Youkuan have made valuable contributions to the popularization of Japanese science fiction in China.

Today, science fiction has gained unparalleled development in China and has gradually become a mainstream culture. Meanwhile, scholars have published numerous articles, and Japanese science fiction scholarship is thriving. It is high time that we looked back upon the endeavors we had made to explore Japanese science fiction and, on some level, reexamined the de facto relationship between Chinese science fiction and Japanese science fiction. This article intends to outline Japanese science fiction studies in China in the past 40 years, and offer a brief account of the major studies which dominated Japanese science fiction studies in China at one time or another.

2

First of all, it is essential that we review the insightful opinions of some prominent Chinese scholars made to explore the nature of Japanese science fiction.

One of the most important Chinese writers of popular science and science fiction after the founding of New China, and the foremost pioneer of science fiction studies in China, Ye Yonglie was also among the first to communicate with the Japanese science fiction community. In 1982, he wrote *Japanese Science Fiction in China*, exploring the history of communication between the two nations' science fiction by detailing the translation and appreciation of Japanese science fiction in the early period of reform and opening-up. When this article was later translated into Japanese and published in Japan, it immediately attracted wide attention of the Japanese science fiction community. According to Ye Yonglie, Japanese science fiction is a completely unique existence in that most works are not confined to a scientific framework. It emphasizes the literariness and social responsibility of its themes, while paying great attention to the fantastical nature of its works. He notes that Shinichi Hoshi's short-short science fiction stories, being a unique Japanese literary genre, resemble the classical Chinese novel *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1740) in both content and form. Ye Yonglie's view provides an explicit reference to the intrinsic connection between the two nations' science fiction.

Wu Yan, one of the most influential science fiction scholars in China, offers us insights based on his close observation of Japanese science fiction. Wu Yan emphasizes that Japanese science fiction, as a genre, is all encompassing. It includes not only adventure, detective, grotesque and political propaganda in the early period of Japanese science fiction, but also deductive, horror, myth, disaster and so on, which can be often seen in Japanese science fiction today. On the other hand, thanks to its unique geographical, historical, and cultural background, the national

character inherent in Japanese science fiction has been significant ever since its birth at the beginning of the 20th century. When Shunro Oshikawa's *Undersea Warship: A Fantastic Tale of Island Adventure*, the pioneering work of Japanese science fiction, was published, Japanese people were greatly stimulated by its expression of nationality. Henceforth, Japanese science fiction has always embraced implicit faith in this distinctive trait. After World War II, Japanese science fiction was sent on a solitary pilgrimage, in which many familiar themes that once seemed to dominate the Japanese science fiction world were abandoned, intentionally or unintentionally. Some writers began to imitate Western science fiction works. But the nationality which is deeply rooted in writers' belief and creativity would not easily disappear. Thus, it is quite safe for us to say it is the persistence of this tradition which has passed down from generation to generation that offers the possibility of restoration to Japanese science fiction in the 21st century.

Han Song, one of the most prominent Chinese science fiction writers, holds that Japan has brought profound inspiration and influence to Chinese science fiction. As early as the late Qing Dynasty, western science fiction was introduced to China via Japan, which literally planted and spread the seed of science fiction on the ground of China. Lately, Japanese scholars have also begun to show their interest toward Chinese science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty, which can be perceived as an intriguing response to that interactive period of time in history. Today, Japanese science fiction studies is trapped in a somewhat awkward situation. Despite the fact that Japanese science fiction is widely read and appreciated by Chinese readers, as an independent scholarly subject it has not received proper respect from the academic world.

In addition, many scholars have devoted themselves to the study of representative Japanese science fiction writers and their works. By reviewing their studies, we may have a glimpse of some evident characteristics of Japanese science fiction studies in China.

Shinichi Hoshi was the first Japanese science fiction writer that Chinese readers got to know after the reform and opening-up. His works were translated into Chinese and published in China as early as 1982. At roughly the same time, he visited China and started to correspond with Ye Yonglie, to exchange views on the actual situation and developing prospect of science fiction in both countries. It was extraordinary and inexplicable that Shinichi Hoshi's works were the only ones to survive the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign³, by which almost the whole science fiction world in China got shattered. Some interesting clues might be discovered by reviewing some of the early interpretations and evaluations Chinese scholars made on his works. Han Fenghua, believed that the sole aim of Shinichi Hoshi's works was to attack capitalist society, economy and culture; similarly, Cui Xinjing and Tao Li, regarded Shinichi Hoshi's works as a reflection of the social evil inherent in capitalist society. Obviously these devoted scholars in the 1980s, almost without exception, strove for a definition of Shinichi Hoshi's works in terms of the socialistic perspective peculiar to that period of time in China. However, the stories' science fiction aspect, which is vital to the works, was relentlessly ignored.

To this day, Sakyo Komatsu has maintained a pivotal position in the history of Japanese science fiction. Accordingly, he is also regarded as one of the most popular subjects of study among Chinese scholars. As early as 1975 when the Cultural Revolution was still enthusiastically going on in China, as a target of criticism, Japan Sinks (1973) was translated into Chinese by Li Dechun, and thus made Sakyo Komatsu the first Japanese science fiction writer introduced to Chinese people after the founding of New China. Actually, *Japan Sinks* is so well-known that when people talk about Japanese science fiction, the first thing that pops into their head will be Japan Sinks. Over the years, the interpretation of the novel from the perspectives of disaster culture and crisis awareness has been particularly favorable for scholars. Wang Zhanyi, by analyzing the multiple contexts of Japan Sinks, defines the nature of the disaster culture implied in Japan Sinks as the crisis awareness peculiar to the Japanese people. Alternatively, Di Fang proposes that geographical characteristics, Buddhist thought, and the impact of foreign culture are the internal elements that cause the formation of the Japanese crisis awareness. Zhang Huishu believes the ultimate aim of the direct depiction of disaster in Japan Sinks is to call for an awakening and restoration of the Japanese national spirit from the 1960s to 1970s. Even today, one may still find these scholars' understanding of crisis awareness meaningful. But the truth is, studies like these abound. According to CNKI<sup>4</sup>, there are a total of 14 scholarly articles on *Japan Sinks*, among which 11 articles with the theme of disaster culture and crisis awareness are listed. Of these 11 articles, the earliest one was published in 1986, while the latest one was published in 2019. Even the newest studies are not that much different from those from decades ago.

However, there are still many crucial problems left to be solved. In fact, ever since the success of *Japan Sinks*, the Japanese science fiction community has witnessed the publication of a large number of science fiction works about disasters. However, if we review all the relevant studies of the past 35 years, we will find there are no science fiction scholars willing to commit themselves to the comparative reading and interpretation of these works. It is desirable that we clarify the dynamic interaction between disaster culture and science fiction, and indicate the uniqueness that distinguishes Japanese disaster novels from western disaster novels. It is worth noting that some scholars consciously attempt to compare *Japan Sinks* with the works by Chinese science fiction writers on similar subjects. Tan Yanhong, by contrasting the different historical and cultural background between China and Japan, offers a penetrating analysis of the similarities and differences between *Red Ocean* (2004) by Han Song and *Japan Sinks*.

We are not surprised at all to learn that Yasutaka Tsutsui, another one of the "Big Three",<sup>5</sup> has been the center of attention, too. Lin Lan attempted to define a literary tendency established and represented by this science fiction master, namely, as she analyzed, a profound social thinking combined with serious scientific assumption and logical inference. Wang Minxi, by reviewing Yasutaka Tsutsui's literary career and writing theory, aimed at summarizing and categorizing the surrealism expression in Yasutaka Tsutsui's literary works chronologically. Zhao Haitao proposed an outline of Yasutaka Tsutsui's style and the theme of works in different stages by offering a detailed analysis of Yasutaka Tsutsui's works in terms of background, writing and

literary evaluation. Apparently such scholars were eager to establish Yasutaka Tsutsui's position as a literary master. Yet once again, we have no choice but to be confronted with the desperate situation: the science fictional perspective is missing from their studies.

Sixty years have passed since the "Big Three" became the dominant force in the Japanese science fiction world. Today, scholars still revere their works as sacred. This, in a sense can be understood as our long-lasting fascination for these classics. However, exclusive and excessive focus on the classics will inevitably lead to the neglect of new writers and new works. Thus, we are seriously confined in a static environment, which is by no means conducive to the healthy development of Japanese science fiction studies as a whole. We need something new and original. Something just like Xu Jinghua's attempt on *Genocidal Organ* (2007) by Project Itoh, to interpret the novel from the perspective of ecological ethics.

3

Concerning science fiction studies, it is important to concentrate on literature at the same time paying equal attention to visual expressions. And this seems particularly remarkable when we talk about Japanese science fiction. A retrospection of Japanese science fiction will inform us of the fact that since its babyhood, great importance has been attached to visual expressions such as film, manga, and animation. Thus, it is safe for us to say that Japanese science fiction has been endowed with a distinctive diversity, which is embodied in its indestructible and intimate kinship with various forms of visual expression.

However, Japanese science fiction film studies are not comparable to American science fiction film studies in terms of both quantity and quality. In the past few decades, the Chinese film market has been flooded with dazzling American science fiction films. Meanwhile, studies of American science fiction films are booming. If we search CNKI with American science fiction films as keywords, we will find more than 300 scholarly articles on American science fiction films, covering a variety of themes such as science fiction film industry, textual analysis of science fiction films, and science fiction film theories. Clearly, these scholars strive to grasp the current situation of American science fiction films in a comprehensive and dynamic way. On the contrary, Japanese science fiction film studies show a relatively static state. According to the statistics of CNKI, there are only about 20 scholarly articles with Japanese science fiction films as keywords. Moreover, these studies are often relatively isolated and unconnected to each other, which makes Japanese science fiction film studies severely deficient of a comprehensive system. Obviously, Japanese science fiction films have not received the due scholarly attention.

As a major feature, Japanese science fiction films often treasure the individual feelings of ordinary man when being confronted with sudden and desperate disasters. Here we have to mention *Japan Sinks* (1973) again. Like its literary original, the film adaptation is regarded as the distinguished representative of Japanese science fiction films, that even in recent years, scholars are still reluctant to give up the subject, and thus makes Japan Sinks long-drawn-out studies for devoted Chinese scholars. According to CNKI, there are a total of 26 scholarly articles on *Japan* 

Sinks, of which as many as 22 scholarly articles take disaster culture and crisis awareness as their subject of study. For a long time, most Chinese scholars have repeatedly interpreted *Japan Sinks* solely from the perspective of either disaster film or crisis awareness, which makes our subject inevitably monotonous, stale and outdated.

Nevertheless, some scholars are able to propose new perspectives. Xi Xia, by clarifying the subtle relationship between science fiction film and disaster film, states that *Japan Sinks* has completely abandoned the cliché happy ending in most western disaster films. The real disaster in the film is by no means the disaster of nature but the deprivation of nationality and self-identity in the face of great disaster. He believes that the real intention of the film is to achieve a spiritual sublimation by means of material destruction. It is the disaster poetics and Japanese spirit that the film endeavored to express. In a sense, the film is more than a science fiction entertainment film. Consequently, the nature of this masterpiece is not a disaster film, but on the contrary, an inspirational one.

In contrast to the studies of Japanese science fiction film, studies of Japanese science fiction animation show a comparatively colorful picture. Being an important part of Japanese culture, animation has always been loved and appreciated by Chinese audiences. Studies of Japanese science fiction animation started relatively late in China. According to CNKI, the earliest scholarly article was published in 2002. In recent years, studies of Japanese science fiction animation show a comparatively colorful picture.

The studies revolving around Hayao Miyazaki and his works are among the most notable and enduring. In particular, Hayao Miyazaki's Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984), a product of Japanese thinking during the Cold War, carries in its genes the flavor of western literature and science fiction classics such as The Odyssey (720 BCE) and Dune (1964). Xi Xia sees this masterpiece as a spiritual support for the Japanese people during the economic recession of the 1990s. On the one hand, the work depicts the survival of the people of Earth after the nuclear disaster, and its imagination of the post-apocalyptic world is directly derived from the collective memory of the Japanese people brought by the nuclear explosion. On the other hand, the work has a political subtext that clearly distinguishes it from other works of its time: how should a small, peaceful country without a formal army survive in the midst of the struggle between the two hegemonic powers? This strongly hints at the difficult position Japan found itself in during the Cold War. While expressing pacifism, Hayao Miyazaki strives to manifest a spirit of Yamato, that is, the courage to die with enemies and to be proud of it. This all shows that Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind has gone beyond the general sense of the theme of peace and embodies a philosophy thinking of harmony between man and nature similar to the advent of Jesus Christ in Occidental culture. Qin Gang holds a similar opinion. By giving a thorough interpretation of wind, which has been generally recognized as the theme throughout Hayao Miyazaki's works, he endeavors to find the hidden clue in Hayao Miyazaki's whole career as a great animation master, that is, the harmony between man and nature. Actually, the simple but unique motif of man and nature in Hayao Miyazaki's works echoes a great deal with the early theme of Japanese science

fiction. It is perhaps fair for us to say that it is the persistent pursuit of this motif that leads to Hayao Miyazaki's success both as a well-known animator as well as an outstanding science fiction storyteller.

Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) is recognized as the most important Japanese animation since *Akira* (1988) as well as a monumental science fiction masterpiece in the 1990s. Most of the studies revolving around the film focus on cyborgs. Xi Xia indicates that the phenomenon that Japanese animation is replete with robots and cyborgs, in essence, originated from the national acceptance and tolerance of robots in Japanese culture. On the other hand, he holds his own interpretation of the pornographic and violent depictions that pervade the film. He believes that it is the ambitious yet serious philosophical exploration hidden behind the seemingly complex plot, interspersed with violence and eroticism, which enables *Ghost in the Shell* to establish an oriental aesthetic paradigm completely different from that of occidental science fiction animation. Deng Yachuan and Cai Song, by analyzing the identity changes of cyborgs in science fiction film, pose the ultimate question that if the distinction between man and cyborg is an ambiguous and obscure one, in which ways could the right to life be defined?

Regrettably, the studies revolving around great animators such as Osamu Tezuka, Fujiko F. Fujio, Katsuhiro Otomo, and Satoshi Kon failed to be put in the context of science fiction. Either focusing on the techniques and artistry or on the aesthetics, current discussions have, almost with no exception, completely ignored the valuable science fiction aspect of the works. For instance, Satoshi Kon, being regarded as a genius of visual narratives skilled in obscuring the boundaries between fantasy and reality as well as technology and humanity, undoubtedly deserves scholarly examination from the perspective of science fiction. Unfortunately, his works never won the favor of our conservative scholars. Indeed, this situation is both embarrassing and frustrating.

We are placing *mecha anime* (robot anime) and *tokusatsu* (special filming) at the bottom of our article not because they are the least in importance. It is because these two genres stand alone, representing very distinctive categories in Japanese science fiction. Fortunately, scholars have started to take hints of the importance of *mecha anime* and *tokusatsu*. Being the expression of the Japanese dream for space exploration, *mecha anime* stages a space opera in its own unique Japanese way. Liu Jian perceives *mecha anime* as a product that integrates traditional Japanese culture into modern science and technology in that on one hand, *mecha anime* is inherited from the Japanese mask culture, and on the other, it embodies Japanese enthusiasm for future science and technology. While *tokusatsu*, represented by *Godzilla* (1954) and *The Ultra Series* (1966), the long-lasting genre is so well-known that some of its most popular series have been remade in other countries. Huang Tao and Liu Jian have done relevant studies respectively. The former focuses on the interpretation of the monster image in Japanese science fiction film, and the latter proposes that by showing the process of Japanese re-modernization during the post-war period, the *Godzilla* series reflects the anxiety of contemporary Japanese people in urban life.

In fact, Japanese science fiction encompasses not only the above fields of literature, film, and animation, but also science fiction comics, science fiction art, and science fiction games. However, in our careful examination of the papers and dissertations on Japanese science fiction studies on CNKI, we find no research in these related fields. It is these gaps that make it difficult for us to grasp Japanese science fiction as a whole.

4

We are now looking at an interesting jigsaw picture, in which Japanese science fiction studies is gradually moving from the edge to the center of scholarly attention. Over the past 40 years, its reputation has been continuously enhanced. It is indisputable that Japanese science fiction studies has gained its solid position as a flourishing subject of studies. Thoughts both insightful and penetrating have been expressed in the form of well-written academic articles, which endeavor to offer a comprehensive, profound, and science fictional interpretation of Japanese science fiction in the presence of a Chinese sociocultural context.

Each year various institutions and universities hold academic conferences and colloquia aimed at providing a platform for scholars to exchange views on Japanese science fiction. Besides, there are a number of academic projects. For instance, *Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction Studies* (2019), a project led by Meng Qingshu, which is sponsored by the National Social Science Fund of China, focuses on the connotations and characteristics of Japanese contemporary science fiction works; while *Studies of Translation and Influence of Science Fiction in Mainland China* (2017), another project led by Yao Lifen, endeavors to offer an overview of the translation of Japanese science fiction in China from 1975 to 2016.

However, we should be aware of the fact that there are still some pieces missing from our jigsaw picture.

First, many studies appear monotonous and repetitious. This feature is particularly striking in science fiction literature studies. Scholarly focus was, is and probably will be firmly placed on the science fiction masters in the golden age, to be precise, on the "Big Three." Valuable studies of influential rising stars are scarce and unattainable. Some articles offer only superficial analyses of the works and are short of meaningful views; others are devoted to the repetition of former articles, in both subject and method, and in some cases even in opinion. For instance, according to CNKI, 40 scholarly articles and theses focused on Japan Sinks were published from 1986 to 2019. The most favored perspective are, as we may imagine, about disaster culture and crisis awareness, with a total of 33. It is difficult for us to imagine when a number of similar studies have already piled up, how to submit a truly innovative article. Excellent articles are few and far between. The situation is both discouraging and alarming.

In addition, not realizing the fact that Japanese science fiction is an inseparable unity consisting of literature, film, animation and many other forms of popular culture, some scholars fail to perceive Japanese science fiction as a whole and exhibit its distinctiveness in their studies,

and thus fail to master the core of Japanese science fiction. In fact, a large number of scholars do not have adequate Japanese language skills, and some of them do not even know Japanese at all, so they are not able to read works in the original. As a result, they have to rely on the Chinese translation, which is sometimes, if not always, obscure and misleading. Ultimately, their field of vision is confined to the Chinese translation.

Moreover, instead of speaking in the context of science fiction, many scholars tend to restrict their topics to form, technique, artistry and aesthetics. Necessary academic knowledge is missing in the essential prerequisite as a qualified science fiction scholar. On the other hand, blind to the fact that science fiction is related to humanities such as philosophy, art, anthropology and so forth, many scholars focus so exclusively on their own professional fields, that they are reluctant to cultivate the above knowledge. Admittedly, owing to the fact that effective interpretations of Japanese science fiction are greatly limited by the lack of knowledge of the humanities, we are unable to bring Japanese science fiction studies to a theoretical level.

In spite of all these problems, we should not be pessimistic about the future of Japanese science fiction studies in China. Undeniably, China still needs more time to develop a deeper understanding of Japanese science fiction. However, it is about time that we asked ourselves the simple but vital question: what academic attitude should we adopt to deepen and broaden our study field? Obviously, by answering it, we will be able to find the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, which hint at a possibility for the future of Japanese science fiction studies in China.

#### **Notes**

- 1. The Perry Expedition was a diplomatic and military expedition to the Tokugawa Shogunate, involving two separate voyages by warships of the United States Navy which took place during 1853-1854. The expedition was commanded by Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, under orders from President Millard Fillmore. The Perry Expedition led directly to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the western Great Powers, and eventually to the collapse of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate and the restoration of the Emperor.
- The Heisei era is the period of Japanese history corresponding to the reign of Emperor Akihito from 8 January 1989 until his abdication on 30 April 2019.
- 3. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was a political campaign spearheaded by left-wing conservative factions within the Communist Party of China which lasted from October 1983 to December 1983. During the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, science fiction was administratively characterized as "spiritual pollution" and was criticized. The publication of science fiction was banned, and related magazines were suspended for rectification.
- 4. CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) is a key national research and information publishing institution in China, led by Tsinghua University, and supported by PRC Ministry

- of Education, PRC Ministry of Science, Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China and PRC General Administration of Press and Publication. Today, CNKI has become the largest and most accessed academic online library in China. The data and scholarly articles used in this paper were obtained from databases of CNKI, including academic journals and dissertations.
- 5. The "Big Three" refers to three of the most influential science fiction writers of the golden age of Japanese science fiction in the 1960s, namely, Sakyo Komatsu, Shinichi Hoshi, and Yasutaka Tsutsui.

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### SYMPOSIUM: CHINESE SF AND THE WORLD

### Science Fiction Education in China: Then and Now



#### Wei Guo

Even before the coinage of the term "Scientifiction" (1915) or "Science Fiction" (1927) by Hugo Gernsback (Langford and Nicholls; Westfahl), there had already been radical promoters of this genre for the education of people towards modernity in China. Liang Qichao (梁启 超) proposed the reforming of the culture through sf as a profound philosophical genre (1902) whereas, Zhou Shuren (周树人 i.e. Lu Xun 鲁迅) urged the transformation of the people through sf as the interweaving of both science and sensibility (1903). These might be the first declarations of sf as a possible means of education, on this traditional though modernizing land. However, the advocacy at the beginning of a new century from both the two great minds was not fruitful. Sf as a literary genre did not soon develop into a robust existence, let alone sf as education or education of sf.

The establishment of new China witnessed the prosperity, during the following seventeen years or so, of a distinctive sf style that emphasized the function of science education. Practical or not, this science-education-oriented sf stopped its prosperity at the year 1966, due to the Cultural Revolution.

Ten years later, sf embraced a short rejuvenation from 1976 to 1983, during which some attempts of "sf teaching" appeared in China. In the year 1979, Philip Smith from University of Pittsburgh taught sf by using English when visiting Shanghai Foreign Language Institute (Shanghai International Studies University, currently). Brief though it was, it did arouse theoretical and pedagogical interest.

Since the 1990s, sf began to thrive, as a self-sustained literary genre, in a more amicable age for sf writers and writings. Under such encouraging circumstances, sf education finally found its way in China. The actual starting point of sf education was the year 1991, when Wu Yan (吴 岩) began to provide an undergraduate course named "Science Fiction Review and Research" at Beijing Normal University. Twelve years later (2003), he became the supervisor of sf-study Master students; and another twelve years later (2015), the supervisor of sf-study doctoral students.

In the new millennium, along with Wu Yan's continuous educational endeavour (who is now the initiator and director of Research Center for Science and Human Imagination at the Southern University of Science and Technology), and the booming of sf as an enterprise, sf education in China gradually attained maturity and keeps developing towards diversification.

At the present stage, scores of sf courses are being provided in different universities to students of various majors, at both the undergraduate level and postgraduate level.

Most of these courses are on the general curriculum, for broader majors, such as Wu Yan's "Sf Movies Appreciation and Criticism," Zhang Feng's (张峰 i.e. San Feng 三丰) "Sf Appreciation,"

and Liu Yang's (刘洋) "Sf Writing" (all three courses available for postgraduate as well as undergraduate students) at the Southern University of Science and Technology; Li Guangyi's (李广益) "Sf Novels and Movies" at Chongqing University; Xiao Han's (肖汉) "Sf Movies Appreciation" at Beijing Normal University; Fu Changyi's (付昌义) "Sf Appreciation: Philosophy of Science" at Nanjing Tech University; Su Zhan's (苏湛) "Sf and Science" and "Theories and Practices of Sf Writing and Popular Science Writing" (both for postgraduate students) at the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences; Guo Qi's (郭琦) "Sf Appreciation and Creative Writing" at Huaqiao University; Wang Yao's (王瑶 i.e. Xia Jia 夏笳) "History of Chinese Science Fiction" (as a section of "Classics and Topical Issues of Literature") in Xi'an Jiaotong University; Mu Yunqiu's (穆蕴秋) "Sf and Contemporary Scientific Controversy" at Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Wang Yiping's (王一平) "Western Sf Appreciation", Li Chan (黎婵) and Tang Li's (汤黎) sf section of "Fantasy, Literature and Movie" (MOOC), Li Yi (李怡), Hu Yirong (胡易容) and Jiang Zhenyu's (姜振宇) "Research of Chinese Science Fiction" (for postgraduate students), at Sichuan University; Liu Yuan's (刘媛) "Sf Appreciation" at Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology; Liu Wen's (刘雯) "Ethics in Sf" at Harbin Engineering University.

Together with the above, some sf courses are on the professional curriculum aiming at literature majoring students, such as Zhan Ling's (詹玲) "Contemporary Sf Studies" at Hangzhou Normal University; Jia Liyuan's (贾立元 i.e. Fei Dao 飞氘) "Sf Writing" at Tsinghua University; Jiang Zhenyu's "Literary Creation and Sf Writing" at Sichuan University; Ding Zhuo's (丁卓) "From Mythology to Sf" at Changchun University; Liu Yuan's "Popular Science and Sf Reading and Writing" in Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology; Song Hongmei's (宋红梅) "Science Fiction" at Shandong Normal University; Dai Congrong's (戴从容) "History of Sf in Foreign Countries" (for postgraduate students) at Fudan University; Guo Wei's (郭伟) "Sf Appreciation", "Sf Movies Appreciation" and "Sf Studies" (the former two for undergraduate and the latter one for postgraduate students) at Beihua University.

Taiwan area and Hong Kong area also achieve prosperity along the traditions initiated by Lv Yingzhong (吕应钟), Jiang Shuzhen (蒋淑贞), Ye Lihua (叶李华), Huang Binghuang (黃炳煌 i.e. Huang Hai 黄海), Zheng Yunhong (郑运鸿) in Taiwan area, and Li Weicai (李伟才), Wang Jianyuan (王建元), Chen Jieshi (陈洁诗) in Hong Kong area.

The entrance of sf courses into universities signifies an academic attention to this genre not only as an inseparable constituent of literature but also as an influencing cultural propellant deserving pedagogical practices and theoretical scholarship. These sf courses cover a broad range of diverse topics and aspects, such as the basic theories and controversies of sf, the schools and subgenres of sf, the history of sf either concerning genre or nationality-related, the creation careers and features of representative sf writers, the appreciation and analysis of sf works as well as sf movies, the research methodology and academic writings of sf studies, and even the creative writings of sf works and popular-science works. Meanwhile, the interweaving of sf and other issues also presents a stereoscopic and kaleidoscopic picture, for example, sf and science, sf and

philosophy, sf and ethics, sf and society, sf and ideology, sf and mythology, sf and literature, sf and fantasy. All of the characteristic sf courses together compose a starry constellation.

Besides various sf courses in many universities, another sign for the maturity of sf education is the emergence of specialized textbooks. An early attempt was *References Collection for Science Fiction Pedagogy and Research* (unpublished, printed in 1991), compiled by Wu Yan, as a product of his course at Beijing Normal University. Other products of this course were Lv Yingzhong and Wu Yan's *A Survey of Science Fiction* (published by Wu-Nan Book Inc. in 2001) and its later extended edition, Wu Yan and Lv Yingzhong's *An Introduction to Science Fiction* (published by Fujian Children's Press in 2006). In 2012, Nankai University Press published *A Survey of British and American Science Fiction*, written in English by Wang Yan (王艳), Liu Xiaojuan (刘晓娟) and Xu Yang (许洋), which gave a rather detailed account of the title subject, and thus quite suitable as an sf textbook for English majors. In 2021, *A Chinese Science Fiction Studies Reader* was just published by Peking University Press. The compilers Wu Yan and Jiang Zhenyu invited several sf scholars to write introductory essays for each piece of work selected in the book, and thus made this Reader an indispensable reference book for sf courses in universities.

A recent series of sf textbooks "Science Fiction," launched by the Research Center for Science and Human Imagination at Southern University of Science and Technology, is prominent and promising. This ambitious series (published by Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House since 2019) aims at an integral pedagogical system for students of primary and high schools. Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Kids, Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Young Adults are the first three textbooks for students of primary schools, junior high schools and senior high schools respectively. Science Fiction: How to Teach is a considerate reference book for teachers, providing instructions and instances. Also included are textbooks for technique training of creative writing via inspirations from sf works. This series keeps going on with more planned and forthcoming textbooks in the well-designed framework, and will doubtlessly give fresh impetus to sf education in primary and high schools.

Speaking of sf in primary and high school pedagogy, a complex picture and potential prosperity deserve description. As early as 1991, Tong Huachi (童华池) introduced sf into his composition class in Sichuan Jintang High School and successfully cultivated the sf writing capability of high school students. The following decade, however, did not witness a boom in this field until the new millennium. A remarkable example early in the new millennium was "Sf Physics" developed by Mi Qi (宓奇), Li Zhigang (李志刚) and Wang Qi (王琦) in The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China since 2008. This elective course employed clips of sf movies as teaching materials, to impart knowledge of physics in a more relaxed and intriguing way, as well as to foster students' critical thinking, creative thinking, and practical-problem-solving ability.

In recent years especially, more and more practices have been carried out in primary and high schools trying to combine sf elements with classes of various subjects such as Chinese, Physics, Chemistry, and Art. These trials are diversified in forms and rich in innovations; but meanwhile, how to make sf elements merge well into classes and shape organic courses, still requires further exploration.

The following are two positive examples exhibiting inspirational curriculum design. At the Beijing Jingshan School, Zhou Qun (周群) leads an sf pedagogical team composed of teachers specialized in Chinese, Biology, Geography, Chemistry, CG Art, and Maker Education. This interdisciplinary team provides, for Grade-Seven students, an elective course of sf that is projectbased and STEAM-oriented. The one-semester course covers two projects "Designing Future Robots" and "Constructing Future Cities." Based on students' massive reading of sf-related texts at the initial stage and their creative brainstorming with inspiration from the pedagogical team at the following stage, each project finally produces, under both peer cooperation and teacher instruction, integrated works in diverse forms, like fiction writing, webpage designing, CG drawing, or 3D printing. With equal inspiration but different orientation, Wei Ran (魏然) at The Affiliated High School of Peking University, provides a series of sf courses for senior high school students of all grades. This series of sf courses are on the regular curriculum, and thus able to assume an sf-for-sf's-sake position. Taking "Survey of Science Fiction" for example, the course covers an overall knowledge system of sf as a literary genre, including sf history, sf theory, sf writers and works, sf creative writing, and sf critical writing, noticeably modeling itself on sf courses of higher education in universities. Via different approaches, both Zhou Qun's and Wei Ran's practices avoid utilitarian attitude in this field, and achieve high-quality sf education.

Also worth mentioning is Chongqing Fishing Castle Center for Science Fiction, initiated and directed by Zhang Fan (张凡) at the College of Mobile Telecommunications, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications. One of the Center's missions is sf education, focusing both on campus curriculum and on sf writers training. As for the campus part, the Center plans to develop a series of elective sf courses for general students in the university, and meanwhile to establish an sf major. As for the writer-training part, the Center is launching the ambitious Future Fiction Workshop, an international-cooperative program for the pedagogy of sf creative writing, with international student-writers talented for sf creation in Chinese language and international tutors renowned in the sf world.

At the beginning of the 2020s, with wide utilization of online interactive meeting-room, classroom or real-time-telecast software, live lectures on sf are booming. These lectures are often flexible, topic-centered and can "conjure" different attendees according to their topic-related interest. Many of such episodic lectures may collectively reach a multitude of possibilities, nurturing both the sf fans and the sf researchers.

All these comprise the ecosystem of sf education in China today. The number of courses in diversified patterns, as well as the robustness of the polyphony, is increasing. Through ups and downs for over a hundred years, sf and sf education in China are marching forward, towards a fruitful future.

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# World Literature as an Approach to the Study of Chinese Science Fiction



### **Mengtian Sun**

In this essay, I would like to talk about the approach that I have taken in studying Chinese science fiction, which is a world literature approach. Firstly, I should clarify what I mean by world literature, considering that it has become such a controversial term that the whole discipline of world literature seems to be teetering on the brink of collapse pending its definition. Since the early nineteenth century, various scholars and critics have held different views toward world literature: Goethe, Engels and Marx, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter; and countless others have written about it. The study of world literature is shrouded in an opaque mist of controversies: does world literature denote a canon of works, or is it composed of works that simply "circulate beyond their culture of origin" (Damrosch, 4), or does it include all the literature produced around the world? Or maybe none of the above? What methodology is suitable for the study of world literature (the conventional close textual reading or the bold "distant reading" proposed by Moretti)? What does the term "world literature" even mean? I propose that world literature should be considered as not a body of works, but as an approach that transcends national boundaries and looks at works in relation to each other and/or to the world in a global perspective. To give some concrete examples: a world literature approach might track the various transformations that King Lear underwent when it traveled around the world; it might analyze the defining features of Greek tragedy and compare it with modern Chinese plays; it might look at how rising environmental concerns in the twenty-first century influenced disaster novels in the pan-Pacific region, etc.

Admittedly, not all works are suitable for a world literature approach; there are, however, works that especially benefit from this approach. I consider many Chinese science fiction texts to belong to the latter. There are at least three reasons. The most important reason lies in the generic features of science fiction. It is the genre that is most outward-looking and future-oriented, with a cosmopolitan mindset. Instead of focusing on the most individual and personal experiences, it often takes a step back and looks at the broader picture. It is also a genre whose success has been a result of the development of various industrial revolutions, modernizations, and globalization, all of which involves complex global networks of capital exchange. The reason why Chinese science fiction is especially suited for a world literature approach is also because of its unique genealogy. Science fiction has been a borrowed genre in China from the very beginning (late Qing China). Throughout the twentieth century, its development and transformation has gone hand-in-hand with the introduction and translation of science fiction from outside of China, such as science fiction from Japan, Russia, UK, and the US, among others. Lastly, and most importantly, Chinese science fiction, like science fiction in the West, is a response to modern interactions with the

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world, interactions that started with the country's encounter with Western colonial powers and continued to include China's deeper immersion into the world system and global capitalism.

The world literature approach is especially potent when it comes to the study of contemporary Chinese science fiction. Since we are in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world (at least before the COVID-19), contemporary literature overall tends to address this feature: texts have a closer relation to one another, they travel around the world at a faster-than-ever speed, and they deal with many issues that are common to countries around the world, such as the widening gap between poor and rich regions, environment pollution and global warming, migration (nationwide and internationally) and the various ensuing problems (such as discrimination against migrants), among others. Contemporary Chinese science fiction also addresses these issues and more. Since the 1990s, many Chinese science fiction texts are either direct or indirect reflections on the rise of China on the global stage and the blessings and curses of joining the global market; for the first time in its history, Chinese science fiction is travelling outside of its national boundaries and has been translated in a vast amount into various languages. Thus, a thorough study of contemporary Chinese science fiction calls for the world literature approach.

Some examples of my own practice of using world literature as an approach in the study of contemporary Chinese science fiction include the essays "Alien Encounters in Liu Cixin's The Three-Body Trilogy and Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End" and "Imaginations of Globalization in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*." In the former, I compare Liu's Three-Body trilogy against the generic features of golden-age alien-encounter science fiction represented by Childhood's End, and argue that Liu's alien encounter stories are best considered as a modern Chinese, postcolonial response to golden-age alien-encounter science fiction. In the latter essay, I look at how globalization is imagined in Chen Qiufan's Waste Tide and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*. I argue that although the two novels have many similarities (for example, both present globalization from the perspective of the "receiving end"), they manifest one key differences when it comes to the critical theorization of globalization, especially in terms of the role of the nation state: whereas The Windup Girl reads like a novelization of the early theorization of globalization by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in Empire (2000), where they argue that the sovereignty of the nation state will be decomposed and replaced by transnational corporations as the new main players in world eco-politics, Waste Tide recognizes the important role the nation state continues to play in the global capitalist market, even as certain aspects of the state's sovereign power have been relocated from nation states to global capital (just like how Hardt and Negri revised their own theorization of globalization in their later works, such as Multitude, Commonwealth, and Assembly). As can be seen, by using a world literature approach, some of the most important values of contemporary Chinese science fiction can be better parsed.

Since this is a very short essay, it is a pity that I can not elaborate further on many of the statements I have made. My main purpose, however, is to give a brief introduction of the value of using a world literature approach to study Chinese science fiction. World literature as an approach is by no means a fully developed theory. It needs more scholars to participate in the discussions

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and to refine it by asking more questions; questions such as: what does world literature as an approach mean, then, for the relation between world literature and comparative literature? Is there a difference, should there be a difference, and if so, what might that be? In conclusion, this essay is an attempt to initiate scholarly interests and discussions of world literature as an approach, especially when it comes to the study of Chinese science fiction. If it manages to raise questions in readers' mind, or it prompts them to look into world literature and what it might mean, then I would consider my mission accomplished.

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### Chinese Science Fiction and Environmental Criticism: From the Anthropocentric to the Cosmocentric



#### Hua Li

Over the past two decades, the interactions and connections between environmentalism and science fiction (hereafter sf) have been widely discussed, recognized, and valued by environmentalists, literary critics, and political scientists alike. When discussing the relationship between the literary text and ecocriticism in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell claims that "no genre potentially matches up with a planetary level of thinking 'environment' better than science fiction does" (57). He further argues: "For half a century, science fiction has taken a keen, if not consistent interest in ecology, in planetary endangerment, in environmental ethics, in humankind's relation to the nonhuman world" (56). Patrick D. Murphy finds in sf narratives "several varieties of nature and environmental engagement" (41). Some sf narratives "provide factual information about nature and human-nature interactions as well as provide thematically environmentalist extrapolations of conflict and crisis based on such information;" they "provide analogous depictions of ecosystems and human interaction with such systems;" and they "demonstrate the disastrous consequences of exploitive relationships between humans and other humans, humans and other sentient beings, and humans and ecosystems in which they are an exotic" (Murphy 41). Though the above scholars' emphasis on the close relation between environmentalism and science fiction has mostly been based on Western sf works, environmental criticism has also been an important perspective in research on Chinese science fiction.

In Fall 2018, *Science Fiction Studies* published a special issue on science fiction and the climate crisis. In Spring 2020, Professor Huang Mingfen edited a special section on the fiction and film of the Chinese Anthropocene in the *Journal of Beihua University* (Social Sciences). Numerous conferences and journal articles have also explored the ecological and environmental issues reflected in Chinese science fiction over the past few years. These efforts show that more and more scholars have been paying attention to Chinese sf texts with environmental themes.

This essay will present my observations on Chinese science fiction produced in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) from the perspective of environmental criticism. Environmental and ecological issues, energy shortages, and climate change have been prominent thematic concerns in PRC science fiction since the 1950s. The subject matter of these texts includes creating artificial precipitation in order to increase agricultural yields, engaging in large-scale geoengineering projects on land reclamation, transforming the natural environment on an alien planet in order to make it humankind's second planetary home, and exploring various dimensions of time and space in order to cope with societal problems of overpopulation and resource depletion. These narratives can be categorized under such subgenres as Anthropocene fiction, terraforming fiction, and climate fiction. These themes have tied in to such critical theories

as "slow violence," environmentalism of the poor, manufactured landscapes, and environmental injustice and ethics (Nixon 2). In this essay, I will review various PRC sf works with environmental themes and some critical theories that can help us analyze these works.

I would first like to clarify some of the terminology related to sub-genres often associated with environmental and ecological narratives; these are Anthropocene fiction, climate fiction, and terraforming fiction. Around the turn of the 21st century, the Nobel Prize winner Paul J. Crutzen formulated the concept of the Anthropocene—human life as a geological force (23). This concept emphasizes that the earth's climate has been increasingly affected by human activities ever since the Industrial Revolution due to the build-up of atmospheric greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane. By the 1960s, the facts around human-induced climate change had been substantiated by various major scientific bodies and research organizations, and have been amplified by further confirmations since the 1990s. The literary critic Adam Trexler argues that "the concept of the Anthropocene helps explain the widespread phenomenon of climate change fiction" (9). He prefers to use the term 'Anthropocene fiction' instead of climate fiction when discussing novels dealing with the theme of climate change. In addition to the emission of greenhouse gases, there are other human actions that have also contributed to changes in global temperature and climate, including the rapid expansion of the human population, the unchecked conversion of wildlands to croplands and pastures, the increasing use of fossil fuels, and large industrial projects (9).

Terraforming fiction is another sub-genre whose thematic concerns often overlap with Anthropocene fiction and climate fiction. In his study of terraforming texts, Martyn J. Fogg indicates that terraforming encompasses two subsets of planetary engineering: terraforming alien planets and terraforming the Earth (90). Another scholar, Chris Pak, points out that "scientists and environmental philosophers have used the concept of terraforming as a thought experiment to consider human relationships to environments undergoing change" (8). Terraforming "involves processes aimed at adapting the environmental parameters of alien planets for habitation by Earthbound life, and it includes methods for modifying a planet's climate, atmosphere, topology, and ecology" (Pak 1). Terraforming fiction is a cousin of climate fiction, with which it sometimes overlaps. According to Trexler, "Human-altered climates were of grave concern to authors before greenhouse gas emissions attracted wide scientific interest. Terraforming—the purposeful transformation of a planet's climate (usually) to make it more hospitable to humans—surfaced in science fiction at least as early as 1951" (Pak 8). Based on the above-mentioned studies, we can see that terraforming fiction includes narratives dealing with such themes as weather modification, land reclamation, genetic engineering, and alien planet colonization.

Since the 1950s, many Chinese sf narratives have dealt with the themes of climate change and terraforming. Weather modification and land reclamation are two of the most dominant literary strategies connected with climate change and terraforming. In these narratives, artificial rainfall or snow is created mainly for the benefit of agricultural production and urban life. For example, in Tao Bennai's short story "Stories of a Climate Company" (*Qixiang gongsi de gushi*, 1959), the

business activities of a climate company in Beijing include the generation of artificial precipitation, the dispersal of fog, and the elimination of damaging meteorological phenomena such as typhoons and hailstorms. This company can also use technology to guide moisture-laden airflows from southern China to arid regions in northern China. In coastal areas, the company launches meteorological rockets over the sea in order to deprive tropical storm systems of the amount of heat energy they need to become bona fide hurricanes. Liu Xingshi's "Northern Clouds" (*Beifang de yun*, 1962) provides the scenario of creating artificial precipitation as a solution to water shortages in northern China. In Wang Guozhong's short story "Dragon in the Bohai Sea" (*Bohai jülong*, 1963), the author envisions using modern technology to drain submerged wetlands in the Bohai Gulf to reclaim land for agricultural uses such as growing legumes and herbs.

These themes continued to surface in the PRC sf narratives of the late 1970s. For example, in Xie Shijun's "Stratospheric Precipitation" (*Hangtian boyu*, 1979), scientists pack a special type of soil nitrogen into rocket-bound bombs. Uncrewed rockets carry these bombs into the stratosphere and release them over the targeted drought region. Soil nitrogen from the exploded bombs reacts with moisture in the air to form rainfall. In addition, the extra nitrogen in the rain droplets also functions as a fertilizer to promote plant growth. In Wang Yafa's "An Interesting Incident Outside the Sports Field" (*Qiuchangwai de quwen*, 1979), clouds are seeded with dry ice and silver iodide to induce precipitation. Scientists then use ultrasound waves to break down the ice crystals and water drops in the clouds to create rainfall.

In addition to this fiction about weather modification, some Chinese sf narratives expanded their thematic range to include terraforming alien planets or engaging in geoengineering projects on Earth in order to more fully exploit natural resources. For example, Wang Qi's short story "Rose and Sword" (*Meigui yu baojian*, 1978) conjures forth the scenario of astronauts collecting specimens of rocks and ores while conducting a geographical survey of an alien planet called "N." Liu Xingshi's "Eye of the Sea" (*Haiyan*, 1979) is about building terrace dams in a subterranean stream in order to generate hydro power in the western part of Guizhou province; this underground water was thereupon diverted for use as agricultural irrigation.

In the course of addressing such themes as weather modification, land reclamation, and energy exploitation, a new sort of environmental awareness started to emerge among readers of these works around 1980. In many narratives, the purposes of the geoengineering projects were not only to advance agricultural production, but also to cope with such problems as environmental pollution, water shortages, and the depletion of fossil fuels and other natural resources. Many PRC sf narratives have addressed the theme of environmental pollution, especially the tech-sf (*jishu kehuan*) written from the late 1970s to early 1980s. Numerous tech-sf narratives offer bold ideas about how to solve environmental problems. Some works even directly address the impact of industrial pollution on marine ecosystems, as highlighted in Huang Shengli's "A Mysterious Incident" (*Shenmi de shijian*, 1981). More critical and skeptical views about terraforming and the ability of humans to manipulate the climate emerge in Zheng Wenguang's Descendant of Mars (*Zhanshen de houyi*, 1983). This novel reflects the author's heartfelt skepticism about human

interference with nature and climate, specifically Mao Zedong's radical assaults against nature during the 1950s and 1960s. This reflective and critical trend in Chinese Anthropocene fiction in the early 1980s was influenced by the liberal intellectual trends of "bidding adieu to the revolution" and "contemplative literature" during the Post-Mao cultural thaw (1976-1983) in China (Li, "Are We" 545-559). It also has a lot to do with China's burgeoning new field of environmental studies. In the 1970s, severe environmental pollution from industrial wastes such as offshore from the northeastern port of Dalian garnered the attention of the central government. From that point on, the PRC government started to fund environmental research into the pollution of rivers, coastal waters, and farmland by industrial effluent.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s, there have been more sophisticated sf narratives written about weather modification, land reclamation, environmental degradation, and the depletion of energy sources. Mindful of the Chinese sf legacy of artificial precipitation, Liu Cixin wrote two narratives about human-caused rainfall, "Round Soap Bubbles" (Yuanyuan de feizaopao, 2004) and "The Butterfly Effect" (Hundun hudie, 2001). Round Soap Bubbles not only offers a method for solving the problem of water shortages, but also presents an analogue of the large hydro-engineering projects in contemporary China. In addition to Liu's two weather modification stories, there were two more novellas dealing with the problem of water shortage. Xing He's Mountains and Rivers (Shanshan shuishui, 2002) and Tianyi Jushi's The Sky Tilts Toward Northwest (Tianqing xibei, 2003) are both about a fictional South-to-North Water Diversion Project, though the two authors have highly contrasting views about the advisability of this project. Chen Qiufan's novel Waste Tide (2013) specifically reveals how the recycling industry has caused severe environmental and occupational impacts on nature and humans, exploring the complex connections between technology, the economy, and the environment. Liu Cixin's The Micro Era (Wei jiyuan, 2001) and He Xi's novellas Alien Zone (Yi yu, 1999) and Six Realms of Existence (Liudao zhongsheng, 2002) push terraforming methods to an extreme—by genetically engineering human body size and exploring more dimensions of both space and time in order to create more living space and food for the exponentially rising human population. Yang Dantao's short story "Uranium Flowers" (You hua, 2004) focuses on the dystopian global consequences of a disastrous nuclear war, along with the politics of nuclear power plants.

The above-mentioned Chinese narratives about climate change and terraforming not only provide factual information about interactions between humans and the natural environment, but also demonstrate the disastrous consequences of an exploitative relationship between humans and other sentient beings within an ecosystem. Such narratives have spurred literary critics to examine these texts through a variety of theoretical frameworks related to environmental criticism. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some theoretical frameworks that have proven useful in the analysis of Anthropocene fiction, climate fiction, and terraforming fiction.

With the emergence of terraforming fiction in the 1950s, the environmental ethics of planetary engineering or geo-engineering have been discussed by philosophers, environmentalists, and scientists. Various scholars have exchanged a range of contrasting views about whether

human beings should transform a lifeless planet into a habitable planet. Scholars such as Erin Daly, Robert Frodeman, and Chris Pak have summarized various viewpoints in their studies of terraforming ethics. Arguments in favor of terraforming have normally been articulated from an anthropocentric perspective. They argue that terraforming a lifeless planet would benefit human beings by "significantly advancing our scientific knowledge of the nature of life" or expanding the living space for Earth's increasing population (Daly and Frodeman, 145). Robert Zubin even regards the possible future terraforming of Mars as a demonstration that "the worlds of the heavens themselves are subject to human intelligent will" (179). Don MacNiven explores the ethics of planetary engineering from three perspectives: the homocentric, the zoocentric, and the biocentric. On the basis of these viewpoints, MacNiven concludes that planetary engineering "would be morally permissible if either project helped protect and enhance the quality of terrestrial life" (442).

These views in favor of terraforming have two features in common. First, "they are all geocentric (Earth-bound) theories which automatically exclude from the moral universe Mars, the solar system, and indeed the universe as a whole" (MacNiven 442). Secondly, these viewpoints include within the moral universe nothing other than animate existence—human and other living organisms—and see them as intrinsically valuable because "life itself is the basis of value" (Ibid.). However, this Earth-bound perspective comes across as insufficient if we examine the moral issues of terraforming other inhabitable places in the universe such as extraterrestrial planets and moons.

Many scholars instead call for a cosmocentric perspective. Mark Lupisella and John Logsdon recommend a "cosmocentric ethic" for scrutinizing ethical matters related to terraforming (1). Daly and Frodeman capture the gist of a "cosmocentric ethic" as follows: "[It] places the universe at the center..., [and] appeals to something characteristic of the universe (physical and/or metaphysical) which might...provide a justification of value, presumably intrinsic value, and allow for reasonably objective measurement of value" (qtd. Daly and Frodeman, 140). If we extend our environmental perspectives from the anthropocentric and the geocentric to the cosmocentric, we may well develop a different approach to the ethics of planetary exploration. Similarly, MacNiven points out that cosmocentrism articulates a new ethical perspective that transcends the distinction between animate and inanimate entities: "Everything which exists has value" (442). This perspective requires us to attach an intrinsic value to the presumably inanimate planet of Mars, such as its uniqueness and its role in the wilderness of space (442-43).

If we cast our gaze on Chinese sf, we find in He Xi's *Alien Zone* and *Six Realms of Existence* exemplary texts to illustrate the cosmocentric ethics. Both narratives explore how humans might deal with shortages of both food and housing that have been triggered by major increases in population. This type of narrative first appeared in the PRC in the mid-1950s, became more widespread around 1980, and has especially surged in popularity since the dawn of the 21st century. However, He Xi's narratives about shortages of food and housing mark a departure from assumptions about the supposedly unlimited scope for the expansion of housing and agricultural productivity—an idea widespread in PRC sf narratives from the mid-1950s to the 1980s. His

novellas also mark a shift to ideas about self-restraint in economic development. The two narratives also reject the longstanding approach to nature as ripe for plundering, and instead view nature as in need of healing. Instead of viewing nature as somehow unrelated to ethical concerns, these narratives imply that humankind is indebted to nature and must behave more ethically toward it. In addition, the hypothetical terraforming projects in the two texts provide a venue to examine humankind's relationship with the vast and complex realm of nonliving space, as well as humankind's proper place on the Earth from a cosmocentric perspective.

In addition to a cosmocentric perspective, the concept of a "manufactured landscape" is another useful lens through which to probe terraforming fiction. The "manufactured landscapes" presented in the large-scale photographs by Edward Burtynsky and captured in a documentary film by Jennifer Baichwal provide us with a critical perspective to ponder industrial society and technology since the Industrial Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The term "manufactured landscapes" has negative, critical, and even ironic connotations. It refers to landscapes that have been deformed, destroyed, or devastated by human industrial endeavor, such as shipyards, dams, abandoned quarries and mines, and junkyards for recycling industrial waste. These human-made landscapes are closely related to energy consumption and environmental deterioration, and are symbols of troubled relations between humankind and nature. The image of mammoth industrial structures dotting an urbanized landscape was already a frequent motif in many Chinese sf narratives prior to the coining of the neologism "manufactured landscapes." For example, coal mines on fire, an entire city festooned with soap bubbles, and a giant tunnel through the center of the Earth to Antarctica are among the images in Liu Cixin's novellas, Underground Fire (Dihuo, 2000), Cannonry of Earth (Diqiu dapao, 2003), and "Round Soap Bubbles" (Yuanyuan de feizaopao, 2004). These images reveal a paradoxical relationship between the tapping of new energy sources and the devastating ecological consequences likely to follow. Readers can also find similar manufactured landscapes, such as the South-to-North Water Diversion project in Xing He's Mountains and Rivers and Tianyi Jushi's The Sky Tilts Toward the Northwest, and the silicon island and patches of plastic floating in the ocean in Chen Qiufan's Waste Tide.

In contrast with the perspectives of cosmocentric and manufactured landscape, which examine Anthropocene fiction or terraforming fiction at the planetary and cosmic level, Rob Nixon's concepts of "slow violence" and "environmentalism of the poor" focus on terraforming's impact on human beings. In 2011, Nixon coined the term "slow violence" to emphasize the "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes" caused by the "incremental and accretive" human activities during a relatively long period of time (2). By slow violence, Nixon means "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and place, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). These catastrophes include "climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental" degradations (Nixon 2). According to Nixon, "it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is

compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives ... It is against such conjoined ecological and human disposability that we have witnessed a resurgent environmentalism of the poor" (4). Nixon argues that environmental catastrophes have yet to gain much traction in the mainstream media because of their delayed effects and less spectacular characteristics. He emphasizes that the significance of environmental narratives is that "imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (15). He considers such environmental writers as Rachel Carson, Indra Sinha, and Nadine Gordimer to be "writeractivists" (5) because they "have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed" (5). If we cast our gaze on Chinese sf, we can find such environmental narratives as Waste Tide and "Uranium Flowers" exemplary texts to illustrate Nixon's arguments of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor. Waste Tide specifically portrays a slow and attritional violence—namely, the ways in which the electronics recycling industry have had a severe environmental and occupational impact on nature and humans—through an exploration of the complex relationships between technology, the economy, and the environment. Similarly, in his short story "Uranium Flowers," Yang Dantao utilizes a setting of the aftermath of a catastrophic nuclear war to provide a fresh perspective for critiquing environmental injustice for the poor in the contemporary globalized world. In "Uranium Flowers," environmental degradation such as high levels of radiation after a nuclear war aggravate class divisions, leading essentially to the bifurcation of humankind.

The remarks in this essay are based on my own analysis of Chinese sf from the perspective of environmental criticism. Chinese sf narratives have made contributions to contemporary debates about environmental degradation and its origins. However, many issues remain to be explored in this area, such as deep ecology, social ecology, land ethics, landscape restoration, and the environmental movement.

#### Notes

- 1. For a more detailed analysis of these Chinese texts with environmental themes from the 1950s to 1980s, see Li, Huai. "The Environment, Humankind, and Slow Violence in Chinese Science Fiction," *Communication and the Public* vol. 3 no. 4, 2018, pp. 270-82.
- Jennifer Baichwal, Manufactured Landscapes, Zeitgeist Films, 2007. Baichwal was inspired by the photographic works of Edward Burtynsky and made this documentary film. For more on Burtynsky's works, see Burtynsky, Edward. China: the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, Göttingen: Steidl, 2005.

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# The Possibilities and "Impossibilities" of Studying Chinese and Latin American Science Fiction



### Yilun Fan

In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping proposed the "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI). While seeking economic and strategic opportunities for domestic development, this initiative also aims to connect China to the development of other countries. As of 2020, the BRIhas been extended to 19 Latin American countries, accounting for 56% of the 34 total Latin American countries. Besides trade and issues of strategic cooperation, cultural exchange between China and Latin America is also an important component that cannot be ignored in this "largest infrastructure and investment project in history" (Campbell).

As China's most successful cultural export in recent years, science fiction might have the potential to bridge the mental distance between the two areas. Historically, the literary exchange between these two regions has been asymmetrical. China has gone through three waves of "Latin American literature mania," while in Latin America, the number and variety of introduced Chinese literature has been much more limited. The first large-scale translation of Latin American literature in China began in the 1950s, followed by two successive waves in the 80s and the 90s. In terms of Latin American science fiction, the most well-known novel among Chinese readers is Adolfo Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel*. A few translated short stories can also be found in collections such as *The Road to Science Fiction* (2009), *The Big Book of Science Fiction* (2018), and *Science Fiction World* magazine. In 2016, *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction* was introduced to China with the book name changed to "History of Latin American Science Fiction." While the original book is regarded as the foundation work of Latin American science fiction studies, the misleading Chinese title failed to meet readers' expectations and therefore has not attracted much attention in Chinese science fiction scholarship.

On the other hand, the translation of Chinese science fiction in Latin America is a brand-new business. In 2016, the Spanish version of Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem* was released, which later won the Premio Ignotus for Foreign Novel, the Spanish counterpart of Hugo Award. The market of Latin America reacted to it positively. Recently, Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*, Bao Shu's *The Redemption of Time*, and two anthologies of Chinese short science fiction stories edited by Ken Liu (*Invisible Planets* and *Broken Stars*) reached the far coast of Latin America. One thing worth paying attention to is that all of these Spanish versions have been preceded by the English version, a common process for Chinese literature to enter the Spanish-speaking market.

When reading *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*, I am surprised by the parallels between early Chinese and Latin American science fiction. The genre appeared in China and Latin America under similar socio-political situations of anti-colonialism and was appropriated as a pedagogic tool of science popularization to enlighten the public through active participation in

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the process of modernization. Not surprisingly, both Chinese and Latin American science fiction are deeply influenced by mainstream science fiction from Europe and North America. People used to believe that science fiction literature is a genre that originated from the West but was widely distributed in various cultural systems around the world. Yet with more and more evidence being discovered, science fiction turns out to be an intrinsic global genre that embraces multiple origins. What can we learn from this phenomenon? Is there a universal template for the prosperity of local science fiction literature? Or rather, how do we balance universal standards and local aesthetics when evaluating these works? Such problems still haunt scholars from both the West and the East. Though their modern metamorphoses are vastly different, the commonalities Chinese and Latin American science fiction shared upon their birth still anchor their genes. The solutions to these questions will shed new light on our understanding of literature and nationality, of globality and locality.

Therefore, the comparative study of Chinese and Latin American science fiction is a promising research field that deserves further investigation. Based on my preliminary research, there are several issues or topics that I would highly suggest for further inquiry: first, the shared mechanism that leads to the emergence of science fiction; second, the relationship between science fiction and local genres such as fantasy and popular science; and third, the mutual imagination of China and Latin America through the mirror of science fiction. Latin America has always been the exotic "other" in the eyes of many Chinese writers and readers. No matter whether they are older or younger generations of science fiction writers, they all tend to conjure Latin America as a beautiful, mysterious, and traumatic land with the power of rebellion and the great potential of thriving, as seen in examples such as Liu Xingshin's "Columbus from America" (1979), Han Song's In the Days of the Future World (1998) and Bao Shu's "The Celestial Priestess" (2018). But how do people in Latin America imagine China and Chinese people in science fiction? Scattered pictures can be found in the work of masters such as Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), which features a Chinese spy's search for the mysterious garden of his great grandfather when performs his mission in World War I. But the overall image seems to be lacking profundity and diversity, and is much more fragmentary, which in turn proves the lagging reception of Chinese culture in Latin America.

Nevertheless, the comparative study of Chinese and Latin American science fiction is a relatively tough task. The first problem is language. It is nearly impossible to find an early Spanish science fiction text in a Chinese library and vice versa. Besides, the number of works translated from Chinese to Spanish and from Spanish to Chinese are equally small, so small that it is difficult to come up with a sufficient pool of samples. For Chinese researchers without Spanish reading proficiency, they would have to resort to English as an intermediary language, but in that case, the scope of what they can reach will shrink even further. Second, researchers should not ignore the internal structural, historical, and institutional differences among different Latin American countries, even when they speak the same language. In dealing with diversity and differences, they must gain a thorough understanding of their political, historical, and cultural contexts. This is also

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a big challenge for Chinese researchers if they are not well-versed in Latin American regional studies.

Studies in global science fiction have been on the rise over the last decade, and dialogues between different regions will lead us to a better understanding of science fiction as a genre of multiple origins. With the increasing cultural exchanges between China and Latin America, I believe those "impossibilities" will eventually be transferred into, and open up possibilities.

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# Cultural Exceptionalism in the New Generation of Chinese Science Fiction



#### Yuan Liu

Science fiction is a kind of literary work that is rooted in reality and combined with the most advanced technology and cultural frontiers in order to carry forward the spirit of science and rationalism. The core of contemporary Chinese science fiction is the transmission of cultural exceptionalism with close relation to real life, including mutual benefits with the development of science and technology and direct connections with the future world. The following passage will give an analysis of the cultural exceptionalism depicted in science fiction written by the new generation of Chinese writers from the aspects of content, strategy, and significance.

The development of new technology plays a certain role in promoting the development of cultural exceptionalism, and sometimes it can even become the carrier of culture. However, they are not the same thing. Focusing on the development of high technology, science fiction may contain some surreal descriptions of the science and technology frontier. However, this kind of surrealism coming from a reasonable deduction of uncertainty must be based on the current facts. Even if the background is fictional, the "future science and technology" described in the science fiction should not be inconsistent with the known ones. Liu Yang's short stories can be good examples of writings thematically predicated on the frontier of science and technology. For instance, The Pythagorean Theorem (《勾股》,2010) discusses the constants of nature; Pathlight (《单孔衍射》,2010) discusses the wave-particle duality of time; Troglodyte (《穴居者》,2017) shows the entropy conservation and the picture of the universe. In his novel The Orphans of Red Planet (《火星孤儿》, 2019), Liu focuses on what would happen to the world when existing laws of physics had changed. The novel manifests the spirit of science and rationalism as it set out from the contemporary scientific frontier, though Liu discussed some vague future topics or replaced some concepts with new ones. The Waste Tide(《荒潮》,2013), written by Chen Qiufan, shows the material life condition of human beings in the near future, and is a novel of alienation and weird senses. Along with the rapid development of industrialization and informational processes, the deeper questions of technological ethics is stimulated by this cyberpunk fantasy about "garbage men," and the novel's cyberpunk culture itself is simultaneously depicted as inclusive and universal. The unity of the spirit of science and rationalism and the spirit of humanism have been achieved in these works.

The content transmitted by the new generation of Chinese science fiction authors is full of distinctive contemporaneity and perceptiveness. The advanced culture is the integration of ancient and modern Chinese and foreign cultures coupled with creative power to face the future, rather than the simple repetition of ancient and foreign cultures. When commenting on *Mobius Continuum* (《莫比乌斯》,2020) written by Gu Shi, Ken Liu said In the preface of the book, "Perhaps the greatest characteristic of science fiction is that it gives readers a perspective to

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understand our world that they have never thought of before, bringing a "sense of wonder" often existing in classical science fiction." All internal requirements or external manifestations of this "sense of wonder" reflect advanced economics, politics, culture, or understandings of the world from different perspectives. Wang Yanzhong's short stories, "Selling Life" and "Stratosphere Canteens" show the alienation caused by developed capital and the absurdity of human social behaviour. His Sphere and Metamorphosis show the alienation of human beings and a sense of oppression and powerlessness caused by uncontrollable technology. The absurd depiction of the imagined world of the future is based on the anxiety and manic depression caused by our times. The writing of culture oriented to the world, the future, and these modern times is internalized, and following this writing, the emotional problems existing in our times can be relieved.

What the new generation of science fiction in China shows in their writing is tightly linked to the general public, reflecting their desires and aesthetic requirements. In Seafood Restaurant (《海鲜饭店》, 2019) written by Regina Kanyu Wang, the setup of seafood-aversion is so successful and the atmosphere description is so real that the readers even have the feeling of smelling seafood. In *Cloud and Mist 2.2* (《云雾 2.2》, 2018), Wang tries to bridge the gap between genre literature and mainstream literature, and she thoroughly observes the crossroad of technology and life from her unique and delicate perspective. The work combines a rational insight into the future of technology with a warm glow of feminism. Childhood Harvest (《收割童年》, 2013) written by Li Wei(Ah-Que) reflect the reality of human emotions, life, and social relations, which allude to the problems we encounter today, inspire the emotions we ignore, and arouses the our concern for human beings as a whole rather than as individuals. These stories also affect our ways of thinking about life's ultimate problems, our yearning for the universe, and our imagining the infinite possibilities of the future. Therefore, a shared future for mankind is no longer a meaningless idea.

The new generation of Chinese SF writers endow their commercial literature with more feeling, which satisfies the pleasure of consumption for readers of science fiction, making them naturally integrate aspects of cultural exceptionalism into their writing. They have not only promoted the development of domestic science fiction, but will also have an ever-increasing influence on the creation of science fiction worldwide.

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# **Interactions between Science Fiction** and Mainstream Literary Criticism



### Ling Zhan

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, science fiction in China has been flourishing. In terms of quantity or quality, the entire situation has far exceeded expectations for Chinese science fiction in the last century. On the one hand, the brilliant achievements of Chinese science fiction over the last few decades are something to be celebrated. On the other hand, we must also see that there are still many problems behind this newfound prosperity. As a science fiction researcher, I would like to talk about the linkage between writing and Chinese science fiction studies from the perspective of science fiction research. There are three primary reasons why contemporary Chinese science fiction has been marginalized in the literary world for so long: first of all are the historical reasons. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the beginning of the period of "reform and opening up" (1978), science fiction had always been classified as children's popular science literature, and was incorporated into the category of scientific literature and art. Except for a few critics who have talked about the topic from a macro level, until recently science fiction rarely entered the realmof contemporary literary criticism and research. The second reason for its historical marginalization is the question of literature type. Science fiction has a unique core of science and technology--both the concept of science and technology and the aesthetics of technology. This makes many critics, who are used to excluding science and technology from literature, feel very strange and alienated. The third is for reasons of the writer. Most Chinese science fiction writers are non-professional writers who focus on science fiction as a hobby. They do not need to rely on literary writing to earn a living and gain the recognition of the society or the mainstream literary circle, but rather focus on the evaluation of their colleagues within their circle. Therefore, they do not care whether they can maintain a good working relationship with mainstream literary critics.

At present, science and technology has penetrated all aspects of daily human life. As the only literary genre with the relationship between science, technology, and the human at the core of its thinking, science fiction shall play an increasingly more important role in the literary world. Although the rise of science fiction has received the attention of mainstream literary criticism, many science fiction writers have only now begun to realize the importance of literary criticism and actively work to establish contact with critics, based on the current level of interaction and research situation, it is far from adequate. Specifically, there are three reasons for this: first of all, few science fiction writers receive much attention from the critics, and thus the acceptance of new literary trends lags behind. Liu Cixin is still the focus of most researchers' attention. Although some early famous writers (such as Han Song, Wang Jinkang, and He Xi) have also begun to receive attention, there is still a lack of rigorous scholarship. Such new writers as Xie Yunning, Shuangchimu, Suo Hefu, Liu Yang and so on have only been on the literary scene for a short

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time receiving little attention from the critics. Secondly, there is a serious lack of critical theory, and the vision of that which exists is not broad enough. Existing science fiction criticism mostly conducts textual interpretations using Darko Suvin's science fiction cognitive defamiliarization aesthetics and Fredric Jameson's utopian politics based on the capitalist postmodern culture, and many of them remain at the level of traditional humanism. Of course, these theories are of great value to science fiction research, but they can't fully meet the needs of a science fiction genre that follows the development of science and technology and whose thinking continues to move forward. Thirdly, the interaction between mainstream literary criticism and science fiction needs to be further strengthened. In recent years, mainstream literary critics have paid greater attention to the creation of science fiction, but most of them focus on research conferences and paper publishing, and their interaction with the writers, themselves, is insignificant. The question of how mainstream literary criticism can change its existing approach in order to look at science fiction from a new perspective utilizing the integration of science and humanity, and how science fiction writers can strengthen their own narrative skills and the depth and breadth of their thinking in order to tell good science fiction stories, are both issues that require more positive interactions (such as holding works seminars, dialogue lectures, etc.) between writers and critics.

Ling Zhan has been a member of Hangzhou Normal University's Art faculty since 2008. She received her PhD in Chinese from Zhejiang University. While teaching at Hangzhou Normal University, she went to Fudan University to do postdoctoral research from 2011-2013 and was a visiting scholar at Harvard University from 2014-2015. Now she is a professor of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature in the department of Chinese Language and Literature. Her topics of research include Chinese historical fictions in the 20th century, aesthetics of fiction, comparative studies of Chinese and Western SF writing, and Chinese SF history.

# Chinese Science Fiction of the Republican Era, 1912-1949: A Treasure Trove Cries for Excavation



### Dongmei Ren Translated by Micky Liu

I started my science fiction research as an undergraduate in the Chinese Department of East China Normal University, with my thesis providing an in-depth analysis of the first Chinese science fiction story, Lunar Colony Novels (《月球殖民地小说》Yue Qiu Zhi Min Di Xiao Shuo), with a view towards time and space alongside the history of science and technology (A Science Fiction Utopia: Realistic and Imaginary, Lunar Colony Novels and the Transformation of Modern View of Time and Space (《科幻乌托邦:现实的与想象的——<月球殖民地小说>和 现代时空观的转变》), Undergraduate Thesis 2007). At that time, David Der-wei Wang had just published his groundbreaking Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911 (2005), which attracted a great deal of academic interest in late Qing Dynasty science fiction on the Chinese mainland. Being a sophisticated sci-fi enthusiast and undergraduate in the Chinese Department, I naturally joined the trend and continued to rigorously study late Qing science fiction. My post-graduate project explored the entire literary genre from the conceptualization and generation of science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty (1902-1912: The Naming of Science Fiction and the Meaning Behind It, 2010). In my doctoral phase, I extended my academic horizon to the study of science fiction from the Republic of China (ROC, 1912-1949), under the guidance of my supervisor and with a view toward my academic development.

Due to the lack of historical data, even senior sci-fi researchers devoted to the history of literary production in China would assert that science fiction had hit rock bottom in the ROC period, as only a few books from this period were recognized as belonging to the genre: China after the Next Decade (《十年后的中国》 Shi Nian Hou de Zhong Guo) by Jingfeng (1923), Cat Country: a Satirical Novel of China in the 1930's (《猫城纪》 Mao Cheng Ji) by Lao She (1932), Iron Fish Gills (《铁鱼的鳃》Tie Yu de Sai) by Xu Dishan (1936) and four other novels created and translated by Gu Junzheng during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). However, I assert that despite scant evidence to the contrary, there should be more under the surface. After digging into the historical data for a long time, I discovered many previously lost examples of science fiction published during this time period. These included texts in the magazine, The School of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies (Saturday School, or yuanyang hudie pai) and other popular science journals during the ROC period, followed by a few novellas and novels. My doctoral dissertation, The Dream of China--The Changes of the "China Image" in Social Fantasy Novels from the Late Qing Dynasty to ROC (2013) concluded with these findings. After graduation, I continued my research, publishing The Comparison between the "Future Chinas" of the Late Qing and ROC (《晚清与民国科幻小说中"未来中国"形象之比较》, 2015), A Primary Exploration of "Science Fiction" (Ke Xue Xiao Shuo) in the Period of the ROC (《民国"

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科学小说"初探》, 2019), participating in the academic project managed by Prof. Wu Yan (Science Fiction Major Prof. in Beijing Normal University) and covering the actual writing of the chapter A History of ROC Science Fiction ("民国科幻小说史").

Based on my archival discoveries, there were roughly 100 pieces of science fiction published during the ROC period, including prominent long literary pieces such as *Lunar Travel Notes* (《月球旅行记》, 1941) and *After a Millennium* (《千年后》, 1943). However, it is a huge pity that historical records and preservation remain extremely insufficient for systematic data collection, such that the current contents of my work need further verification, selection, and reorganization. On the other hand, a lack of research successors has led to a lack of specialized academic works on this topic, with the rare exception of a single research paper on ROC science fiction films by scholar Jia Liyuan, as well as some papers mainly focusing on ROC period journals and the School of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies.

This state of the field does not correspond with the actual productivity of ROC science fiction authors at all. Perhaps the biggest reason for this gap in the research is the lack of abundant data-digging and the fact that most researchers are still ignorant of the existence of ROC science fiction at all. In the future, I hope more researchers will devote themselves to this field, improving their data-digging and conducting an intensive study of major works in order to fill the gaps in Chinese science fiction studies. Only then can we place Chinese science fiction into the field of literature as a whole, comprehend science fiction from the perspective of cultural change over time, and establish its literary value and status.

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# The Development of Science Fiction Studies in 21st-Century China



### **Yiping Wang**

Since the 21st Century, Chinese science fiction has increased notably in terms of its popularity. As a science fiction fan and academic researcher, I can still recall the excitement I felt when I first read Han Song's 2000 novelette "The Abyss" in *Science Fiction World*. And now, over 20 years later, what is the current status of academic study of science fiction in China, which plays such an important role in boosting Chinese science fiction? This article explores and analyzes the research situation within contemporary Chinese academia by investigating specific data.

In February 2021, if we use the term "Science Fiction" to search in "Subject" (subject = "science fiction" or title = "science fiction") in CNKI (https://www.cnki.net/), a comprehensive Chinese academic database, we obtain about 24,000 articles (the result slightly varies on different dates). If we search "Science Fiction" in "TKA" (Title, Keyword, Abstract) in CNKI (title = "science fiction" or keyword = "science fiction" or abstract = "science fiction"), the total number of articles obtained is around 36,000. Meanwhile, the number of articles about science fiction over the last ten years has increased very rapidly. For example, using the term "Science Fiction" to search in the "Abstract" field, we can see that in 1996 there were fewer than 100 related papers published, over 500 papers published in 2007, and in 2019, the number of published articles totalled more than 2000. It is safe to say that before Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award in 2015 and the subsequent popularizing effect that award had on the area of study within China, Chinese research aimed at science fiction had already begun to accelerate. In general, the rapid growth of the number of science fiction research articles allows us to understand the way Chinese science fiction research has developed.

If we further examine the main focuses of these articles by searching the frequency of their keywords, we can find that "Science Fiction" and "Science Fiction Film" are the two major keywords. In terms of the specific perspectives of research, "Utopia(n)"/"Dystopia(n)," "Science and Technology," "Humanity," and "Feminism" are the dominant perspectives of the studies. As for the popularity of individual writers and works, Liu Cixin (and his *Three-Body* trilogy), Doris Lessing, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* have received much attention in Chinese academic circles. Liu is the most influential native science fiction writer, Lessing is the Nobel Prize laureate in literature (although academics usually treat her as a writer of high literature rather than a sci-fi writer), and the high degree of attention *Frankenstein* gets may suggest that Chinese study of Western science fiction is mainly at the stage of studying traditional classics. Regarding these research trends, the developmental curve of traditional topics such as "Utopia(n)" is very flat, while the popularity of Liu Cixin and *The Three-Body Problem* keeps growing.

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It is very interesting that in the area of "Science Fiction Film," the top keywords are "The Wandering Earth" (a film adapted from Liu Cixin's novelette), "Avatar" and "Artificial Intelligence." The topics being studied in SF films are different from what literature research focuses on - the main focus of the film study is on contemporary works and their narrative mode, and the specific techniques of science fiction films.

If we search "Science Fiction" in "Subject" in the master's dissertations and doctoral theses of CNKI, which demonstrates the potential direction of future studies, about 990 dissertations are found. The top-publishing institutions are Shandong Normal University, Central China Normal University, East China Normal University, Shanghai Normal University, and Southwest University. The top keywords characterizing all the sci-fi study dissertations in the database are "Science Fiction," "Liu Cixin," "The Three-Body," "Science Fiction Film," and "Translation," reflecting the fact that the young researchers, especially those who major in foreign language and literature studies, have a particular interest in the translation and dissemination of science fiction.

The central figures of science fiction studies in contemporary China mostly appear as leaders/ members of important research teams. There are several core teams, including Professor Wu Yan's team. Wu is one of the earliest researchers of science fiction in contemporary China. His teams from Southern University of Science and Technology and Beijing Normal University are the backbone of the current academic community. The team at the China Research Institute for Science Popularization is also important, represented by Wang Weiying and her longtime collaborators, Gao Yabin and Zhang Yihong, among others. The teams of Jiang Xiaoyuan from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Huang Mingfen from Xiamen University, respectively, have published many papers on the history of science and technology and science fiction films and televisions. Scholars like Li Guangyi from Chongqing University, Jia Liyuan from Tsinghua University, and myself and Jiang Zhenyu from Sichuan University are also very active in the field. In addition, overseas scholars such as David Der-Wei Wang and Song Mingwei also pay attention to Chinese science fiction. Although they have relatively few publications in Chinese, they have played an important role in promoting Chinese science fiction in international academic circles. The members of those key teams are also responsible for various projects related to science fiction studies and have published related monographs, anthologies, and translations. In short, the number of science fiction researchers is relatively small, however, these scholars have formed a tightly connected academic community. These few scholars and their teams, in conjunction with a small number of others, are basically leading the current trend of studies in science fiction in China.

It is also noteworthy that some academic articles have been published in the most well-known journals of mainstream literature studies over the last ten years. By searching "Science Fiction" in the "Abstract" field of the following leading periodicals, we can see that there have been six papers published on the topic in Literary Review. The authors--including Jia Liyuan, Wang Yao, and Zhan Ling--are among the most prolific and influential young scholars working in China today. Literature and Art Studies has published seven articles and *Modern Chinese Literature* 

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Studies has published 18 articles. In addition, some papers have been published in other influential mainstream journals, such as Southern Cultural Forum (27 articles) and Exploration and Free Views (twelve articles), etc. Many of those papers were published in the last decade by influential academics, discussing history and theories of Chinese science fiction, as well as writers like Liu Cixin and Han Song. By and large, the authors are the scholars of the key teams mentioned above. Regarding publication within international academic circles, flagship journals like Science Fiction Studies have published special issues focused on Chinese science fiction, and many of the authors of the issue are also from the aforementioned core teams.

The problem is, the study of Western science fiction is the expected model of science fiction research because of science fiction's Western origins. However, this does not seem to be the case in China. The essential periodicals for the study of foreign literature in China, including *Foreign Literature Review*, *Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literatures*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* and *Foreign Literature Studies*, etc., represent high-level Chinese foreign literature studies. By searching "Science Fiction" in "Abstracts" in those journals, we can see that only three sci-fi research papers have been published in *Foreign Literature Review*, including one newsletter; *Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literatures*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* have each published ten related articles. The major subjects of the articles in question are the works of Doris Lessing, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, etc. About 20 articles have been published in Foreign Literature Studies focusing on such diverse topics as the research of robot ethics in sci-fi, Liu Cixin's reception of Arthur Clarke, etc. It is not difficult to see that although the total number of science fiction research articles in Chinese foreign study community is not insignificant, there have been very few related papers published in high-level journals.

Generally speaking, led by outstanding scholars and their teams as it is, the research of science fiction in contemporary China has begun to take shape. Although the field of study has great potential, its diversity and quality still needs to be improved. For example, the current direction of research interests is mainly limited to the history and development of Chinese science fiction over the last hundred-odd years, and is further limited to the works of a small number of essential Chinese and foreign writers. The introduction of mainstream literary theories and foreign academic studies is far from adequate. The popularity of the basic study of science fiction has increased significantly. However, compared with the long-term and in-depth research of science fiction by renowned Western scholars (such as the studies by Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, etc.), Chinese academia has not seen similar iconic achievements. The proportion of original articles that are published in highly influential journals is very low. Therefore, there remains much to do to improve the field of science fiction research in China – primarily the diversification and promotion of academic studies, the attraction of more resources and scholars, and the construction of key teams across related disciplines. Achieving these goals will elevate Chinese science fiction research to the next stage of development.

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### The History and Reality of Chinese Science Fiction Studies



### **Zhenyu Jiang**

Science fiction research is becoming a multidisciplinary field with significant impacts on both the academic and social-cultural fields in China. In recent years, many researchers from disciplines like philosophy, literature, film and television, science culture, and cultural industries have participated in science fiction research and produced valuable results in their respective fields.

The history of science fiction research in China is closely related to the history of the development of Chinese science fiction literature and culture overall. During the late Qing dynasty, when Chinese science fiction was being created indiscriminately, science fiction theory was also at the earliest stage of gestation and genesis. At that time, authors Liang Qichao and Lu Xun enthusiastically advocated for science fiction literature and established many influential theories about the field, in addition to their deep involvement in its creation and translation. In particular, the young Lu Xun's theory of genre "by science, by human feelings"(经以科学,纬以人情) and his practical theory of "guiding the Chinese people to carry out"(导中国人群以进行)laid the foundation for the development of Chinese science fiction and the exploration of science fiction theory in the following half century. Since then, within the genre, Chinese science fiction has formed a confrontation between science and human society, everyday reality, future fantasy and other human "non-scientific" elements; in terms of external genre positioning, it has always been in the midst of political grand narratives such as the "Four Modernizations". It was only after the great discussions of the early 1980s that this situation was gradually relaxed.

From the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China to the end of the 1970s, China's approach to science fiction could be regarded as being in a **Period of Learning and Exploration**. Under the influence of Soviet science popularization, as well as a system of science literature and art (科学文艺), Chinese science fiction was sheltered under the three-tier mechanism of "science popularization (科学音及)--science literature and art (科学文艺)--science fantasy (科幻小说),"¹¹ but at the same time, it gradually accumulated the momentum to find its own path. In the essays and writers' notes of editors and authors such as Zheng Wenguang (郑文光), Tong Enzheng (童恩正), and Ye Yonglie (叶永烈), Chinese science fiction theory gradually took the first steps toward establishing a local pulse. On the one hand, science fiction authors enthusiastically supported the creation of science fiction as an integral part of the "task of transforming society" (Editors 1) through the popularization of science; on the other hand, they also realized that science fiction is "different from science literature and art." (Wen Guang 161) Science fiction should not be simply instrumentalized as subsidiary material for popular science, but also could not simply use a scientistic manner to confront already-known knowledge.

Developing alongside a strong national anxiety about the legitimacy of the science fiction genre, Chinese science fiction theory underwent a **Period of Growth** in the late 1970s. When Tong Enzheng proposed that science fiction should break away from the stereotypical popularization of knowledge and spread a "scientific view of life," (Tong Enzheng 110) the autonomy of the science fiction genre became fully developed. In the midst of debates and criticism, Chinese science fiction writers, editors, and enthusiasts sought discursive resources from overseas science fiction, literary theory, and science communities. In the midst of eager study and debate, writers established farreaching ties with the global science fiction community and contributed to the convergence of Chinese science fiction with the world's science fiction literature and culture.

During this brief period of theoretical explosion, the core of the relevant discussions consisted of two primary aspects. One of these was the attempt to give a richer connotation to "science," especially the demand to understand it in the context of universal social practice as scientific culture, scientific spirit, and scientific method. Secondly, science fiction as a genre required an all-round redefinition of it in relation to the concept of "fantasy," trying to solve the closely related issues of "fantasy and reality," "fantasy and science," "fantasy and plot," and other important relationships that had defined it up until this point.

These discussions not only go directly to the core of the science fiction genre, but also use related creations to pry open a series of ideas and logical inferences that have been considered a default part of the modernization process since the Enlightenment. Important references include "expressing a scientific view of life" (Tong Enzheng 110); "arousing readers' attention in, interest in, and love of science" (Xiao Jianheng 113); "science fiction realism" (Zheng Wenguang 6); "thrilling science fiction" and "towards popular literature" (Ye Yonglie 21); "the continuation of realistic scientific research" (Liu Xingshi 2), and so on, all of which still play a role in the creation of science fiction today in all its various forms. Many of these ideas are widely known, such as "bat theory," "two kinds of conception, "a "hard science fiction and soft science fiction," and "social science fiction." They should not only be regarded as an important supplement to the system of science fiction theories currently dominated by the English-speaking world, but also have the theoretical potential to engage in dialogue with, and even innovation of, the main wave of world science fiction theories, from Darko Suvin on down.

During this period, the most important theoretical achievements are mainly focused on combining the history of Chinese science fiction with the theoretical concerns of overseas scholars. The organization and tracing of the history of Chinese science fiction is attributed to the interaction and efforts of Ye Yonglie with overseas scholars such as Masaya Takeda. By discovering historical materials, they set the starting point of Chinese science fiction in 1904 (Ye Yonglie 2).

Unfortunately, although these discussions and explorations had once enjoyed widespread social attention, they did not result in a systematic and complete Chinese science fiction theory system that could be developed in a healthy manner. In the mid-to-late 1980s, the development

of Chinese science fiction theory did not break off, but it did enter a **Period of Accumulation**.<sup>5</sup> At this time, the theoretical discourse dominated by the popular science discourse and identified as "science literature and art" regained its dominant position in a short time, but soon declined in many aspects, including in terms of literary creation, conception, and publication. In the midst of this intense confrontation, opposition, and transformation, the theory and practice of "science popularization" went deeper and a new concept of "science communication" began to be conceived.

At the same time, a number of theoretical articles with more rigorous forms and clear academic specifications were gradually being published in various university journals and academic periodicals. The researchers behind such works, who have turned their attention to science fiction, are generally not the front-line science fiction and science writers that were more common in the earliest days of science fiction theorization, but often have a clearer theoretical and academic background. They have grown up during the period of latent accumulation, and have intervened in the complex theory and historical context of global science fiction literature and culture in a more independent and relaxed manner than their predecessors. Among these, the most representative ones are researchers like Wu Yan, who are both familiar with various science fiction texts and create them as well, who are extensively involved in science fiction activities, and who have a clear identity as "science fiction fans."

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese science fiction theory has embarked on a journey characterized by a sudden jump from gradual recovery to overexertion. Wu Yan has written, composed, and edited a series of papers, text books, and translated works, all of which accounted for the majority of influential theoretical results and practice for a long time. In 2013, he co-edited a special issue on Chinese science fiction for the journal *Science Fiction Studies* (SFS), which became the most important collective appearance of Chinese science fiction research in the world up until that point. Around that time, Chongqing University's "Chinese Science Fiction Literature Re-start Workshop" (2013.05), Fudan University's "Science Fiction Literature" workshop (2015.06), Beijing Normal University's "Utopia and Science Fiction Literature Research" international conference (2016.12), Hainan University's "Liu Cixin's Science Fiction and the Cultural Condition of Contemporary China" (2016.03) conference, among others, were also concentrated manifestations of the increasingly important influence of Chinese science fiction research on the academic stage at home and abroad.

At present, Chinese science fiction theory is becoming more and more fruitful, and the forms of academic activities are becoming more diverse, bringing an unusual vitality to the traditional academic world. On the one hand, science fiction often appears as a separate topic or activity section in various academic conferences on literature, culture, industry, and science and technology studies; on the other hand, science fiction research is often deeply involved in various cultural activities and industrial operations that are not purely academic, thus forming a very rich and rare interaction between theory and practice.

The ranks of science fiction researchers are also growing larger by the day. In addition to the long-standing "science fiction fan" researchers at different levels, famous scholars from traditional academia, such as Dai Jinhua, Wu Fei, and Ye Shuxian are also actively involved in the field of science fiction research; more young scholars, such as Yang Qingxiang and Xu Gang, are often able to transcend various academic stereotypes and theoretical molds and to explore and enrich Chinese science fiction theory in greater depth; important science fiction writers, such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Chen Qiufan have been able to directly intervene in the field of science fiction research with explicitly theoretical approaches. In addition, there are many scholars and critics from different academic backgrounds and with theoretical approaches who have reported great interest in science fiction research and have produced many results within the field.

Of course, as the science fiction research boom continues to surge, a series of problems have emerged, such as the issue of overwhelmingly borrowed theories, the relative waste of research resources, and the lack of a general research consensus. Sometimes, even though different academic discourses are discussing the same work, the same event, and the same issue, they often find it difficult to communicate effectively. There are three prominent dilemmas central to this difficulty: first, the historical development of science fiction in China has not been effectively sorted out, and the important theoretical resources and profound thoughts of our predecessors have not been fully explored; second, issues such as the "Chineseness" of science fiction, what is meant by "Chinese science fiction aesthetics," and "the Chinese context of science fiction theory" have not been effectively developed and discussed, making Chinese science fiction theory unable to function as a powerful discourse within a global field; third, Chinese science fiction culture itself is undergoing rapid development and change, its textual forms are rapidly evolving under the influence of the Internet and new media, and its industrial practices of film, television, and games have also not received sufficient theoretical attention, all of which makes the science fiction theory that is gradually taking shape run the risk of being confined to the shackles of a narrow discourse.

Today, Chinese science fiction research and Chinese science fiction itself cannot be ignored by the academic and cultural communities. Perhaps what we need is exactly what generations of science fiction scholars have long been insisting on, which is a return to the text, to return to the historical scene, to care about technology, modernity, and wisdom, to discover the grand universe and real life that generations of science fiction authors have touched upon, and to discover those important issues that are often neglected, in order to truly let the potential and prospects of science fiction research be fully developed.

#### **Notes**

1. Since the 1950s, the Chinese science popularization community has focused on introducing the Soviet Union's management experience and theoretical references, including the term "science fiction" (科学幻想小说). After local adaptation, the broadest sector of management was called "science popularisation", and the category of knowledge dissemination in the form of

- literature and art was called "science literature and art". The "science fantasy fiction" is a type of "science literature and art", along with "science poetry", "science reportage" and "science prose".
- 2. Zheng lamented, "...the scientific community considers it (science fiction) a work of literature; those who engage in literature and art consider it science, and as a result, it has become a bat in a fairy tale: birds say it resembles a rat and is a beast; beasts say it has wings and is a bird". This formulation was later simplified as the "bat theory", which gradually became a trigger for the debate on science fiction "surname 'science' or 'literature'".
- 3. The "two conceptions" means the existence of both "scientific ideas" and "literary ideas" in a science fiction novel. This formulation was intended to reconcile the positioning of science fiction in the regulatory system, but later developed into a widely accepted criterion for evaluating the genre, with a preference for one idea over another becoming the hallmarks of "hard science fiction" and "soft science fiction".
- 4. With the help of Ye Yonglie, the "China Science Fiction Study Group" was established in Japan in 1980.
- 5. Starting from the end of 1982, various debates within science fiction and science popularization gradually rose to political criticism. From the end of 1983, Chinese newspapers, magazines and publishers gradually stopped publishing science fiction works. Theoretical thinking was also interrupted.
- 6. Science communication is an emerging concept from the philosophy and history of science, and scholars believe that "science popularization" overemphasizes the authority of science and the sense of superiority of scientific and technological intellectuals. In the modern media environment, the emphasis should be on the means of communication of scientific knowledge.

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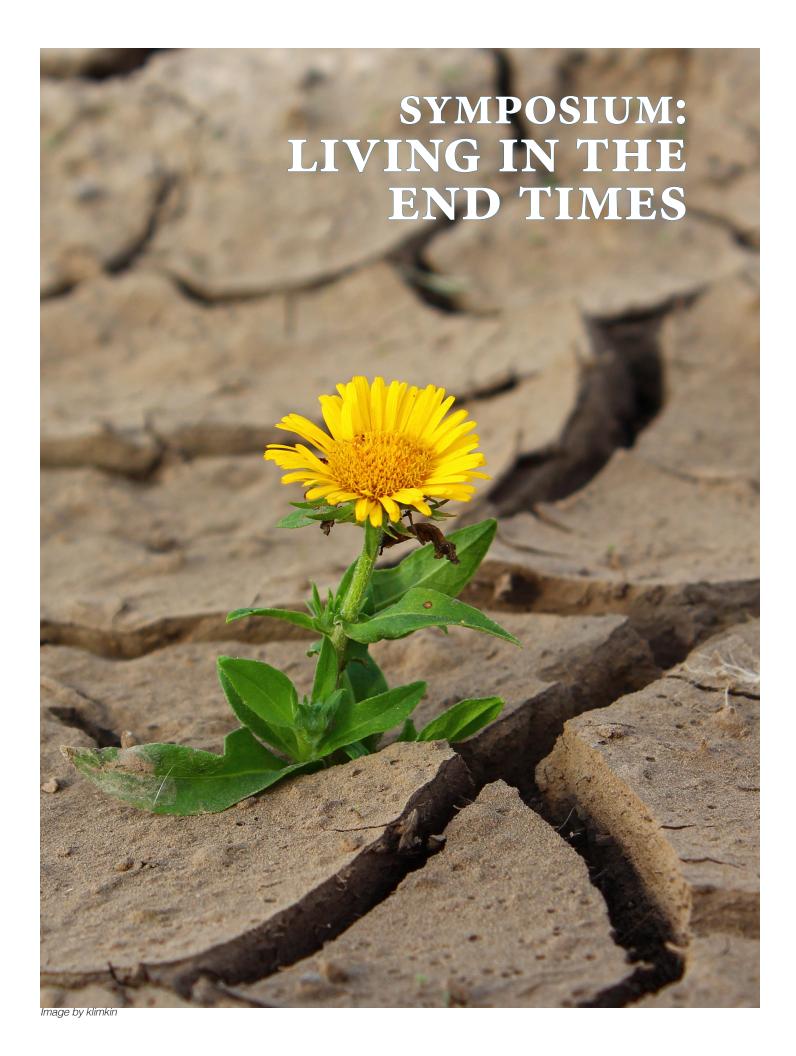
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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### The "Living in the End Times" Conference



### Nora Castle, Heather Alberro, Emrah Atasoy, Rhiannon Firth and Conrad Scott

"On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. He gazes at it with rapture; there is no other word for it. Rapture. The heart seized, carried away, as if by some large bird of prey. After everything that's happened, how can the world still be so beautiful? Because it is. From the offshore towers come the avian shrieks and cries that sound like nothing human" (439).

- Oryx and Crake, by Margaret Atwood

"Clark looks up at the evening activity on the tarmac, at the planes that have been grounded for twenty years, the reflection of his candle flickering in the glass. He has no expectation of seeing an airplane rise again in his lifetime, but is it possible that somewhere there are ships setting out? If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?" (332).

- Station Eleven, by Emily St. John Mandel

As Kim Stanley Robinson put it in his keynote address, the "Living in the End Times: Utopian and Dystopian Representations of Pandemics in Fiction, Film, and Culture" conference was "both a symptom and a diagnostic of the time that we're in." Hosted by Cappadocia University in Turkey, the conference took place virtually on Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Discord from Jan 13 to Jan 15, 2021. It sought to explore not only representations of pandemics in a variety of narratives, but also to examine what might come after, searching for that faint glint of hope amongst the despair and destruction -- an echoing of the dystopian, utopian, posthuman, and even personal seen through key pandemic texts like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). "Living in the End Times" featured 4 keynotes and 50 panels, with a total of 200 speakers from 40 different countries. The keynotes included scholar-authors Kim Stanley Robsinson, Larissa Lai, and Maggie Gee, as well as Professor Elizabeth Outka and the members of the newly-formed Dystopia Project (Raffaella Baccolini, Laurence Davis, Patricia McManus, Tom Moylan, Darko Suvin, and Phillip E. Wegner). This truly international endeavor—whose multiple timezones and myriad concurrent panels certainly kept the organizing committee up at night—was ironically made possible by the very pandemic that has kept us all physically apart.

Its inception began, however, in the flesh. Many of the conference organizers met at the Utopian Studies Society Europe's 2019 conference in Prato, Italy, and the friendships and camaraderie that began there found their way to the core of this virtual endeavor. The pandemic formed the backdrop of the conference not only as its subject-matter, but also its materiality—we very much missed the visceral and embodied aspects of an in-person conference. We reminisced

about the Utopian comrade spirit that we developed during the heatwave in Prato, which involved chats over coffee and cakes, drinks together on balmy terraces, and swimming in lakes. Instead, we found ourselves sitting in front of computer screens in different rooms, climates, and time zones. Some of us had birdsong in the background, while others had hammer drills and building noise. In some ways, our separation and alienation could be seen to resemble a dystopian landscape in comparison to our adventure in Prato.

Nevertheless, the utopian impulse is no stranger to genre-bending and working through different forms and mediums. The online conference created other types of relationships and engagement that we could not otherwise have imagined. The sheer amount of work that went into the logistical effort of organizing the conference meant that the organizers bonded strongly over the adventure despite living in different time zones for the duration. We learnt the tech together, we experienced the tech failures together, and we had a 'backstage chat' in a WhatsApp group that was an ongoing source of mutual support and laughter. We are grateful to the representatives from Cappadocia University, who showed their generosity through their virtual presence and support throughout the conference, including their participation in the Opening Ceremony. We are also very grateful to the Cappadocia IT team, who spent hours and hours creating links, prepping how-to documents, and monitoring panels. The Cappadocia cat, Black Mirror, was also a source of joy in stressful times—and indeed part of the fun of the virtual format more generally were the cameos from presenters' pets.

The format of the conference also meant that it was much larger, more diverse and more inclusive than an in-person conference, where people would be required to acquire visas, pay for travel, and book their accommodation. This had its pitfalls as well as benefits, and when several speakers dropped-out at the last minute, we learned the lesson that offering a virtual conference for free does not necessarily generate the same levels of commitment in some attendees, despite taking at least as much work to organize. We also experienced the dystopian side of virtual events thanks to a Zoom-bombing during the "Musical Oasis" concert performed by Natali Boghossian and Hans van Beelen, just prior to the arrival of the Ambassador of Canada to Turkey, who was making a surprise appearance to kick off Larissa Lai and Maggie Gee's keynote address. Luckily, with help from the Cappadocian IT team, we were able to pivot to new, locked links (paired with YouTube simul-streaming), allowing the conference to continue.

Despite this interruption, the conference was a resounding success, and we were consistently taken aback by the multiplicity of approaches and imaginaries that went into the presentations we saw. Even if we had several books worth of space, it would be impossible to do justice to this diversity, but in this symposium collection, we have gathered 14 papers demonstrating the breadth of work that was presented and discussed at "Living in the End Times." The authors hail from a wide range of countries, including Turkey, Australia, the UK, Portugal, Hungary, Uruguay, and Canada, and their research subjects range from podcasts to posthumanism, from queer theory to mountain anthropology, and from postcolonialism to creative practice. We hope that this symposium will act as a taster, rousing your curiosity and prompting you to seek out more utopian

perspectives and spaces in, against, and beyond the end times. With that in mind, we also attempt here to summarize some of the most important key themes to come out of the conference -- those which merit further thought, exploration, and utopian adventures.

The outbreak of COVID-19 wrought spatial, socioeconomic, and political upheavals and laid bare existing structural inequalities within global capitalist systems. Several papers at the conference found resonances of the severity and scale of the pandemic in eco-dystopian fiction works such as Margaret Atwood's increasingly prescient *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013). A key theme here is using dystopian 'end time' extrapolations to disrupt our blindness to the stark inequities and injustices of our own times. While multitudes face the economic hardships of a looming global recession, the planet's wealthy elite have found refuge in their exclusive 'utopias' of private medical and security staff, escape mansions, and luxury doomsday bunkers. Kroon (this issue) argues against seeking inclusion in the oppressive and debased structures of the status quo through policy change and reformism, arguing instead for the radical hope of the 'queer utopia,' which says 'yes' to 'non-normative ways of being.' The pandemic, and its dystopian reflections and representations, serves as an augur of further socio-ecological perturbations to come should global capitalism's relentless exploitation of species and ecosystems continue unabated.

This brings us to another key theme: the posthuman, and our relationships with non-human beings, the viral, and to nature and technology. In this vein, Horn and Martin mobilize concepts from posthumanism and feminist new materialism to identify an 'ontology of networked agency' in Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio*. Ağın and Horzum focus on the entanglement of (diseased) human bodies with non-human bodies and matter, from ecto-parasites in hair follicles to microbiota in our gut, asking: How, then, are we to understand ourselves and our own agency? Pandemics bring to light the intricate and inextricable entanglements between humans and myriad Earth others, and the realization that we are far from the only actors with the agency to engender world-shattering transformations.

Such times of widespread upheaval render the perennial utopian (and dystopian) imaginary especially valuable, namely through the key utopian and dystopian function of educating desire through critique and consciousness-raising—another key conference theme. The educative function of utopia can be explicit and enacted through pedagogy within and beyond higher education institutions, which was explored during the conference in lively detail by Dan Byrne Smith, Caroline Edwards, Adam Stock, and Darren Web in their Roundtable, "Whither Hope? Teaching Utopia(nism) Through the Pandemic Crisis," which was a highlight of the event for many. The educative function of utopia also takes place in the cultural sphere. Burt finds a potential grassroots, collectivist utopianism in Brazilian podcasts using audio drama as a medium for dystopian storytelling.

While utopias offer imaginative projections of better worlds and ways of being, dystopias extrapolate from the deficient 'present' and offer projections of potentially nightmarish futures. Inherent within both are critique, imagination, and desire for the 'better,' or the queering and

transgression of taken-for-granted borders and boundaries (Sargisson). Thinking beyond the spatial, temporal, and conceptual boundaries of the decaying status quo is essential for building beyond the current 'eco-dystopian' era of pandemics, extinctions, and ecological collapse. Marks explores how the utopian, messianic conception of history found in the works of Walter Benjamin transgresses the homogeneous empty time of capitalism. Denning expresses a utopian aesthetics of temporality that transgresses egotistical mainstream conceptions in which humans place themselves at the centre.

Pandemics and the spectre of eco-apocalypse do not signal the end of all worlds or times but merely of the world as presently constituted. For this is a world of many worlds (de la Cadena & Blaser), with other modes of being long preceding, existing alongside, and yet to come after Western capitalist modernity. Our interdisciplinary conference critically and imaginatively explored the vital question of what might come after capitalism and the Anthropocene. The spectacular array of excellent papers that were presented at this conference touched on many pertinent themes. Discussions often centered around posthuman reflections on the reworking of borders and boundaries—conceptual, bodily, spatial, temporal—engendered by viral happenings, effects that 'end-time' events like pandemics have upon hope and utopian imaginaries more generally, as well as how we ought to co-construct more ethical and liveable worlds after the 'end' imposed by late-stage capitalism on so many earthly collectives. Our final keynote roundtable with veterans in the fields of science fiction, utopian and dystopian studies—Raffaella Baccolini, Laurence Davis, Patricia McManus, Tom Moylan, Darko Suvin and Phillip Wegener—ended on a suitably hopeful note with Tom Moylan concluding: "This conference has responded to the 'end times' and resoundingly said, 'No, another world is possible!"

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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

# Diseased Bodies Entangled: Literary and Cultural Crossroads of Posthuman Narrative Agents



### Başak Ağın & Şafak Horzum

From ecto-parasites in the hair follicles to the microbiota in the gut flora, the human body is composed of diverse nonhuman species, illustrating what symbiotic adaptation is, and which often goes unnoticed due to our limited perception. The entanglement of nonhuman matter "in everything bodies are, experience and do" pinpoints the difficulty of "putting" it "under the spotlight" (Macnaughton 31). If we are so imbued with nonhuman bodies around and within us, then how are we supposed to disentangle ourselves and understand their agency? The posthuman and material-ecocritical senses of agency might provide an answer to this question, which is crucial to our contemporary understanding of pandemics, especially considering how zoonotic diseases hold a pivotal place in the "geopolitical-biopolitical medical surveillance" (Wilbert 7) systems of the twenty-first-century global communities.

Underscoring the constant reconfigurations among the human and nonhuman actors of such diseases, this paper takes disease-carrying agents as material-textual bodies with narrative capacities. In doing so, it relies on posthuman theories which deconstruct the dualistic worldview of Enlightenment humanism and offer a non-hierarchical ontology among planetary systems, things, and beings. We examine the complex and dynamic web of these agents in literary and mediatic works like Ndemic Creations' *Plague Inc.* (2012) and *Plague Inc.*: *Evolved* (2014), Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), and Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992), portraying narrative capabilities of non/human beings as nonlinear assemblages of effect. These assemblages, we argue, enhance posthumanist understandings of ethical, ontological, and epistemological positions of (un)contaminated bodies that narrate themselves in myriad ways "through the mutual accommodation of . . . heterogeneous components" (DeLanda 144).

Sometimes read as gods' "language of displeasure" (Wald 11), contagious diseases 'communicate:' they spread, and they speak, most often in ways that are "not possible for epidemiologists [without] the disembodied, all-knowing . . . gaze" (Dahiya 520n1). Such omniscience can only be available for the human in literary or media narratives, recalling Priscilla Wald's observation on the transgressive kings in *The Iliad* and *Oedipus Rex*, who must read the language of the plagues to decipher the wrath of the gods and correct their wrongdoings. Forcing the kings or the sinful population "to assume responsibility for their actions," the plagues in Antiquity "illustrate[d] the relationship between the group and an anomalous individual" (Wald 11). Nonhuman narrative agency in the posthumanist sense, however, is not a direct translation of human intentionality, conveying literal or metaphorical messages, but explicates how communicable diseases confound our primary visions of ourselves as self-contained entities by making the porosity of our bodies palpable, exhibiting the agency of matter and the inextricability

of the human from the nonhuman. In other words, the disease-carrying agent demotes the human from its position of the only determiner of causality and the only narrator.

Such demotion is strongly exemplified in Ndemic Creations' mobile game *Plague Inc.* and its sequel Plague Inc.: Evolved, recalling Wald's conceptualization of contagion as both "epidemiological" and "foundational" (2). The games, manifesting themselves as narrative bodies, activate a conversation between the player and the disease-carrying agent within an alwaysalready entangled dynamic web of the more-than-human world. The task is to eradicate humanity by selecting a pathogen ranging from viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites to nano-viruses and bioweapons, so the players can empathize with the microorganism, see the map as an omniscient entity, and rewrite the narrative again with their choices, which blend with the games' agency. As every pathogen acts and intra-acts differently with the population, climate, and the player's decisions, it creates a different narrative pattern depending on the player-gameplay interaction. The players must overcome a wide range of actors, varying from the treatment potentials of the developed countries to geographically isolated areas where it is difficult to spread the virus. They must also calculate whether and when to activate the pathogen's resilience against cold or hot climates, or if they should spend the collected DNA points on a certain symptom, which might help or prevent dissemination. In a nutshell, they need to "determine how to solve [the] puzzles, which mutate depending on the disease type, difficulty level, and chosen location of patient zero" (Mitchell and Hamilton 591) to guarantee disease transmission all over the map.

Those material agencies and meaning-making strategies form an amalgam giving each storyline its unique outcome, affected by "situated activity inflected by personal, social and cultural factors" (Bradford 56). The gameplay is, therefore, a cluster of human and nonhuman agents: the decision-making strategies employed by the player, informed by his/her background, require at least some basic knowledge of geography, climate, biology, and economics, thus making the disease both a ludic and a narrative experience of the embodied self. Both narrative and interactive, the games balance strict control and a preset storyline with freedom, which produces "signs," not simply "representing" them (Mitchell and Hamilton 591), paralleling an emergent relationality. As the player changes the severity, lethality, and infectivity of the disease, leading to new narrative patterns, the game thus "recirculates and rewrites elements of an increasingly coherent semiotic repertoire" (Mitchell and Hamilton 588), which is part of the intra-active human-nonhuman relationships. The omniscient view that the contamination map provides enables the player to observe the pace of the spread, the magnitude of its effect, and the incidence rate of the disease, while the biohazard symbol facilitates the track of the "speed, scale, and ubiquity of pandemic threat" (Mitchell and Hamilton 588). The disease thus becomes a narrative agent central to the interactions between the player and the game design, the entanglement of which reveals a set of material-discursive practices at work. In other words, it relates how individual actants of geography, climate, bacterial/viral bodies, the signals on the screen, the storyline, and the invisible population are "entangled" and "intra-relating agents" of the narrative choreography (Barad, Meeting ix).

Among the intra-active agencies within the game are also pathogenic calibration, which denotes "gene expressions that determine the interaction between humans and contagion" (Servitje 86), and epidemiological mapping, which is independent of neither the set of concrete data from the physical and medical sciences nor the social, cultural, or economic knowledge practices of local and global communities. The calibration and mapping function like an apparatus, which "becomes inverted as players work against humanity rather than for it" (Servitje 86). This inversion analogy, suggesting "a dynamic set of open-ended practices, iteratively refined and reconfigured" (Barad, *Meeting* 167), demonstrates both literal contagiousness of material entities with which we are constantly in touch (like mobile phones or tablets) and the metaphorical "connection" of the disease "to the virality of social media" (Servitje 86). Therefore, the games reveal a learning opportunity, allowing the players to (re)consider and (re)evaluate "the biopolitics of outbreak narratives" with their fingertips on the games' nonhuman components such as their "narrative, mechanics, graphical representation, and hardware interface" (Servitje 86).

Along similar lines, Steven Soderbergh's Contagion highlights how "natures-culturestechnologies are always already mixed up and mixing up—intra-acting—in . . . technonatures or socionatures" (Wilbert 7). Although it is an "outbreak narrative" in itself, as Wald would contend, it is the final scene of the film that speaks volumes and narrates "the precise origin story of the pandemic" (Dahiya 520n1). The character of Beth Emhoff, one of "the prime suspects for being patient zero—the first to be infected—along with the three unnamed characters in London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo," is easily the scapegoat as a corporate executive celebrating her success in a casino in Macau, who "stops in Chicago for a tryst with an old flame before returning home to Minneapolis" (Weisberg 2). As Matthew Beaumont notes, "this is a dirty stopover" (84). Beth's "cosmopolitanism and promiscuousness," as Beaumont asserts, that is, "her thoughtless consumption of fossil fuels and selfish recourse to casual sex" signal the primal cause of the outbreak because they "prove to be a killer combination" with "moralistic" and "misogynistic" undertones (84). This "red herring" fallacy leads the viewer to leave behind the other unnamed characters who were also potential index patients, "provok[ing] [the audience] to question whether Beth is liable for spreading the lethal disease and if she warrants sympathy" (Weisberg 2). Soderbergh wittily plays to the species-based prejudices of the viewer, clearly aware of the human tendency to seek linear causality between disease and morality, hinting at the potential stigmatization that accompanies contagions.

As is often the case with real-life pandemics, the invisibility of the disease-carrying agent and its entanglement with the nonhuman environments within and around us prevent our understanding of relationality and emergent ontologies. Unable to grasp at once what such relationality means, humans often fail to acknowledge that "things (or matter) draw their agentic power from their relation to discourses that in turn structure human relations to materiality" (Iovino and Oppermann 4), which means individual agents do not follow or precede one another in existence but are inextricable.

The final scene of Contagion, however, reveals the intricate dynamics between material and discursive practices as it exposes how the multinational corporation AIMM Alderson, Beth's employer, causes deforestation, leading to the displacement of bats, which, in turn, approximate an industrial pig farm upon losing their habitat. Dropping the remains of the fruit it is chewing onto the pig farm, a bat clearly transmits the MEV-1 agent to a piglet that ingests the dropped fruit. That same piglet, chosen for slaughter, is moved in a wired cage to the casino restaurant, where the local chef seasons it and prepares a pork meal. When Beth, the business executive, wants to meet and thank the chef for the meal, the chef simply wipes his hands on his apron, and the film ends when Beth and the chef pose for the camera smiling and holding hands. It is within those two minutes that the viewer can understand how human cultural practices are always already enmeshed with nature: the human-induced dangers such as deforestation and loss of habitats for many species circulate both human and nonhuman bodies, putting their lives at risk and reducing the likelihood of survival for many species, especially humans. As bats and other forest species have stronger adaptation capabilities to co-host several forms of nonhuman bacteria and viruses, they mostly outlive humans in such dystopic scenarios, thus creating narratives from the gaze of the nonhuman.

Although Soderbergh's narrative seems to shift the blame from Beth Emhoff to the Chinese chef, who is another easy target of scapegoating for reasons of racial and ethnic discrimination, it is the dynamic relations of the humans with the nonhuman bodies that cause the outbreak, not a single person or animal. Breaking away from the common tendency to seek linear causality between phenomena, events, and agentic bodies, the narrative thus reminds us of Barad's observation: "subjects and objects do not preexist but rather emerge from their intra-action" ("Erasers" 444). The film thus creates a narrative of such emergent subjectivities, with an emphasis on the intersections of race and gender stigmatization, as well as that of class, as in the case of the Chinese villagers' kidnapping of Dr. Leonora Orantes, the WHO official, in a desperate search for the vaccine that is otherwise unavailable to them. Soderbergh's narrative also reappoints the human as one of the many agents within material-semiotic enmeshment and explicates what it means to be entangled, which can be summarized, again, in Barad's words: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair" (Meeting ix). Thus, Contagion, especially in its final scene, not only portrays the dynamic relations between materiality and discourse but also helps the viewer (as members of Homo sapiens) face their socalled superior position by outlining what narrative agency would look like in nonhuman bacterial or viral agents.

Viewing *Contagion* in this light, one cannot help remembering Gregory Bateson's evaluation on the enmeshed and interdependent characters of ecosystems: "If," Bateson writes, an "organism ends up destroying its environment," then this organism "has in fact destroyed itself" since its "likelihood of survival [in such a relation] will be that of a snowball in hell" (451), especially if that organism is *Homo sapiens*. Humans' limited apprehension of and crippled relation to nature,

predicated on a false belief in possessing an agentic throne due to having advanced technology, bring about their cataclysmic end. As in the exploitative practices of the AIMM Alderson, which destroy habitats for many species, causing wild and disease-carrying nonhumans to get closer to urban zones, irresponsible human activities bring a planetary demise.

Bateson's suggestion of symbiotic adaptation of beings in a system is also significant because it echoes the posthumanist array of material ecocriticism, which views nature as loquens—an eloquent body that shares with humans many of the characteristics that were once considered to be uniquely human. This symbiotic adaptation highlights the incessant communication between earthly bodies and their material-semiotic, human-nonhuman, and natural-cultural enactments on one another, as illustrated by the extra-terrestrial planet, Jeep, in Nicola Griffith's Ammonite. A re-discovered planet ready to be (re)colonized and exploited by the Durallium Company, Jeep shares its name with its endemic virus, which infects everyone and kills all men and some women who resist welcoming it into their bodies. As the "Company's guinea pig" (Griffith 14), the protagonist Marghe Taishan, an anthropologist, contacts both native communities and the virus, thus getting enmeshed with othered alien bodies in her new habitat. Throughout her journey, space remains "[not] as a neutral backdrop against which events unfold," reminding us of Barad's spacetimemattering, since "space and society [in Jeep] are mutually constituted and that space is an agent of change, that is, it plays an active role in the unfolding of events" (Meeting 224). Coexisting nominally, geographically, and physically, the planet and the virus both lead Marghe to biological and mental reproductions. She oscillates between assimilation and integration, along with power and powerlessness in her encounters with new alterities and 'alien' naturecultures, while revisiting the ideas of belonging, being, and becoming by herself and with other bodies.

Griffith thus shatters binaries in *Ammonite* first by excluding the male sex from Jeep and then by blurring subject/object, nature/culture, and human/nonhuman dichotomies. The virus, which poses an environmental threat to the well-being of men and the earthly continuation of heteropatriarchy, stands as the ultimate nonhuman other, subverting the worldly systems. It replaces those systems with vivid unforeseen multiplicities and feminist reproductive futurities. The elimination of the male sex underlines the false fixation of the dominant anthropocentric vantage on sexist, speciesist, xenophobic practices based on a set of so-called superiorities in contemporary Western culture. Having "fluid instead of rigid boundaries" (Farwell 97), Jeep—in its two senses—narrates the explorations of porous bodies and landscapes that constantly interact and intra-act with (but not oppose) one another. With their own agentic properties, these bodies and landscapes are in a state of perpetual emergence, as everything in between active and passive.

"Meeting" each other "halfway" in a new spacetime, as Barad would call it, Jeep's and Marghe's tales "emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 8). The reader can observe "this shared creativity of human and nonhuman agents" (Iovino and Oppermann 8) in *Ammonite*, first with Marghe's attempts to preserve her earthly, supposedly pristine, uncontaminated body, and then with her viscous becomings with the virus. These becomings resemble the labor pains of a new identity formation,

which is "a contingent and contested ongoing material process" (Barad, *Meeting* 40-41). In such "dynamic intra-relationship with the iterative (re)configuring of relations of power," as Barad contends, "identities are mutually constituted and (re)configured through one another" (*Meeting* 40-41). Therefore, as none of us can, Marghe becomes unable to escape a new identity formation. Beyond contacting it, she connects with and 'becomes with' the Jeep virus, thus giving birth to her new transcorporeal self, which, when infected, possesses virus-sharp senses and illustrates a new form of parthenogenesis.

This newly emergent transcorporeality shatters the stereotypical stigmas of the dualistic human. The collection of Marghe's embodied self and consciousness transgresses the borders of her skin and mind as her viral becoming has turned her into a new entity. As she senses that her body does not belong anymore to her human self and mind, she experiences the porosity of her body. She "did not want to return to her body. It was no longer entirely hers. The virus lived in it now, in every pore, every cell, every blood vessel and organ. . . . [S]he would never be sure what dreams and memories were her own, and which were alien. She belonged to Jeep" (Griffith 195; emphases added). In Marghe's viral becoming, this material-semiotic assemblage of skin and consciousness refers to a sense of uncleanliness, an experience of being infected and possessed. "That is why she feels "[u]nclean" (Griffith 195). Her partner, Thenike responds: "Unclean? No. Your body is *changing*, just as it does *every time* you get sick and another little piece of something else comes to live inside you. . . . Is this unclean? No. It's life. All life connects" (Griffith 195; emphases added). This expression is where nonhuman matter comes to shape the narrative as it articulates how we get constantly reconfigured in our everyday experiences with nonhuman microorganisms. Ammonite thus invites us to reconsider our so-called hegemonic story-telling nature as there exist multiple reformulated materialities that manifest their tales, and hence, reconfigured senses of realities.

As these literary and mediatic manifestations of the nonhuman in *Contagion*, *Plague Inc.*, *Plague Inc.*: *Evolved*, and *Ammonite* showcase, everything, regardless of its species, molecular structures, or anthropocentric taxonomy, has its own polymorphous layers of ontoepistemological textuality. If everything, from the biosphere to its human and nonhuman inhabitants, is interconnected, these narratives of the nonhuman attest to a set of intersectional crossroads, where there is a strong and complex cluster of dynamic relations between matter and narrativity. The nonhuman agentic bodies hold their own narrative voices, which always already blends with that of the humans, creating a fusion of stories in an intricate web of relationalities that co-emerge as they intra-act with and on one another.

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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### Podcasting in a Pandemic: Dystopian Audio Drama in 2020 Brazil



### Benjamin Burt

#### Introduction: Negotiating Dystopia in the Country of the Future

As the twenty-first century enters its third decade, Brazil's enduring associations with Edenic bounty and predestined prosperity have succumbed to a dystopian imaginary (Sadlier 1-9). Optimistic visions eliding the darker aspects of Brazilian history have long characterized the place that Stefan Zweig famously called *A Land of the Future* in the subtitle of his 1941 nonfictional book, Brazil. In recent years, however, fatalism has largely eclipsed such hopefulness. The 2016 parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff, the election of far-right congressman Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018, major fires in the Amazon rainforest, and the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 have fueled a consensus that Brazil has become a dystopia (Fernandes; Fuks; Lavinas and Stefanoni). The pandemic has been particularly damaging, with Bolsonaro overseeing the world's worst national response according to a January 2021 study by the Lowy Institute.

As the coronavirus spread in Brazil, most collective artistic production became potentially dangerous. Unlike cinema, television, and the theater, however, podcasting required minimal adaptation to continue apace. Audio dramas released via podcasts thus stand alone as fullcast, fictional productions released in their standard form during the initial months of the pandemic. This article analyzes three such works released in July and August 2020: Jacqueline Vargas's #TdVaiFicar... (#EverythingWillBe...), Projeto Pytuna's Pytuna: Estação Nacional Libertadora (Pytuna: National Liberation Station), and Spotify Studios' Sofia. While these series are united by their contemporaneous debuts and their exaggerated depictions of social ills, their production histories and the foci of their respective sociopolitical critiques diverge widely. As reflected by #TdVaiFicar's COVID-centric script, Vargas conceived of her podcast entirely during the pandemic (Vargas, "Como"). Pytuna sought public funding as an audiovisual project yet transformed into an audio drama in 2020 (Crisci). Although it was recorded in lockdown, Pytuna does not incorporate COVID-19 into its critique of Brazilian fascism. In contrast to these independently produced works, Spotify's Sofia is not an original drama but rather an adaptation of Matthew Derby and Kevin Moffat's 2018 podcast Sandra.<sup>2</sup> The absence of COVID-19 in the Brazilian version directed by Mabel Cézar is unsurprising given its close adherence to the American original.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the exact timeframe of Sofia's realization is unspecified in any production materials, meaning that it could have been recorded prior to March 2020. Still, the podcast's debut during the pandemic recontextualizes its topical yet temporally indefinite depiction of technology's detrimental social effects. By comparing these three projects, this article considers podcasting's status as a medium for speculative critique and the uncertain ethics of dystopian narration during moments of collective crisis.

#### Compounding Tensions: Form, Genre, and Field of Production

Faced with the logistical challenges of production during pandemic, the selected podcasts adopt similarly conventional approaches to form and narrative. *Sofia* maintains *Sandra*'s episodic structure and original sound design, while the independent productions are similarly serialized and sonically straightforward. Journalist Leonardo Sanchez highlights the theatricality common to all three works, tracing their aesthetic roots to the *radionovelas* popular in Brazil in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. This shared traditionalism, however, constricts the shocking elements of each work's dystopia, characterized by "plac[ing] us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now" (Gordin et al. 2). By maintaining a conception of audio drama as the "theatre of the mind" rooted in radio plays, these podcasts foreground cognitive interpretation without engaging the expressive, avantgarde representational possibilities outlined by Farokh Soltani (200). While more experimental approaches to auditory dystopia might incorporate discordant music or cacophony, for example, these podcasts describe their heightened societies primarily through dialogue and narration.

These tensions between form and content produce cognitive dissonance that limits the critical possibilities and utopian impulse of each work's dystopian vision. For Michael Gordin et al., dystopia and utopia comprise a dialectic rooted in reciprocal functions of social critique: "Every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia - whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is engineered to address, or a dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself in practice" (2). Dystopia functions as utopia's negative, exaggerating social flaws to reveal the need for targeted, constructive imagination. The object of this critique may be explicitly identified, as in the works Lyman Tower Sargent categorizes as "critical dystopia," or remain implicit (5-7). A work that is uncritical or entirely hopeless, however, should not be considered a dystopia but rather an anti-utopia (Baccolini and Moylan 5).

A brief overview of the field of Brazilian podcasting will contextualize each work's embrace of dystopian criticism. For Pierre Bourdieu, fields of cultural production are intricately structured social spaces wherein agents compete for cultural (and economic) capital through a series of position-takings (29-73). The cultural capital available for Brazilian podcasters has risen precipitously in recent years. In his study of the medium, Lúcio Luiz identifies rapid expansion in the early 2010s, arguing that the national "podosphere" included programming on nearly any subject by 2014. By 2019, Brazil was the world's second largest podcast download market, trailing only the US (Blubrry).

Despite this increased popularity, profitability has lagged (Luiz). In response, Brazil's podcasters have traditionally embraced a collaborative ethos (Bonassoli). Due to this sense of community and cheap costs of production, podcasting has remained attractive for creators despite the unlikelihood of financial gain. #TdVaiFicar and Pytuna embody this low-stakes, risk-taking tradition despite the involvement of television professionals in each project. Developments during

the late 2010s portend significant changes to the field, however, as domestic and international media companies seek leadership in a consolidating market.

Audio dramas retain a niche position in a field dominated by a conversational, nonfictional format derived from live radio. The 2019 edition of the biannual *PodPesquisa* market research survey, for instance, does not list a single narrative work in its top twenty ranking (Associação). Still, Marcelo Abud et al. identify surplus demand for fictional podcasts (13). Spotify's investment in Portuguese-language audio drama seeks to capitalize on this dynamic. Initial results suggest that this Swedish firm has effectively leveraged its position as the dominant delivery system for Brazilian podcast listeners (Associação). *Sofia* is among the most popular fictional podcasts on Spotify's rankings and the only featured podcast in the company's overall top 200 list (Chartable. com, "Spotify Podcasts: Brazil"). While this success might translate to heightened awareness for independent dramas like #*TdVaiFicar* and *Pytuna*, Spotify's billions pose a clear threat to the collaborative spirit underpinning these works.

#### Catastrophe, Cognitive Dissonance, and Conformity: Analyzing 2020's Dystopian Podcasts

Set in a near future where COVID-19 has run amok, #TdVaiFicar embraces the exaggerated darkness of dystopia. Even so, the podcast's explicitly "vintage" aesthetics rooted in theatricality and serialization evoke a sense of normality that belies its production during lockdown (Vargas, "Como"). While the series effectively evokes the dramas of yesteryear, this unexpected ordinariness at times dilutes the urgency of the work's social critique and accentuates the ethical challenge of representing an ongoing crisis.

The podcast's primary narrative takes place in a single location: the upscale Edifício Harmonia (Harmony Building) in São Paulo. Millions have died from COVID-19, which has now evolved into multiple, vaccine-resistant strains. Much of the drama is quotidian, but one fantastical subplot follows a conspiracy to forcibly vaccinate all of São Paulo with an airborne, untested remedy. In addition to the main storyline, Vargas intersperses occasional narration by building resident Débora from an unspecified point further into the future. Backed by the sound of rain and thunder, this intradiegetic narrator repeatedly affirms the hopelessness of the narrative future.

At its best, #TdVaiFicar conjures the darkness of March and April 2020 alongside the resilience and hopefulness of this frightening time. During emotional moments like Ulises's revelation that his physician wife died working in a COVID ward, Vargas takes advantage of the intimacy of earbud listening that Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann identify as a distinguishing characteristic of the podcast medium. Such moments of vivid pathos fortify #TdVaiFicar's illustration of unexpected solidarity between acquaintances, hinting at the prospect of localized utopian praxis rooted in collective trauma.

Other elements of the series, however, undercut this constructive impulse. Any political critique remains fragmentary, as Vargas eschews the specificity and historical focus of critical dystopia to focus primarily on interpersonal drama. Since overcoming a pandemic requires large-

scale, collective action, this absence dilutes the series' transformational imagination. Devoid of political perspective, Débora's dispatches from the narrative future fail to add urgency and instead imply that community-based solidarity is impotent when faced with authoritarian governance. #TdVaiFicar's social criticism similarly fails to outline any radical utopian horizon for the post-pandemic world. Good intentions reconcile class differences between building residents and employees, while neither the script nor the series' casting address racial disparities. As proven by the outsized effect of COVID-19 on Brazil's Black and indigenous populations, these historical divisions must be addressed to realize a more socially just future after the pandemic recedes.<sup>4</sup>

In an interview with Luciano Guaraldo, Vargas asserts that dystopia produces a cathartic effect by allowing an audience to confront their fears in fictional form (Guaraldo). Indeed, a comparison of the real and fictionalized pandemics at the time of #TdVaiFicar's release would suggest that the worst-case scenario did not come to pass. Nonetheless, the surge of the more infectious P.1 variant across Brazil in February and March 2021 underscores the prematurity of this sense of relief.<sup>5</sup> With Brazil increasingly resembling #TdVaiFicar's dystopian future, the podcast's implicit optimism appears misguided. Disconnected from any specific vision of sociopolitical reform, the implication that the pandemic could have been much worse fuels a potentially dangerous sense of complacency that approximates the resigned worldview of anti-utopia.

Pytuna avoids any such fatalism, instead constructing a paradigmatic critical dystopian denouncement of Brazilian fascism. Despite its well-defined target, this podcast adapted by Vitor Paranhos from an idea by Francesco Crisci struggles to synthesize its focus on the present with its broader allegory of twentieth century history. Although the series' script predates the pandemic, the exclusion of COVID-19 fuels dissonance related to this engagement with current events. Whereas #TdVaiFicar's virus-centric narrative would benefit from more specific sociopolitical critique, Pytuna reveals how this catastrophe's gravity challenges critical dystopian representation of other phenomena.

The series' narrative recounts the struggles of a racially and sexually diverse group of rebels forced into hiding by a fascist regime in 2025. The journalist Clarissa hopes to bring down the Novo Regimento (New Regime) government by proving that its founder and his wife, evangelical leader Mara Summer, enslaved an indigenous girl. *Pytuna*'s heightened depiction of religion, politics, and censorship draws from several moments in Brazilian history: the integralist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, the Estado Novo dictatorship of 1937-45, the military dictatorship of 1964-1985, and the Bolsonaro government. However, explicit references to the earlier moments are largely confined to the podcast's blog while the narrative allegorizes recent scandals.<sup>6</sup> The character of Mara Summer, for instance, derives her name from right-wing agitator Sara Winter, while the story of the exploited adolescent Aracy derives from evangelical government minister Damares Alves's controversial adoption of an indigenous child. These references underscore dystopian aspects of contemporary Brazilian society, but this specific attention to comparatively minor crises throws the pandemic's absence into relief.

Pytuna's utopian aspirations, outlined in the series' paratextual materials, are recurrently curbed by a script that emphasizes survival rather than social reconfiguration. In his blog introducing the podcast, Crisci argues that radio can serve as a liberating medium of democratic expression for Brazilians engaged with myriad social justice struggles. The decision to adapt his screenplay into an audio drama due to insufficient funding exemplifies this belief (Crisci). In Pytuna, Paranhos and Crisci incorporate the aesthetics of radio to generate identification with the rebels. As the first episode begins, the listener hears snippets of music and a sermon as if they were "tuning in" to the resistance's pirate broadcasts. In later episodes, the audience is privy to shortwave radio communication between individual guerillas. However, the rebels' ultimate failure to broadcast their incriminating evidence appears to acknowledge this medium's limited cultural reach. While the series could yet become a cult favorite, Chartable.com's rankings confirm that the series' creators encountered similar difficulty connecting with a broad audience ("Apple Podcasts: Brazil: Fiction").

Crisci's blog also invites collaborators and audience members to project the future they wish to see. The rebels reflect this collectivist ethos, yet they too often appear as secondary characters eclipsed by the vaudeville villainy of Mara Summer. For instance, the series offers minimal details about the resistance's governance of the Park of Monsters, a rural area contaminated by a Chernobyl-like meltdown, while an interview with Summer fills an entire episode. Apart from its admirable embrace of diversity, *Pytuna* fails to project a radically different society and instead limits its vision to exaggerating undesirable aspects of the present.

By excluding COVID-19, *Pytuna* partially avoids the ethical challenges faced by #*TdVaiFicar*. Nonetheless, this absence could be construed as negligent in a work recorded during the pandemic and otherwise actively engaged with contemporary politics. Given its devastating impact in Brazil, COVID-19 will cast a long shadow over national artistic production regardless of the virus's narrative inclusion in a particular work. *Pytuna* thus foreshadows the delicate balance that socially engaged works whose critical priorities lie elsewhere must seek. At the same time, the series' lack of narrative resolution suggests that Paranhos and Crisci's critical vision remained constrained by the financial difficulties that undermined their initial ambitions.

Unlike most independent podcasters, Spotify has vast resources at its disposal. The company's arrival in Brazil could thus reshape the field of podcast production and the niche of audio drama. Given this context, *Sofia*'s dystopian bona fides derive as much from its status as a potential harbinger of a homogenous future as from its heightened portrait of technological alienation. The series' Brazilian localization only changes character and place names, maintaining the rest of the original, American script verbatim. *Sofia*'s critical view of corporatized technology applies to Brazil, yet the series does not engage with current events or distinct aspects of contemporary Brazilian society. Deprived of the cultural and historical specificity inherent in critical dystopia, the series' analysis foregrounds a moralistic rejection of technology disconnected from any constructive projection.

This series' plot follows Helena as she begins working in a call center whose employees are the true voice behind the popular virtual assistant Sofia. Although she initially aspires to leverage her position to escape her dreary hometown, Helena later perceives the corrupting influence of corporate culture and her employer's technology. Given the script's roots in 2018, the exclusion of COVID-19 is unsurprising. However, *Sofia* maintains a brief discussion of an imaginary pandemic from the original script that now produces a striking moment of cognitive dissonance. Despite the coincidental nature of this incongruity, this moment demonstrates Spotify Studios' disinterest in adapting *Sofia* to address Brazilian reality at the time of the podcast's release.

The series is entertaining, with high production values and an effective plot twist whereby Helena's attempts to create interpersonal connections accidentally enable a domestic abuser. After ignoring mounting evidence that technology facilitates destructive impulses, the protagonist abandons her professional ambitions and attempts to save the woman whose life she endangered in the series' final moments. Still, Helena's decision does not represent conscious engagement with utopian possibility but rather an attempt to limit the disastrous effects of her corporate ambitions.

Although *Sofia* effectively exaggerates negative repercussions of technological ubiquity, the series' ambition to remain evergreen limits the impact of its critique. The call center's technical capacities suggest a near-future setting, yet the podcast does not include temporal markers. The topicality of its themes and setting in recognizable geography associate the narrative with contemporary Brazilian reality, yet there are no references to public figures or historical events. This aesthetic does not affect the podcast's broad denouncement of corporatized technology as morally corrupt, but it does preclude the specificity of critical dystopia. Consequently, *Sofia*'s social analysis and its final utopian gesture towards a less-connected future are simultaneously sweeping and superficial.

#### **Conclusion: Problems without Solutions**

None of the three podcasts analyzed in this article ultimately project the radical aspirations that Gordin et al. associate with dystopian narratives: "dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions" (2). #TdVaiFicar effectively recalls the trauma of the pandemic, but its premature satisfaction that this crisis could have been worse leaves little space for the series' critical impulse. Pytuna approximates the critical dystopian interest in root causes, yet this analysis is too often eclipsed by denouncements of recent scandals. Sofia's adherence to its American predecessor requires a broad vision that precludes granular critique.

At the same time, the indefinite temporality of the Spotify Studios production throws the historical rootedness of the independent works into relief. Neither #TdVaiFicar nor Pytuna outline revolutionary alternatives to the present, but they do analyze contemporary Brazilian society with constructive intent. As a result, it remains possible that future artists (in less trying circumstances) will draw inspiration from these works' inchoate utopian desires while outlining their own visions for radical change. Such works will likely be marginalized, however, if major corporations continue to colonize the Brazilian podosphere.

#### **Notes**

- 1. Recent headlines confirm the prominence of this pessimistic vision across academic disciplines and national borders. To cite but a few examples, French political scientist Gaspard Estrada (in an interview with Daniela Fernandes), Brazilian author Julián Fuks, and Brazilian economist Lena Lavinas (in an interview with Pablo Stefanoni) each describe Brazil as dystopian in articles published in 2020.
- Sandra was produced by Gimlet Media, which was purchased by Spotify in 2019. Part of Spotify's larger experiment with localization, Sofia was released alongside German-, French-, and Spanish-language translations of Sandra.
- 3. Cézar's presence as director of an entirely Brazilian cast explains *Sofia*'s classification as a Brazilian podcast.
- 4. Consult Dom Phillips's article "Enormous disparities': Coronavirus Death Rates Expose Brazil's Deep Racial Inequalities" (2020) for an overview of this dynamic.
- 5. This strain of COVID-19 drew international attention by overloading Manaus's healthcare system in January 2021. It is known colloquially as the Manaus variant or the Brazilian variant.
- 6. See Marcela Silva's "O fascismo tupiniquim" (2020), included on *Pytuna*'s Medium.com page, and Rafael Patiri's "Plano Cohen" (2020), published on the series' website.

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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### Imperialism is a Plague, Too: Transatlantic Pandemic Imaginaries in César Mba Abogo's "El sueño de Dayo" (2007) and Junot Díaz's "Monstro" (2012)



### Giulia Champion

As the world is in the midst of a global health pandemic, focus on the continued other crises that have plagued our world is both minimised and increased. It is minimised because COVID-19 seems to have taken centre stage in all news outlets and in much academic research and it continues to impact everyone's daily life. However, it has also increased the focus on structural and systemic inequalities, which are pandemics of sorts as well. The very marginalised communities that are more vulnerable to COVID-19 have also continually suffered from these inequalities in the past. Our current health crisis is entangled with all these other ones, including our climate emergency, our racism pandemic and many others.

This brief paper engages with pre-COVID-19 pandemic imaginaries in two short stories. The first is authored by Equatoguinean César Mba Abogo entitled "El sueño de Dayo" ("Dayo's Dream")1 (2007) and the second is by US-Dominican author Junot Díaz and entitled "Monstro", first published in The New Yorker in 2012. The transatlantic connections between these two works inscribe pandemic imaginaries into the history of the Atlantic trade and colonialism, the diseases developed then, and into contemporary histories of mobility and migration, put into a halt in time of lockdown. This comparative investigation proposes to identify the use of the pandemic trope in fiction as a manner to emphasise colonialism as a metaphorical pandemic. I argue that the mobilisation of contagion and disease in the short stories serves to highlight the continuity of uneven developments and dynamics in formerly colonised spaces. This is crucial when considering that sf tropes like alien invasions and abductions, environmental apocalypses, and contagion plots, such as pandemics, are not merely works of the imagination; they are a reality, having taken place for indigenous and previously colonised communities (Whyte). Moreover, to support this argument, I also focus on the fact that in both narratives one can displace monstrous tropes from a colonial and racist rhetoric onto (neo-)imperial practices to signify the consequences of colonial dynamics as bringing forth destruction and extinction. This is seen in particular by identifying "Western" countries—broadly described as "United Powers" and the "Great Powers" in each short story—as responsible for the creation and spread of the epidemic and pandemic scenarios depicted. The conflation of these Euro-American-based powers in the two stories emphasises how most of the Global North can be seen as having benefitted and continuing to benefit from colonialism, whether through formal colonial relations or mercantilism and because of the advantages it generated for the Global North, which continue to be at the basis of its current wealth and productive economies.

Colonisation also continues to impact former colonies economically, socio-politically, environmentally and infrastructurally. This is the reason why imperialism can be articulated as a metaphorical pandemic, though one with material consequences: It invades, exploits to the level of extinction and then leaves its victims like patients affected by an illness's long-term effects. Countries on the African continent—as noted below Mba Abogo's narrative operates a specific conflation of the continent to exemplify these dynamics—and Haiti, as the spaces of the two narratives considered here, are crucial for this discussion. Indeed, through different yet similar histories of colonisation and (neo-)imperialism, they continue to live through these uneven consequences, as I will discuss below.<sup>2</sup> It is important, though, that these spaces are more than this history and, as Gina Athena Ulysses and Felwine Sarr argue in each context, they are more than depictions of victimisation and monstrousness.

Mba Abogo's short story is part of a collection entitled *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color* (*Marlow's Helmsman. The Black Song without Colour*) and the work considers throughout the way in which all of Europe has profited from colonialism and is still profiting from its extension in various forms of imperialism today. This is done in particular through the setting of all the pieces in different invented places located on the European and African continents. Indeed, the collection does not directly refer to Equatorial Guinea or Spain, but rather sets its writings in imaginary places referring to Africa and Europe more broadly and "[t]hus [the pieces in the collection] transcend particular national contexts and point to more abstract geopolitical power structures determined by notions of 'center' and 'periphery,' of belonging and alienness, and by positionalities of privilege and exclusion" (Brost 35). In these terms, it becomes clear that the collection attempts to give a voice to different diasporas across the European continent, and to recentre the "Black subject" which has been marginalised in different socio-economic, political and cultural spheres.

In "El sueño de Dayo" ("Dayo's Dream"), the narrator and character Dayo, a young man from an unnamed African country who has recently moved to Europe to study, dreams that Africa stops existing after the receipt of humanitarian aid afflicts all Africans with a strange illness from which they cannot seem to recover. This echoes dynamics in Díaz's short story "Monstro"—taking place in the Dominican Republic as a strange and unknown epidemic is slowing developing on the other side of the border in Haiti—in which we are made to recognise that apocalyptic scenarios often speak to the daily lived experiences of formerly colonised countries. Monstrosity in particular comes to play a crucial role in both narratives: in Mba Abogo's short story African characters are described as "savage" and violent towards each other following the receipt of the fatal aid: "Los negros se enfrentaron unos a otros como perros por aquellos alimentos, se arrancaron la piel a tiras y se devoraron unos a otros" ("Black people fought each other for this food, they skinned each other, devoured each other") (20). This depiction is followed by the description of major news outlets' coverage, including that of BBC and CNN, of the humanitarian intervention and its subsequent result in a pandemic. The news outlets appear as voyeuristic and feeding on people's misery as they cover live what they describe as "el Apocalipsis de la estirpe condenada a

cuatrocientos años de agonía" ("the Apocalypse of the lineage condemned to four hundred years of agony") (20). This phrase invokes the four hundred years of colonisation and exploitation of the continent as a catastrophic and ongoing event. This illuminates a connection between the literal pandemic unfolding and the metaphorical one that colonisation has been for the continent. This type of discourse is associated with Euro-American fantasies concerning formerly colonial spaces, in particular narratives of the African continent, which, as Patrick Brantlinger argues "grew 'dark' as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of 'savage customs' in the name of civilization" (166).<sup>3</sup> Outside of the fictional world, this imagery is still powerful in the perception of the continent abroad, which is often conflated as one big country and described as a place of hunger, violence and "under-development", fetishised through images of starving children and violent strife.

A similar monstrosity is deployed in Díaz's short story in the increasingly violent depiction of the victims of an unknown pandemic. The action of "Monstro" unfolds from the perspective of a first-person narrator who has returned home from the US during the summer break to visit his mother in the Dominican Republic. She had moved back to the island to seek treatment being unwell, facing a much more dire situation in the US given the costliness and unevenness of its health care system. While this is a pre-COVID-19 imaginary, this type of situation only appears more prescient in the current health crisis that crowds hospitals all over the world and, in the US in particular where minorities have the least access to the health care system and are often the primary victims of the pandemic due to systemic and structural inequalities ("Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups"). In "Monstro", the depictions of the people affected by the epidemic, which at first is concentrated in Port-au-Prince, evolves from describing them as "viktims [sic]" (84) to "possessed" (98) to "invaders" (101), and, as the illness evolves the city is bombed to avoid further contagion:

Nothing was working except for old diesel burners and the archaic motos with no points or capacitors. People were trying out different explanations. An earthquake. A nuke. A Carrington event. The Coming of the Lord. Reports arriving over the failing fatlines claimed that Port-au-Prince had been destroyed, that Haiti had been destroyed, that thirteen million screaming Haitian refugees were threatening the borders, that Dominican military units had been authorized to meet the *invaders* – the term the gov was now using – with ultimate force. (101, emphasis in original)

The use of the term "invaders" raises the issue of migration and the appalling treatment of Haitian labour migrants in the DR since the establishment of Rafael Trujillo's race-based anti-Haitian autocratic rule that resulted in violence such as the *El Corte* (the cut) massacre that took place in 1937 (Martínez 115-116). This is continued in the 21st century in the obscene 23 September 2013 ruling by the Dominican constitutional court, "[a]ptly described as civil death, social apartheid, and administrative genocide" (Shoaff 59), which established that only persons born in the DR to Dominican parents or legal residents are regarded as citizens. Considering

Díaz's background as a US-Dominican author, this depiction of migrants' treatment can be read as spilling over from the Haitian-Dominican context to that of the South-North migration, especially when bearing in mind the treatment of immigrants in the US under the Trump administration. Migration is, to many extents, a legacy of colonialism, because of the lack of infrastructure in the countries that were drained (of resources and peoples) and exploited during the colonial period and then forced to take IMF loans during the decolonial period. As Christina Sharpe argues, the:

ongoing crisis of capital in the form of migrants fleeing lives made unlivable is becoming more and more visible, or, perhaps, less and less able to be ignored. [...] The crisis is often framed as one of refugees fleeing internal economic stress and internal conflicts, but subtending this crisis is the crisis of capital and the wreckage from the continuation of military and other colonial projects of US/European wealth extraction and immiseration. (59)

The racist and discriminatory rhetoric surrounding immigration in the Global North can also be seen as such a legacy as it stems from residual traces of colonial and imperial discourse.

Moreover, monstrosity is suggested by the short story's title itself, which as Sarah Quesada notes is "phonetic for *monstruo* in Spanish" (292), which she argues reflects the term's "Latin root *monere*, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means *to warn* and *to instruct*" (292). Scholars have, in general, focused solely on this connection of *monstrum* to *monere*: interestingly, none seem to have considered the close etymological relation that the term 'monster' bears with 'monument'. Indeed, *monere* also means "to remind, bring to one's recollection", which is the root for the term monument, to which the adverbial suffix *-mentum* is added ("Monster"). The myriad of terms associated with memory and commemoration implied in the word is crucial in understanding monstrosity and monstrous figures as monuments of colonialism. Crucially, monuments play a critical role in relation to colonisation, being physical reminders of western hegemony. Hence, the monstrous figures in these short stories—the zombie-like "viktims" in "Monstro" and the cannibal-like ill Africans in "Dayo's Dream"—can be understood as literary monuments of colonial relations, signifiers that represent a vestige of this history, and they can be read as depicting the monumental ruins, or material traces, of colonial pasts and monstrosity as representing the corporeal embodiment of empire's violence.

In particular, this violence can be seen in the fact that both pandemic scenarios depicted in Mba Abogo's and Díaz's works can be identified as resulting from colonial and neo-imperial dynamics and are considered to be the responsibility of Euro-American countries. In Mba Abogo's short story this link is made in the following description: "un doctor escandinavo, con la piel tan blanca que daba pena mirarle, denunció que el mana lanzado a los negros, por un descuido que nadie sabía bien cómo, transmitía una enfermedad mortal y contagiosa" ("a Scandinavian doctor, whose skin was so white it was painful to behold, reported that the mana thrown to black people, due to an unexplainable oversight, transmitted a contagious and fatal illness") (20). In this quotation, the description of the "Scandinavian doctor"s whiteness as painful to behold inverts

racist discourses and thereby emphasises the arbitrary and epistemic violence of these types of rhetoric that are themselves monstrous monuments of colonialism. Along the same line, the identification of all Africans here as only black people plays on usual Euro-American stereotypes that conflate the continent to one country and ethnicity overlooking its heterogeneity.

Moreover, the identification of humanitarian aid as responsible for the pandemic highlights the unintended issues that these aid programmes often create, which perpetuate uneven dynamics already in place as consequences of colonialism. In Díaz's short story, I argue that the association of the epidemic with climate change similarly aligns the responsibility for global warming with the Global North as different colonial dynamics have accelerated and exacerbated anthropogenic climate change in former colonies and in particular in the Caribbean.4 Indeed, it is notable that from the beginning of the short story, the narrator continually describes the epidemic alongside issues related to anthropogenic climate change, such as abnormally fluctuating temperatures: "The infection showed up on a small boy in the relocation camps outside Port-au-Prince, in the hottest March in recorded history" (81) or the exploitation of nature: "Strangest thing, though: once infected, few viktims died outright; they just seemed to linger on and on. Coral reefs might have been adios on the ocean floor, but they were alive and well on the arms and backs and heads of the infected" (82). This rhetorical device informs the reader of the connection existing between the impending climate crisis, the culpability of the Global North, and the epidemic narrated in the short story. This connection continues to exist outside of this fictional world, considering the context in which COVID-19 emerged, wherein the destruction of natural habitats for a number of animal species has allowed for zoonotic diseases to spread more easily, as contact zones between humans and non-human animals continue to be compressed (Dobson et al.).

Furthermore, in both short stories, the solutions proposed and enacted to resolve the pandemics are genocidal. In "Dayo's Dream", the description is reminiscent of the stereotypical view of the "new-world-explorer" machete in hand traversing the jungle: "Con machetes y trajes especiales suministrados rápida, diligente y eficazmente por las Potencias Unidas, y sudando copiosamente, iban rematando a todos los enfermos. No se podía correr el riesgo de que le transmitieran la enfermedad a alguien. La operación fue un éxito. Se mataron a niños, mujeres, hombres, ancianos" ("With machetes and special garments rapidly, diligently and effectively supplied by the United Powers, and sweating profusely, they went to finish off all the people who were sick. One could not take the chance that the illness be transmitted to anyone else. The operation was a success. Children, women, men and elderly people were killed") (20-21). Additionally, in the narrative, the "United Powers" erect a monument in front of their headquarters to commemorate the victims of this sacrifice (21), allowing us once more to associate monstrosity, monuments and colonialism with the extinction that colonialism brings forth and that a statue cannot replace.

Echoing Mba Abogo's "United Powers", in Díaz's "Monstro" the narrator describes the decision of the "Great Powers" to bomb Port-au-Prince (99). The aftermath is felt as far as Cuba, Puerto Rico and Florida and it has many consequences, including a power outage, which itself

provokes more death: "Tens of thousands died as a direct result of the power failure" (101). While this line appears to have further meaning in the wake of the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, which inspired Díaz's narrative, it also now echoes the state of other Caribbean islands since the repeated hurricanes and violent storms of 2017 and 2019, which have destroyed infrastructure across the region, leaving countless people without electricity or shelter. Additionally, as Quesada notes, the use of language in describing the event, and particularly of the word "white", leaves space for multiple interpretations: "The Detonation Event—no one knows what else to call it turned the entire world white" (Díaz 99). Quesada focuses on its relation to the race binary and its extension to lightness and illumination: "In this case, whiteness as the counterpoint of its binary other is produced by such intense illumination that it does not reveal clarity. Rather, its brightness is blinding, both literally [...] and figuratively, as it occludes the distinction of reality. The reinscription of the universal in light, like the dichotomy of blanqueamiento [whitening] and negrura [blackness], is thus reversed in 'Monstro" (312-313). She discusses how the lack of illumination destabilises the race binary and thus re-evaluates it, showing how, in fact, whiteness and light provoke "occlusion and blindness" (313). I want to bring this argument further by proposing that the use of the term can also be seen as a "whitening" or "white-washing" of history and identity. The bombing, metaphorically, represents European and North American colonial and imperial agendas and interventionism in the Caribbean and South America; the destruction symbolises the writing of this region's history and identity from a one-sided Euro-Americancentric perspective, which returns to my above discussion concerning the use of monstrous figures and tropes to describe former colonies.

As Mba Abogo's story progresses, Dayo, the main character repeatedly dreams about the disappearance of the African continent provoked by the pandemic, which fills him with dread. The storyline begins to blur the boundaries between dream and reality, pushing Dayo to confront his fear and his dream. As he does, death comes upon him and, as he is about to die, he understands that "[s]u vida estaba anclada en la historia" ("his life was anchored in history") (22). This quote can be read through what Sharpe describes as "a past that is not the past" (13), insofar as the final line of the short story concludes its message by inviting the reader to reconsider contemporary events and developments as consequences of our colonial and neo-imperial past. Crucially, Sharpe explains this as one of the ways in which black people globally live in the wake:

The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the 'racial calculus and . . . political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago' (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present. [...] I've been trying to articulate a method of encountering *a past that is not past*. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are. (13, my emphasis)

The formulation of "a past that is not the past" reminds us that colonialism, neo-imperialism and racism are a pandemic too, one that began a long time ago and that continues to spread

and perpetuate structural and systemic inequalities. Díaz's "Monstro" and Mba Abogo's "Dayo's Dream" remind us of this reality and demonstrate how epidemic and pandemic imaginaries can be mobilised to articulate colonial and (neo-)imperial realities.

#### **Notes**

- 1. All translations are mine unless specified otherwise. I would like to acknowledge Nora Castle's help which significantly improved this brief intervention.
- 2. See for instance Walter Rodney's seminal study on this for the African context.
- 3. Though migration is also a pre-capitalist phenomenon, considering many nomad groups for instance, the specific fluxes and routes that are established today often follow the Global North/South or Metropole/Periphery divide established during colonialism.
- 4. See in particular Watts 1990.

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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

# The Wrong Kind of Viral: Post-Apocalyptic Pandemics in Contemporary North American Fiction



#### **Katrin Isabel Schmitt**

Narratives of catastrophe are omnipresent. They range from the latest concerning headline about the COVID-19 outbreak to canonical movies such as Roland Emmerich's The Day After Tomorrow (2004). A prominent and iconic story of disaster is that of the apocalypse, which goes back to the Bible, especially to the Book of Revelation. While the term 'apocalypse' still evokes strong associations to the biblical narrative, in the twenty-first century, it is primarily used to refer to large-scale disasters or drastic changes of any kind. Consequently, the apocalypse has undergone a conceptual expansion. Now, it encompasses doom, downfall, and disaster, a "modern conflation" (DiTomasso 478) of the end of the world. Concerning literary renditions, the apocalyptic event has ceased to be an ultimate endpoint in contemporary narratives. Rather, as James Berger argues, in "nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains after the end" (5-6). As there are survivors and other remnants of former times in the post-apocalyptic world, the catastrophe is not only destructive, but also bears the potential for new beginnings and therefore signifies hope. In this regard, Mary Manjikian points out that it is not primarily the apocalypse as such that is at the center of post-apocalyptic stories. According to her they are rather "concerned with the consequences of the apocalyptic moment, the ways in which society's norms and values and social practices will be changed as a result" (64-5).

It is an inherent feature of apocalyptic representations that they are adapted to and influenced by the time of their creation. Accordingly, they pick up on prevailing individual and collective fears, and draw attention to potential threats and dangers within society. This is already disclosed in the Ancient Greek root, *apocalypsis*, which translates to 'revelation'. The spread and impact of COVID-19 poses an ongoing threat to the global community. Years before the spread of COVID, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels took up the theme of worldwide pandemics. Although these works follow the same genre conventions – a world-changing catastrophe, few survivors struggling to carry on, and destroyed urban spaces – they are also diverse in their structures and themes. In this paper, I focus on three particularly felicitous post-apocalyptic novels by North American writers that feature a deadly virus: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Dog Stars* (2012) by Peter Heller, and *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel. This comparative analysis allows to highlight how contemporary works approach apocalyptic pandemics, especially concerning new beginnings and the element of hope in the post-apocalyptic space.

Oryx and Crake features the protagonist Snowman, who is the (apparently) sole human survivor of a pandemic and shares the world with posthuman creatures called Crakers. The Dog Stars follows Hig, who has outlived a flu that killed almost everyone around him, and his struggles in a post-pandemic space. In the third example, Station Eleven, a deadly virus spreads in North America and eradicates most of humanity, apart from a few survivors like the actors

and musicians of the 'Travelling Symphony.' While all three novels present a pandemic setting, they vary in their representations of catastrophe and the changes caused by it. To compare them, I will analyze the respective pandemics as catalysts of change, to then describe the remains in the post-apocalyptic world. As a conclusion, my paper will highlight elements of the hope for new beginnings in post-apocalyptic literature, mirrored most prominently in the re-emergence of nature and communities. Based on these findings, I will discuss whether the respective pandemics in these novels are, in fact, the wrong kind of viral.

All three novels feature a pandemic that overthrows civilization and disrupts modern life. In *Station Eleven*, the "Georgia Flu" (Mandel 17) brings an end to the modern world. It has a short incubation period—"if you're exposed, you're sick in three or four hours and dead in a day or two"—and a "mortality rate at 99 percent" (20, 253). Throughout the novel, it remains unclear who is responsible for the emergence of the virus, thus giving it a sense of agency of its own. For example, the virus is characterized as so "efficient that there was almost no one left" (192). Similarly, in *The Dog Stars*, a "[m]utation of a superbug" (Heller 197), which supposedly originated in New Delhi, kills almost everyone. However, it turns out that the virus was fabricated in the national weapons lab in Livermore, California, and then spread in a plane crash, making a governmental institution responsible for the catastrophe. In contrast, in *Oryx and Crake*, the outbreak of a pandemic is intentionally caused by the scientist Crake with the objective of freeing the world from harmful and morally corrupt humanity to make room for the posthuman Crakers.

A comparison of the novels stresses that the representations of the viruses vary and hereby set different emphases. In *Station Eleven*, the origin of the flu is not revealed, which signifies a lingering anxiety concerning the unknown and the unpredictability of life. In *The Dog Stars*, the pandemic spreads due to the error of a governmental institution, which symbolizes fear of the misuse of political power and influence. Only *Oryx and Crake* portrays a virus that is purposefully created to sentence sinful humanity, thereby evoking Judgment Day in the Book of Revelation. While the biblical apocalypse leads to a better place, New Jerusalem, Crake's approach is merely destructive—at least for humans.

It is striking that in both *Station Eleven* and *The Dog Stars* the pandemic is ascribed to foreign countries, namely to India and the Republic of Georgia, respectively. Hence, the characters in the novels perceive the viruses as a representation of the Other, something caused by an alien force. These perspectives are also reflected in the pandemics' names: Georgia Flu and Africanized bird flu. There appears to be an inherent need to find a logical explanation for the catastrophe. If none is to be found, as the characters experience in the novels, people try to find a scapegoat—a scenario quite familiar after the year 2020 and the rhetoric of the 'China Virus.' The anxiety that powerful scientific knowledge might be abused is reflected in *Oryx and Crake*, as a scientist with a biocentric value system makes the conscious decision to eliminate humanity.

Although the novels' pandemics differ in their causes, they share the representation of a clear-cut "divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through... life" (Mandel 20). Yet,

the apocalypse is not a conclusive end, as there are some survivors and physical remains of prepandemic modernity. August, one of the members of the Travelling Symphony in *Station Eleven*, remarks: "The world didn't *end* . . . It's still spinning" (Mandel 202). While the pandemics may not prove to be the end of the world, they significantly alter the world and demolish the achievements of civilization. Heather J. Hicks claims that post-apocalyptic fiction "interrogat[es] the category of modernity" as the apocalypse destroys "physical structures, social formations, and values of modern life" (2, 4). In this context, it is not the question of whether something remains that is relevant. What is significant is what persists, how the apocalypse transforms the remnants, and what emerges in the spaces almost completely void of humanity.

All three novels feature the destruction of infrastructure and social systems in the pandemic, which are virtually non-existent in the post-apocalyptic world. The breakdown of modernity is prominently depicted in ruined urban spaces as the pandemics lead to an "industrial wasteland" (Mandel 191), desolate cities, and collapsed buildings; worlds where it "won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone" (Atwood 222), as proposed in *Oryx and Crake*. With the collapse of societal structures and depictions of ruins, the novels present the familiar "end of the world as we know it" (Hall 3). Previously held humanist values are shattered together with these structures. The few remaining people live in a "world that's way past diplomacy" (Heller 203) and fight for their survival, regardless of the consequences for others. The apocalypse is not only an end on the physical level, it also demolishes the core concepts of human interaction and existence.

As human lives and structures disappear, nature can reclaim the spaces they once occupied. From a biocentric perspective, which according to Timothy Clark aims to "identify with all life or a whole ecosystem, without giving . . . privilege to just one species" (3), the novels under discussion reveal a sense of purpose in the ruins as they are re-naturalized. For example, *Station Eleven* describes "beauty in the decrepitude, sunlight catching in the flowers that had sprung up through the gravel of long-overgrown driveways." This image of serenity is strongly contrasted by the remains of urban life, as houses contain "only trash from the old world" (Mandel 296). While the pandemic brings the damaging environmental impacts of humans abruptly to an end, the long-lasting effects of climate change brought on and precipitated by them are still visible. Although there might not be a clear future perspective for humanity, nature is recovering. In *Oryx and Crake*, the former urban structures are annihilated by the natural world as "the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs" (221-2). Natural space conquers human constructions. To summarize, in all three novels, nature gains more space to flourish and regenerate than in the pre-apocalyptic world.

The pandemics are presented as a positive event from a biocentric perspective in which non-human life forms no longer suffer under a hierarchy shaped by human exceptionalism. The survivors in *Station Eleven* and *The Dog Stars* adjust to the situation and sometimes even enjoy peaceful pastoral moments. For Snowman in *Oryx and Crake*, in contrast, nature continuously poses a threat and he cannot accept a subordinate role within the new ecosystem. In addition to

the struggle for survival, the post-apocalyptic world also provides space for the formation of new human communities. Although most characters in these three novels start out as lonely survivors, almost all of them establish new social bonds and forms of familial ties. Eva Horn asserts that those who survive are "either communities that fight or nuclear families—communities, in any case, whose bonds are based on blood, the blood shared by kin or the blood shed by the enemy" (100). Within this framework, it is a central concern, whether the new collectives attempt to reproduce the past or if they are future-oriented.

A prime example is the newly formed community at Severn City Airport in *Station Eleven*. Shortly after the pandemic, the survivors are keen for their lives to go back to the way they were before, waiting for "the army coming in and announcing that it was all over, this whole flu thing cleared up and taken care of, everything back to normal again" (Mandel 179). However, as they start to realize that there is no way back, they accept their situation and find a new purpose in life. Starting out as individuals and small groups from all over the world who are stuck at an airport, the survivors soon begin to cooperate, developing shared survival strategies, and establishing new traditions, such as a topical bonfire every night. This new beginning is most strikingly manifested with the burgeoning of new life, as a woman at the airport giving birth to a baby is "the only good thing that had happened in that terrible first year" (233).

Similarly, The Dog Stars opens with Hig dreaming of returning to the past as well, sleeping outside so he can "pretend there's a house somewhere else, with someone in it, someone to go back to" (Heller 30). His only close contact is Bangley, although the two form an efficient survival team rather than being friends. Nevertheless, they grow closer and add to their community by letting Cima and her father join them. As Hig and Cima become romantically involved, there are grounds for a new nuclear family, which Hig even considers to be his "patriotic duty to follow... through." Although the novel ends before there is any potential offspring, the topic of new life is further evoked with Cima bringing a male and female lamb with her, "[1]ike the Ark" (250, 265). The reference to the biblical flood narrative underscores that, theoretically, it only takes two to repopulate a species. In Oryx and Crake, in comparison, Snowman roams the earth as a lonely last man, only encountering other survivors at the end of the novel, although it remains unclear whether he will approach them or not. He desperately yearns for what he has lost. His postapocalyptic present is significantly shaped by nostalgic memories he cannot let go. Constantly on his own and longing for the past, Snowman is unable to develop a perspective for the future and is incapable of building a new existence in the post-pandemic space. However, a new, future-oriented community is introduced in the form of the posthuman Crakers, who are perfectly adapted to the harsh environmental conditions and have a harmonious relationship with nature. To ensure that this equilibrium is maintained, Crake removed all attributes he considered to be human flaws in his creation, making racism, hierarchy, and territorial behaviour impossible for Crakers. While there seems to be little hope for humanity, the Crakers prosper in the post-pandemic space.

New communities are established in different variants in these novels. In *Station Eleven*, there are several new collectives, for example a cult led by a prophet, who think "they were

saved from the Georgia Flu and survived the collapse because they're superior people and free from sin" (Mandel 115), and the Travelling Symphony. At first glance, these groups appear to be transformational and novel. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, the survivors spot a town "whose streets were lit up with electricity" (311), a sight that foreshadows the redevelopment of other structures of modern life. *The Dog Stars* presents a traditional nuclear family, thus reinstating former societal values. Consequently, these two novels contain the hope that former times can be reconstructed. Yet, this hope also contains the threat of cyclically repeating mistakes, potentially leading back to apocalyptic circumstances. In *Oryx and Crake*, in contrast, a unique and promising posthuman community is introduced. However, the Crakers, contrary to Crake's plans, start to mirror human behavior, such as symbolical thinking and the formation of hierarchical structures. There is consequently the risk that they will repeat human mistakes as well, which diminishes the utopian traits of their new beginning.

In sum, this comparative analysis has shown that the selected novels are representative for the range and depth of North American post-apocalyptic fiction as a negotiation of political, philosophical, and bioethical questions and values. Although the works considered here create a scenario in which viral pandemics are vastly destructive and cause the annihilation of social (infra-)structures and large percentages of humankind, there are also new beginnings. The surviving humans rebuild communities, which are adapted to the post-apocalyptic space while simultaneously replicating elements of pre-pandemic times. The element of hope is a double-edged sword, as there is an underlying threat that history might repeat itself for humanity. Nature, however, thrives in the post-apocalyptic spaces, stressing its intrinsic value outside the anthropocentric framework of human perception. In the end, pandemics are, from a biocentric perspective, the right kind of viral after all.

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#### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

#### The Underside of Time



### Laura Denning

'Pandemics and the spectre of eco-apocalypse don't signal the end of all worlds or times but merely of the world as presently constituted; there is always the vital question of what comes after."[1] The Present as a future archaeological past is, currently, often identified as the Anthropocene. This contested term, however, continues to calibrate our human-scale perception of time as central to deep pasts and deep futures. This poem-film draws upon a recent collaboration with paleo-archaeologist Suzi Richer, to question that calibration, and to consider 'change' within these massive scales. Some of the questions that surfaced were: How can we unmap, backwards? What is revealed in the shift from the polar view to the equatorial view? What stories might evolve as companions in a changing world? What can we do with furrows, spores, apertures and spikes? Could hydrophobic materials adapt back towards their origins? Do humans just need to get over themselves? Could metals become future pollinators? How would oxidisation fold into future fertility narratives? And so forth.

Timefullness, says Marcia Bjornerud, references literacy in relation to the longer view. She says 'We need a poly-temporal worldview to embrace the overlapping rates of change that our world runs on, especially the huge, powerful changes that are mostly invisible to us'. The Underside of Time is an evocation of these insights, realizsed through visual and sonic metaphor. The short film and subsequent poem is situated long after 6<sup>th</sup> or even the 9<sup>th</sup> mass extinction, and offers a speculative and fictional account of how OUR present is a future archaeological past, asking what a poly-temporal world view might offer, in terms of how we live and what we leave behind, in a post-pandemic world.

#### The Underside of Time

It's Over
Get over it
Get Over Yourself
Humans are Zero
Gone, Nada, Zilch
Disappeared
Here, on the Underside of Time
Just Ice and Stardust
Carried in the wind.

Traces of you
(Just the ruins really)
Pock the fringes of this planet still.

### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES The Underside of Time

You were always building

Then unbuilding

Further and further away from yourself

You scared the weather

You scared the birds

But you're just zero now.

Careful Now

Do you suppose that the

Underside of Time

Is a place?

That can be known?

Mapped? Somewhere?

On the inside of

Yourself?

You? Surrounded by your own detritus.

Careful Now

Time moves on

Without you

But this isn't History

History is a human thing

The world breathes without you

Time and History

Are set free.

Your detritus pollinates other possibilities

Form and Function adapt

Earth's secrets

Seeding new stars

Shooting.

Shot

Submerged

Tempests hurl

All this matter

(That doesn't matter)

But still

Reaching out.

Reaching across multiverses

Weaving myths of connection

Spectacular Tentacular

### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES The Underside of Time

Temporal acrobatics
That you will never see.

Death Star
Killing everything
Chasing the shiny new
Extracting pasts
Sinking in your own discharge
Always with strings attached
You tried to compress time
But you merely killed time
Without you

There is just
The Underside of Time.

There were jungles everywhere
Before the extractions
There were diamonds dancing on veils of silver
Before the Deluge
But the light faded
Leaving nothing but
The Underside of Time.

#### **Notes**

1. Taken directly from the CFP for Pandemic Imaginaries 2020.

Recipient of the inaugural scholarship in Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University, Laura Denning has recently successfully defended her PhD thesis "Hydrofeminism: bodies, spaces, practices". This practice-led research positioned art practice within experimental geography in order to open up the registers within which art might operate, and to foreground the environmental and ecological focus of her art practice. Using Hydrofeminism as a trigger to generate speculative artworks, all of which attracted Arts Council England funding, Laura is now developing new works as proposals for post-doctoral opportunities that have an arts/science crossover. These works explore transcorporealities in relation to temporal shifts – including the moment, and extending to considerations of deep time. Laura is the recipient of a number of awards and commissions and her work has featured in a number of publications.

#### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

# Apocalypse Never: Walter Benjamin, the Anthropocene, and the Deferral of the End



### **Gregory Marks**

Today there is no shortage of proclamations on the end of days, either in the mode of imminent catastrophe or in the grim acknowledgement that it is already too late to change our fate. It is said that our actions on this planet have inaugurated a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene, the era of humanity—and that this epoch also marks our doom as an era of inevitable catastrophe and extinction. The concept of the Anthropocene carries within it a temporal ambiguity, as it signifies both "that there will not be complete annihilation but a gradual witnessing of a slow end, and that we are already at that moment of witness, living on after the end" (Colebrook 2014). To call this situation apocalyptic or even post-apocalyptic would be a misnomer, because the catastrophe is one without a moment of revelation, much less a redemptive relation to the history that preceded it. The end is embedded in the earth itself, and made into something always already present, as an incontrovertible fact of the human era.

It is the argument of this paper that this vision of an end to human history that is at once finished and unfulfilled is not an innate fact of our ecological predicament, but is rather symptomatic of our present historical juncture of late capitalism—which is itself interminably caught on the verge of global climate catastrophe but seemingly without alternatives. To attribute the ecological disasters of a historically novel economic system to the geological epoch of humanity itself risks reifying that system into something ahistorically innate to human nature, and therefore without changeability or recourse. The narrative of the Anthropocene is thus characterised by a mournful order of time—which shrinks from historical consciousness and envisages humanity as fossils in the making.

To make sense of this melancholic disposition, I will turn to the works of Walter Benjamin to give a typology of the forms of time available to us. Specifically, I will examine Benjamin's early writings on baroque drama, which stages a model of history in which all human action sinks into the mute eternity of the natural world. This form of time stands in contrast with Benjamin's more famous formulations of industrial capitalism's homogeneous, empty time and the messianic time which marks the moment of historical fulfilment. If, as Benjamin claimed, the funereal vision of nature's eternity is a mark of historical failure, we are today confronted with a failure of world-historic proportions that threatens to sweep up even the most critical minds in its tide.

The subject of Benjamin's 1925 habilitation thesis is the 'trauerspiel,' which may be best defined as an obscure genre of baroque drama originating from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany. The trauerspiel has its counterparts elsewhere in Europe, although the most famous of these—Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Calderón's *La vida es sueño*—are marked by their transcendence of the trauerspiel form, which in Germany remained an esoteric, even stagnant, genre without a

claim to greatness. The term trauerspiel is variably translated into English as 'baroque tragedy' or 'German tragic drama,' although both translations risk assimilating the trauerspiel to tragedy proper.

Unlike tragedy in its classical sense, the trauerspiel lacks a historical dimension, in which its heroes attain the immortality of a fulfilled fate. The plot of the tragedy sustains itself on the interplay between fate and character, and the eventual fulfilment of both in the hero's fulfilment of his destiny. His death is his gateway to greatness, and therefore a paradoxical kind of immortality as the heroic forefather of a city, a culture, or a faith. As Benjamin writes, "in tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality. Death is an ironic immortality; that is the origin of tragic irony" (*Origin* 262). As we shall see, the trauerspiel lacks access to an immortal or historic register because it admits neither a permanence to worldly affairs nor a transcendence from the world of creation.

Yet in its lack of historical consciousness, the trauerspiel is in every respect a reflection of its historical context. Emerging from a Europe ravaged by the wars of religion, culminating in the prolonged bloodshed of the Thirty Years War, the trauerspiel was a narrative form that expressed the hideous violence of the age. For the heroes of the trauerspiel there is no immortality following great deeds, much less any redemption conferred from on high for the victors of the bloody squabbles that take centre stage.

Translated literally, the trauerspiel is a 'mourning play' or even a 'funeral pageant'—terms which better express the melancholic disposition of the genre. It is the prevalence of mourning that informs the trauerspiel's unique relation to time and history, which it conceives under the symbol of the ruin: a marker of humanity's passing, where historical triumph is recognised in decay, and nature reasserts itself over the greatest of human achievements. As a measure of decay, the time of the trauerspiel is marked by its transience and the sinking of historical time into the timelessness of non-human nature. "With decay, and with it alone, historical occurrence shrinks and withdraws into the setting" (Benjamin, *Origin* 190). Its narrative, and the prevailing symbol of the ruin, provide a model for a conception of history that is inevitably fated for decline. The ruin figures the failure of history to achieve any ends beyond inescapable death.

If the trauerspiel occupies a curious position in relation to historical time, this relation is only complicated by its conception of nature and the natural world. As Benjamin writes, "what has the last word in the flight from the world that is characteristic of the Baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but total secularization of the historical in the state of creation" (*Origin* 81). This is not an opposition between history and nature, but the total submergence of the former within the latter, silencing historical consciousness in favour of a melancholic rumination upon the cruel whims of nature. Human history is caught within the much wider movement of nature itself, and inevitably cycles downwards from glory to desolation. It is this turn from history to nature that marks the barrier between classical tragedy and the trauerspiel; as Fredric Jameson suggests, "tragedy brings history into being by emerging from legend, by overcoming myth;

*Trauerspiel* is condemned to a history without transcendence, which it can only think my means of natural categories, cycles, organisms, the seasons, the eternal return" (68). This nature appears "not in the bud and blossom but in the overripeness and decay of its creations. Nature looms before them as eternal transience" (Benjamin, *Origin* 190). Nature in this sense is not merely the non-human world or the earthly basis for human affairs, but a force external to history which constantly intervenes to dash the dreams of historical permanence.

Although preoccupied with death, the trauerspiel is not an apocalyptic vision of the end of history, because there is no end to speak of. Eternal transience destroys all sense of permanence, but it also precludes any fundamental change to the state of the world. It is in this interminability of natural history that the time of the trauerspiel shows its diabolical face. The eternity of nature's dominion is experienced as the endless torment of perdition. In the trauerspiel's bloody dramas the most boastful of nature's creations are the most overripe, and the most accomplished are the ones most ready for decay. Something abyssal is recognised at the heart of humanity, god's fallen children who cannot be anything but the imperfect mirrors of a creation lacking all transcendence. The subsumption of history within nature begets a theory of human nature: a bloody turmoil, a lust for power, and a war of all against all. History does not end, because it can come to no lasting conclusion; it eddies in the vastness of nature but does not entirely subside. "History finds expression not as [a] process of an eternal life but as [a] process of incessant decline" (Benjamin, *Origin* 188). The narrative of the trauerspiel realises a melancholy negation of historical consciousness, which retains the historical interest in disputes of power while simultaneously undercutting the lasting achievements of those historic struggles.

But where does this damned, earthly time of the mourning play find its expression today? If this melancholy resignation to the vicissitudes of nature came to the fore of German drama during the social crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I argue that similar attitudes toward history and formulations of time are also near at hand for many who today see climate change as the augur of a new, posthuman age. As we have seen, the time of the trauerspiel has four key traits: (1) It is, first and foremost, a time which is historically unfulfilled: a litany of lost causes; (2) it is a spectral time in which history is understood under the symbol of the ruin; (3) it naturalises eternal transience as the order of the world at large; (4) its drama is one of earthly creation without hope of messianic redemption. Now it remains to be shown that the grand narrative of the Anthropocene possesses parallel traits to those of the trauerspiel narrative, allowing it to be understand as both an anti-historical narrative of naturalised decline and as a symptom of the world-shattering catastrophe that it purports to describe.

As in the narrative of the trauerspiel, the concept of the Anthropocene carries with it a sense of time that twists back on itself, projecting its catastrophic epoch back to the primordial origins of humanity and far into a post-human future. As Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro write, although the Anthropocene is an epoch "in the geological sense of the word," it also "points toward the end of epochality as such, insofar as our species is concerned." Danowski and Viveiros de Castro continue:

It is certain that, although it began with us, it will end without us: the Anthropocene will only give way to a new geological epoch long after we have disappeared from the face of the Earth. [It is] a present 'without a view,' a passive present, the inert bearer of a geophysical karma which it is entirely beyond our reach to cancel. (5)

The Anthropocene, from this perspective, is not only a description of a new era, but an injunction to think of the present time with resignation. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro's invocation of 'karma' is no anomaly. Among the proclamations upon the changed circumstances of history, there is no shortage of statements on the *moral* meaning of those changes. The discovery that we have entered not only a new era of history but a new geological epoch has brought with it a chiliastic fervour, spoken in, for example, Roy Scranton's manifesto for *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* and Patricia MacCormack's argument in *The Ahuman Manifesto* that human extinction may well be the only solution to climate change.

It is little wonder that the trauerspiel has not gone unnoticed by some theorists of the Anthropocene. As the editors of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt's Anthropocene Project write, "the *Trauerspiel* plays on in the Anthropocene, for 'the catastrophe here is in the form of the age itself, meaning our entire civilization, and its requisite way of life, is already a ruin" (Klingan et al. 34). The Anthropocene is rendered as a trauerspiel drama for the entire globe:

A return to the earthly conditions of man, the name of a fated history, the passing away of Renaissance humanism, humans above all, for a general ideology of the creaturely, an immanent intermingling between rocks, trees, angels, and tyrants. (Klingan et al. 29-30)

A rosy picture, but one we will not be fated to see with our own eyes. What at first sounds like an eschatological vision of paradise returned to earth belies the infernal heart of the trauerspiel. In its shock at the unrepresentable catastrophe that lies before it, the trauerspiel finds solace in a catastrophic conception of nature itself. In the eternal stretch of natural time, we are already dead; a fate we must contemplate in melancholic resignation. In Anthropocene theory, too, there is a recognition of shock, a desperate need to make sense of a world that no longer conforms to the myth of progress—and the answer these theorists provide is a new, earthly myth. At precisely the moment that the planetary reign of *Anthropos* is declared it is disavowed, and the eternal transience of nature's dominion is reaffirmed.

If the Anthropocene contradicts the narrative of historical progress by naturalising decline in the place of ascent, this is not to say that it has no relation to the mechanical time that Benjamin identifies as the source of progressive modernity in his 1940 "Theses." In fact, the time of the Anthropocene depends just as much upon a homogeneous, empty construction of time as does the myth of progress. But whereas the universal history of progress sees a timeline stretching indefinitely upward into the heavens, the Anthropocene envisages a timeline that infinitely curves back upon itself across millennia. As Claire Colebrook writes, conceptualising the Anthropocene means envisaging a world without us which is already present, virtually, at this moment:

The positing of an anthropocene era (or the idea that the human species will have marked the planet to such a degree that we will be discernible as a geological strata) deploys the idea of human imaging—the way we have already read an inhuman past in the earth's layers—but does this by imagining a world in which humans will be extinct. (28)

This construction of time is no less uniform than its progressive counterpart, but whereas the latter takes the clock as its model the Anthropocene measures itself on a cosmic scale. In the place of the seconds, minutes, and hours of the clockface, the Anthropocene's homogeneous, empty units are geological layers—trace remnants that we imagine ourselves as in advance. Chronological time is distended across an inhuman expanse of time, projecting forward a future in which we must necessarily meet our demise—a future that is then brought back to the present as the lesson that our fates are already sealed: *sic transit gloria mundi*. Just as mechanical time and its universal history of progress work to negate true historical consciousness by turning our gaze from the sacrificed dead to an imagined future paradise, so too does this vision beget an ahistorical image of eternity: which seals up the past and future alike in forgotten aeons.

In its retreat from historical time, the concept of the Anthropocene is opened to a mythic sensibility, which discovers in the inhuman void of extinction a hard-faced divinity staring back. Isabelle Stengers has made much of James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis,' taking seriously the theory's personification of an impersonal planetary system. For Stengers, Gaia is a strange kind of god, who announces the end of days but does not preside over the casting of judgment or distribution of redemption:

Gaia is the name of an unprecedented or forgotten form of transcendence: a transcendence deprived of the noble qualities that would allow it to be invoked as an arbiter, guarantor, or resource; a ticklish assemblage of forces that are indifferent to our reasons and our projects. (47)

Mirroring the demiurgic divinity of the trauerspiel, this is a 'transcendence' that does not, in fact, transcend, but remains mired within the world it governs without recourse to a world beyond. This curiously non-transcendent divinity also finds its spokesperson in Bruno Latour, in his lectures on natural theology, who proclaims the coming rule of Gaia over a terrestrial world of "immanence freed from immanentization" (212). Whereas for Stengers the inauguration of a new mythology for the era of climate change stops short of a definite political project, for Latour the intrusion of Gaia means a return to the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of Hobbes, the 'earthly' politics of Carl Schmitt (149-50), and the repudiation of the modern world proclaimed by Eric Voegelin (242-5). For this mystified faction of Gaia, the world as we know it is damned, and all that remains to be done is to make a choice of future barbarisms. An apocalypse is proclaimed, but redemption is postponed, as myth reasserts itself over a humanity with neither a history nor a future.

Even apart from these more explicit attempts to formulate a mythology for the era of ecocide, the Anthropocene has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny for its ahistorical qualities. One

cogent expression of this critique has been given by Andreas Malm, who writes that the main paradox of the Anthropocene narrative is that, within it "climate change is denaturalised in one moment—relocated from the sphere of natural causes to that of human activities—only to be renaturalised in the next, when derived from an innate human trait. Not nature, but human nature—this is the Anthropocene displacement" (270). For Malm, the core problematic of the Anthropocene is a sleight of hand, which displaces the culpability of industrial capitalist society onto a wider complicity of 'human nature,' presumably including the masses of humans today and in the past who did little to fuel the climate crisis. Seen through the lens of the trauerspiel and Benjamin's typology of temporal forms, we can see how this act of legerdemain extends into the heart of the Anthropocene concept. As the proclamation of the first human epoch, the Anthropocene naturalises the present state of humanity and its crises as symptoms of human nature specifically and nature itself in general.

Against this naturalisation of history it is necessary to historicise nature; to understand the recursive, or dare we say dialectical, feedback loop between history and nature, and the way in which both are composed in a mutually dependent natural history. The merely natural processes of the world—from weather, to digestion and respiration, to the architecture and fashion we take for granted as part of our living environment—are, Benjamin insists, only those things of which we remain unconscious, allowing them to slip into the subterranean zones of dream and myth. To the dreaming collective, these phenomena "stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 390). This is the meaning of historicised nature: the emergence of unconscious forces into the light of day, transforming their motions from the vicissitudes of chance or fate into the known causes of a totality in which nature and history are inextricably linked. The failure to recognise the *historical* component of this system is to lose this foothold, and to conceive of nature as an unconscious and seemingly inalterable force that slowly engulfs history in its myths.

As in the trauerspiel narrative, we find in Anthropocene theory a recognition of historical crisis that precludes a consciousness of history itself. Rather, crisis is naturalised and made the founding myth for a melancholic model of history. According to this narrative, we are the doomed creatures of a monstrous world, residing in the ruins of a geological epoch that will stretch far beyond the life of our species. But even though extinction is at hand, the end is nowhere in sight as we drift further into an anti-apocalypse; an event that mutes revelation and casts its transient shroud across our collective horizons. That is, until we can grasp the *historical as well as the natural* genesis of the present conjuncture—to understand that the present epoch is not the consequence of an eternal order but the work of human hands; hands that, if conscious of the work they do, can just as well halt what they set in motion.

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### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### Pandemics in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Rethinking the (Post)Human



### Tânia Cerqueira

Following the worldwide popularity of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), dystopian narratives took the young adult publishing world by storm. The subsequent dystopian boom in young adult literature offered readers dreadful new worlds that emerged from the ashes of contemporary society after it was destroyed by violent wars, climate change, deadly contagious diseases, and the like.

As is widely understood (and some people still pretend to ignore), our society is currently facing an infectious disease that is straining the social order. Young adult dystopian literature has often represented the consequences of a pandemic – some of which consequences we are currently facing as a society today. From novels published at the beginning of this century, such as *The Way We Fall* by Megan Crewe (2002) and *The Last Dog on Earth* by Daniel Ehrenhaft (2003), to works like *The Eleventh Plague* by Jeff Hirsch (2011), *Masque of the Red Death* by Bethany Griffin (2012-2013), and *This Mortal Coil* by Emily Suvada (2017-2020), to highlight a few, this literature has explored the loss of human life, the paranoia caused by the fear of being infected, the struggle to find a cure, and how the infection (or the cure) can alter the human body – the body might evolve or retrogress, changing in ways such that it is no longer defined as human.

This essay discusses how pandemics and their effects on the human body are represented in recent young adult dystopian texts through the lens of posthuman studies. My analysis will focus on three young adult series: James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* trilogy (2009-2011), Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012-2015), and Rory Power's *Wilder Girls* (2019). In these works, the characters are confronted with the consequences of a viral outbreak, including zombie-like creatures and "unnatural" bodily changes. Due to these bodily changes, one can affirm that the infection provoked by the viral outbreak and/or cure creates posthuman bodies – bodies that threaten social norms by being different from the rule—forcing the reader to rethink what it actually means to be human and deconstructing the dominant idea implemented by the humanist worldview, where humanity is disconnected from the surrounding world.

#### A Definition of Posthumanism

During the Renaissance, a new vision about the human emerged, humanism. This new cosmovision "affirmed values of the individual and the right to self-determination" and "enshrined 'Man' as unique, the origin of all meaning, protagonist of History, the hegemonic measure of all things" (Knickerbocker 67). Thus, a new conception of the Human as an individual being with agency, responsible for his own destiny, reigned by reason, and as the centre of the universe emerged. Moreover, Man built himself in opposition to nature, the Other, and what was

considered to be monstrous. Then, humanism came to influence the construction of several binaries which are now, as the young adult dystopian novels under analysis will show, being questioned and challenged by posthuman studies.

In the last decades, there has been significant growth in the corpus of theoretical and critical posthuman studies. The following influential works on this philosophical perspective deserve our attention due to their own importance to this discussion. Firstly, N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), stresses a vision "of the human that embraces the possibilities of information, technologies [...], and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (5). Secondly, in *What is Posthumanism*? (2010), Cary Wolfe argues that posthumanism "isn't posthuman at all—in the sense of being 'after' our embodiment has been transcended – but is only *posthumanist*, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself" (xv, author's emphasis), accentuating how posthumanism defies humanist notions. Finally, Pramod K. Nayar's *Posthumanism* (2013) distinguishes "transhumanism" from "critical posthumanism" as two different types of posthumanism. The latter of these "seeks to move beyond the traditional humanist ways of thinking about the autonomous, self-willed individual agent in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology" (13).<sup>2</sup>

Recent studies on posthumanism and children's and young adult fiction use these critical works as a basis for further development, such as Victoria Flanagan's *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject* (2014), an exploration of the importance of posthumanism for adolescence identity formation, Zoe Jacque's *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (2015), in which she defines posthumanism as "a new ontology which goes beyond the borders of our kind" (2), and *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World* (2018), edited by Anita Tarr and Donna R. White, a volume that gathers several essays in which we can find a multiplicity of definitions regarding the concept of "posthumanism." Some definitions of the term contradict themselves, and such happens, as Tarr and White state, because posthumanism is not "a monolithic concept" (22).<sup>3</sup> In her essay collected in this volume, White claims that in the twenty-first century, to be posthuman signifies "to be more or less than human, but always means being different from human" (258). Although there is an assortment of definitions and ways to interpret this concept, the posthuman bodies under analysis are indeed more or less than human, but always different from what we tend to consider human.

Overall, this brief overview of posthumanist scholarship shows how this perspective decentres the human subject, thus exploring the close relationship of the human with both technology and nature. In other words, it explores how the human being interlinks with the surrounding world. By taking into consideration the corpus of theoretical and critical posthuman studies that has been briefly discussed, and since this essay will mainly look into the body, I shall then define posthumanism as a bodily difference that threatens social conventions and forces the reader to

rethink what it means to be human. This difference, which creates posthuman bodies, might be external, as in rotting flesh or gills, or internal, as two hearts or a mutated DNA structure. Since I will be discussing three different texts, which compromise several sequels, except for *Wilder Girls*, I will be giving a brief overview of each one of them, closely observing the viral outbreak and how the disease or the cure creates posthuman bodies.

#### The Maze Runner by James Dashner (2009-2011)

After massive solar flares ravaged the Earth and permanently changed the Earth's climate and environment in Dashner's *The Maze Runner* trilogy, human civilization was devastated. Realizing there would not be enough resources for all survivors, the Post-Flare Coalition began researching methods to control population growth; that is, scientists began researching procedures to painlessly exterminate a large number of people. During their research, the Coalition discovered the Flare. An airborne virus, the Flare "attacks the brain and shuts it down, painlessly. [...] [It] was designed to slowly weaken in infection rate as it spreads from host to host" (Dashner, *The Kill Order* 282). However, the virus did not work as expected. Instead, it slowly "ate" away the brain of those who were infected, turning them into bloodthirsty and irrational beings with no memory of their past, who killed, tortured, and ate human flesh. Those infected by the Flare came to be known as Cranks.

When Thomas, the protagonist of the trilogy, first faces a Crank, he is left with an uneasy feeling, describing the infected man as follows:

A man stood on the other side, gripping the bars with bloody hands. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, filled with madness. Sores and scars covered his thin, sun-burnt face. He had no hair, only diseased splotches of what looked like greenish moss. A vicious slit stretched across his right cheek; Thomas could see teeth through the raw, festering wound. Pink saliva dribbled in swaying lines from the man's chin (Dashner, *The Scorch Trials* 15).

The Cranks evoke the figure of the zombie, a creature that is usually represented as a monster that leaks disgusting fluids, with parts of its body often missing, and which does not even seem to know what's going on beyond the fact that it is hungry, pissed off, or both (Greene and Mohammad 13). In recent years, zombie-like creatures have been depicted as the result of viral outbreaks, biological warfare, or even of a vaccine created to treat a pandemic outbreak that deeply changes human biology.

After being infected by the Flare, the humans in *The Maze Runner* trilogy go through a decaying process. Just like the zombie, the Cranks rot and become walking bodies with no memories or cognitive capacity, ruled by their most primitive desires. By going through these bodily changes, the zombie-like Cranks deny humanism, revealing that the human being is not static and can retrogress into what is described as a primitive being—of course, this primeval transformation allows the Cranks to survive in a world that has become a wasteland, while humans find themselves close to extinction. Additionally, as Dale Knickerbocker claims, "In

opposition to the free will and individualism held so dear by humanists, the zombie lacks autonomy and individual identity, each action exactly as its peers and thus functioning—literally unwittingly—as a collective" (68). Thus, by losing their memories, the Cranks, as the zombie, also lose their personality, disputing once again the humanist worldview by shattering the notion of individualism.

#### The Lunar Chronicles by Marissa Meyer (2012-2015)

In Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles*, a deadly pandemic, Letumosis, has killed millions of Earthens worldwide. This disease has four stages: the first stage is the incubation period in which nothing appears atypical; during the second stage, large boil-like patches in shades of blue appear on the skin; in the third stage, those who are infected become lethargic, unable to move or speak, and occasionally cough blood; in the final stage, the fingertips become tinged with blue due to lack of blood and oxygen. In New Beijing, the main setting of *Cinder* (2012), the ones infected are kept in a warehouse, taken care of by droids. When Cinder, the protagonist of the first novel, visits her step-sister, Peony, who was infected by Letumosis, she is faced with the dire conditions the sick live in: "the stench of excrement and rot reached out" and "flies had already caught on and filled the room with buzzing" (Meyer, *Cinder* 145-146). This pandemic was created in the laboratories of Luna, a country built on the moon's surface.<sup>4</sup> The virus was created due to Levana's, the queen of Luna, wish to control the Earth and enslave its inhabitants.

As observed throughout *The Lunar Chronicles*, Earthens and Lunars, the latter of whom are considered the Other, do not see eye to eye. They share a strong distrust and hatred, even though Lunars are descendants of human colonizers that travelled to the moon to advance space exploration. As Cinder explains, "Lunars were a society that evolved from an Earthen moon colony centuries ago, but they weren't human anymore. People said Lunars could alter a person's brain – make you see things you shouldn't see, feel things you shouldn't feel, do things you didn't want to do" (Meyer, *Cinder* 43). Due to their DNA being damaged from prolonged exposure to ionizing radiation from cosmic rays, Lunars were genetically mutated and can manipulate bioelectricity—they can control other people's minds and bodies. It can be stated that Lunars inhabit posthuman bodies—posthuman bodies that reaffirm the idea that the human is not static. Moreover, here we can see the reinforcement of the notion that what we usually consider a human body is the norm, upon which one can either retrogress, as the Cranks, or evolve, as the Lunars. Due to these abilities, the relationship between Earth and Luna was strained.

Before infecting the Earthens, Lunars developed a cure to Letumosis—yet despite the existing animosity between Earth and Luna, Lunars did not intend to exterminate humanity. Nevertheless, this cure requires the blood of Lunar shells, that is, Lunars that do not have the ability to manipulate bioelectricity. More precisely, the cure requires the platelets that can be found in their blood. Platelets contain mitochondrial DNA, which is a:

form of DNA [that] consists of a tiny ring of hereditary material that actually lies outside the nucleus of the cell and is passed solely through the maternal line. It is not recombined between generations, as is nuclear DNA, and it seems to accumulate changes quite rapidly, which makes it ideal for analysis of recent evolutionary events (Tattersall, par. 7).

From the chimera-like monsters from ancient Greece to cinematic works such as *The Fly* (1986), one can perceive that there has always been an irrational fear about mixing the DNA of different species, a process seen as unnatural. This feeling of anxiety "may be mostly to do with how it destabilises our perceived human uniqueness and undermines our own moral superiority" (Bastian, "The Uneasy Truth about Human-Animal Hybrids" par. 29). Thus, to survive, Earthens must take a cure in which one of the main components is the blood of the Other—their DNAs must be mixed.

Those who are cured do not go through physical changes—not like the Cranks or the characters from *Wilder Girls*, as we will observe later. The only hint of every being infected is small scars left by the large boil-like patches. And even those can be insignificant since "The rash from the disease grew fainter every day. He doubted it would leave many scars" (Meyer, *Winter* 776). Nevertheless, can a body still be the same when there is what one might consider "alien" DNA running through their veins? Could not the cured Earthens acquire Lunars' abilities, or perhaps develop their own, due to the mixing of DNA?

#### Wilder Girls by Rory Power (2019)

In Rory Power's *Wilder Girls*, a highly contagious disease, referred to as Tox, has been contained in Raxter, an isolated island. Once a private school for girls, Raxter is now a quarantine area where the former students must deal with the effects and dangers of the Tox with little-to-no resources. The outbreak manifests in flare-ups, which leave the girls' "bodies too wrecked to keep breathing, [...] wounds that wouldn't heal, or sometimes, [manifested in] a violence like a fever, turning girls against themselves" (Power 13). Most girls ended up dead from the wounds provoked by the Tox or by the deadly violence that has prompted them to kill each other. Those who survive the flare-ups develop bodily mutations, such as gills, two hearts, a taloned hand, a serrated ridge of bone down the back, or a second closed eyelid. After the first mutations took place, it is understood that the Tox models the girls after the natural environment (fauna and flora) that surrounds them. Not only do the girls go through these bodily mutations, but also the animals and the vegetation that populate the island.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the novel, the origins of the mysterious Tox are revealed:

And there it is—the climate changing, the temperatures rising. I read once about creatures trapped in the arctic ice. Prehistoric, ancient things, coming awake as the ice melts. In Maine, on Raxter, a parasite slowly reaching into the weakest things—the irises, the crabs—until it was strong enough to reach the wilderness. Into us. (215)

A worm—a parasite—has taken hold of every living thing in Raxter. If one is to remove this dormant parasite from their body, they become empty shells—a body without speech, feelings, thoughts, or memories. The living beings of Raxter and the parasite have developed a symbiotic relationship; one cannot survive without the other.

The bodies of the girls are no longer similar to what one usually identifies as the body of a human. After surviving for so long, the girls, who are harshly treated by those who should be helping them, are left to die on the island. Due to the structures created by humanism, speciesism is strongly underlined by our society. As Wolfe points out in *Animal Rites* (2003),

as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of *whatever* species—or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference (8, author's emphasis).

Thus, the girls' mutations, a cross between human-animal-nature, deny them their human status. No longer seen as human, and once starved, probed, and tested, they have no more use to the CDC and are left to fend for themselves on a nightmarish island. Nonetheless, has not their journey on Raxter highlighted the girls' humanity even though they inhabit a posthuman body? The presence of humanity in bodies that are no longer considered human (one might say, of a different species) undermines the humanist discourse of species since one must question the violence against these girls (or any other being) simply because of their bodily difference.

#### Conclusion

Humanism created a view of the human built in opposition to and wholly separated from the monster, the Other, and the animal. This worldview built boundaries that do not allow the human being to merge with all of the living beings that surround them. Additionally, this narrow vision built a concept of the human that stresses the idea that whatever those other beings are, the human cannot be: if the monster is vicious, the human is kind; if the Other is uncivilized, the human is civilized; if the animal is irrational, the human is rational.

As we can observe, the consequences of a pandemic viral infection in young adult dystopian fiction create posthuman bodies—the changes the human body goes through to become posthuman can be external or internal, as observed in *The Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Lunar Chronicles*, and *Wilder Girls*. These posthuman bodies force the reader to problematize the binary oppositions human/monster, human/Other, and human/animal established by humanism, as well as reconsider what one believes a human body to be. As the novels mentioned in this brief analysis reveal, the infection and/or cure resulted in posthuman bodies, that is, bodies that question and dismantle the aforementioned binaries. These bodies, which are strange and yet so alike, have the power to change perceptions, to open dialogue, and to unveil how powerful is the connection between human/monster, human/Other, and human/animal. Hence, in these novels, monstrosity,

otherness, and animality are depicted as a part of human ontology, just waiting to be awakened by a pandemic. Therefore, the human being has always been (and will always be) interconnected to the world that surrounds them, and is part of a network of relationships that cannot be detached. Contrary to what humanism presumes., there are no boundaries, no hierarchies, no categorizations. Then, as Michel Foucault ominously declared, "as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (422).

#### **Notes**

- 1. Needless to say, when this new view about the human was formulated, "human" actually meant white cis straight male. For that reason, I used the pronouns "his," "himself," and "he".
- 2. Another important study on this field is Rosi Braidotti's The Posthuman (2013).
- 3. More recently, in the field of young adult fiction, Jennifer Harrison's *Posthumanist Reading in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction: Negotiating the Nature/Culture Divide* (2019) was published.
- 4. Later, the plague mutates, and not only does it affect the Earthens, but also the Lunars.
- 5. When Hetty, the protagonist, faces the grizzly bear that inhabited the woods, she is confronted with the deep changes the wildlife in Raxter has gone through: "The bear's head swings up and around to look right at me. I let out a muffled scream. One half of its face is bare to the bone" (177).

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#### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

# Dreaming as Pharmakon in Larissa Lai's "Salt Fish Girl" and Cherie Dimaline's "The Marrow Thieves"



### Özlem Öğüt Yazıcıoğlu and Allison Mackey

Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous [...] Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.

- Thomas King, The Truth About Stories (11, 124)

Larissa Lai and Cherie Dimaline, Canadian authors of Chinese and Métis descent, respectively, interweave in their writing different epistemologies that inform their complex cultural heritage understood as rational, Western, and scientific on the one hand, and embodied, Indigenous and/ or mythological, on the other. While dismantling the hierarchical dichotomies of the Western cultural tradition, they also avoid ethnocentric or nationalist essentialism that would generate new forms of exclusion. Rather, both authors' critical engagements with colonial history signal what indigenous feminist critic Zoe Todd calls "a reciprocity of thinking" that requires us to pay attention to who else is "speaking alongside us" (19). By employing native myths and storytelling traditions, Lai and Dimaline show how the historical memories saved in myths and stories, as well as the processes of their transmission through oral and graphic modes of communication, can open vistas beyond dominant white anthropo- and andro-centric paradigms. While we have adopted a central metaphor from one of the seminal texts of the Western philosophical canon, Plato's Phaedrus, as revisited by Jacques Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy"— namely, the figure of the pharmakon as simultaneously poison and remedy—for our discussion of dreams in Lai's Salt Fish Girl (2002) and Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves (2017), our intention is not to impose a Western philosophical framework on the novels' presentation of myths, stories, and dreams, but instead to show what new perspectives they can bring to the dominant frameworks that have marginalized them.

Derrida's unconventional reading of the *Phaedrus* is centered around the irony that Socrates, as representative of the Western logocentric tradition, rejects the value of writing by resorting to myth which he had also dismissed in the name of truth and (self-) knowledge. The "kinship of writing and myth" (Derrida 75) thus established gains new perspectives in the novels of Lai and Dimaline, who weave elements from oral cultures into their textual web in ways that traverse the boundaries of dream and reality, past and present, and body and story. Both of these novels feature the conceptual framework of dreaming as pharmakon, understood as both disease and cure. In each case, the "illness" stems from an exploitation of human and (hybrid) non-human bodies within capitalist systems of resource extraction that brings society to the brink of collapse.

Throughout Derrida's essay, the recurrence of metaphors such as "texture," "textile," "loom," and "web" entwine text with body and matter, neither being reducible to the other, which shift

the focus from the subject of the *cogito* to the body caught in a process of re-inscription. The text emerges as an organism, "indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace," since "[t]here is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it has mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once" (63). This idea of text as an inexhaustible resource that can never be fully consumed is reflected in Lai and Dimaline's openended novels that, as in Alison Ravenscroft's description of Indigenous textualities, make "cuts" in language that unsettle the Western sovereign subject and call for a move from the lexicon of 'hold' and 'grasp' and 'apprehend' toward something more liminal, provisional, tentative, experimental" (358). These novels not only resist monological readings, but they also signal boundless possibilities for bodies and minds to escape from oppression and reconfigure ways to survive and thrive.<sup>1</sup>

As Patrisia Gonzales writes, "For many Indigenous cultures, dreams are both the site of knowledge and a way of knowing, as well as a method for organizing experience, interpreting data, and diagnosing illness and imbalance" (171). Dreaming, as both remembrance of a mythical past and (re)imagination of the future, emerges in both novels as *pharmakon* for capitalist systems of resource extraction. It compels one to "stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws" (Derrida 70) so as to challenge the *status quo* which, in both novels, is maintained through the exploitation of human or (hybrid) non-human bodies. The novels, which end with escape, rebellion, and/or revolt, feature the body as the locus of the (hi)story of the past, and of visions or stories about the future, both of which are associated with dreaming.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, a dreaming epidemic leaks the past into the present, evoking vivid "memories" and driving sufferers to commit suicide by drowning; in *The Marrow Thieves*, the non-Indigenous population has lost the ability to dream, driving them to harvest the dreams from the bone marrow of a people for whom dreams have a spiritual and cultural significance. Evoking Derrida's textual webs, dreams are understood as a story that is materially written upon (or coded within) the body. As Migwaans states in *The Marrow Thieves*, "Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there" (Dimaline 19), while in *Salt Fish Girl*, the body is understood as a "language," as evidenced in Dr. Flowers' "dissections on TV" where he "rearranges the organs of the afflicted" (Lai 76). Heather Latimer suggests that Lai's novel connects "the creation of new bodies" via new reproductive technologies to the "creation of new texts" and to "new myths and stories of origin" (125). The kind of "experimentation" that is linked with the scientific methods in the novels—for example, the "Department of Oneirology" (Dimaline 4) in *The Marrow Thieves*, or Rudy Flowers' laboratory in *Salt Fish Girl*—proves insufficient for grasping or apprehending the dreaming sickness.

In both novels, dreaming is associated with disease. At the same time, however, in each case dreaming also provides an impetus for resistance against exploitation and for new and affirmative re-conceptualizations of life and social existence. The dreaming disease cannot be prevented by rational medical methods, but necessitate a re-appraisal of conceptions of health and healing. The novels feature dreaming as *pharmakon*, namely, as a means to recuperate difficult or painful

memories and histories, and as a source of inspiration to imagine alternative ways of engaging with the world and others. Like the difficult yet necessary migrations that each of the characters undergoes, dreaming removes one from the safety of one's habitual context; yet, despite the discomfort that such dreaming provokes, it nevertheless appears as a force for configuring less violent futures.<sup>2</sup>

Lai and Dimaline suggest possibilities for decolonizing imaginaries by revisiting the significance of dreams and stories and linking them to speculative postcapitalist and dystopian contexts. Both novels imagine possibilities offered by non-dominant cultures' conceptions of dreaming and being that cut across bodies and stories, underscoring the transformative potential of oral, written, and graphic "texts." Native myths and stories, as well as dreams, are embedded in the embodied lives of the characters and constitute the very forces that compel them to cross zones and transgress boundaries as they attempt to escape from the sickness of post-capitalist dystopias, in order to forge new and inclusive communal bonds. However, far from making a call to revert back to some kind of pure (Chinese or Indigenous) origin, or presenting a universal idea of hybridity as the defining feature of diasporic or colonial experience, the novels contest ethnocentric, nationalist, and universalist claims of identity, by foregrounding the singularity of each diasporic experience as an antidote to toxic monocultures.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, the stories of the three incarnations of Nu Wa reflect the fraught history of colonial and diasporic experience in three different contexts. In the futuristic Ontario landscape of *The Marrow Thieves*, after the "world's edges had been clipped by the rising waters, tectonic shifts, and constant rains," the non-Indigenous population of North America have "stopped reproducing without the doctors, and worst of all, they stopped dreaming. Families, loved ones, were torn apart in this new world" (28). The loss of the ability to dream—understood as a "plague of madness" (53)—is intricately linked to the breakdown in relationships to kin, to community, and to land. This relationality has been lost in a society that has cultivated an extractivist relationship to the earth that sustains its very being. This is the same suicidal culture that now wants to retrieve the ability to dream by sending "Recruiters" to capture fleeing Indigenous populations and extract the dreaming from the marrow of their bones.

In both novels, the dreaming sickness is connected to dystopian visions of dominant society, whose survival is deemed impossible without relying on capitalist systems that feed off the bodies of "peoples of the so-called Third World, aboriginal peoples, and people in danger of extinction" (Lai 160). The corporate compounds in *Salt Fish Girl* depend on the labour of factory workers with brown eyes and black hair, just as the dominant Canadian population in Dimaline's novel depends on the harvesting of bone marrow from Indigenous peoples. In both cases, as a direct result of the dominant society's alienated and destructive relationship to the earth, survival is impossible without the bodily exploitation of Indigenous and/or cloned populations.

While the scientific methods of resource extraction have failed to ensure a sustainable existence in Dimaline's dystopia, Lai presents a similar image of landscapes in the process of

being destroyed: the dreaming sickness slowly reaches "the point of epidemic" (71) at first in the Unregulated Zone (85), but eventually even in the walled corporate compounds which, despite their relative affluence, cannot escape "danger of infiltration from the ground, the danger of attack from the land itself, fighting back" (244). This pandemic indicates an impasse in dominant technocratic culture as the logical end point to scientific rationalism. Yet the ideology and practices of the privileged few are self-defeating, given that continuing along the lines of the status quo will only bring inevitable self-destruction. Likewise, the extraction of Indigenous dreams in *The Marrow Thieves* is an unsustainable solution to the problems of the white population since they are, after all, destroying the very people whose dreams they need for their survival.

Sonia Villegas-Lopez notes the way Lai's novel engages with bodies that have been "besieged by the effects of globalization, capitalism, and scientific engineering," and with "the means devised by diseased, hybrid, and queer bodies to rebel against social, sexual, and ethnic homogenization" (27). Lai's character Miranda reworks her mother's song lyrics and her own artwork in order to produce a series of graphic designs and slogans to sell brand-name running shoes, at the same time collaborating with her girlfriend, Evie—one of the cloned factory workers known as "Sonias"—who is trying to subvert the same exploitative capitalist system that gradually reveals itself to be the real sickness in the novel. This is a disease that cannot be cured without attending to the dream-memories that are driving people to suicide. Understanding this suicidal drive in line with the toxic lack of dreaming in The Marrow Thieves, we might suggest that disease is linked to a blindness or refusal to confront difficult histories.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Miranda and the Sonias' willingness to "embrace the contagion" (189) represents a potential threat to the dominant corporate structure, specifically by recuperating alternative histories in order to imagine alternative futures, just as in *The Marrow Thieves*, where the colonial system is "torn down by the words of a dreaming old lady" who "called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors" and "brought the whole thing down" (Dimaline 172, 173).

As pharmakon—which, like any technology, has both positive and negative potentials—the dreaming illnesses are ambivalent but hopeful conditions. Likewise, the act of writing itself is figured as a risk, albeit a potentially transformative one, in both novels. Each narrative draws attention to a complex dialogue between the oral and the written in the tension between "official" writing (contracts, books, legal documents) and more relational stories, songs, dreams, and graphic engravings, which are cast as potentially revolutionary. For example, the fact that Miranda is seduced into signing a legally binding contract commercializing her mother's songs (Lai 239) does not diminish the creative potential of her drawings and oral memory, which are at the same time rooted in the body (91). The revolutionary slogans inscribed by the Sonias on the soles of the "sabot" shoes they produce in sweatshops "left a textual imprint behind" (237) as a form of "economic sabotage" (246). Given that some of the imprints "told the stories of individual Sonias' lives, some were inscribed with factory workers' poems, some with polemics, some with drawings" (248), this act of sabotage is simultaneously an act of communal storytelling.<sup>4</sup>

Also like the Sonias and their sabot/age shoes, the revolutionaries in *The Marrow Thieves* understand the paradoxically limiting and liberating role of writing, supplementing their traditional oral storytelling with the use of graphic signs, in the form of engravings on trees and the "syllabics" of written language (155) in order to communicate with one other and organize the resistance. At the same time, they are well aware of writing as dangerous techné, as in the genocidal residential schools based on the "book that was like a vacuum, used to suck the language right out of your lungs" (107), not to mention that other book that regulates virtually every aspect of Indigenous life in Canada, the Indian Act.<sup>5</sup> "They turned to history to show them how to best keep us warehoused, how to best position the culling," says Migwaans, and the new schools were set up when "they had found a way to siphon the dreams right out of our bones" (89). This dystopic dream culling is just a (less metaphorical) version of the cannibalistic tactics of ongoing colonization.

The powerful legacy of song in *Salt Fish Girl* can be compared to the "key" of the old language, as linked to Minerva's and others' dreaming, in *The Marrow Thieves*. Central to the narrative is the articulation of individual memory through the telling of the "coming-to" stories of the protagonists: Migwaans remarks, "Everyone's creation story is their own" (79). Yet, at the same time, these stories together constitute "Story" in a collective sense. The fugitives share memories, dreams, and visions, and the individual and communal stories of those who are lost along the way are preserved in the texture and textile of Story, as it is reshaped by each new addition to the community. The Canadian government's techno-extractivist approach to Oneirology is set against Indigenous dream narratives and the sharing and interpretation of stories. Frenchie feels "sorry for a minute for the others, the dreamless ones" (19) who are disconnected from collective memory. In a sense, the most dangerous illness comes from living a hyper-individualized existence, instead of forming an integral part of "metaphors and stories wrapped in stories" (20) of communal history. Woven into the diasporic memories of individuals from various nations and backgrounds, "Story" emerges as a store of memories of individual and communal history, in a dynamic cocreative process that envisions time as a continuum in a constant re-inscription of the past.

In both novels, dreams are carved within memory and passed on through stories, songs and poetry, and as such constitute a source to healing through emerging forms of kinship and community that cut across boundaries of various kinds. Importantly, both novels foreground the idea of communal futurity in hybrid and non-heteronormative terms. At the end of *The Marrow Thieves*, Frenchie chooses to leave his biological father behind in order to make a home for himself with his chosen family; even though this decision in large part depends on his feelings for Rose, the narrative (narrowly) avoids following a heteronormative model by conclusing with a powerful vision of same-sex love. As Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear suggests, colonial nation-building projects continue to impose a (heteronormative and monogamous) nuclear family model upon the vibrant webs of family relations in Indigenous communities. In this respect, (open-) endings that prominently feature reconfigured kinship networks present an important challenge to the shaping of population in a colonial mold by the settler state.

As Villegas-Lopez argues, in *Salt Fish Girl* Lai proposes "a new ontology of the body that fosters productive and enriching readings of interbreeding, same sex relationships, and cyborg politics" that suggest ways to "imagine worlds in which body technologies have made it possible to think differently about sexual relations and to go beyond heteronormativity" (28). The Sonias are able to "seize reproductive power and change their abject origins, creating a redemptive space and a female community" (Latimer 131). By implanting human genes into the fruit of the durian tree the Sonias are able to take control of their own futures:

We are the new children of the earth, of the earth's revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future. (Lai 259)

Even though the Sonias and their babies are destroyed, the novel ends with the birth of Miranda and Evie's baby girl in the hot springs of the Rocky Mountains. Latimer suggests that "although it involves a womb birth," this "reproduction is both human and technological without being paternal" (132). Not unlike "the seeds of the durian tree" which are "not quite organic, not quite technological," this "is a birth that acknowledges how the creation of new cyborg bodies through innovative reproductive technologies might lead to the creation of new myths and new ways of imagining and representing the world" (132). The setting is also important: the birth occurs close to the Burgess Shale (Lai 160), where some of our oldest non-human, ocean-dwelling ancestors are quite literally written on the earth: "the ancient imprint of their bodies to sleep beneath ice and snow, smelling faintly of salt. Here they lay on this dry, cold ocean, dead or dreaming, I couldn't quite tell" (268). This nod to the fossil record at the very end of the novel resonates with the idea of "making kin" in Haraway's sense, as a "flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people" (160), and thus not only decenters the heterosexual family as the norm, but opens the notion of kinship to include non-human others.

As a "key" (Dimaline 227) to accessing the future through a re-inscription of the past, dreams signal the recuperation of individual and communal history, while at the same time refusing to idealize any kind of essentialist or "pure" origin. In his reading of the *Salt Fish Girl*, Nicolas Birns aptly remarks that Lai not only offers no return to prelapsarian purity, but also stresses that "hybridities can be radically different from each other" (163). Similarly, Sabine Sharp makes use of Lily Cho's notion of "diasporic solidarity" to identify in *Salt Fish Girl* an "affirmative politics wherein a monstrous collective of marginalized voices attends to the entangled histories of racialized and gendered oppression" (226). In both novels, there is a certain skepticism toward "purity" in a biological as well as a cultural sense: Evie tells Miranda, "I'm not human.... I am a new life form" (Lai 258); Frenchie carries the complex mixed history of Métis ancestry; Rose's father is black; the Guyanese nurses are important allies; and one of the most important "keys" to resistance and survival is Isaac, who is part European but nonetheless dreams in Cree.

Gonzales suggests that "dreaming is a simultaneous co-creative process that involves the

bodyspiritland and life-moving powers in which there may or may not be borders between flesh, mind, spirit, cosmos, or place" (172). *The Marrow Thieves* concludes with its young protagonist finally understanding that "as that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream ... I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger dream that held us all. Anything. Everything" (231). Dreaming is the only way that broken relationships to land, as well as to human and non-human others, can begin to be repaired: Migwaans suggests that "when we heal our land, we are healed also...maybe not soon, but eventually" (193). Minerva's last words to Frenchie are "Kiwen," which means "you must always go home" (211). Apart from signaling the importance of connectedness to land (as well as land claims) for Indigenous communities in Canada, the narrative suggests a more general necessity of going home to a certain relationship to the earth itself, to the cycles of nature, to the land as our dwelling place.

Lai and Dimaline engage with the notion that storytelling and myth are both necessary and dangerous, painful, and liberatory. In contrast to diseased extractive ideologies, the novels showcase the creative, (re)generative, and renewing potential of stories oriented towards the future, without turning their backs on the baggage of the past as well as the present. As Christopher B. Teuton argues, stories "enable us to create our worlds" (xii), while at the same time they are "a source of reflection on the responsibilities of being" (xiii). The ability to dream is the ability to imagine the future in a speculative sense: the interwoven stories of the characters in these novels highlight the importance of telling different kinds of stories in order to imagine that healthier futures might still be possible.

#### **Notes**

- 1. In *Salt Fish Girl*, material/bodily traces are texts that invite further reading but will never be fully deciphered by existing paradigms. For example, the durian seed holds within it the secret code for life in the past- present-and-future of the novel: "a pearl in the mouth... something cool and precious to lay in the cavity from which speech comes. The dark and empty rooting place of language. A pearl, a seed, how little space it takes to record all that is essential to know about life" (Lai 206).
- 2. The significance of a change in setting —the characters' movements to and from the Unregulated Zone in *Salt Fish Girl*, and from the city to the forest in *The Marrow Thieves* reflects Derrida's observations about the significance of the geographical space in which Socrates felt the need to refer to myths. The river outside of Athens where he and Phaedrus sit and converse is the same river where one the myth of Pharmacia had allegedly taken place. In *Salt Fish Girl*, for example, Miranda would not have met Evie if her family had not been exiled from Serendipity; at the same time, she would not have been born if her father had not secretly brought the durian from the Unregulated Zone.
- 3. Miranda herself does not register her affliction as negative: "I did not think of myself as a child

- afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments" (70). In fact, despite her father's deep shame, she says, "I did not feel unwell" (167). On the contrary, she says, "my dreams comforted me. I dreamt often of the sea, but not of drowning" (168). For Miranda, the disease brings back ancient memories of humans' evolutionary history, and this lineage is heightened in the novel by the presence of the cloned Sonias who share their DNA with "freshwater carp" (158).
- 4. This act of sabotage is, in turn, re-absorbed within the capitalist system, when the "memory-proof soles" are advertised by Pallas as "protection from the dreaming disease" (Lai 244). *The Marrow Thieves* similarly problematizes the dangers of the cultural assimilation of that which is potentially transformative: "At first, people turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them," but quickly they looked "for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves. How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical?" (Dimaline 88). The problematic appropriation of Indigenous knowledge is also reflected in Salt Fish Girl: the building in the mountains was designed by a "Native architect," "as though purchasing her labour would somehow connect their project to the land" (Lai 267).
- 5. The almost complete loss of language for Indigenous people in Canada echoes Nu Wa's experience on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, where she acquires the "gift of speech" "albeit at the expense of" her "native tongue" (132)—not to mention her kinship, culture, and community.

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#### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### Connectivity and Collectivity: Network- Oriented Sociological Storytelling, Intra-Action, and the Pandemic Response Scenario in Greg Bear's "Darwin's Radio"



### Ben Horn and Jayde Martin

This paper examines Greg Bear's depiction of a pandemic crisis response scenario in his text, *Darwin's Radio* (1999). It analyses his portrayal of the biopolitical and necropolitical impacts of this response under neoliberal capitalism. We seek to explore how Bear represents such biopolitical and necropolitical pressures of a pandemic and the effects of this on characters who embody intersectional struggle. We do this by examining Bear's use of what we term Network Oriented Sociological Storytelling (NOSS). NOSS is an identification of the networked connections of an existing social order and its resulting social phenomena. Borrowing concepts from posthumanism and feminist new materialism (Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad), we examine Bear's ontology of networked agency and emergence that produces these phenomena. This is then considered alongside Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe's analysis of institutional networks of oppression (Biopolitics and Necropolitics). By bringing these methodologies and Bear's use of NOSS into conservation with one another, we reveal the extent to which Bear relies upon the construction of networks within *Darwin's Radio*.

NOSS is a worldbuilding method that treats social connections and their resulting phenomena as the objects of its critique. By combining them with sf's speculative nature, NOSS identifies existing social relations in the light of an imagined future to make them the subject to critical inquiry. In Bear's case, his text elaborates on observations of actors from the historical context of 1990's and early 2000s America, and its accompanying networks of social institutions, which remain with us into 2020/2021. *Darwin's Radio* is a form of NOSS that helps us to better examine real world reactions to pandemics. In Bear's text, protagonists, biologist Kaye Lang, and archaeologist Mitch Rafleson, discover that the fictive SHEVA (Scattered Human Endogenous RetroVirus Activation) is not a virus, but a part of the human genome, capable of short-term, directed evolutionary adaptation that spreads like a virus.

Bear's text is a composite of sf and pandemic fiction. His choice to write within the genre of sf contributes to *Darwin's Radio*'s enduring relevance (Haraway 6). Sf is noted for its ability to create thought experiments which act as self-reflexive critiques of contemporary social reality, which may be repurposed for different periods. The act of speculation involves constructing possible alternative realities based on the networked relations that underpin sociological phenomena. By identifying such patterns in the relations between agential networks, future developments can be imagined. The manufacture of these new realities is a key component of NOSS and one frequently present in sf. With a focus on social connections and their resulting phenomena, sf texts can remain pertinent beyond their historical context. This is because some of the larger cultural social

actors within the networks they examine continue to exist (capitalism, sexism, racism etc). Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio* is one of these texts that exhibits its significance through its use of NOSS.

We argue that sociological interactions which are the basis of NOSS in *Darwin's Radio*, are what feminist new materialist philosopher Karen Barad calls "Intra-actions", material-discursive relations that produce social phenomena (33). She states that "the neologism 'intra-action' signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" in contrast to the interaction of established bodies. "These entangled entities are productive, on multiple scales; different intra-actions produce different phenomena" (Barad 58). The objects of measurement "emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them". Therefore, in this paper we focus exclusively on the result of multiple sociological intra-actions and the social phenomena they produce (128). Intraaction illustrates the interconnectedness of social phenomena and their physical, material effects upon one another. Intra-actions refuse to artificially separate agency into distinct categories. Instead, it attributes agency to all phenomena, at the macro and microscopic scales. Thus, it provides a formula of networked agency that resists the conflict between seemingly innate material characteristics and contextual, environmental factors and relationships. In this model, agency emerges through relations, which can change. These dynamic forces include natural and social phenomena. It also includes the material phenomena these connections produce. How these intra-actions are/could be put to work means that they could be utilised for politically oppressive or liberating ends. Therefore, Bear uses NOSS to highlight the problematic aspects of state and industry involvement in pandemic responses under neoliberalism.

As organisms integrate environmental and genetic information at all levels, there is no line dividing where genetics ends, and the environment begins. Bear's text highlights the significant societal responses to genetic differences, so the intra-actions stemming from SHEVA form the basis of our analysis. Intra-action thus removes agency from exclusive reference to the subject of liberal humanism and instead situates agency in the realm of entangled human and non-human entities. *Darwin's Radio* also depicts agency as neither the exclusive property of either the human subject, or pre-established bodies. Rosi Braidotti notes that classical humanism distinguishes what is human (the properties, abilities, capacities, etc associated with the human) from the non-human through "the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness" (Braidotti 23). Here, the human needs the non-human for its definition, while the non-human is only defined negatively; as "other" to the human (23)

Subjects are deemed non-human, or less than human in relation to signifiers of difference, imagined or otherwise. This applies to discourse of health, disease, and disability, forming part of the mechanisms by which such identities are produced and maintained. But this alterity is not given but produced. The consequence of this production of alterity are the practices of biopolitics and necropolitics. Biopolitics is a political rationality that takes the administration of life as its subject. 'Life' applies to individuals, populations (groups, localities, states), or the species Homo Sapiens. It draws on the biological body of the human, but also discourses of biology, ethics, politics, and sociology. During pandemics, the desire to categorise and classify the infected from

the uninfected intensifies the power of biopolitical mechanisms. As a result, surveillance and additional measures of control are imposed under the guise of protecting citizens from becoming biologically compromised. Initially developed by Michel Foucault, biopolitics is defined as "the means to ensure, sustain and multiply life, to put this life in order" (Foucault 138).

To "put this life in order" means to establish heterogenous categories according to which forms of life can be classified and disciplined. The product of these power relations can result in material and immaterial forms of domination, such as the conflation of physical health with moral health, or the treatment of physical health and abnormalities with social ills. Likewise, this can lead to conceptual identification of marks of criminality on the bodies of those who do not or fail to adhere to the prevailing forms of categorisation. On the topic of capital punishment, Foucault points out the conflation of the rhetoric of disease with material practices of discrimination:

[C]apital punishment could not be maintained except by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others. (138)

In the text, SHEVA mutations produce visible changes in the body, which distinguish the uninfected from the infected 'other'. As SHEVA affects the species Homo Sapiens, the text shows society's attempts to maintain an image of the species against the possibility of genetic difference. According to this, life and its growth may be allowed or disallowed, to the point of death. This power over life and its continual development is what Foucault calls 'biopower' - an apparatus which entails the classification, administration and regulation of individuals and populations, and even whole species, in accordance with norms:

[Biopower emerges with] numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations. (140)

The intra-action of these different discourses within and between institutions, is instrumental to the functioning of biopolitics.

In *Darwin's Radio*, Americol (Bear's representative for the pharmaceutical industry) and the American state intra-act to continue profit production during a pandemic. In contemporary capitalism, social relations become indistinguishable from productive forces, as both are geared towards profit production and administration. Writing of biopolitics after Foucault, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that post-Fordist capitalism is explicitly biopolitical, an arrangement in its prime at Bear's time of writing. What is produced under post-Fordist capitalism are subjects able to labour and consume, constituted through economic, social, and biological relations, which in turn are consumed and geared towards profit production: "Production becomes indistinguishable from reproduction; productive forces merge with relations of production" (Hardt and Negri 385). Therefore, policing and sustaining the normative body and its reproduction is integral to capitalism.

Both Marc Augustine (Head of the CDC) and Marge Cross (CEO of Americol) are symbolic of biopolitical regulation. At one of their meetings, Cross and Augustine "embrace" and "kiss" (Bear 155). Their romantically coded encounter symbolises ways in which wealthy pharmaceutical industries court the cooperation of the American government in regulating healthcare and, by extension, the population, creating a literal public-private partnership. The profitable social phenomena from their intra-action is the manipulation of the president to acquire more funds, and the exploitation of biologist Kaye Lang to marketize the SHEVA cure.

Kaye's services are utilised to research the SHEVA virus with the aim of finding a cure and to produce biopolitical bodies able to labour under these conditions. This fusion of intellectual labour, institutional, political, and scientific rhetorics become the absolute of biopolitical rationality:

The symbiosis between intellectual labor and institutional, political, and scientific rhetorics became absolute on this terrain, and every conceptual formation came to be marked by it: the formalization of politics, the instrumentalization of science and technique for profit, the pacification of social antagonisms. (Hardt and Negri 80)

When Kaye initially agrees to work for Marge Cross, she is told her research and presentability are profitable, indicating the subordination of scientific labour to profit-production. She reduces herself to being "Kaye Lang the corporate item." (Bear 142) She uses the idea of "corporate item" to express her self-exploitation and to berate her choice to comply with capitalism for better "dresses" and "silk blouses" because she doubts Americol's stated goals of population protection for scientifically sound reasons. She is not sure that SHEVA is a virus that should be eradicated via a cure, yet she still works towards this goal. Her sense of self is subsumed into Americol's property. The consumption of her body as an Americal asset further demonstrates its likeness to an immune response, turning her from a threat into an advocate for its cure and its subsequent marketization. Kaye is even told that she "is... female and presentable enough" to "ease the public" when discussing the disease on TV. She is also "famous" and "presentable" (Bear141-142) which demonstrates how celebrity culture serves to marketise both the virus and its cure through a medium that already exerts a strong amount of biopolitical power. Augustine manipulates the political system using fear of "mutant children" (154) to force the president to adhere to his agenda. The birthing body is legislated by those in power, transforming SHEVA mothers and children from subjects to "reservoirs" of infection:

[Augustine]: "If the babies get out in the general public, they'll be vectors. All it took for AIDS was a few." (331)

The ruling class attempts to reproduce itself, and its ideological image of humanity, through the intra-action of state and private companies.

Bear highlights the mechanisms of stigma and control that operate on a macro-level (global and state) by introducing the reader to the public sanctioned violence, and the micro-level by

including characters that exemplify the intersectional oppression faced during global pandemics. Here, states, institutions, and individuals intra-act to produce ideologies of discrimination that are often violent. Bear represents these to make them objects of critique.

SHEVA patients experience changes in skin pigmentation, second pregnancies post-miscarriage, and cold and flu like symptoms, which become signifiers for the dualisms of self/other and uninfected/infected other. These divisions based on physical differences, are grafted onto the human/non-human split. Such dualisms are typically codified by a series of social norms, from which the infected, or unhealthy 'other' are seen to deviate. Norms are both a common standard, and a unit of measurement against this standard. In biopolitics, distribution around norms creates categories into which individuals may be grouped, on medical, political, and moral lines (Foucault, *Discipline* 197-198); healthy and unhealthy; able-bodied and disabled; sanity and madness; typical and atypical, etc. Within Bear's text, this manifests as the dualism between infected and uninfected. This power produces subjectivities, and at the same time excludes them through apparatuses of stigmatization based on bodily characteristics, which are treated as signifiers of infection. People who display such signs are not only the target of social, political, and medical stigmatization, but likewise have their political status partially or completely revoked.

Neoliberal values of responsibility, individualism, and rationality, are also some of the characteristics defined as being part of liberal humanist ideology (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 29). Liberal humanism elevates a "partial image of Man", one with these qualities, to "the top of a hierarchy" which measures ontological worth (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 105).

That [exclusionary] humanist image of 'Man' also implemented social systems built on sexism, homo-and-transphobia, colonialism and racism that turned cultural specificity into a fake universal and normality into a normative injunction. (105)

In the worst cases, this dialectic of self and other is naturalised and thus 'social systems' that create "a fake universal normality" also create the domination of disposable bodies. By establishing such hierarchies of decreasing worth, humanism mistakes this partial image of 'Man' for the differential reality of Homo Sapiens because Pandemics trouble the idea of what constitutes a healthy body. Consequently then, the SHEVA virus infection exposes the falsity of this image of 'Man' (Tully 45). The construction of a healthy body is dependent on a medical checklist to identify and categorise the human body as healthy, creating heterogenous categories of appearance, functionality, mental states, and their corresponding pathologies, around which norms are distributed and maintained.

It can be said, then, that Bear's text and its representation of a pandemic, destabilises the ontology of philosophical humanism. The emphasis on a uniformity of the human body, and therefore identity, on functionality and action is because of a capitalist focus on the 'healthy' human body as one that can both labour and consume (Oliver 4). Those who fall outside of this category are then classed as disabled (Turner 1-6). This dualism of able and disabled stigmatizes those unable to labour in the expected manner. These anxieties are projected onto SHEVA

children because their ability to communicate differently is an unexpected anomaly and one that affects their ability to labour and consume in a predictable fashion.

Bear illustrates a form of necropolitics in the violence and "social death" (Mbembe 21) of SHEVA patients, up to and including the internment of children in 'concentration nurseries' (Bear 344). SHEVA occupies a liminal space between the biopolitical and necropolitical policing of populations. Bear introduces the reader to institutionally sanctioned stigma and the discrimination it engenders through his inclusion of genocidal measures of pandemic control. Bear compares the American approach to SHEVA to that of contemporary and Stalinist Georgia to demonstrate global similarities to pandemic responses. Their reactions are the same, they both follow similar populist reactions to SHEVA infected people, the only differences being their national and cultural contexts.

Bear uses the Nazi regime, an extreme example of biopolitical control, to inform his depiction of the genocidal administration and the generalised instrumentalization of death. By doing this, Bear brings the mechanism of stigmatisation and its signifiers to the forefront of his text. The SHEVA infection manifests in literal, visible marks that can be identified, classified, and used as a target for discrimination. These visible markers identify, isolate and segregate those who do not fit societal norms and are cast into a necropolitical zone of death:

Reliable sources in the Ukraine had told him of women bearing subtle, and not so subtly different children, of children immaculately conceived, of entire villages razed and sterilized... in the wake of a plague of miscarriages. (Bear 49)

Thirteen thousand men, women, and even children were killed in Georgia, Armenia, Abkhazia, and Chechnya because they were believed to spread a disease that cause women to abort. Fifteen thousand pregnant women [in the USA] were murdered in the last six weeks. Fifteen thousand, Christopher. (153-154)

This resembles Nazi campaigns to find individuals who apparently belonged in internment camps, such as 'a-socials' or 'hereditary degenerates' (Evans 74, 80) to remove them from the public based on assumptions of inherent criminality. It also animalizes the subjects in question, meaning political subjects, but beings that can simply be killed; their deaths become a technical question. By including this practice of eugenic purging, Bear demonstrates how the American state retains the right to kill of older sovereign societies. Though not as overt as the Nazi regime, Bear demonstrates that the US state has internalised the same compulsions to produce a 'healthy' body by eliminating those perceived as carriers of infection. The necropower these regimes exercise becomes self-defeating and auto-genocidal. As SHEVA is part of the genome, the virus is conflated with bodies and hereditary, meaning the only way to eliminate it is to eliminate anyone who has, is, or could carry it.

At the micro-level, Bear's character Delia exemplifies similar injustices marginalised people face during a neoliberal pandemic response. NOSS enables Bear to connect the different types

of discrimination and how their intra-action results in the oppression of vulnerable people during a pandemic. Intersectional analysis of Delia's circumstances examines the intra-actions of sociological phenomena that create multiple systems of oppression. Through the classification inherent in dominant liberal humanist ideology, those made less-than-human in the hierarchy of worth face different types of discrimination. The relationship between one identity category and the humanist image of man intra-acts to create discrimination. However, when a subject is ascribed more than one of these less-than-human identities, their associated oppressions intra-act, resulting in harsher and more violent forms of discrimination.

The sociological study of HIV/AIDS and the impact this has on social relationships is going to be used as a model for discussing SHEVA and the discrimination faced by SHEVA patients. Bear links SHEVA to HIV/AIDS in his afterword when discussing his interest in Human Endogenous Retroviruses (HERV). He states that scientific research changes fast, but he read about the role that HIV developed in combination with HERV to potentially mutate to be resistant to potent drugs. It is safe to say then that the HIV pandemic, with is biological interaction with HERV acted as a model for Bear's fictional virus (Bear Afterword).

HIV scholarship has identified that one of the many causes of mass death during the pandemic was, and still is, the stigma around being infected (Loufty et al 1). This stigma is supported on the popularly accepted dualistic binary of infected/uninfected which in turn is part of the larger binary of healthy/ unhealthy, able/disabled (Hanass-Hancock). HIV/AIDS patients have also said that sociological stigmatisation stems from a cultural mark associated with the disclosure of infection (Earnshaw et al 1160-1178). This mark is invisible, therefore, conceptual. However, Bear literalises this through SHEVA's pathology and his patient's marks. The sociological impact of SHEVA closely follows the model of the fallout from the HIV pandemic. Many disability scholars classify HIV/AIDS as a disability based on its impairment of the body to the point of inability to labour, produce and consume in the expected and desired manner. We class the SHEVA infection as a disability because it has the same effect - human bodies cannot labour and reproduce in the expected and desired manner, their process of labour is different, incompatible with the uniformity that capitalism requires to function.

While it is problematic that Bear only conveys such struggles through one character who is taken to embody them, Delia's placement in the narrative allows readers access to the experience of other injustices relating to intersectional discrimination present in societies operating under systems of neoliberal capitalism. Delia is a young, black, and homeless SHEVA mother who meets the protagonists through hitch-hiking with her friends. Her bi-racial heritage and visible SHEVA marks create an intersectional discrimination borne of both racism and ableism. Black women with HIV have identified that their source of comfort and support about their diagnosis and all it entails are their families and other black women with HIV (Melton et al 300). Assuming similar circumstances for SHEVA patients, the fact that Delia is with her two white friends demonstrates that she is removed from adequate comfort and support.

"The girl's face was blotched and mottled, as if splattered with reddish-brown paint [...] "Delia was pregnant, but her baby was born dead," he said. "She got some skin problems because of it." [...] "He was a white boy," Morgan continued, [...] "and Delia is partly black." [...] "I am black," Delia said [...] "[he] said she was making him sick" [..] The pattern of demelanized, teardrop-shaped dapples, [were] mostly on her cheeks with several symmetrical patches at the corners of her eyes and lips. As she turned away from Kaye, the marks shifted and darkened. "They're like freckles," Delia said hopefully. "I get freckles sometimes. It's my white blood, I guess." (Bear 295)

There is also a triple layer of privilege being exercised by Delia's boyfriend when her situation is analysed through the lens of intersectionality (Walby et al 240). His assumption of being able to hit her is based on the American acceptance of public sanctioned white violence against black people, the conflation of her infection with genetic pollution, and reproductive sexism. Bear states that men's bodies are most likely the vectors of infection. However, women are still blamed for the spread of SHEVA, due to patriarchal views about feminine bodies and sexual morality. Therefore, Delia's apparently unhealthy SHEVA body infects and supposedly feminises her boyfriend by placing him in the 'passive' position of receiver. The loss of privilege that comes from having his white, able-bodied, masculine identity challenged leads to him projecting his anxiety, and aggression onto Delia in a violent outburst. Delia's boyfriend fits the identity categories Braidotti notes as being at the top of a hierarchy of ontological worth. His loss of this privilege (losing this status) leads to his violent attack against Delia, believing her infection to be the source of this loss.

This paper has examined the responses to a pandemic crisis scenario in *Darwin's Radio* by examining the networked intra-action of different social forces, and their biopolitical and necropolitical consequences by analysing Bear's use of NOSS. It has observed the linkages between Bear's critique of biopolitics and a latent critique of capitalism, as well as the links between SHEVA and HIV, signifiers of discrimination, and institutionalised eugenic practices. Finally, it has demonstrated how Bear utilises characters such as Delia to represent the effects of such intra-actions at a personal level, as well as how neoliberal pandemic responses intensify the injustices suffered by already vulnerable members of the population. The focus on networks and the social phenomena they produce within Bear's text gives us a critical framework with which to analyse and better evaluate the impacts of existing equivalents, such as the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **Notes**

1. 'Significant modern SF, with deeper and more lasting sources of enjoyment, also presupposes more complex and wider cognitions: it discusses primarily the political, psychological, and anthropological *use and effect of knowledge*, *of philosophy of science*, and the becoming or failure of new realities as a result of it.' Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale University Press. 1979. 14-15.

### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES Pandemic Response in "Darwin's Radio"

- 2. Public-Private-Partnerships (PPP) are a key component of Neoliberalism. See; Roehrich, Jens K. Lewis, Michael A. George, Gerard. 'Are public-private partnerships a healthy option? A systematic literature review'. Social Science & Medicine. Vol. 113. 2014: 110-119; Arestis, Philip and Malcolm Sawyer. 'The Neoliberal Experience of the United Kingdom'. Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader. ed. Alfredo Saad-Fihlo and Deborah Johnston. London: Pluto Press, 2005. Print. pp.199-208. For more on the pharmaceutical industry, see Sekerka, Leslie E. Lauren Benishek. 'Thick as Thieves? Big Pharma Wields Its Power with the Help of Government Regulation Government Regulation'. Emory Corporate Governance and Accountability Review. Vol 5, No.2, 2018. 113-141.
- 3. For the use of 'autonomy' in neoliberalism, see Sinha, Subir. 'Neoliberalism and Civil Society: Projects and Possibilities'. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader.* ed. Alfredo Saad-Fihlo and Deborah Johnston. London: Pluto Press, 2005. Print. p.166; for rationalism and individualism, see Ronaldo Munck. 'Neoliberalism and Politics, and the Politics of Neoliberalism'. Ibid. 61.64; Subir Sinha. 'Neoliberalism and Civil Society: Project and Possibilities'. Ibid. 163.
- 4. Todorov, Tzvetan. *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Princeton University Press, 2002, quoted in Rosi Braidotti. Posthuman Knowledge. 1st ed. Polity, 2019, 10.

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Ben Horn's project examines selected science fiction texts (both long and short form) by Philip K. Dick through the lens of 'Speculative Realist' philosophy. Drawing on thinkers such as Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Timothy Morton, his work examines how Dick's fiction critiques post-Kantian 'correlationist' philosophy (Meillassoux, 2007). His interest in ontology, genre fiction, and science has developed since his undergraduate dissertation. His project is supervised by two literary critics, one trained in phenomenology, the other in post-humanism. He is a fellow of the English PEN society, has participated in the 'Anthropocenes' and 'Productive Futures' conferences, and co-organised the 'Speculative Futures' event at the university of Birmingham (£200). He has co-authored a chapter for the upcoming book, *Posthuman Pathogenesis* with Jayde Martin and presented with her at the 2021 'Living in the End Times' conference. He has likewise given seminars on the topic of science fiction, futurity, and crisis. He was an affiliate of the Centre for Digital Cultures During his undergraduate degree, he was awarded a Royal Holloway bursary and his work has been published in *Foundation* and *Fantastika*. He is also co-founder of the University of Birmingham Contemporary Theory Reading Group (CTRL Network).

Jayde Martin is a UKRI funded PhD student at the University of Birmingham. She has also been previously awarded a research grant for her MA in Literature and Culture. Her thesis analyses the representations of genetic science in feminist science-fiction by three authors: Octavia Butler, Nancy Kress, and Margaret Atwood. She uses posthumanist and transhumanist philosophy as a critical framework within her project. She has a special interest in the capability of science-fiction to act as a form of popular science communication. She has organised and chaired a panel on the importance of humanities methodologies in science and technology studies at the Nordic STS conference in 2019. Alongside this, she has co-founded two research networks These are the Central Posthumanism Research Network, and the Midlands Network of Popular Culture. She has previously contributed to the field of object-oriented research; her work explored museology as a key component of science (mis)communication. Her article Gender Identity: Friedrich Ziegler's (1850-1920) Wax Models has been published in the journal Midlands Art Papers. She has co-authored a chapter for the upcoming book, Posthuman Pathogenesis with Ben Horn and presented with him at the 2021 'Living in the End Times' conference.

### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

### Living Beyond the End Times: An Argument for Queer Utopianism



#### **Ariel Kroon**

More concretely, this refusal that I describe as queerness is not just homosexuality but the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place.

– José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia 134<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 2020, American politics dominated the news headlines here in Canada; an unavoidable reality, especially given that Canadian politics often takes cues from American campaigns. This year was no exception. President Joe Biden's website for his transition, for example, is called buildbackbetter.gov, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau used the phrases "build back better" and "building back better" a few times in his own speech from the throne (delivered by Governor General Julie Payette)<sup>2</sup> back in September 2020 (Moscrop). This slogan was picked up on immediately by the Canadian Conservative party – their website states that Liberal policy is to "build back better" and contrasts that with their own new motto of "Build Back Stronger" ("Build Back Stronger"). The original "Building Back Better" strategy, however, was not a political slogan but the name for a specific approach adopted by the UN in 2015 in the aftermath of natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, or earthquakes, and was used as early as 2006 during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami relief effort by UN officials. The strategy aims to reduce the risk to communities in the wake of future disasters by integrating disaster risk reduction measures into the restoration of physical infrastructures, social systems, and more ("Sendai Framework").

Current political discourse has taken the concept of disaster as a natural occurrence and applied it to the realm of sociopolitical relations as a precondition for justifying their campaigns' focus on the past; for example, the Trump presidency was "a disaster" in many ways, or Liberal policies have been "a disaster" for the Canadian economy, or to elect a Conservative government would be "a disaster." Regardless of left- or right-leaning political agendas, it is unanimously agreed upon by politicians and journalists alike that a disaster of some sort has occurred—and perhaps is still even unfolding—in the sociopolitical sphere and that the state and the electorate must recover from it. The slogans "Building Back Better" and "Building Back Stronger" are almost identical in their emphasis on building back. It is immediately evident that both of these mottos are ultimately conservative ideas of a future made perfect by either an augmentation or concentration of past social structures and policies in order to achieve an ideal state or utopia. Thomas More's original *Utopia* was not a new or even progressive social formation (Jameson 229), just one transferred to a distant land where the totalitarian governing system functioned smoothly and without meaningful dissent to disrupt the static social order. This paper argues that since conventional (or 'abstract') ideas of utopia uncritically idealize the past and seek to bring about a

sociopolitical order based on the continuation and rehabilitation of a glorified past, it is necessary to adopt a praxis of queer utopia in order for society to truly move forward.

Queerness as a utopian formation is future-oriented, but with firm roots in the context of the contemporary moment. José Esteban Muñoz grounds queer utopia in a praxis of hope as a critical methodology in his book *Cruising Utopia* and describes queer utopia as "a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (16); by looking to the past, queer utopian dreamers see what can be redeemed but also what can be avoided. The past is not a template, but more a loose collection of guidelines or a 'moodboard' that provides inspiration and a target for utopian hopes, which may well be disappointed at times by the events that transpire on the way to the future. But just because hope can be disappointed (and is prone to it) is not, Muñoz writes, a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process. Disappointment *needs to be risked* in order to resist certain impasses (Muñoz 20), such as the despair induced by the slow-moving but ever-present threat of climate catastrophe, or the long dreadful waiting of coronavirus lockdowns, or the intensification of current political fascisms. Further to this paper's discussion, Muñoz writes that the strategy of turning "to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity" (43). Queer utopias are a practice: not a noun, but a verb, always informed by a critical methodology of hope that evaluates the past to make sure that the future is worthwhile.

This paper builds on Muñoz's discussion of queer utopia as it stands in contrast to conventional ideas of utopia, which Muñoz calls abstract utopias and describes as "dead ends, too often vectoring into the escapist disavowal of our current moment" (43). While *Cruising Utopia* discusses the nature of utopian dreaming in the context of queer politics' mid-90s obsession with achieving marriage equality, Muñoz's critical interrogation of the way that utopian dreaming is mobilized politically is useful to apply to the contemporary sociopolitical moment of coronavirus and climate catastrophe. Muñoz explicitly likens the abstract utopian desire for the attainment of marriage equality with what Lauren Berlant calls a "stupid" form of optimism: "the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking—for example, the prospect of class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity—will secure one's happiness" (126). Muñoz critiques the desire for marriage equality as an investment in a surface-level issue that grants the appearance of utopian achievement, but is still dictated by the standards set by heteronormativity and does nothing to change the deeply homophobic—often violently so—structuring of society.

I argue that a similar phenomenon can be seen in the way that Canadian and American politicians mobilize their political slogans to present the appearance of utopia through the promise of surface-level policy change that will in fact only strengthen, as opposed to dismantle, the structural inequalities of the status quo. For example, the stupid optimism of a slogan like "Build Back Better" assumes that happiness can be secured for every citizen by a return to a vague, unspecified "Time Before," that has been altered just slightly by progressive policies that grant a modicum of dignity and humanity to women and minorities. Something like the 1980s, but also post-#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter and #IdleNoMore, a society that is still built on deeply

embedded structures of racism, classism, and sexism, not to mention its devotion to neoliberal policy and economic gain at the cost of human happiness. The dream of building back better ignores the way that these underlying forces continue to perpetuate the need for campaigns such as #MeToo, uncritically believing that if a society looks diverse and and appears to be thriving on the surface, there is no need for any deeper commitment to dismantling structural oppression. The abstract nature of traditional utopian politics is most evident in the conservative slogan "Build Back Stronger," where no such augmentation is promised and the promises of liberation for women, queer, and Black folks would be in fact detrimental to the happiness of a lot of conservative voter bases in the Western world (Ahmed "Feminist Killjoys," "Killing Joy," and "The Politics of Good Feeling").

The rhetoric of "building back" is intensely problematic not just for the above reasons, but most significantly for its depiction of an alternate reality that clashes with the bald fact that there is no place for anyone, no matter their identity, to which to return where their pre-climate change way of life can be continued happily and safely. The Anthropocene progresses; climate catastrophe progresses, whether politicians want it to or not (Casselman). Politics as usual deliberately ignores the fact that climate catastrophe is much larger than the concerns of human political campaigns, implicating and affecting all life on the planet (human and non-) and, as Timothy Morton points out, reaching backwards into geological time as well as forward into the future (49-51). Berlant terms the abstract utopic desire for the 'good life,' despite the fact that the world as we know it is actively falling apart, as "cruel optimism," describing it as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24), even if that object is what prevents the 'good life' in the end—for example, a treasured car whose fossil fuel emissions contribute to the warming of the world that will in turn drive up the price of the fossil fuels the vehicle needs in order to run. Abstract utopia can be seen most clearly in conservative politicians' wishful thinking to return to a less complicated time when citizens (aka cismale white heterosettlers) were prospering, the economy was doing well, and climate change was not a thing that existed to be worried about.

In contrast to the wishful abstraction of classic utopianism, queer utopia as presented by Muñoz is concrete and actionable, in keeping with present reality—climate catastrophe, racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia and all—and still dares to hope for the future. Muñoz writes that, while these 'concrete' utopias can seem like daydreams, they are "the realm of educated hope" (15) that directly contrast the abstract, uncritical utopia—"utopia' in its pejorative sense, the good place that is no place" (Alberro 20). This paper could exchange "educated" for "informed" or "radical," the kind of clear-eyed hope that assesses and understands the past and present in order to inform the future.

Queer utopia relies on a praxis of explicitly radical hope, separating out wishful, uncritical versions of hope from a more concrete, informed, earned hope. Hannah MacGregor, in conversation with Eugenia Zuroski, observes that uncritical expressions of hope "[come] so often packaged in ... toxic positivity" that insists that "we are all in this together" and that "we will get through this terrible situation," yet for many people (especially people of colour and queer people)

"we don't always get through this" (11:52-12:05). Zuroski therefore posits a "radical hope" as a hope that is earned: the kind of hope that marginalized people such as Black, Indigenous, people of colour, LGBTQ2S+ and disabled people, have been "earning all along ... just by living under conditions that are designed to deprive you of ... hope for yourself ... for your own survival, your own flourishing, and your own future" (13:52-15:25). Radical hope is an outgrowth of a kind of political consciousness that comes from being trapped inside a system that is wholly devoted to a cruelly optimistic promise, of a recognition of that promise of the good life as cruel, denying it, and searching elsewhere for optimism.

The hallmark of the abstract utopia is its foundation upon wishful thinking disguised as hope, which furthers the distortion of past, present, and future reality, instead of the radical hope that brings about concrete change. Zuroski elaborates on the difference between wishing and hoping with the example of someone prefacing their opinion with the phrase "I hope this isn't racist," and then going and saying something egregiously racist (17:21). Zuroski identifies how, in this example, the speaker uses the terminology of hope to express the wish that their sentiment were not racist, because they wish that they themselves were not racist. However, that wish is contrary to the reality of the situation and, to quote Zuroski again, "you can't hope for realities not to exist" (17:21); hope is not an applicable word in this situation. Zuroski goes on to say that in order for marginalized people and their allies to access truly radical hope, it is necessary to dedicate time to "thinking about temporality ... your relationship to histories [and] to the present .... and let that inform how you build a relationship to the future, which is what hope is.... hope is the name for relating to a future of some kind" and that "you can't just hope out of nowhere. You have to do the work of understanding... where we've come from, where we all are right now, where you are in the middle of all that, then you can start to...build your hope" (18:03). Change, MacGregor agrees, has to be intrinsically tied to will and to action, not an ephemeral wish for a better future to abstractly happen, somehow.

The ability to access radical hope and queer utopia thus lies in what Sara Ahmed calls "being for being against," a move that affirms a specific type of negation. Saying yes to a no, or affirming negation, Ahmed writes, is still in the end an affirmation, which could "reinstitute a certain yes as the proper signifier of queer politics, even as a yes to what's not" (*The Promise* 162). For example, saying yes to a no could take the form of choosing to celebrate instead of being ashamed of one's queer identity despite pervasive homophobic messaging from one's family and culture. This responds in large part to queer people being defined by the negative and characterized by political or social propagandists as anti-family, anti-heterosexual, anti-woman, anti-man, anti-child, and more.[4] The practice of saying yes to a no, however, does not mean that now the individual can only experience depression and despair. Ahmed makes the point that it is possible to explore "the strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair ... within forms of politics that take as a starting point a critique of the world as it is, and a belief that the world can be different" (*The Promise* 163). Radical hope can therefore be accessed via saying yes to non-normative ways of

being, by investing in alternative lifeways that contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman beings into the future. Acting on that radical hope is performing a queer utopia into being.

Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear illustrates how radical hope illuminates a queer utopia in the Anthropocentric present, as she turns to the past with the purpose of envisioning a future despite ongoing catastrophe. Tallbear, who is Dakota, finds hope and what she terms a "hostile joy" in the "implosion of the settler narrative," (0:20:57) which assumed the inevitable failure of Indigenous lifeways in the United States and Canada. She finds hope in the changes in "mythologies and thinking" and the demise of violent intellectual systems (such as terra nullius, extractivism, and petroculture) as humans are now reckoning with "earthly systems' agitation against anthropogenic change" (Tallbear, 25:28). For example, Tallbear remembers that after floods in 1997 in Minnesota, the farms were transformed into wetlands and she does not see endings there, but instead the regeneration of the prairies, returning to themselves (26:40). She does not celebrate the devastation of planetary ecosystems or the most vulnerable humans and non-humans, but instead finds a radical hope in "trusting in the collective genius of all the people who have survived these 'wicked systems" (Tallbear, 20:57). Her hopefulness is not a narrative, Tallbear emphasizes, of redeeming the colonial empire to make it more inclusive (as a liberal politics wishing to "build back better" would have it), but instead an opportunity to be in relation and to care for each other as relations in the present (22:40). Tallbear's radical hope is selective in its celebration of certain resurgences of the past—such as land reclamation and rediscovering of kinship and relational modalities—and her deliberate "hostile joy" in the demise of ideologies rooted in the past that are in the process of falling by the wayside of history. The future is as much about what is present as what is absent; queer utopia is deliberate about its inclusions and exclusions.

The 'failure' of certain lifeways and political systems is no reason to abandon them to history; in fact, this paper argues that these social systems' failure is key to keeping them from being cast as wishful thinking and categorized as abstracted utopias that did not work because of their ideological impracticability, instead of deliberate opposition from sociopolitical forces that made these lifeways impossible in the past. Muñoz reads the failure of queer people to conform to heteronormative dictates as a kernel of utopian potentiality, writing that utopia's rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure, and that queer utopia represents "most profoundly" a failure to be normal (172). Queer utopia does not dream of the past entirely as an abstracted good that it wishes for the future, but grounds itself in the refusal of oppressive elements of past society as much as it affirms others for inclusion in the utopic future, bringing forward a patchwork of sustainable lifeways that can ensure the flourishing of the queer (and/or Indigenous/feminist/ POC) subject despite the present presence of oppression, sociopolitical or otherwise. As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti reminds us, affirmation is not banal optimism, but "the process of transforming pain into praxis" ("Self-styling").

Queer utopia stands in contrast to the slogans of building back better in its fundamental refusal to believe in the inherent good of the sociopolitical structuring of the world before COVID-19. A practice of radical hope, to me, is not wishing for a world in which the same

neoliberal policies, petroculture, patriarchy, and heterosettler society of the Canadian state is restored by way of a vaccine, but instead a fierce sort of hope for a radical restructuring of the status quo that recognizes indigenous sovereignty, tackles climate change as much as possible, and makes a just recovery from the pandemic that recognizes and prioritizes the health and wellbeing of all. Practicing radical hope also means a daily engagement with building the conditions by which certain elements of queer utopia can be made possible: relation-building, advocating for climate policy, standing up for the rights of oppressed peoples, working to undermine capitalist modes of transaction and exchange in favour of communitarian and social endeavours. Braidotti states that it is not enough to be against: the critical dissatisfaction of utopian dreaming that Muñoz describes as queer must always be married to action inspired by radical hope. This hope will be disappointed again and again – as Muñoz reminds us, utopia is always destined to fail. This paper argues that instead of building back, we need to take up the practice of queer utopia, and, in spite of failure, to build forward.

#### **Notes**

- 1. This was a virtual presentation, but the author would like to acknowledge that she lives and works in amiskwacîwâskahikan, located on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of First Nations and Metis people and historically a gathering place for diverse indigenous peoples including the Cree, Inuit, Metis, Dene, Anishinaabe, and many others whose culture and history continues to influence this place and inform her thinking as a settler scholar.
- 2. Each new session of the Canadian Parliament is opened by the speech from the throne, delivered by the Governor General as the Queen's representative. For more information, please see "2020 Speech".
- 3. A DuckDuckGo search of "Trump presidency disaster" performed 16 Feb. 2021 resulted in too many articles to cite. Canadian news headlines are more circumspect: the first page of results returned by searches for "liberal Canadian government disaster" and "conservative Canadian policy disaster" yielded, respectively, a National Post article on fiscal scandals plaguing Justin Trudeau's liberals, and a Globe and Mail op-ed about healthcare: see Dawson 2020 and Danisch 2021.
- 4. Please see Lee Edelman for further elaboration of this cultural bias.

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#### SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES

# The Failure of Progress and the Example of Fraternity in Mary Shelley's "The Last Man"



### Zsolt Czigányik

The Covid-19 pandemic naturally turns readers' interest toward books that feature epidemics; the usual suspects are Bocaccio's Decameron, Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year, and Camus' The Plague. This paper focuses on a similarly important book, Mary Shelley's 1826 pandemic narrative, The Last Man. 1 Its plot takes place in the end of the fictive 21st century, when England has become a republic but any social progress is annulled by a global plague epidemic that wipes out humanity. The Last Man culminates in a tragic exodus of an ever-decreasing number of the remaining members of humankind through a devastated Europe, until the narrator can find no more living persons on the continent. As Madeleine Joelson argues, the widowed Mary Shelley was also very lonely at the time of writing the book, and thus the narrative's "infectious disease is not only a physical or biological phenomenon, but a sociological one as well" (Joelson, np). In building on this assertion, my short essay draws conclusions that concern modern societies, and offers a twenty-first century reading of The Last Man with the current pandemic in mind. I believe that Shelley's book might help us understand how and why we should live our lives differently after the pandemic, rather than returning to the same practices of the individualism of a consumer society that has been one of the main causes of global warming and which has also had a significant impact in the development of the current pandemic.

Éva Antal argues that *The Last Man* is three novels in one—the first part being "a romantic narrative of six characters' life and their relations, the middle one is an apocalyptic narrative of the plague, while the last, post-apocalyptic volume describes the melancholy of the end of the world" (4). Muriel Spark also points out these three parts, identifying them as the decomposition of the family, of society, and of mankind, respectively (181). Yet these three parts are not interwoven seamlessly, and nothing beyond the suspicious title suggests, until roughly halfway through the book, that *The Last Man* is going to be about a devastating pandemic. I suspect that, in 1824, when Mary Shelley began her work, she did not know yet that it would be mainly about a plague. It is likely that her thoughts were turned towards this topic in the following year, in 1825, by the publication of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, with its detailed descriptions of the 1665 London plague. Yet this is speculation, as her journals unfortunately reveal no such evidence: in this period, neither Shelley's letters nor her journals reflect on either her readings or her work, so the fact that she does not mention Pepys does not mean that she did not read it.<sup>2</sup> What we can state for certain is that the uneven structure of the book reflects the uncertainties and significant personal and literary events during its composition.

Turning from the circumstances of the composition to the contents, we may note that the political and military conflicts of the early nineteenth century that seriously concerned the Shelley family are present in the fictive future of *The Last Man*. In Shelley's novel, the Ottoman Empire has

held out much longer than in historical reality. The liberation of Greece from Turkish rule is still not completed in the fictive twenty-first century. Yet the book depicts a successful campaign to liberate Greece and, in fact, even Constantinople (the present-day Istanbul) is under siege by the allied Christian armies. They manage to take the city and end the Ottoman rule in Europe, yet this victory has unexpected consequences.

It is during the siege of Constantinople that the second, apocalyptic part of the novel begins: the pandemic kills the defenders of the city, infects the liberators, and, within years, spreads all over the world. The narrative later reflects on the events in England. The spread of the plague is slow at first, but after a few years, the whole country is infected and human life comes to a halt: towns become devastated, and commerce and agriculture stops. Yet it is still a better situation than in other parts of the world, and a migration toward England begins. The situation is becoming anarchic but, finally, order is temporarily restored. As the lethal pandemic cannot be stopped, soon only a few thousand inhabitants remain alive in England, who decide to begin a huge pilgrimage to the continent.

They first cross to the continent and, from devastated France they decide to move to Switzerland, but only fifty survivors reach the vacant Alpine country. From here they take a route to Italy, but a mere three survivors reach Venice, and finally, only one of the main characters, Lionel Verney, the narrator and titular last man, reaches an empty Rome, where he plans to sail around the globe in search of more survivors. This makes the narrative situation of *The Last Man* somewhat embarrassing: Verney, the only survivor, tells the story to no one after every human being has died. Instead, the introduction gives a mystic explanation of the origin of the text: the notes were found by Shelley near Naples in Sybil's cave more than two hundred years before the events described in them (Shelley 2-4). As Antal argues, the "frame narrative projects the last man's testimony into the past and, if we think of the great cycles of man, in its vortex, the text still foreshadows a catastrophic future" (5). The issue is problematized by the narrator as well: "I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote, DEDICATION TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD. SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL! BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN" (Shelley 364). This dedication is in an interesting parallel with Winston Smith's dedication of his illegal diary from George Orwell's 1984: "To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone—to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone" (26). Under completely different circumstances, the last man living and the last man thinking (Orwell's working title was The Last Man in Europe)<sup>3</sup> face very similar challenges: they write to a supposedly non-existent audience.

The pandemics in both Shelley's book and in 2019 begin in Asia. Similarly to Daniel Defoe's description in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), the pandemic comes from the East. The apocalyptic narrative about the spread of the epidemic ends in complete destruction and offers no hope. The plague proves to be unstoppable. An ambivalent depiction of technological and social progress is also a significant element of the book, as any form of progress, be it social or

technological, proves to be futile with the plague sweeping across the world and destroying all human life. Distress and perseverance prove to be equally pointless, yet examples of human greatness, altruism, and hope (despite the hopeless situation) are depicted as positive examples.

In the last exodus of the remainder of humankind, there is no purpose that gives meaning to this pilgrimage of a smaller and smaller number of survivors. It is a meaningless quest for nothing. One would believe that such final meaninglessness renders all action up till that point meaningless, but this is not the case in the narrative. Two scenes will illuminate how, in Shelley's book, there is a difference between fear and bravery, between egoism and altruism. The negative example is the sect in Paris formed by a false prophet, who promises health to his followers. Many people give up both freedom and common sense for a false hope. As the promise cannot be kept, the episode ends tragically, with the followers killing the prophet and all of them ultimately dying in the epidemic.

Another episode in England looks completely different:

In the village of Little Marlow an old woman ruled the community. She had lived for some years in an alms-house, and on fine Sundays her threshold was constantly beset by a crowd, seeking her advice and listening to her admonitions. She had been a soldier's wife, and had seen the world; infirmity, induced by fevers caught in unwholesome quarters, had come on her before its time, and she seldom moved from her little cot. The plague entered the village; and, while fright and grief deprived the inhabitants of the little wisdom they possessed, old Martha stepped forward... She entered the cottages of the sick; she relieved their wants with her own hand; she betrayed no fear, and inspired all who saw her with some portion of her own native courage. She attended the markets—she insisted upon being supplied with food for those who were too poor to purchase it. She shewed them how the well-being of each included the prosperity of all. She would not permit the gardens to be neglected, nor the very flowers in the cottage lattices to droop from want of care. Hope, she said, was better than a doctor's prescription. (212-13)

Even though the town is struck by a lethal epidemic, Little Marlow becomes a utopia of people caring for each other, an example of hope and of mental hygiene also symbolized by the flowers. Death cannot be prevented, but the rest of their lives are not spent in misery and fear. Martha in Little Marlow achieves something that Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, reflects on in his latest book, *Let Us Dream – The Path to a Better Future*, published as a reflection upon the current pandemic. Pope Francis claims that, out of the three chief targets of enlightenment—that is, liberty, equality, and fraternity—humankind has made great efforts to reach the first two, and now it is time to turn toward fraternity as well (7). This kind of fraternity is what appears through the example of old Martha in Shelley's book. I consider this idea relevant in our analysis of *The Last Man* as in this narrative, liberty becomes extremely reduced in the context of the destruction of mankind, whereas equality becomes simply the equality of all people being mortal. Yet, in the scenes where fraternity becomes apparent, an existence worthy for humans becomes available,

even if death cannot be avoided. As it is suggested by Pope Francis, "[i]f we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain" (5). Martha in Shelley's book is an apt example of this attitude, and so are all the other characters who act out of altruism, overstepping their individual fears and interests. A more secular source, Gregory Claeys, argues that "most utopias are linked by their commitment to a form of enhanced sociability, or more communal form of living, sometimes associated with ideals of friendship" (145). The Last Man is about the destruction of the large community that is humanity; however, throughout the book, we find instances of the power of small communities and the importance of solidarity, fraternity, or enhanced sociability. Such instances, as we see in the above example, may even lead to a more or less utopian model of communal existence, even when it can only appear in the context of death, the unavoidable fate of all humanity.

If we look at Shelley's book as an allegory, death is unavoidable: the death of the individual surely comes. Under normal conditions, humanity survives because the many individual deaths do not occur simultaneously or in close proximity. These deaths in *The Last Man* would normally occur across decades; what makes the narrative horrible is that Shelley brings them together within a few years, and so many deaths occurring within such a short time destroys the structure of human society. The devastation, however, does not reduce the importance of solidarity; rather, it highlights the necessity of a fraternal relationship between the members of humankind.

The envisioned political changes that take place in Britain over the 250 years that pass between the time of writing and the fictive future the book narrates are significant, as the country has turned into a republic. However, it is still an aristocratic and highly hierarchical republic, where even members of the former royal family have a significant role and birth still defines social rank and marriage prospects. Shelley's social and political imagination is, in fact, very much linked to her own time. Rather than depicting new social structures, the betterment of the world in *The Last Man* is attempted by virtuous people who primarily triumph over their adversaries using their rhetorical skills. A large number of social and political conflicts are depicted, yet they are not defined by social trends or structures, but in an intentional vein.

Neither is the narrative concerned with technological progress. The 1820s, when the book was written, was significant from a technological-industrial point of view, being as it was the heyday of the industrial revolution. It was in 1809 that Robert Fulton began commercially running regular passenger steamboats and, in 1819, the first hybrid steamship crossed the Atlantic, and in 1825, only a year before the book was published, the first regular railway began its operation in England. Such important inventions are not reflected in Shelley's futuristic book—with the exception of a faint reflection of the Montgolfier brothers' 1783 experiment with balloon flight (Shelley 92), and also one mention of a steamship (Shelley 166). But these are the exceptions to the rule that the technological details in the novel reflect the beginning of the nineteenth century. In *The Last Man*, people travel on horseback or horse-drawn vehicles and on sailboats. Certain elements even prompt a historical rather than a futuristic fiction, like soldiers using muskets (Shelley 235), and

no mention is made of industry. What is even more salient is the lack of medical progress. In Shelley's book, no significant attempts are made to fight the illness, leaving everybody completely helpless against the plague.

The technical aspects of utopianism are not within the interest of Shelley in this novel (unlike in Frankenstein). As Antal argues, The Last Man "is not really an SF [novel] ... it is more a warning about a possible future, it is an ecofeminist novel" (12). Antal also points out that nature is always female in the novel: "mother nature and her sister the epidemic ultimately eliminates mankind" (5). We should not believe, however, that progress is completely irrelevant for Shelley. Let me quote from a longer speech of one of the protagonists, Adrian. This speech is made before it becomes obvious that the plague cannot be stopped: "The choice is with us; let us will it, and our habitation becomes a paradise. For the will of man is omnipotent, blunting the arrows of death, soothing the bed of disease, and wiping away the tears of agony" (60). Adrian can be seen as the alter ego of Percy Shelley,4 and as Anne McWhir reminds us, these lines may be a reflection of Julian and Maddalo: "it is our will / That thus enchains us to permitted ill" (McWhir 60). Shelley wrote in a reflection on Prometheus Unbound that Percy "Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none" (McWhir 60). In the context of the tragic ending of the novel, the reflection on "blunting the arrows of death and wiping away the tears of agony" (Shelley 60) can only be interpreted in an ironic manner. As Madeleine Joelson argues, the main characters of The Last Man are "thinly veiled portraits of Byron, Percy Shelley, and Claire Clairmont: depictions that not only allow Shelley to mourn her friends, but also to think critically about their ideals and the ideals of their cultural moment. Shelley's idealism, Wordsworth's naturalism, Byron's ego and heroism—even the progressive politics of her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin—are each examined and rejected in turn" (Joelson, np). Or, as Antal reflects on this phenomenon, a "parody of millennial wishful thinking" (4) is characteristic of the novel. This is how the book becomes a tragic satire of the notion of progress and the belief in the unlimited capabilities of humanity. Yet struggle itself is not satirized, and solidarity, fraternity, and altruism are shown in a positive light, despite the complete destruction of mankind.

In conclusion we may state that, in Shelley's *The Last Man*, the human will cannot resist the blind powers of nature. Suffering and the destruction of humankind are inevitable, yet there are significant differences between the attitudes of humans toward the demise of our species. The attitude of fraternity that is manifested as solidarity of small communities may not stop dying, but it creates a social atmosphere where the well-being of the individual may not be the cause of the destruction of others. If Shelley's book, written two hundred years ago, has any continued relevance, in my opinion it is the question of whether we can call something progress that destroys our environment and culminates in endless consumption. I hope the present pandemic gives us a chance to re-discover the structures of fraternity.

#### **Notes**

- 1. An earlier version of my paper was published in Hungarian as "Az utolsó ember: a halálfélelem utópiája."
- 2. See Feldman, Pamela, and Diana Scott-Kilvert, editors. *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844*. Clarendon Press, 1987.
- 3. In George Orwell's letter to F. J. Warburg on 22 October, 1948, he writes, "I haven't definitely fixed on the title but I am hesitating between 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' and 'The Last Man in Europe'" (Orwell and Angus 448).
- 4. Antal asserts that "all of the characters recall reminiscences in Mary Shelley's life: Adrian alludes to Percy Bysshe Shelley himself." See Antal, pg. 6.

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#### NONFICTION REVIEWS

# Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology, by Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer



Theory for the World to Come

Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology

Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer

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### Gabriel A. Saldías Rossel

Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer. *Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology.* University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Forerunners: Ideas First. Paperback. 116 pg. \$7.95. ISBN 9781517907808.

Apocalypse is never singular, but multiple. This is "Wyndham's rule," the main premise with which Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer opens *Theory for the World to Come. Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology* (the title of the first chapter and its contents detail what Wolf-Meyer means by the term), an interesting and thought-provoking study of the future and the conditions of possibility that make it happen.

This compact volume of just over 100 pages is, despite its brevity, packed to the brim with contingent and at times even radical ideas on topics as widespread as catastrophe, city planning, race, human nature, and politics. This interest in seemingly disconnected topics also extends to Wolf-Meyer's cross-disciplinary methodology, which groups speculative fiction, personal diaries, and social theory in a common effort to interrogate the many possible dimensions of our imagination about the future.

The future—and its limits—are exactly what lie at the heart of this book: the "world to come," with all its problematic folds and inexplicable weirdness. How can we trace back the way our world has come to be, and understand its temporality as a complex continuum of historical variables? How can we develop new ways of comprehending what's going to happen in the next few centuries if we haven't yet absorbed the many undetermined possibilities of our present? And, more importantly, how can we deal with the idea of an "end" to what we've built? Can we change it, or should we resign ourselves to impending doom? These and other questions lead Wolf-Meyer to explore the ways in which twentieth and twenty-first century speculative fiction—in both literature and film—have advanced different social theories that provide us with usually unorthodox as well as revealing answers about our past, present, and future.

The structure of the book follows a straightforward premise: if the threat of annihilation looms on the horizon, as Wyndham's rule seems to suggest, then speculative fiction must address this notion and produce social theories relevant for a future at risk of never materializing. From this standpoint, the author identifies three different forms of narratological social theory under the guise of "future historiography" (19): extrapolation, intensification, and mutation. These

# NONFICTION REVIEWS Theory for the World to Come

modalities manifest themselves as narrative or even thematic devices designed to propel the conversation about the future beyond its commonly agreed limits and to advance discussion on alternative ways of portraying what's to come. Accordingly, each chapter explores different fictions and ways of employing future historiography to produce coherent and relevant social theories.

The first three chapters after the introduction ("Detroit Diaries, 1992-1999," "White Futures and Visceral Presents: Robocop and P-Funk," and "The Revolutionary Horizons of Labor and Automation: Blue Collar and Player Piano") deal with the idea of "intensification" (19), analyzing futures in which present issues are not really resolved, but rather expanded on, both in significance as well as spatial and social presence.

Images Wolf-Meyer brings forward during these first few pages include *Robocop*'s (1987) ultra-violence as an expression of repressed humanity and P-Funk's music as an attempt to recover such lost humanity during the 80s; *Player Piano*'s (1952) representation of automation as a reflection on the meaning of labor, and Detroit as a city of technological promises degraded into a racially segregated sprawl. Each chapter is short and direct, not wasting any time to get to the main topics the author seeks to put into the spotlight: race politics, human nature, and the possibilities of automation in a posthuman age.

The following two chapters ("California Diaries, 2008-2015," and "Extrapolating Neoliberalism in the Western Frontier: Octavia Butler's Parables") focus on extrapolation as a narrative device employed to represent present problems in scenarios radically different from our own. In his "California Diaries," Wolf-Meyer reflects upon how living—and, particularly, buying a house—in California forced him to accept the fragility and indeterminacy of a future "so precarious, so subject to change" (53), where catastrophe is always around the corner, while his study of Octavia Butler's work makes some interesting points about the inner logic of capitalism and its ever-consuming nature, revealed through extrapolation and a rather fascinating proclivity towards devastation and crisis, something the author also finds a characteristic feature of life in California.

The final three chapters of the books ("New York Diaries, 2015-2018," "The Nihilism of Deep Time: Man after Man and After," and "Mutating Temporalities: Slipstream Christopher Columbus") deal with mutation, or the speculative expression of change as a chronological and temporal construct. This section opens with the "New York Diaries," in which the author explores life in a secluded town where the future "never seems to come" (72), thus rendering thinking and worrying about it as unnecessary exercises in frustration.

This notion of an unmanifested future, precluded from experience, is also present in his study of "deep time" (82), which posits that in the larger scheme of things, human existence and humanity's self-made so-called apocalypse, is not only circumstantial, but irrelevant altogether. This pessimistic conviction is then contested in the final chapter of the book, which turns its attention to the possibility of alternative futures, or "mutant temporalities" (91) that would allow,

# NONFICTION REVIEWS Theory for the World to Come

at least in theory, for possible "ways out" (100) of the unavoidable apocalypse that we, as humans, seem so stubbornly obsessed with bringing about.

In the end, this is indeed a book about the future and the many natural and artificial threats it faces; but it's also a deep and well-researched study on the expression of hope through speculative fiction and social theory during the last fifty years. Through his analyses and account of personal experiences, Wolf-Meyer provides a panoramic view of the many attitudes towards the future we have developed over time: Should we fear it? Should we try to stop it? Escape it? Transform it? The possibilities are numerous, and if there's something to be taken from this book, it is the idea that an undetermined future is not necessarily a bad one. Indeterminacy means possibility, and possibility means opportunity for change. For Wolf-Meyer, this is the conviction that motivates speculative fiction to represent different scenarios and outcomes to problems we, today, might see as simply insurmountable. It also helps us to understand the trends that have brought us to where we are and, ideally, to try to remediate them before it's too late, because any theory for the world to come should at least address our experience with time and space and project it beyond our imagination into—if not better, at least different—ways of experiencing reality.

**Gabriel A. Saldías Rossel** is an Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of Temuco in Temuco, Chile. He holds a PhD in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature. His areas of expertise include Latin American literature, utopian studies, politics of catastrophe, critical theory, science fiction and fantasy studies. Currently he is researching the utopian implications in the representations of catastrophe in current Latin American novels.

#### NONFICTION REVIEWS

### Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction, by Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel

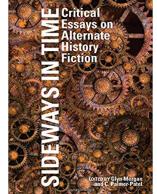


### Carl Abbott

Glyn Morgan and C. Palmer-Patel, eds. Sideways in Time: Critical Essays

on Alternate History Fiction. Liverpool UP, 2019. Hardback. 216 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781789620139.

Sideways in Time collects essays derived from a 2015 conference at the University of Liverpool. It opens with a Foreword from prolific speculative fiction author Stephen Baxter and includes ten essays that are bookended by an Introduction and an Afterword by the editors. With a couple of exceptions, the contributors are based in Britain or have British academic connections.



That scaffolding described, the editors deserve a shout-out for their

Introduction. In eleven pages they provide a quick and clear review of
the critical literature on alternate history from H to G (Hellekson to Gallagher) and make a cogent
argument for simple and direct terminology that avoids awkward coinages like allohistory and incrowd references like Jonbar Hinge. Use "alternate history" and "point of divergence" and people
will know what's being talked about. They also make a case for considering alternate history as its
own genre or category that overlaps science fiction but also draws from counterfactual history and
historical fiction, attracts mainstream writers, and morphs easily into television thriller mode.

The ten essays touch on some familiar landmarks of alternative history: *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1836), *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), *The Man in the High Castle* (TV version, 2015-19). Other contributors treat less frequently studied texts, such as short stories by Alfred Bester and John Wyndham, as well as introducing English-language readers to a Spanish novel from 1998 and a set of twenty-first century films and anime from Japan. All of the pieces offer interesting takes, and every reader will have their preferences. One of mine is Jonathan Rayner's "Forever Being Yamato: Alternate Pacific War Histories in Japanese Film and Anime," which explores a fascinating set of feature films and animations. It is a good start at developing a complement to the extensive analysis of alternate "Hitler wins, or doesn't he?" fiction by Gavriel Rosenfeld and Catherine Gallagher. A second is Chris Pak's "'It Is One Story': Writing a Global Alternate History in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*." A third is Karen Hellekson's "Agency and Contingency in Televisual Alternate History Texts," which energetically analyzes eight separate television series and mini-series (Maine winters must be good for bingeing). As a group, the essays raise several questions about the character and boundaries of alternate history, which the editors interpret broadly.

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A first issue is the tension between "timeline stories" and "lifeline stories." The former explore the social, political, and cultural effects of a divergence and work in the same realm as do the more abstract counterfactuals that historians sometimes propose. The latter focus on single individuals whose personal stories change through time travel interventions or passage to a parallel world. In very rough division, the essays in "Part I: Points of Divergence" deal with timelines and those in "Part II: Manipulating the Genre" with lifelines. The point of this boundary question is whether something to be called alternate *history* needs to dramatize counterfactuals with implications for social groups, societies, or nations. "Straight" alternate history hews to the plausible, whether its scope is as specific as Simone Zelitch's *Judenstaat* (2016) or as broad and deep as *The Years of Rice and Salt*. Authors who work in this vein are interested in how their characters interact with the changed society, which remains "realistic" in that we can understand how things might get from the point of divergence to the society being described. Some of the best examples, of course—Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2004) or Jo Walton's "Small Change" trilogy (2006-08)—are able to span the two interests by placing compelling characters in alternate timelines where they have to cope with very interesting dynamics of politics and power.

A second issue involves the mechanisms that generate the alternate history. Is the divergence based on an event that is conceivable within the context of the time, such as the assassination of Elizabeth I or southern victory in the American Civil War without extra weapons from the future? In contrast, does the story depend on the speculative physics of parallel worlds with convenient portals tucked away in a basement? Or on equally speculative time travel scenarios in which a Japanese warship from the twenty-first century can materialize in 1942 (the manga series *Zipang* [2000-09]) or a history professor (!) joins the time patrol to save the world (Michael Crichton's *Timeless* [1999])? Utilization of alternate physics offers abundant options for authors to play with but may thin the "history" part of the alternative. It also brings these sorts of alternate history firmly into the science fiction camp.

On a different side of the Venn diagram are stories that fall in the realm of fantasy with fully implausible, non-scientific premises. Stephen Baxter suggests distending the category to alternate cosmologies, favorably citing the flat Earth in Philip Jose Farmer's "Sail On, Sail On!" (1952), Chloé Germaine Buckley's essay explores *Shadows over Baker Street* (2003), edited by John Pelan and Michael Reaves; its contributors imagine Lovecraftian monsters, shape-shifters, and other supernatural phenomena perplexing reimagined versions of Sherlock Holmes. *La locura de Dios* (1999) by Juan Miguel Aguilera seems born from a kinky coupling of H. Rider Haggard, Dan Brown, and Erich von Daniken. The analysis in these essays is interesting, but I wonder if the texts are alternate history or some other category such as fantasy, fantastic adventure, or magical realism (the latter being perhaps the best slot for Colson Whitehead's alternate-historyish *The Underground Railroad* [2016]).

There is a matter of intellectual interests behind these boundary issues, for different readers engage most deeply with different aspects of human experience. I've been studying, practicing, and writing "straight" history for multiple audiences for longer than I've been writing

### NONFICTION REVIEWS Sideways in Time

about speculative fiction, and find alternate history that engages the dynamics of societal change to be the most challenging and the most capable of imagining more just as well as more unjust societies. One might guess as much from the individual essays that I've cited. Readers of *Sideways in Time* whose predilection is for narratives that focus on the thoughts and emotions of individuals or that play with the weird and fantastic will have a different set of favorites. To paraphrase the editors, they will be drawn to the narratives that expand, stretch, subvert, and redefine the genre. For all of us, however, the collection is worth reading and consulting.

**Carl Abbott** retired after teaching Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University in five decades (but not fifty years!). His book Imagining Urban Futures was recently published in Chinese translation.

#### NONFICTION REVIEWS

### EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest, by Qiana Whitted



#### **Dominick Grace**

Qiana Whitted. *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest*. Rutgers, 2019. Comics Culture. Paperback. 196 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9780813566313. Ebook. ISBN 9780813573106.

Qiana Whitted's EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest, the latest volume in Rutgers's Comics Culture series, is of more value to comics scholars than to SF scholars, but it is nevertheless both eminently readable and a valuable addition to pop culture scholarship. As Whitted notes in her introduction, despite the general high regard in which EC comics are held, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. In this volume, Whitted focuses on the so-called "Preachies," the stories in various EC titles (mainly Shock SuspenStories) that were "designed to challenge readers' assumptions about racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, Cold War paranoia, and other anxieties over social difference and American heterogeneity" (5). Whitted does not attempt



to do a high-level survey of how EC stories addressed social concerns, and rightly notes that a great many of them have little or no (overt) social commentary. Indeed, she cites William Gaines's testimony from the US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings in 1954, in which he differentiated between the "preachies," which carefully spelled out the messages readers were expected to receive, and stories designed merely to entertain. Instead, she focuses specifically on the more obvious examples of the "preachies," notably the story "Judgment Day!" written by Al Feldstein and drawn by Joe Orlando, originally published in *Weird Fantasy* #18 in 1953 and reprinted in one of EC's final comics, *Incredible Science Fiction* #33 (1956), as a poke in the eye to the Comics Code Authority. EC subsequently shuttered its comics division. While Whitted could have fruitfully expanded her study by looking more broadly at EC comics (I would especially have been interested in her take on New Direction titles such as *MD* and *Psychoanalysis*, the latter title especially, with its proselytizing for the benefits of psychotherapy), the focus on a few key stories allows her space not only for extensive and detailed historical context but also for deep dives into the stories on which she does focus.

For readers of *SFRA Review*, the most relevant chapter here is chapter four, "Battling, in the Sea of Comics': EC's Invisible Man and the Jim Crow Future of 'Judgment Day!" This famous story recounts the visit of Tarlton, representative of the Galactic Republic, to the planet Cybrinia, to determine whether its robot inhabitants, descended from (if robots can indeed descend from ancestors) robots first built on Earth. Tarlton discovers that there are two robot classes, orange and blue, and that the blues are treated as distinctly second-class, despite being identical in

### NONFICTION REVIEWS EC Comics

manufacture to the orange robots, except for the colors of their external shells. Tarlton determines that the robots are not yet ready for admission into the Galactic Republic. Probably unsurprisingly to readers today, but very much controversially when the story first appeared (this issue was the basis of the Comics Code Authority's attempt to bar EC from reprinting the story in 1956), Tarlton, who has worn his space suit throughout the visit, is revealed in the final panel of the story to be Black. Whitted's reading of this story is detailed, subtle, and nuanced. Especially beneficial are her detailed comments on the historical context of Jim Crow, other relevant comics stories of the time, and, most interestingly—for me, anyway—her linking of the story to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, one year before this story was first printed. Whitted reads the imagery and dialogue (even its use of ellipses) closely and carefully to build a complex reading that acknowledges not only what makes the story important but also the ways in which its proselytizing intent is complicated by its own assumptions. This chapter alone makes the book of value for scholars of SF, especially those interested in issues of race and of colonialism as explored in SF.

The whole book, however, is of enormous value to comics scholars. While Whitted has little to say about the vast catalogue of other SF, fantasy, and horror stories published by EC (and there is indeed much room to consider the merely entertaining stories, as well as the "preachies," through the lens Whitted applies), her study nevertheless engages deeply and insightfully with EC's complex legacy as a comics publisher renowned for its overall quality while also at times criticized for its formulaic storytelling and often pat moralizing. Whitted assumes a middle ground, between EC idolatry and the tendency of some scholars to attempt to apply a corrective to the often uncritical admiration of EC via harsh critique. This book is especially valuable for comics scholars but also of use for SF scholars, especially ones interested in SF in visual media.

**Dominick Grace** is professor of English at Brescia University College in London, Ontario. He is the author of *The Science Fiction of Phyllis Gotlieb: A Critical Reading* and the co-editor of several books, many focusing on comics and graphic novels.

### NONFICTION REVIEWS

# The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games, by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas



### Jonathan W. Thurston-Torres

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. New York UP, 2019. Hardback, 240 pg. \$28.00, ISBN 9781479800650.

Even as I am writing this review, I am wearing both a Slytherin tank top and a Slytherin scarf. I grew up in a generation in which J. K. Rowling's famed Harry Potter book series was coming out; they were published during my middle and high school years. While I have seen the movies a few times, I have never gone back to read the original books. But, when I saw the title and subtitle for Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's new book, I found myself thinking back to racial representation in the book series. I knew about the occasional person of color in the books, and I knew that representation was minimal. I remembered, too, the "scandal" in the media over the black Hermione



in the stage production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016). But Thomas's book pushes back against all of these preconceived notions of race in the Harry Potter books and other young adult literature, begging the question, "What about the space for young adult imagination?"

Thomas begins her book with the eponymous critical term for her work: "the dark fantastic." She first defines it as "the role that racial difference plays in our fantastically storied imaginations" (7). In this introduction, she details how monstrous others in fantastic literature are "endarkened" and convey to "readers, hearers, and viewers of color" that they "are the villains [...] the horde [...] the enemies [...] the monsters" (23). She gives numerous examples throughout the text to showcase the term more concretely, such as Rumpelstiltskin who becomes the "Dark One" in the TV series Once Upon a Time (2011-18), the Native American bestial werewolves of the Twilight series (2008-12), and the "majority of witches and warlocks" with "visible African ancestry" in the television show The Vampire Diaries (2009-17) (30-31). However, as the diversity of these examples shows, the "dark fantastic" is a murky term to define.

In his 2019 monograph *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction*, Jerry Rafiki Jenkins summarizes and discusses race discourse around Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In this description, he shows how while many scholars have argued that a dominant response to

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the novel is to empathize with the victims of the vampire, some race readers like Jewelle Gomez align more with Dracula himself as a form of "shared 'suffering" (24). What Jenkins creates here is an awareness that both darkness and othering are spectra in and of themselves, not to mention their intersections. Is Mina Harker capable of being a Dark Other for Thomas, or is only Dracula capable of that? As Thomas points out, being othered in literature often means being darkened, so, therefore, are all folkloric antagonist archetypes qualifiers for Dark Othering? All antiheroes?

When Thomas moves into case studies, she starts with representations of Rue in *The Hunger Games* (2008). This section begins with a solid analysis of construction of race and ethnicity in the series, showing how Rue was raced in the first book. While these representations are complex, Thomas excels at being able to focus the camera in at the line level and then zoom back out to show the larger picture: we see how specific phrases and sentences help to create a systematic construction of race, and that affects the ways that Rue "becomes" innocence in the novel. But, as Thomas shows, that innocence is "transferred" to Katniss by the end, and Rue "fades from the narrative" (57). The chapter wraps up with a survey analysis of social media responses to the black representation in the films, investigating what Thomas calls the "dark fantastic cycle," a narrative cycle that tracks the role of the Dark Other in fantastic literature (60, 26). This cycle makes it so that cishet white men can read the work and not even notice these characters who just "happen to not be white."

The next chapter reads closely representations of Gwen in BBC's *Merlin* (2008-12). The chapter starts by showing how the mixed-race character of Gwen might disrupt the dark fantastic cycle, but, at each step of the analysis, while there is potential for disruption, Thomas shows how even this narrative follows the conventions, even if in more roundabout ways. The second half of the chapter is devoted to Thomas countering common trends in social media response to Gwen's racialization. However, many of these analyses are really quoting various posts, putting them in conversation with each other, and then making a brief point that could have been explained more. In one section, Thomas traces the statement that "Gwen and Arthur [as a desired coupling] are heteronormative" (96). She sets up the context for this discourse, she shows some quotes, details how important an Arthur and Merlin shipping is for the LGBTQI community, gives more quotes, one of which says that race is important for characterizing Gwen, and then paraphrases that quote some more, and then moves on to the next assertion. The social media analysis throughout Thomas's work signifies new ways to examine young adult literature and its reception, but I would have liked to see more critical analysis of it, rather than mostly summary.

In the final two chapters, Thomas examines blackness in *The Vampire Diaries* and the Harry Potter series. In each, she grounds the discussions in anecdotes of conversations with her family about race and racial representation, and these anecdotes showcase one of the strongest

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aspects of the book: this book is an essential text for anyone teaching young adult literature, especially in middle or high schools. Thomas models reading YA lit for race and encourages ways to teach not just reading but also analysis of social media reception of race in literature and film. Thomas's work definitely needs to be in university libraries, educators' hands, and scholars' shelves. And for me at least, even as a proud Slytherin, I have new understandings of the Harry Potter series and the ways the dark fantastic cycle snakes its way into the narrative.

**Jonathan W. Thurston-Torres** is a PhD Candidate in English at Michigan State University, and their edited collection *Animals & Race* is scheduled to come out through MSU Press later this year. They specialize in early modern studies, animal-race theory, and HIV activism.

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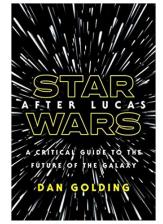
# Star Wars after Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy, by Dan Golding



### Benjamin J. Robertson

Dan Golding. *Star Wars after Lucas: A Critical Guide to the Future of the Galaxy*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Hardcover. 264 pg. \$21.95. ISBN 9781517905422.

In *Star Wars after Lucas*, Dan Golding implicitly and explicitly grapples with challenging questions scholars of that galaxy far, far away must consider when they attempt to make definitive statements about the franchise. How does one deal with more than forty years of *Star Wars*? How does a single person, in a single text (even a book-length one) identify and address an adequate sample of films, television shows, novels, comics, toys, video games, theme park attractions, and so on? How does one make sense of the relationship and interplay among the various groupings of narrative texts that make up the universe: the original trilogy, the prequel trilogy, the Disney trilogy, the films labeled



as *Star Wars* stories, the de-canonized texts that make up *Star Wars* Legends, the new non-filmic texts that have replaced the Legends as canon, and so on? How does one account for the myriad historical moments in which they were produced and the various models that shaped their production, distribution, and reception? Perhaps most importantly, how does one say something about *Star Wars* now, in the present, when the inevitable progress of the franchise machine will make whatever one says about it obsolete in the very near future, perhaps even before one's claims find their way to readers?

Star Wars After Lucas comprises an introduction and nine chapters, the bulk of which, as Golding's title suggests, focus on the Disney era of the franchise, especially Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015). The introduction lays out the foundations for Golding's subsequent discussion of the complex nostalgia Star Wars produces in its fans, a nostalgia that has become perhaps the franchise's main thematic concern and narrative guide since at least 2015. Chapter one examines the politics of the original trilogy, the malleability thereof, and the consequences of this malleability with regard to the ongoingness of franchise. Chapter two turns to the Disney era, specifically to fan reaction to the announcement of new Star Wars films after the prequels—whose legacy has been, at best, problematic for the franchise—and the prospect of revitalizing Star Wars in such complex circumstances. Chapter three offers a strong reading of The Force Awakens by way

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of Golding's conceptualization of the legacy film, whose goal is "to extend the life of a film series and renew it for a new era" by: bringing back actors/characters from earlier films, introducing new actors/characters, repeating and revising narrative strands and thematic concerns from earlier films, documenting a handoff from one franchise generation to the next, and using this handoff to shift the narrative focus from the older generation to the younger one (71). Chapter four stays with The Force Awakens to investigate the film's politics, which shift away from the original trilogy's concerns with colonialism and war in the aftermath of Vietnam and towards questions of diversity and representation appropriate to a decade when Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and similar identitarian movements focused on marginalized voices have taken center stage in political debates. Chapter five, perhaps the most interesting in the book along with chapter three, also focuses on The Force Awakens and how the film's score, by John L. Williams, plays a clear and important role in Disney's nostalgic enterprise. In chapter six, Golding compares the nostalgia deployed by The Force Awakens to that deployed by the second film of the Disney era (and the first film to not be part of the episodic structure of the entire film franchise to that point), Rogue One (2016). Chapter seven then compares how Rogue One and the animated Star Wars Rebels television program take on fascism in their respective ways. Chapter eight turns away from engagements with specific films in order to think about how actors and the characters they play (specifically Carrie Fisher/Leia and Harrison Ford/Han Solo), by way of their mortality in the real world and their narrative weight in the storyworld, affect franchise production and reception. Finally, in chapter nine, Golding turns to Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi (2017) and how it responds to The Force Awakens and Rogue One "by questioning some of the fundamental questions about Star Wars that these films took for granted" (205). Such questioning, undoubtedly, will remain at the heart of the franchise for the foreseeable future.

As this summary suggests, Golding accomplishes a great deal in *Star Wars after Lucas* even as he continually faces the specific challenges *Star Wars* presents to critics, as discussed above. In some cases, he answers a challenge by doing what so many scholars of the franchise have already done. For example, he defines his object mainly in terms of the films, and privileges discussions of them over *Star Wars* in other media—a sensible move given the volume of material in other media and given the fact that the films will likely always remain canonical, and therefore central, for the *Star Wars* universe. While this choice might appear merely standard, it allows Golding the opportunity for a very clear and focused discussion of the consequences of Disney's 2012 acquisition of Lucasfilm for the recent rebirth and success of the *Star Wars* franchise through *The Force Awakens* and subsequent films. As Golding makes clear, this success derives from a complex relation the new material establishes with the older material, a complexity that the idea of the legacy film clarifies and makes available to further scholarship. For Golding, as for many other fans and critics, while *The Force Awakens* and subsequent films clearly recall beloved moments from the original trilogy, they also distance themselves from the prequel trilogy.

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However, Golding takes a further, and much needed, step by making clear that we must not only consider how the Disney-era films relate themselves to the past, positively or negatively. We must also account for how these films do something new within the franchise itself: "For all that has been made about these new films' ability to deliver something quintessentially 'Star Wars-y,' their atonement for past sins, and their renewal of the franchise, there are discontinuities here, too. [...] Disney's strategy in reviving *Star Wars* can tell us much about not just how American, global media functions today but also the power of the contemporary audience's thirst for revisiting the past, and culture that deals with questions of legacy and myth" (3-4). In other words, *Star Wars* will always refer to its own past, but such reference goes beyond the valorization of what we like and denigration of what we don't. It requires that Disney balance the weight of franchise history with the need for new narrative and thematic possibilities which can leverage the galaxy for further profit.

Here, however, we find a challenge that no critic of Star Wars will likely ever completely overcome. Just as Anakin Skywalker could not bring any final balance to the Force, no critic can ever make a final claim about how the franchise works. Because the franchise always carries on, and because this particular franchise (more than most, I think) so clearly concerns itself with a constant revision of its own history, future films (and television shows such as The Mandalorian [2019]) will not only provide new grist for the critical mill in and of themselves, they will also constantly affect how we understand all that has come before. With this point in mind, we can understand how any scholarly investigation into Star Wars will not only offer potential insights into what the franchise means (or has meant to date) and how it works (or has worked to date), but such statements will also provide a snapshot of Star Wars and its reception prior to some new revelation that might moot such statements. It is, of course, far too early to tell how, for example, Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker (2019) might undermine Golding's arguments. Nonetheless, the fact that Golding could not have known the title of this film—revealed in April 2019; Golding refers to the film as "Episode IX"—hints at the franchise's potential for such undermining. Along similar lines, Golding says very little about Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018) or the claims that its relatively poor performance at the box office caused Disney to cancel or delay previously announced Star Wars projects, including trilogies by The Last Jedi director Rian Johnson and Game of Thrones showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss (both of which Golding mentions in his introduction as evidence of the robust future Disney imagines for the franchise). Finally, although Golding spends a whole chapter on *The Last Jed*i, his reading of the film does not seem to have much impact on his discussions of earlier films, perhaps because he could not wait for it to be released and integrate his reading of it into the rest of the book given academic publishing timelines.

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I do not mean to suggest that Golding's inability to see the future is a problem for this book so much as that every scholar's inability to do so presents a problem for critical engagement with twenty-first century cultural production generally and the most prominent form of such production specifically. Insofar as Golding's book both succeeds as an investigation of *Star Wars* in the Disney era and performs the limitations such investigations necessarily entail, it provides a useful and necessary account of contemporary, popular entertainment. It shows us that, as critics, we must make claims about what we know even when part of what we know involves the fact that knowledge, and therefore claims, will always remain radically provisional under contemporary capitalism and the forms it produces.

**Benjamin J. Robertson** is an assistant professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder, author of *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018), and editor, with Gerry Canavan, of a new book series from the University of Minnesota Press: Mass Markets: Studies in Franchise Culture.

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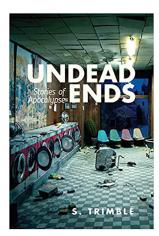
### Undead Ends: Stories of Apocalypse, by Sarah Trimble



### **Daniel Helsing**

Sarah Trimble. *Undead Ends: Stories of Apocalypse*. Rutgers University Press, 2019. Paperback. 210 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9780813593647.

As I am writing this review in June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, face masks, and travel restrictions have become the new normal. At times, the line between fiction and real life has seemed eerily blurry; if headlines and news clips from the past few months were edited into a minute-long video, it could easily be mistaken for the opening scenes of an apocalypse film. For this reason, and for the fact that we do not know when and how this pandemic is going to end, it is more important than ever to examine the apocalypse narratives that circulate in film and literature. Which narratives are we enacting in our responses to COVID-19? How do we imagine life after the crisis? And who are "we"?



In her book *Undead Ends: Stories of Apocalypse*, Sarah Trimble examines popular Anglo-American apocalypse films of the past two decades. Her arguments illuminate the entire genre, but she singles out six films for closer analysis: *The Road* (2009), *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Days Later* (2002), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Children of Men* (2006), and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012). Though highly relevant also before COVID-19—anthropogenic climate change, the rise of right-wing populism, and the persistence of neoliberal capitalism being three important reasons—*Undead Ends* has taken on another level of relevance in this unprecedented global pandemic.

Trimble argues that the prevalence of high-visibility apocalypse films should be read in the context of a particular kind of capitalism that has gained influence in recent decades. She invokes cultural critics and theorists, including David Harvey and Naomi Klein, who characterize this version of capitalism as "creative destruction" (Harvey, cited on page 2) and "disaster capitalism" (Klein, cited on page 2): when disaster strikes or is induced, as the case may be, policy makers and investors arrive at the scene to privatize resources and reconstruct society in ways that will benefit them. Apocalypse films neatly parallel this process of destruction and reconstruction: the old order collapses, and a group of survivors struggle to create a new order. And since, according to Trimble, stories are incredibly powerful—she borrows Sylvia Wynter's term *homo narrans* to characterize humans as "a species of storytellers" (9)—it becomes crucially important to critically analyze the identities, behavior, and aspirations of the survivors in apocalypse films. Do they reproduce Western colonialism and neoliberal capitalism? Or do they let other voices in, offering

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alternative visions of culture and society? In Trimble's words: "In *Undead Ends*, I argue that contemporary apocalypse films offer an occasion to intervene in neoliberal storytelling. At the heart of this claim is the conviction that stories make and remake the world" (3).

The historical roots of Trimble's arguments extend further than the last few decades, however. She builds on Wynter, who traces the "invention of Man" to the Renaissance, when "the Christian tale of humanness gave way first to a vision of the human as rational (Man1) and then to a 'biocentric' vision of the human as a living organism imperiled by natural scarcity (Man2)," a vision that "took shape in relation to Others imagined as exploitable and/or killable" (3). Closer to our time, Trimble argues, Man2 can be identified with homo oeconomicus, or the "economic Man," who "defines good humanness in terms of economic productivity and security" (3). Borrowing the title of Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826), Trimble then defines "the Last Man" as "the protagonist who exemplifies the norms of humanness established by Man's story" (153, n8). For Trimble, "the Last Man" thus signifies both a survivor of the standard apocalypse narrative and an embodiment of the Western, neoliberal "economic Man."

Except for 28 Days Later and 28 Weeks Later, which she discusses in the same chapter, Trimble devotes a chapter each to the films listed above. But rather than ordering the films chronologically, she creates a kind of narrative of her own through the order in which she discusses them. Very simply and roughly, the films increasingly problematize the story of the Last Man and, in different ways, let other voices in. In Trimble's reading, *The Road* reinforces the current economic order. For example, the unnamed father explains to his unnamed son that they are "the good guys" and that they are "carrying the fire." They are distinguished as such in the plot of the film too, both through the contrast with the unnamed mother—who has committed suicide—and through the contrast with a group of cannibals—a trope which evokes the old Western binary of "the savage" versus "the civilized" (29–30).

In subsequent chapters in *Undead Ends*, the Last Man is still present, but his hegemony becomes undermined and other perspectives and voices gain in strength. The last film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, sees a very different protagonist from The Road: not a white man trying to rekindle "civilization," but a young, black girl, called Hushpuppy, living with an abusive father in precarious circumstances. However, Trimble does not simply praise *Beasts* for challenging the status quo; she quotes and discusses a number of critics who have argued that *Beasts* amounts to "a romanticization of racialized poverty" and reinforces "tired tropes of primitivism and black familial dysfunction" (119). But Trimble also sees an opportunity for challenging the hegemonic "we" in our renderings of history. For example, in a key scene early in the film, Hushpuppy "accidentally-intentionally sets her house on fire" (119). While hiding from both the flames and her father in a cardboard box, she draws pictures on the walls of the box and explains: "If daddy gonna kill me, I ain't gonna be forgotten. I'm recording my story for the scientists in the future" (quoted on page 119).

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Undead Ends is a valuable and timely addition to the literature on climate fiction and apocalypse narratives. Through her well-written and nuanced readings of Anglo-American apocalypse films, Trimble illuminates and problematizes the "we" of widespread apocalypse narratives by relating the films' plots and perspectives both to 500 years of colonial history and to the "disaster capitalism" of recent decades. We will be better off if we read *Undead Ends*—with regard to everyday life as well as to COVID-19 and other potentially apocalyptic hazards down the road.

**Daniel Helsing** received his PhD in literature from Lund University in 2019, and he currently teaches at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Liberal Arts at California Polytechnic State University. His research centers on representations of science and the universe in texts of various kinds, including fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and science communication.

### **NONFICTION REVIEWS**

### Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century, by Angus McFadzean



### **Rob Latham**

Angus McFadzean. *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century.* Wallflower Press, 2019. Short Cuts: Introduction to Film Studies. Paperback. vii + 140 pg. \$22.00. ISBN 9780231189958.

The seed for this slim book was a 2017 essay in the *Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television* that anatomized a cluster of movies from the 1980s and 1990s the author saw as forming a new genre he called the "suburban fantastic." At 25 pages, the essay was one-fifth the length of the new volume, which is basically an expanded version, chopped into five chapters and with more developed readings. A sixth chapter extends the discussion to encompass films released in the twenty-first century.

McFadzean's basic claims are cogent and illuminating. According to him, the suburban fantastic initially crystallized in the films of Steven Spielberg and other directors—e.g. Joe Dante, Robert Zemeckis—who worked for his production company, Amblin Entertainment, during the early-to-mid 1980s. In movies such as E.T.: The Extraterrestrial (1982), Gremlins (1984), and The Goonies (1985), a distinct pattern emerged: an adolescent boy with some kind of personal dilemma (conflict with parents, alienation from peers) is confronted with a supernatural intrusion (an alien being, demonic entities); these related crises develop in parallel over the course of the narrative, such that the resolution of one leads to the resolution of the other. At the end of the story, the supernatural element has been expunged and the protagonist has been effectively socialized into the suburban patriarchal order. Later in the decade and into the 1990s, other producers and directors developed and experimented with this basic model, in films such as Flight of the Navigator (1986), Short Circuit (1986), Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), Jumanji (1995), and numerous others. In the process, they hybridized the form with themes and narrative elements borrowed from science fiction, horror, romantic comedy, and other genres. At the same time, a significant subset of these films included parodies or pastiches of earlier fantastic traditions, especially 1950s SF movies, making the genre increasingly self-reflexive. Yet the core remained a fusion of personal melodrama and fantastic incident, usually set in contemporary suburbia or some narrative surrogate for it.

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Laying out this model, structurally and historically, takes up the first two chapters, with chapters three through five pursuing specific thematic strands within this cinematic corpus. Chapter three focuses on the crisis of masculinity experienced by the youthful protagonist, who over the course of the narrative moves from outsider to representative of the patriarchal order, in effect being successfully socialized into an appropriate gender identity (as a Freudian critic would say, Oedipalized) through confrontation with the fantastic. Chapter four further addresses the self-reflexivity of the genre by analyzing a series of films in which the mass media is centrally, almost metafictionally present—e.g., *Explorers* (1985), *The Monster Squad* (1987), *Matinee* (1993). Chapter five considers the genre's socioeconomic implications, claiming that the fantastic intrusion into suburbia functions as some sort of allegory of contemporary capitalism and its key social institutions: government, science, and the military. The final chapter, as noted above, looks at later Hollywood versions of this basic story structure, such as *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Frankenweenie* (2012), and the *Stranger Things* TV series (2016-).

While McFandzean's core claims are largely convincing, and many of his readings of specific films are compelling, few readers will really need this longer version of the argument—the 2017 article is probably enough. A larger problem, at least for me, is the structuralist framework underpinning the argument (borrowed from film theorist Rick Altman), which tends to make the process of narrative construction sound much too mechanical. Essentially, the genre is reduced to a kind of toolkit of "semantic" and "syntactic" elements from which individual filmmakers borrow to assemble a new film text. While McFadzean is a bit more attentive to external history than are most structuralist critics—he shrewdly shows, for example, how developments like the new PG-13 rating impacted the genre—he still makes most film narratives sound like mix-and-match aggregations of pre-fabricated materials rather than complex and often contradictory aesthetic creations. This tendency is exacerbated by his rather mechanical, often jargon-clotted prose: "Even as the fantastic established itself as a semantic and syntactic bend, with the defining syntactic trait of a connection between the pre-teen protagonists and the element of the fantastic, it became subject to a series of experiments and extensions that altered its semantic and syntactic set" (39). If this were what the process of movie-making is actually like, no one would ever watch movies.

This problem aside, I can recommend *Suburban Fantastic Cinema* to scholars and students of SF and horror film, and fantastic media more broadly—though, as noted, the article-length version will be more than adequate for most purposes.

**Rob Latham** is the author of *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption* (2002) and the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014) and *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings* (2017). He is a senior editor for The Los Angeles Review of Books.

#### NONFICTION REVIEWS

# The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction, by Jerry Rafiki Jenkins



#### Misha Grifka Wander

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins. *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction*. The Ohio State UP, 2019. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality In The Speculative. Paperback. 234 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9780814214015.

Picture a vampire in your head. Whether your image is more Nosferatu or more Edward Cullen, more than likely one of its most notable traits is the stark whiteness of its skin. Although humans come in a great variety of colors, depictions of vampires rarely reflect that. In *The Paradox of Blackness In African American Vampire Fiction*, Jerry Rafiki Jenkins uses stories of Black vampires to investigate how the seldom paired traits of "vampire" and "black" expose American society's assumptions about what it means to be Black.

Jenkins focuses on a specific work of African American vampire fiction in each of the five chapters, covering *The Gilda Stories* (Jewelle Gomez, 1991), *My Soul To Keep* (Tananarive Due, 1997), *Dark Corner* (Brandon Massey, 2004), *Fledgling* (Octavia Butler, 2005), and *Image of Emeralds and Chocolate* (K. Murry Johnson, 2012). Through the lens of the novel in question, each chapter also focuses on a particular aspect of Black life and experience, from masculinity to religion to sexuality.

In the introduction, Jenkins efficiently counters the idea that the vampire myth is a European one, sourcing vampire myths from across Africa and the Caribbean, and writing, "to treat the vampire as the sole property of whites is to ignore the history of this creature, a history which predates the word 'vampire' and the biological notion of race" (5). Rather, Jenkins writes, the vampire is a tool, used to express the fears and anxieties of its originating culture, especially those about death and immortality. This thesis is well-accepted in speculative fiction studies, but to my knowledge, has seldom been used to examine questions of Black racial construction. Jenkins poses the main question of the book as, "Is there more to being black than having a black body, and what might the answers to that question mean for African Americans in the 21st century?" (10).

In the following chapters, Jenkins uses the vampire novel to illustrate ways in which various parties have attempted to define Blackness in line with requirements other than the simple fact of having a Black body. The nature of vampirism allows the novels' authors to use tools to assert their characters' racial "authenticity" in ways that would not be possible for human characters,

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such as establishing their characters' participation in American slavery, lives in historical Africa, and connections with famous abolitionists and civil rights activists. Simultaneously, the characters question the assumptions of other characters about what is necessary to be deemed Black, or Black enough. Gilda from *The Gilda Stories* frequently says, "a row of cotton is a row of cotton," indicating that oppression is oppression no matter how you slice it, and this sentiment is echoed across Jenkins' book. The oppression that women, queer people, and other marginalized groups experience does not make them less Black, but rather is part and parcel of the oppression Black people face in America.

Jenkins uses analysis of the novel and real-world events and theories in equal measure, alternating between characters' narration and explanations of their own racial beliefs, and real political figures and movements such as Afrocentrist Molefi Kete Asanti and political scientist Francis Fukuyama. Jenkins uses the fictional vampires to counter real arguments, demonstrating for instance how the unquestionable Blackness of Marquis in *Image of Emeralds and Chocolate* or Dawit in *My Soul To Keep* are not at war with their homosexuality or atheism, and therefore neither homosexuality nor atheism can dilute one's Blackness, as has been argued by various Afrocentrists, Black conservatives, and Church members (whom Jenkins cites).

Though each chapter focuses on a specific topic, the chapters as a whole build toward answering the question Jenkins poses in the introduction: is there more to being Black than having a Black body? Each chapter answers no in its own way, but the final chapter, on Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and transhumanism, goes a step further. Shori, the main character of *Fledgling*, is the first Black Ina, a race of nonhuman vampires who have no melanin in their skin. Shori is a hybrid of human and Ina, the first Ina to possess melanin and therefore the first to be able to withstand the sun's rays. Jenkins argues that Butler, through the figure of Shori, is demonstrating that all humans have melanin, and therefore all humans belong on a spectrum of Blackness. There is no such thing as a non-Black human, just humans with more or less melanin. Jenkins ends the volume with the statement:

By linking humanity's fate to the fate of black people, the new-black vampire novel offers us a future in which blackness no longer defines one part of the human species, as it does in the post-black vampire novel and most of the Western world, but the entire species [...] The road to that future, as Butler suggests in Fledgling, begins with accepting the fact that nonblack people are not born not black; rather, we make them not black (180).

This triumphantly transhumanist ending confirms the ambitious scope of Jenkins' work—reconfiguring our understanding of Blackness to include all of humanity.

This brings me to my one critique of this otherwise brilliant book. "All humans are black" is a statement Jenkins supports elegantly throughout the book, but one that struggles in regular conversation. Jenkins does not address what that conclusion does for the cause of any real humans,

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Black or otherwise. One might argue that he never promises to, which is true, but when working with a politically laden topic, one might ask for a few signposts as to the political utility of such an argument.

That said, I highly recommend this book. Academic books are rarely called page-turners, but this one might qualify, for Jenkins's skill at building his argument propels each chapter. Jenkins glosses the basics of both race theory and vampire theory, so those lacking expertise in either will not be lost, but doesn't dwell on it enough to bore more experienced readers. I recommend this book for scholarly and general audiences interested in speculative fiction and race, vampires, and the battle over Black authenticity in America.

**Misha Grifka Wander** is a PhD student at the Ohio State University. Their research focuses on media, speculative fiction, gender, and ecocriticism.



### **FICTION REVIEWS**

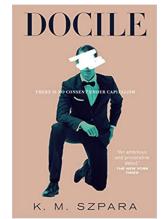
### Docile, by K. M. Szpara



#### Adam McLain

K. M. Szpara. *Docile*. Tor.com, 2020. Hardcover, 496 pp. \$27.99. ISBN 9781250216151.

A book like *Docile* requires a reviewer to provide a strict content warning at the beginning. This book (and this review) contains discussions and depictions of sex, slavery, and abuse. It contains moments of harm that can be triggering for survivors of sexual violence and abuse. K. M. Szpara handles violence and forgiveness with grace and civility instead of gratuitousness and voyeurism. Under Szpara's pen, these topics become molded into a story that is aware of the harm they can cause and the future that all survivors must live through.



Having inherited his family's insurmountable debt, Elisha Wilder "chooses" to sell himself into the docile program, a program that allows a person to give up their agency for monetary return. The man who buys Elisha Wilder's contract is none other than Alexander Bishop

III, the inheritor of the company that patents, manufactures, and markets Dociline, the drug that makes dociles docile, numb to the choices they make and obedience to those who bought their contracts. Upon entering the contract, though, Elisha refuses to use Dociline, something usually not done but provided for as a docile's right. The book then delves into questions around systemic capitalism, consent, and change. Switching perspectives between Elisha and Alex allows Szpara to dismantle the dystopic future he has built and thus provide readers with a possibility of dismantling the dystopic present in which we live.

In the previous paragraph, I provide quotes around chooses to highlight one of the central themes of this book. What is choice and consent? The question occurs over and over again as the characters grapple with being benefited by, trapped in, and assaulted with a system that does not let anyone out. Szpara's text highlights the sexual and capitalistic system of a dystopian, near-future America, but the questions he poses are universal as we struggle in the relationship between humanity, humanness, and all institutions. Szpara shows a keen awareness of thinkers like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, and so many others as he engages in dismantling and deconstructing what agency and consent mean within a system that grips the very soul of humanity; in other words, Szpara's thoughts, questions, and beautiful eloquence are on par with (and in some cases better than) the writers and thinkers we enshrine in academia, but his text fundamentally undermines that same system that builds up, defends, and obscures knowledge.

# FICTION REVIEWS Docile

Indeed, to understand what Szpara is saying and to allow it to work within you, a reader simply needs literacy and empathy, instead of a degree or an intellectual guide.

Docile's handling of sexual violence, consent, and capitalism is genre nuancing. On its surface, one could see it as a book about the relationship, even a form of romance, between Elisha and Alex, but its complications of this relationship turn it from a simple book into one of the most evocative written in recent years. As with dystopian novels like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Docile is never what it completely seems and will always evoke reread after reread as we mull over and consider what Szpara is saying about institutionalized control and (the lack of) consent within that system.

But Szpara doesn't simply portray his capitalism as necessary of anarchistic response or proletarian revolution. Szpara realizes that systems, institutions, and the humans who make up both are more complicated than the necessity of overthrowing them. *Docile* grapples with the humanity that philosophical treatise and systemic interventions cannot. Through the relationship of Elisha and Alex, readers receive an intimate complexity to what it means to live in a world of systems and institutions. By the end of the novel, readers are not left with a one-way path to an answer, but they are instead given a diversity of intersectional roads by which to travel.

Not only does *Docile* deliver a resounding critique of debt and prison, but it also provides room for readers to think, consider, and rethink their positions. At every page turn, I found myself questioning how I viewed the systems around me and how I might be able to change them. *Docile* delivers where fiction is needed most: it is not a systemic takedown of an institution but rather the systemic buildup of awareness and possibility that a reader can gain in experiencing this America that almost is but hopefully never will be. It delivers the perfect package of dystopian philosophizing and fictional questioning that empowers the thoughtful reader to return to reality better equipped to battle our own tyrannies and our own docility.

Adam McLain recently graduated from Harvard Divinity School with a master of theological studies and holds a BA in English from Brigham Young University. He will be a Harvard Frank Knox Traveling Fellow in Fall 2021, studying 20th-century dystopia and the legal history of sexual violence in the UK.

#### **FICTION REVIEWS**

### Border Crosser, by Tom Doyle

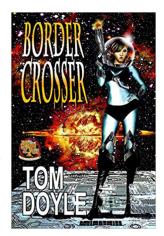


### **Ed Carmien**

Doyle, Tom. *Border Crosser*. Eric Flint's Ring of Fire Press, 2020. Paperback, 383 pp. \$15.99. ISBN 9781953034144.

Tom Doyle, fresh from his American Craftsmen trilogy (one part Clancy-esque Jack Ryan, one part Kurtz-ish *Adept* series, all parts wahoo) turns to space opera with his October, 2020 novel *Border Crosser*. The back cover tells us the novel features Eris, "a charismatic spy with a violent borderline personality and emotional amnesia," a condition that allows her to bypass scanners meant to assess the intentions of galactic travelers.

Border Crosser serves aptly as title and descriptor; Eris crosses many a border in her adventures, during which she unknowingly instigates galactic war and an investigation into her employers, with whom she communicates by chatty, light-hearted correspondence (no drudgery of espionage paperwork for her!), ultimately joining her "friends" and



family in a frothy resolution of most of the major issues of the plot. She is transhuman, sexually omnivorous, emotionally fragmented yet true at her core, and carries out a character development arc of self-discovery and self-identity. Eris begins as the epitome of a Bond villain: charismatic, violent, cartoonish. In the end she...saves the galaxy? Gaining agency is her game: she retains the charisma, a violent nature, and a "painted in broad strokes" quality. Any galaxy saving serves her goal of self-determination.

The cover copy fails to mention Eris's most interesting attribute: a working and productive artist, she crafts her art from the bodily fluids and DNA of those she interacts with. Yes, quite often *those* bodily fluids. Facing torture at the hands of a minor enemy, she blithely suffers it all—until the villain begins to torch one of her works of art.

If one refers to the excellent *The Space Opera Renaissance*, edited by Hartwell and Cramer (2006), it becomes apparent Doyle knows space opera, as the antecedents of *Border Crosser* appear everywhere one looks in the table of contents. The novel transgresses like Samuel R. Delany, plays on a big field like Robert Scheckley, Lois McMaster Bujuold, and Iain M. Banks, performs on the inner field like Catharine Asaro, and at least glances at the political as might Charles Stross. Any mangling of references remains my fault, as are any blatant omissions.

This is not to say *Border Crosser* represents a derivative work. It expresses an original energy all its own. Where Banks' *Culture* presents a wealth of opportunity for redefining the human,

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Eris's madness expresses a transhuman relationship to technology that would find no place in Banks' studied, clear, and essentially hopeful works. And where Larry Niven's Known Space setting postulates a future Earth with cheap teleportation, Doyle offers us a more likely scenario, and merely as a sideshow to the main plot: an Earth with expensive teleportation, where the children of the very upper crust spend ordinary fortunes to leap "into low orbit and on to some antique space station refitted as a microgravity pleasure palace..." to "the bottom of the sea and into an open-water club designed like some silent film fantasy of Neptunian delights." All of this operates in the service of the spy trope "do something interesting until the villain's kids invite you to party."

Later Eris recreates herself in a (male—another purported border crossed!) genetically constructed body of a species exterminated by one of the junior villains of the piece while at the same time compelling one of a growing number of her "friends" to craft a doppelganger with a limited subset of her memories; this complicates a family reunion through questions of identity (border crossed!). The novel proceeds through the plot with increasing speed; the narrative structure is one that invites closure at several points but resists, instead spiraling out to the next, always wider environment: Eris moves from ship to planet to interplanetary system to ongoing interstellar war to final galactic showdown, and the pace increases to cover the ever-lengthier amount of spiral along the way. Contemplate the path a needle takes from the start of a vinyl record to the end.

Practiced readers instinctively assess important narrative cues merely from holding a text—one can feel where one is as the pages turn. As I read this novel electronically due to the limitations of Covid-19 precautions, without that page "feel" the novel unspooled unsettlingly, a practice I recommend. At least one natural stopping point went by like a bypassed rest area on a freeway: looks like a good place to...nope, not stopping here! Reading a paper copy of the novel would not have disoriented one in the least—the fingers' pinch of pages would reveal how much story there was to go. Where good old James Bond (as presented in his Daniel Craig persona) travels through several plots to arrive at his ultimate showdown between the powers controlling his life, Eris spirals up through such a sequence in an extended sprint, all one show, resolving a factional clash playing out around the galaxy while leaving plenty of sequel material to follow.

Using this text in a college classroom requires fortitude: while the frequent sex is largely un-graphic, it is plentiful and nearly always violent. Eris, a "borderline personality" as the back cover text tells us, stops at murder when inconvenient and not part of her work or art. "Trigger warning?" anyone? The novel presents elements of the transhuman and includes characters who are examples of the posthuman. Gender issues abound, and many a scholar could sharpen their knives for a discourse on Tom Doyle, though I would recommend perception precede action, and caution in any event.

oyle includes thanks in an afterward to two different workshops: The Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Writers Group from Hell. In addition, he thanks a number of editors and commenters who "helped me with this tale." That the dynamism and hard corners of this novel

### FICTION REVIEWS Border Crosser

weren't rounded off by such group reviews is good. But that also means the author had access to plenty of feedback. It is not a self-indulgent work. It is not easy to keep a train on the tracks when it speeds so quickly along such a spiral. So: caution before judgement.

Border Crosser embodies space opera wahoo. Readers of *The Space Opera Renaissance* might find it hard to place—a call back to the wide-open wahoo of E. E. "Doc" Smith? Yes. Delanyesque? Indeed. Bujold-y galactic spy wahoo? For sure. Banksian enabling tech wahoo? Yep! But by crossing all those borders, it is Doyle-ian. Doyle-esque? Question instead the need for such a categorization. In closing, I suggest letting wahoo be wahoo. Doyle-esque wahoo.

**Ed Carmien** teaches writing, science fiction, fantasy, and other literatures at Mercer County Community College in New Jersey. He is: a member of the SFWA, a member of the SFRA, section hiking the Appalachian Trail, of the belief C.J. Cherryh doesn't get enough critical attention, and full of admiration for the current incarnation of the *SFRA Review*.



#### **MEDIA REVIEWS**

### Color Out of Space



#### Lúcio Reis-Filho

COLOR OUT OF SPACE. Dir. Richard Stanley. SpectreVision, 2019.

Produced by Spectrevision, *Color Out of Space* (2019) is the latest rendition of H. P. Lovecraft's most adapted short story to date. Richard Stanley's cosmic horror film centers on a family who moves to a remote farmstead in rural New England to escape the hustle of the 21st century. They are adapting to their new life when a glowing meteorite crashes into their front yard and melts into the earth, poisoning both the land and the fabric of space-time with a strange, otherworldly color. To their horror, the family realizes that an alien force is gradually mutating every life form it touches. The film stars Nicolas Cage as a neurotic, righteous family man who faces the odd phenomenon while his wife and children fall victims of a grotesque transformation, which takes him to the brink of madness.

The film opens with a voice-over narration of the first lines from "The Colour out of Space": "West of Arkham the hills rise wild, and there are valleys with deep woods that no axe has ever cut...". The plot follows that of the source material, but also dialogues with the more magical-supernatural side of the Mythos by adding a wide range of references to the storyline. In the first scenes, for example, the family's daughter Lavinia Gardner (Madeleine Arthur) performs a Wiccan ceremony to cure her mother's cancer. Later, a copy of the Necronomicon and a notebook with arcane symbols can be seen in the girl's bedroom. Witch cults, occult arcana, and ancient folklore are recurring motifs in Lovecraft's fiction, although they are absent in that specific source. In addition, the glimpse of a psychedelic dimension inhabited by alien entities whose tentacles curl up through the moving image references the Cyclopean architecture and the dream worlds of "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926) and other stories.

Stanley also brings a new color palette, which was a significant move from earlier adaptations of "The Colour out of Space". Historically, cinema has built a correlation between the "blasted heath" and the effects of radioactivity on the environment—that was already hinted by the source itself. It's not by chance, for example, that the "color" fluoresces green from enriched uranium in Daniel Haller's *Die, Monster, Die!* (1965), the first adaptation of the story for the screen. That "green" had long become associated with radioactivity, how it reflected post-Cold War era fears, and how it taps into science fiction tropes of radioactivity and outer space. In this sense, Stanley's color purple is innovative since it departs from the shining green, with any allusion to radiation being much subtler and almost disappearing.

It is interesting that in changing the color palette of the film, Stanley seems to be aesthetically invoking that more magical-supernatural side of the Mythos, instead of the extraterrestrial-cosmic side of it. At the beginning, the strange meteorite is implicitly summoned as a result of Lavinia's

# MEDIA REVIEWS Color Out of Space

magic ceremony. Nevertheless, the Color's effects are just as devastating, since it infects mind and body, destroys soil and crops, and causes horrific mutations. At the climax, the color purple is dominant and leaves a trail of destruction. The newcomer hydrologist Ward Phillips (Elliot Knight) witnesses the Gardner property becoming the visual depiction of Lovecraft's "acres of grey desolation," with everything (even the color palette) "turning grey and brittle", "fast crumbling to a greyish powder."

The film also interacts with the history of horror cinema, since it plunges into body horror—a subgenre of horror and science fiction films since the 1980s. After being affected by the Color, Theresa (Joely Richardson) absentmindedly cuts off two of her fingers with a kitchen knife, spreading blood in the sink. Later, the Color fuses the mother and her son Jack (Julian Hilliard) together into a deranged, grotesque mass in the gruesome style of Sam Raimi, Stuart Gordon or David Cronenberg. In the stables, the alpacas undergo a horrible mutation and become a manyheaded monster that resonates the practical effects in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). In a way, *Color Out of Space* could be said to be a film of that decade, and is definitely related to the 1980s revival being currently experienced in film and television.

Color Out of Space opens valuable avenues of interdisciplinary research. If previous generations interpreted the Color's green as radiation—a "scientific" fear that was a product of the Cold War—, the film reveals how cosmic horror appears to have taken a departure from science fiction in recent times (excepting in media like Stranger Things and Chernobyl, perhaps). Adaptation studies may shed a light on this departure and why it has become a trend in cosmic horror films nowadays. In the field of reception, the changing in the color palette may clarify today's audience's fears and the metaphors Stanley is exploiting. Another point of interest, which also represents a departure from Lovecraft's writings more generally, especially given Lovecraft's blatant racism, concerns the main roles being played by a female actress and a black actor—Lavinia and Ward, respectively. Reminiscent of the novel Lovecraft Country (2016) and its adaptation, this choice points to the currently changing landscape concerning adaptations of period literature, and should be considered to explore key areas in gender and race studies. On a more paratextual level, the film is tackling the horror that was Lovecraft and racism in general, by casting a diverse cast. Also in the field of gender studies, Lavinia's mystical bonds with the Color may raise questions about how the female character is represented and why it is more connected to the magical-supernatural side of Mythos.

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**Lúcio Reis Filho** is a Ph.D. in Media Studies (University Anhembi Morumbi, 2019), film critic and historian specializing in the relationships between cinema, history, and literature, with a focus on the horror genre. Addressing the echoes of H.P. Lovecraft in Clive Barker's works, he wrote the chapter "Demons to Some, Angels to Others: Eldritch Horrors and Hellbound Religion in the Hellraiser Films," in *Divine Horror: Essays on the Cinematic Battle Between the Sacred and the Diabolical* (McFarland, 2017). His award-winning research funded by CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, Brazil) "Lovecraft out of Space: Echoes of American Weird Fiction on Brazilian Literature and Cinema" was published in *Lovecraftian Proceedings No. 3*. He also wrote essays on zombies in contemporary Latin American films, published in journals such as the *SFRA Review* and horror-themed anthologies. Currently, he investigates Lovecraft's works and its cinematic adaptations in the late twentieth century.

#### MEDIA REVIEWS

### The Comma Press Podcast, Series 2 - Futures



#### Paul March-Russell

THE COMMA PRESS PODCAST. from Comma Press, May-September 2020, <a href="https://commapress.co.uk/digital/the-comma-press-podcast/">https://commapress.co.uk/digital/the-comma-press-podcast/</a>.

Founded in Manchester in 2003, Comma Press is one of the UK's leading publishers of short fiction. Influenced on the one hand by such techno-inspired collections as Sarah Champion's *Disco Biscuits* (1997) and, on the other hand, by Charles May's now-classic critical anthology, *The New Short Story Theories* (1994), Comma Press has sought consistently to promote the short story as the vanguard of literary experimentation and artistic responses to modernity. This has meant a strong commitment to science fiction, as well as other related modes such as horror and the Weird, and to the dialogue between science and SF, for example, in Geoff Ryman's landmark anthology, *When It Changed: Science into Fiction* (2009). More recently, Comma Press has responded keenly to the refugee crisis, for instance in David Herd and Anna Pincus' collection, *Refugee Tales* (2016), and in the publication of émigré authors such as Hassan Blasim. This podcast series, recorded on the eve of the first Covid-19 lockdown in Britain in 2020, brings together the press' various concerns for SF, the Arab-speaking world, 'Fortress Europe', literary innovation, and the politics of locale.

The main presenter is Comma Press' founder, Ra Page, with Sophie Hughes, co-editor of *Europa28* (2020), presenting episode four. Each episode, with the exception of the series opener, takes a recent Comma Press publication as its focus – Blasim's *Iraq* + 100 (2016), Basma Ghalayini's *Palestine* + 100 (2019), *Europa28*, and M. John Harrison's selected stories, *Settling the World* (2020). Although 'futures' is the common theme, each discussion is wide-ranging – covering such topics as the resurgence of Arabic science fiction, the translation and distribution of non-Anglophone literatures, political and cultural oppression, hauntology, and the ambivalences of social media. The longer listening format of the podcast enabled free-flowing conversations, with each episode ranging in length from 60 to 90 minutes. The one exception to the series format, the opening edition, takes a more general look at the role of science fiction, its relationships to science and society, and the predictive and ethical bases for futurology.

For this introductory episode, Page's guests are the academics Amy Chambers and Amanda Rees, and the SF writer and literary critic, Adam Roberts (a frequent contributor to Comma Press anthologies). Although Roberts begins the discussion by recounting his thesis that science fiction has its origins in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, he acknowledges that (as Paul Alkon influentially argued) the idea of futuristic fiction only began in the late 18th century as part of that period's revolutionary ferment. Roberts's linkage, however, between SF and scientific and political revolution enables Rees, an historian of science, to argue for SF's pivotal role

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as a thought experiment rather than a pedagogical tool. It is in this role that SF most effectively communicates science to a wider public by thinking through the ethical and social dilemmas that underpin scientific discovery. Chambers, a former member of Lisa Garforth's 'Unsettling Science Stories' project at Newcastle University, concurs with Rees's position whilst drawing upon her research specialisms in SF film and TV. Page's description of the frustration felt by scientists, participating in the Comma anthologies, towards the more sceptical responses of SF writers initiates a rewarding discussion not only of the differing responsibilities between science and SF but also of the roles of utopia and dystopia. Roberts expresses his distaste for the ultraviolence of *Game of Thrones*, as well as the simplistic solutions of superhero movies, whilst also lamenting the revisioning of (ostensibly) utopian franchises such as *Star Trek*. All three acknowledge, though, that dystopia can have a critical function which, ironically, also has a utopian purpose—by pointing out the worst possible scenarios, SF can help to safety-proof future technological outcomes.

Episodes two and three most strongly complement one another, and so form the central focus for the series. In episode two, Page is joined by the Arabic scholars, Sinéad Murphy and Annie Webster, as well as the writer Anoud, one of the contributors to *Iraq* + 100; in episode three, he is joined by Ghalayini, editor of *Palestine* + 100, the academics Barbara Dick and Lindsey Moore, and the Palestinian writer Rawan Yaghi. The first of the anthologies imagines life in Iraq a century after the US invasion of 2003 while the second imagines Palestine 100 years after the Nakba: the enforced exodus in 1948 of 700,000 Palestinians following the creation of the state of Israel. Although Murphy and Webster tend to concentrate on the current vogue for SF in the Arab-speaking world, Dick emphasises that its roots lie in the 1960s, and so is more of a revival than a new phenomenon. Anoud's stress upon the influence of the 1001 Nights as a repository of marvellous tales and feisty heroines suggests, however, that the supposed belatedness of Arabic science fiction is a false construction. Both sets of panellists avoid comparisons with Western SF, concentrating instead upon the local conditions for the production of Arabic SF.

Page notes that, although interest in Arabic futurisms has grown in the wake of Afrofuturism, it may still be Orientalised as an exotic counterpart to Western SF. By contrast, in episode three, mention is made of Larissa Sansour's film, *A Space Exodus* (2009), in which the first Palestinian in space can still not escape the historical legacy of the *Nakba*. Page pertinently observes that, despite the enthusiasm of Western scholars and readers, the production of Iraqi and Palestinian SF from within those countries remains precarious. Anoud, for instance, describes the hostility of US officials and the regional threat of Isis. But, whereas these oppressions drove Anoud to create her SF, the decades-long colonisation of Palestine has all but stifled local literary networks. Page notes that, while there is active émigré writing from Iraq, contact between Palestine and the West remains difficult with Palestinian writers denied the right to travel overseas. Although Anoud, Murphy and Webster emphasise the mix of absurdity and terror that constitutes life in Iraq, a generative factor (as Webster argues) for the 'creative destruction' of art, Palestinian life appears more rigid and controlled with fewer opportunities for creative outlets. To that end, Dick and

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Moore warmly celebrate the appearance of *Palestine* + 100, and co-opt the role of interviewer from Page to ask Ghalayini how the collection was assembled, how the translations were prepared, and how the authors have distributed their work. Their hope is that the cause of Palestinian SF may be advanced with the aid of TV and film adaptations of Arabic texts—for example, a mooted screen version of Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2008).

Episode four, recorded after lockdown had been introduced, changes tack by focusing upon women's futuristic fiction from Europe. It acts, though, as a mirror-image to the previous conversations by exploring the refugee crisis from the EU's point of view and its implications for the European project. As Hughes's guests and contributors to Europa28, Janne Teller and Kapka Kassabova, contend, the failure to help refugees from Syria and other warzones undermines the utopian principles of the EU, born from the (literal) ashes of two World Wars and the Nazi Holocaust. In their conversation, Teller and Kassabova argue for the need for embodiment, intimacy, touch and the face-to-face encounter in contrast with the alienation of the Internet and screen culture. As Hughes and her panellists note, this demand is all the more ironic since—due to the pandemic—their conversation is reliant upon Zoom. Nonetheless, while making communication across borders technically possible, the technology also highlights the estrangement between individuals and the need for sustainable ecologies to ensure the physical survival of the public space. In the writings of Thomas Piketty, Teller and Kassabova see an economic model in which a fusion of capitalism and socialism is viable. Underlying both this conversation and the collection of stories and essays, written by twenty-eight European women, is a vision of Europe that predates the EU—an Enlightenment model consisting of the 'republic of letters'.

The final episode is only tangentially related to the overall theme of futures through discussion of hauntology, Mark Fisher's concept of 'lost futures,' and Robert Macfarlane's reflections on the 'eeriness' of the English landscape. Page's guests include M. John Harrison, the critics Andy Hedgecock and Jennifer Hodgson, and the filmmaker Adam Scovell, best-known for his popularisation of 'folk horror'. Taking Harrison's retrospective anthology, Settling the World, as its focus, the conversation offers a thoughtful and insightful examination of what it means to move through a landscape, to be both possessed and radically displaced by it. In comparing Harrison with other neo-avant-garde writers of the 1960s and '70s, such as Ann Quin, Hodgson emphasises the phenomenological basis to his fiction—the collapsing of any dialectic between inner and outer experience—, so that Harrison's protagonists tend to treat the external world as a hieroglyph to be deciphered: only to be entrapped within its manifold complexities. Harrison concurs with Hodgson, acknowledging the impossibility of mimetic representation to describe the object in itself, but emphasising that this tendency also comes as a refusal of such literary conventions as linear narrative, closure and plot. For Harrison, his aim is for fiction to be viable to live on its own terms—and not at the behest of such external apparatus as the science-fictional obsession with ideas. Although the exchange between Harrison and Hodgson allows Hedgecock and Scovell to discuss the now-familiar terrain of the hauntological, with mention of such writers

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as H.G. Wells ('The Door in the Wall'), M.R. James and Robert Aickman, more interesting is how Harrison's writing is positioned in relation to the avant-garde and the legacy of European modernism. This, too, would seem to dwell upon the nature of political and artistic borders as discussed in the preceding episode. Despite the excellent contributions of the other panellists, Harrison—as is so often the case—is not only the most thought-provoking writer but also the most perceptive analyst of his own work, and its sustenance of a late modernist aesthetic.

Taken as a whole, the series offers a number of engaging and stimulating conversations on the relationship between science and science fiction, the politics of writing, the role of translation, art and civic society, and the nature of landscape. The general theme of futures is somewhat stretched, not least in the final episode, but this is compensated by the quality of the conversations and the various contributors. Since the series was affected by the transition into lockdown, praise should also be given to Becca Parkinson for the editing and sound quality of the series despite at least two of the conversations being conducted remotely. Ultimately, however, the podcast acts as a shop-window for Comma Press and, on this basis, the series demonstrates how the press is not only tapping into some of the most urgent issues of the day but also contributing to the cosmopolitan ideal of the republic of letters. From the point of view of the short story, Comma Press's anthologies emphasise the importance of short fiction in assembling voices from around the world—a veritable United Nations of writers, artists, and other unacknowledged legislators.

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### **MEDIA REVIEWS**

### The Expanse



#### Heather Clitheroe and Mark A. McCutcheon

*THE EXPANSE*. Fergus, Mark, Hawk Ostby and Naren Shankar, creators. SyFy/Amazon Prime Video, 2015-present.

In 2016, an article I co-wrote (see McCutcheon and Barnetson) argued that contemporary SF markedly underrepresents organized labour (in contrast to business), with exceptions by writers like China Miéville, C.J. Cherryh, and Cory Doctorow. While the article was in press, this review's co-author, SFF writer Heather Clitheroe, suggested *The Expanse*, and from the first episodes I realized that our article needs a major update—or a rethink. *The Expanse* bases its finely machined world and story in working-class culture, organized labor, and the political-economic context of postcoloniality—just a few reasons *The Expanse* repays critical attention with interest.

James S.A. Corey is the *nom de plume* of co-authors Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham. Leviathan Wakes, the first novel in Corey's nine-volume roman-fleuve, was published in 2011; subsequent novels have followed almost annually. The ninth and final Expanse novel, Leviathan Falls, will appear in November 2021, with a final novella planned afterwards (Urrutia). The Expanse takes place some three hundred years from now, positing a postcolonial solar system that stretches from a climate-changed Earth and its moon, centrally governed by the United Nations, to an independent Mars, engaged in a Cold War with Earth, to the asteroid belt and gas giant moons, where "Belters," les damnés du vide, labor on the colonial periphery in resource extraction for "the Inners" who exploit and oppress them. Belt governance beyond corporate charters is loosely organized around the Outer Planetary Alliance, or OPA, an ambiguous collective that "had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation" (Abaddon's Gate 183) and parlays its organizing power into political power as the story unfolds. *The Expanse*'s interplanetary, postcolonial setting is premised on the novum of an "Epstein drive" that enables fast (but not light-speed) rocketry. To launch the plot, a second novum emerges: the "protomolecule," an artifact of a vanished alien civilization, discovered on a moon of Saturn and appropriated for research and development by private interests seeking to weaponize it. How the solar system's powers respond to the destabilizing effects of the protomolecule technology, competing to control or destroy it, drives the series' storyline over nine novels, which also work as three linked trilogies. The first sets the scene, then estranges it with the "protomolecule" novum; the second—with Nemesis Games as middle volume and fulcrum of the whole—recounts the political and economic fallout wrought by the protomolecule mostly within the solar system; and the third, set later, follows that fallout well beyond the solar system.

The TV series based on the novels originated with producers Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby and Naren Shankar as show-runner. Franck and Abraham signed on to write and produce. The

first three seasons aired from 2015 to 2018 on the SyFy channel, which cancelled the show in mid-May 2018. Fans campaigned to "#SaveTheExpanse" and, before that month ended, Amazon picked up the series for its Prime Video service, where it now streams. There is postmodern irony in the acquisition of such a labor-friendly show by one of the world's most notoriously exploitative corporations. Amazon aired Season 4 in 2019, and the fifth in late 2020—accompanied by Amazon's announcement that the next, sixth season will be its last.

Each season of the TV series adapts mainly one novel; however, to strengthen the adaptation, the writers take bold and shrewd creative liberties with the novels (and accompanying novellas and stories), like rearranging plot points and turning minor book characters into major screen roles. Season 5 follows the main plot of *Nemesis Games*, integrating elements of the sixth book, *Babylon's Ashes*. In purported "retribution for generations of atrocities committed by the Inners against Belters" ("Gaugamela"), a radicalized Belter faction attacks Earth with accelerated meteors (literalizing, to cataclysmic effect, the resort to rocks as the only weapons the desperate and downtrodden can wield against empire). The ensuing catastrophe embroils the series' protagonists—especially Naomi Nagata (played by Dominique Tipper) and Amos Burton (played by Wes Chatham)—in a thriller plot of terrorism, espionage, sabotage, abductions, underground trade, double-crossing, disaster survival, and daring escapes.

The Expanse's style, in print and on screen, emphasizes accessibility (Franck and Chatham, "Episode 8"): in linear plotting; realistic rendering of diverse, likeable protagonists; plain-speaking dialogue; and skilled interweaving of two familiar SF tropes with proven crossover success—first contact and Frankensteinian hubris. The Expanse's accessible narrative style helps the series' representations of working-class culture reach the popular audience that relates to them. Yet The Expanse also harbours arch allusions, ironies, and references. The writing reworks elements from a myriad of genres such as space opera, hard SF, climate fiction, noir crime, Gothic horror, pulp Westerns, and political thrillers (the fifth instalment's title echoing Tom Clancy's Patriot Games). Ironies abound in the series' postcolonially informed détournement of Western tropes (frontier, first contact, shootouts) and Gothic tropes (hauntings, monsters, imprisonments). Sometimes both classes of tropes are brought together, as in the remark by protagonist Jim Holden (played by Steven Strait) that humankind's interstellar expansion will be "another blood-soaked gold rush" ("Abaddon's Gate"). The series also teems with literary references—often to poetry: Clarissa Mao (played by Nadine Nicole) talks about writing poetry in prison ("Tribes"); Chrisjen Avasarala (played by Shohreh Agdashloo) contemplates a line by her poet spouse ("Winnipesaukee").

The Expanse features pervasive, refreshingly sympathetic representations of organized labor as part of everyday life, in details like union representatives, dialogue about work and working conditions, enactments of democratic and community-building practices, and leftist and labor allusions (in character names like Althusser [Nemesis 229] and Bertold, a sixth-book character introduced in Season 5, played by Stephen Tracey). Workers facing arrest can request union representatives for defence. Basic income is standard policy on Earth. Season 5 dramatizes good-faith bargaining (in Burton's negotiation of housing for a friend, and in Mao's advocacy for

servants abandoned by their employers) and expressions of solidarity both blunt—Avasarala's call for unity among Earth, Mars, and the Belt ("Nemesis Games")—and subtle, like Belter idioms that suggest the internalization of union-inculcated collectivism. "The more you share, the more your bowl will be plentiful," says a Belter family sitting to supper ("Churn"). Formally, too, a collective tells the story, in rotating focalizations of multiple characters' viewpoints—antagonists' included. "Everybody gets a point of view that makes sense," says Franck of their writers' room ethos (Franck and Chatham, "Episode 5").

Burton and Nagata exemplify the series' valorization of labor organizing, the entrenched capitalist class striation it challenges—and the importance of higher education to mobility. The lack of socioeconomic mobility and tertiary education experienced by characters like Burton in his early life, and the exceptionality of Nagata's advanced engineering degrees (for a Belter) unnervingly reflect the real-world crisis of late capitalism's "university in ruins" (see Readings), as neoliberal governments cut education budgets, tuition fees and student debt escalate, and private capital colonizes public universities.

The Belter character Camina Drummer (played by Ojibwe actor Cara Gee) exemplifies the series' working-class grounding and how the show adapts the book to magnify that focus. In the books, Drummer is a minor character first appearing in *Nemesis Games* (172); in the series, Gee's Drummer has been a lead role since Season 2. Season 5 also rewrites Drummer into the "polyam Belter fam" brought forward from *Babylon's Ashes*: "It was really important to all of us," Gee reflects, "that this queer...fluid and polyamorous [family was] represented with respect" (qtd. in Franck and Chatham, "Episode 6"). Gee's Drummer exemplifies the TV series' consistently creative adaptation of the books and its brilliant casting of Indigenous and international talent in the series' many leading women protagonists, among them Nicole's Mao, the ex-Marine Draper (played by New Zealand-Samoan actor Frankie Adams), Iranian actor Aghdashloo's magisterial Avasarala, and the Dominican-British Tipper as Nagata. The Expanse far surpasses the Bechdel test's threshold.

Nagata focalizes a Season 5 subplot in which she gets abducted and imprisoned by her abusive ex; then, for several episodes, this Black woman struggles to communicate her emergency, to escape, even just to breathe: first aboard a ship whose oxygen depletes because of the way she hacks its communication tech ("Winnipesaukee"), then in a spacesuit whose oxygen runs out ("Nemesis Games"). While this subplot's context of surviving abuse and oppression is more about misogyny than racism, the season's sustained close-up on Nagata's struggle to breathe—set against a backdrop of terrorist conspiracy implicating a corrupt police force in arming Nagata's captors—argues a dialectical, intersectional synecdoche, the political in the personal. Tipper's performance of Nagata's struggle thus makes for uncanny, harrowing viewing in the wake of 2020's #BlackLivesMatter protests and ongoing violence perpetuated against BIPOC communities.

Corey's series has become a genre-culture, transmedia touchstone, orbited by a satellite belt including short fiction, graphic novels, social media, and a role-playing game. *The Expanse* 

rewards science fiction studies and studies in the other aforementioned modes it reworks, as well as Cultural Studies, postcolonial and postmodern theory, socialist and labor studies, adaptation studies, and poetry. Between the latest season and whatever big finish the final novel and TV season will bring, now is the perfect time to explore *The Expanse*. Its world is not one of warp speeds or anti-gravity fields, and its attention to scientific realism, if not its vision of solidarity, may ruin other space opera for you. Don't worry. It's worth it.

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Heather Clitheroe is an author whose stories have been published in numerous SFF anthologies and magazines, including *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Lightspeed*, and she has participated in writing residency programs at the Banff Centre for the Arts, including the Leighton Artists' Colony, and the Arrowmont School for Arts and Crafts. She has edited science fiction collections in collaboration with the NASA Exoplanet Science Institute at Caltech's Exoplanet Demographics conference, and leads youth science fiction and fantasy writing workshops in collaboration with the Calgary Public Library. Heather has been a member of the award-winning *Uncanny* magazine staff since 2014 as a submissions editor, and is a full member of SFWA.

Mark A. McCutcheon is Professor of Literary Studies at Athabasca University. Mark's open access works include the books *Shape Your Eyes by Shutting Them: Poems* (2019) and *The Medium Is the Monster* (2018), winner of the Media Ecology Association's McLuhan Award; poems in the Exoplanet Demographics conference zine (2020), the 2019 Rhysling Anthology, and *Riddled with Arrows* (2018); and SF studies in scholarly periodicals like *TOPIA* (2016), *Continuum* (2011), and *SFFTV* (2009). His poems also appear in *Beyond Earth's Edge: The Poetry of Spaceflight* (2020), and journals like *On Spec*, *Star\*Line*, and *Kaleidotrope*. Mark's on Twitter and Mixcloud as @sonicfiction.

#### MEDIA REVIEWS

### Snowpiercer



### **Ada Cheong**

SNOWPIERCER. Hawes, James and Graeme Manson, producers. Netflix, 2020-2021.

There is a strange dissonance about watching fictional depictions of the end of the world when the world we live in feels about to end. As the Covid-19 virus devastated many parts of the globe, the gratuitous pleasure and morbid intrigue offered by on-screen catastrophes felt like a confirmation of the adage that it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.

I was thus reluctant to give *Snowpiercer* (2020-2021) a go when it was pulled onto the Netflix platform. At first glance, the TV series is just another story about Humanity's struggle to survive on an inhospitable planet, joining the many post-earth TV series on their catalogue, such as *The 100* (2018-2020), *The Rain* (2020) and *Into the Night* (2020). The eponymous *Snowpiercer* is a train that circles an uninhabitable earth. The apocalyptic event that precedes the story is triggered by the release of synthetic coolant CW-7 into the atmosphere in an attempt to reverse global warming. Now on its seventh revolution through the earth's unforgiving whiteness, the train struggles to stay on track as a rebellion from its tail end threatens its delicate socio-ecological balance. Consisting of unticketed passengers that have been forced into the last carriages with limited space, food, and water, the Tailies seek to rearrange the social order of the rain. The fragility of the closed container of Snowpiercer is jeopardized by an external temperature that is announced to be -119.6 degrees in the first episode. Used to execute dissidents by freezing off entire limbs in a matter of seconds, the cold makes even the smallest breach a grave threat. Snowpiercer thus becomes (for the most part) the last container of life on earth, a near-biblical ark brought to fruition by human ingenuity and technological prowess.

The TV series first premiered on TNT in the US and is based loosely on the French graphic novel series created in 1984 by Jacques Lob and illustrator Jean-Marc Rochette. The second and third volumes of the original comic were released by Benjamin Legrand and Rochette in 1999 and 2000 respectively, with Olivier Bocquet and Rochette wrapping things up with the fourth volume in 2015. Bong Joon-Ho's esteemed direction of the *Snowpiercer* film in 2013, based mostly on the first and second French volumes, was produced in English. Boosted by widely recognised faces such as Chris Evans and Tilda Swinton, the narrative assumed an international reach that triggered the translation of the original French comic series into English in 2014 and 2016, redistributed into three volumes instead of four by Titan Comics. Titan Comics also produced a two-volume prequel comic to the Snowpiercer universe in September 2019 and November 2020, written by Matz and illustrated by Rochette.

Amidst this vibrant intertextual history, Graeme Manson and co-producer James Hawes have done well with the TV series. Their version of the end of the world rejects an essentialised, undifferentiated notion of Humanity (with a capital H). It reinserts the complex material and cultural struggles surrounding resource scarcity into the dominant technocratic narrative of climate breakdown, a narrative that has long presented green technology as the main solution to the present climatological condition. The consequences of climate breakdown, they insist, will always be experienced unevenly, the blame most heavily falling on the Global North, and the consequences most greatly borne by the Global South.

As is typical of works in the post-apocalypse and cli-fi genre, energy scarcity forms a key concern, managed through human technology and ingenuity. Indeed, across all Snowpiercer's permutations, humanity's last vanguard of defence against a frozen death is the old energy myth of sf: the perpetual motion engine. In Lob's graphic novel, the engine assumes a pseudo-sentient status, requiring human companionship. Although it loosely gestures towards notions of sentient AI, the comic series never really develops this, eventually choosing to take its plot off-train. In the TV series, on the other hand, as with Bong's film, the eternal engine is completely inanimate and thoroughly engineered by human design: specifically, by Wilford Industries. Mr. Wilford, as the creator of the engine, assumes a god-like status in both film and series, something that Manson and Hawes magnify in the latter. The man is even afforded an altar in the Snowpiercer's Tea Room, a spiritual car. In a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the Catholic practice of drawing the sign of the cross, his supporters draw a W across their chest. Wilford's deification in the TV series most vibrantly articulates the faith in the progress of Humanity's technological expertise that has become so characteristic of the Capitalocene. This technocratic faith is also encapsulated by the admittance of protagonist Layton's adopted son, Miles, into the ranks of the train's engineers, a highly esteemed role. As the brightest new mind to continue this essential work of balancing the train's energy inputs and outputs, his full name, Miles and Miles, is a hopeful prayer for an engine truly eternal.

Keeping the carrying capacity of the train's biosphere on track is thus a major plot engine within the TV series, involving the neo-Malthusian balancing act of limiting population size and creating food supplies. Yet, while scientists and engineers hold great esteem within the series for their ability to keep this delicate mathematical balance in check, the show makes it clear that it is not just about the math. Indeed, the TV series' main success is its ability to strike a fine balance between the histrionic ecological emergencies that threaten to derail the train (always soothed by the hospitality team, dressed in an inoffensive faux-calm shade of teal) and the other very human, social issues that the series explores.

Manson's *Snowpiercer* sheds the brutalist aesthetics of the original cramped, Soviet-like train in Lob's comic (Bocquet). It more closely resembles the luxury liner designed within Bong's film, by production designer Ondrej Nekvasil. Masterminded by Barry Robinson, the beauty of animal and plant life in the TV series is given space to shine around the human dramas of the train, acting as an elegy to the complex ecosystems wiped out by the manmade apocalypse. The

mathematical problem of sustaining life is thus given a highly sensuous quality. Furthermore, by avoiding chrome finishes for the train's interior and utilising copper instead (Grebey), the TV series distracts from the train's apocalyptic dieselpunk exterior and eschews a minimalist end-of-earth aesthetic.

The material and cultural issues that accompany the end of the world are also given ample space to play out around the ecological and technological crises in Manson's series. Indeed, it is in the articulation of socio-economic inequality where the series sets itself apart from the 2013 film. In the latter, Bong's critique of capitalist inequality is couched in allegory and absurdity. Who could forget Minister Mason's (Tilda Swinton) speech as the limb of a Tail member gets frozen off? Resting a shoe on his head, their theatrical rhetoric is at once laughable and deeply unsettling: "Would you wear a shoe on your head?" The film gestures towards the cyclical and inherently chaotic nature of capitalist progress, as Mr. Wilford is revealed to work in tandem with ex-leader of the tail, Gilliam, to spark periodic revolts. Through such rebellions, the tail population is systematically pruned by 74%, thus restoring ecological balance. Unfortunately, the momentum of Bong's plot loses steam after Curtis successfully reaches the engine. The lengthy dialogue he has with Wilford on capitalism and its cycles of instability is an anti-climactic finish to his rebellion saved only by the final explosion of the entire train. The derailment of the train and the emergence of the last two surviving humans into the snow (Korean girl, Yona, and 5-year-old Afro-American boy, Timmy) suggests that destroying the train is a more viable option than rehauling its existing capitalist system.

Conversely, the serialised medium of television offers Manson and Hawes more space to explore the intricacies of resource struggles. The caloric distribution of food is the most visible manifestation of such inequalities in a post-apocalyptic world. Both the graphic novel and film imagine radical changes in our food future. In the comic, rabbits are bred as meat for the most privileged, while the rest of the train's population feed on something called *the mother*, the quasisentient blob that resembles a yeast culture. The artificial supply of meat is grotesque despite its miraculous proliferation and certain supply, disturbing in the same way as Margaret Atwood's chickienobs in her novel *Oryx and Crake*. Bong's film similarly invokes a sense of grotesque when depicting the food of the Tail section, even exploring the trope of cannibalism. Furthermore, the dark, gelatinous slabs of protein that the Tail eats are ground from insects (roaches), an ingredient that has now received serious scientific consideration in technofixing the worlds' shrinking food supplies.

In this, Manson's latest reincarnation of the tale is perhaps the least original. Yet, in part because of this, it most poignantly critiques the realities of the current world food system. Synthetic and miraculous gustatory concoctions are completely missing from the TV series. The train's food system is instead supported by greenhouses and aquariums as well as feedlots in the cars loosely grouped together as Ag-Sec. While slabs identical to those in Bong's film are served up, their origin is not mentioned, suggesting a perhaps more open-minded attitude to non-animal protein alternatives. Despite the (just) sufficient volume of calories being produced for the entire

train population, the richest eat in quality and excess, while the poorest starve. The highly familiar food system of the microcosmic train thus provides a no-frills critique of food distribution in reality, mirroring it closely.

Building on the film's abstract critique of capitalist inequality, the TV series also more fully explores its unsustainable contradictions through its rebellion. Manson's chosen hero, Layton, stages a more convincing revolution than Curtis in Bong's film, with information networks and diplomatic tactics. Significantly, he forms an alliance between the Tail and Third Class section, unfolding a complex picture of class politics and the value of unionising labour as underground networks unfurl amongst janitors, caterers, and brakemen. As Miss Audrey, a key ally from Third, threatens, "Third touches every system on this train. We will be heard."

The diverse and inclusive world of the Tailies and Third Class that displaces the wealthy population of the First Class section in the series is a key tenet of its success. The distinct rejection of a white-centric picture of Humanity's survival, engineered through wealthy technocrats, is reflected through Manson's and Hawes' casting choices, containing a deliberate diversity that is absent from the graphic novels and film. Unlike a largely white, cisgendered heterosexual cast of the film, led by the face of Chris Evans, with the token black and Asian actors, the TV series features African American actor Daveed Diggs, playing Layton's character, as its hero.

The mix of characters in the series is also far more inclusive along the lines of gender and sexuality. Unlike the film, in which Curtis stops the young female Yona from engaging in combat, the series stars strong women in the frontlines of political and military confrontation. Strikingly, the brightest engineer and character behind Mr. Wilson's fictional persona in the first season is Melanie Cavill. She is joined by a whole host of other female characters who play key roles in the revolution: Miss Audrey (the Madonna of the Nightcar who performs the train's healing and emotional salvation); Josie (Layton's revolutionary partner-in-crime) and Bess Till (another frontliner in the revolution who convinces the brakemen to join the movement). The series also features several queer characters such as train detective Bess Till, chef Jinju, civilian Zarah and brakeman Osweiller.

Overall, I am surprised by the nuance of the TV series, given the limited mileage offered by the 'last train on earth' premise. Despite being strongly rooted within a hard sf tradition where math is critical in ensuring survival, the TV series asserts that it can only get us so far in understanding the end of the world. Beyond the abstract margins of scientists and engineers, climate breakdown and resource scarcity are experienced in highly material and uneven terms. If climate breakdown is not just a technological problem but also a cultural and imaginative one, the series offers a bold vision of what it would be like to radically re-imagine our existing sociopolitical structures of inequality. With the production for season 3 now in train, I am excited to see where the next season alights.

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#### MEDIA REVIEWS

### Star Trek: Lower Decks, season 1 (2020, TV)

### Jeremy Brett

STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS. McMahan, Mike, creator. CBS Television, 2020.

The opening to each episode of Lower Decks has a familiar ring to viewers of Star Trek. The grand views of deep space and a mighty starship, the U.S.S. *Cerritos*, set to swelling music until asteroids start thudding off the ship's hull, or until the ship arrives in the middle of a pitched battle with the Borg and immediately turns around and retreats, or until the *Cerritos* is seen zipping through space at warp speed with a giant bug-eyed parasite suctioned to the engine nacelles. Ideally, the audience smiles as they realize that this is not typical *Star Trek* nor is the *Cerritos* the U.S.S. *Enterprise* or *Voyager* or *Discovery*.

But the *Cerritos* is a more typical Starfleet vessel, and therein lies the beauty of this intentionally goofy show. The *Cerritos* is no flagship devoted to Enterprise-like missions of deep exploration; it takes on the less glamorous assignments, most notably "second contact". As Ensign Bradward Boimler (voiced by Jack Quaid) notes in his practice 'Captain's Log' in the pilot episode:

First contact is a delicate, high-stakes operation of diplomacy. One must be ready for anything when Humanity is interacting with an alien race for the first time. But we don't do that. Our specialty is second contact. Still pretty important. We get all the paperwork signed, make sure we're spelling the name of the planet right, get to know all the good places to eat.

The *Cerritos* and its crew don't live on the final frontier; they live behind, and maybe slightly to the left, where the scutwork gets done that gives the heroes the freedom to do what they do best. It's an inspired concept that makes *Lower Decks* a show of immense humor and surprising emotional depth.

For decades, audiences have watched *Star Trek* almost entirely through the eyes and experiences of high-level Starfleet officers: Kirk, Picard, Sisko, Janeway, Archer, Burnham, and their command crews. In most cases, members of the lower ranks appear as extras and disappear as rapidly as they came (represented most visibly in popular culture by the concept of the 'redshirt'—the utterly expendable crewmember who dies early, unheralded, and often nameless). But Starfleet is a massive and sprawling organization, which in order to function as peacekeeper and exploration arm of the Federation must rely on countless underlings to make everything run: namely, the ensigns. *Lower Decks* centers around four of these lowly officers who live and work far from the *Cerritos*' bridge, taking part in missions that waver between routine and fatally hazardous, sometimes with a healthy dollop of grinding dullness.

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Crammed into bunks that line the corridors at the bottom of the ship's saucer section, the ensigns deal with their lots in life in various ways: Boimler is an anxious rule-follower who dreams of captainhood and idolizes his superiors; Beckett Mariner (Tawny Newsome) is an excited, excitable, impulsive devil-may-care junior officer who ignores Starfleet regulations and the chain of command (including her mother, *Cerritos*' Captain Carol Freeman (Dawnn Lewis)). Sam Rutherford (Eugene Cordero) is an engineer with a cybernetic implant and boundless enthusiasm for constant repairs and inspections of the ship's machinery. The last in this quartet is Deltan D'Vana Tendi (Noel Wells), new to the *Cerritos* and bringing comedic levels of excitement to her sick bay duties. Over the course of the season, the four grow close, forming tight bonds equaling any in *Trek*'s long series of shipboard friendships forged from shared loyalties, senses of duty, and curiosity about the wider universe. Much of the dramatic (and comic) tension in *Lower Decks* comes from the disconnect between the ensigns and their superiors, as each ensign comes up hard against the perilous realities inherent to Starfleet missions.

Lower Decks isn't for everyone. The animation and vocal stylings are fast and frenetic, like Rick & Morty. There is much more violence than is typical of Trek, and far more sexual references. Some may find it just too silly. Arguably, however, Lower Decks adds a welcome note of hilarity to the sometimes-too-solemn-for-its-own-good Trek franchise, poking fun at some of its traditions and cliches but doing so with a sense of real love and respect for its predecessors. Not the least part of this comes from the constant shower of references to incidents and characters from previous Treks. Yes, these kinds of references are Easter eggs for Trek fans, but they give Lower Decks a lived-in sort of feel—that the show is not just a parody but part of a shared canonical universe.

One of *Lower Decks*' direct inspirations is a 1994 *TNG* episode (also titled "Lower Decks") in which four *Enterprise-D* junior officers are shown to have lives of their own, with the ship itself a setting for the lives and struggles of non-main cast members. *Lower Decks* follows in this narrative tradition, showing how the "regular" people—the ones that work behind the scenes undramatically and with perseverance, or whose unseen lives are lived in the wake of decisions made by major characters—have their own moments of heroism and centrality to the moment. That is certainly an inspiring notion for the legions of *Trek* fans who have imagined themselves as members of Starfleet and through fanfiction or cosplay written themselves into the narrative.

Some may quibble over whether *Lower Decks* should be considered *Trek* canon. *Lower Decks*, in fact, can be a source of fruitful discussions about what constitutes true "canon"—is there room in a media universe for a production that so differs in tone and pace from the keystone shows? Where does an animated production fit into a family of non-animated productions? This last question has been asked in *Trek* history before, of course, with the 1973-1974 *Star Trek: The Animated Series*. Is canonicity even necessary—does a particular media universe require a single accepted narrative for audiences to enjoy individual productions within it?

Lower Decks is also an example of what many in the *Trek* community see as a retrograde obsession with revisiting and recrafting the historical timeline. In recent years, the mainstay of

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filmed *Trek* has involved prequel material such as *Discovery* or the upcoming *Strange New Worlds*, or the Kelvin Universe of J.J. Abrams' film trilogy. Furthermore, productions like *Star Trek: Picard* or the upcoming animated *Star Trek: Prodigy* are centered on major cast members that have been explored in previous installments. These all suggest a question: how imaginatively rich is a media enterprise that at times seems entrapped by its past, endlessly retreading the same time periods and settings and relying on appeals to viewer nostalgia through in-the-know references or memes? None of this makes *Lower Decks* any less enjoyable to watch, but it does raise questions about the franchise's overall commitment to the original themes of *Trek* that have inspired several generations of viewers—the ever-forward progress of science and technology, the movement towards an increasingly utopian future, and a growing consciousness that humanity can and must unite for the collective good. Indeed, similar questions can be posed of other recycled franchises at this time. As time passes, expect much fruitful scholarship to be mined from *Lower Decks* and its relation to *Trek*'s classic vision of the human future, as well as to the dramatic and narrative malleability of media franchises.

The *Cerritos*' ensigns, in their imperfect personhood, are appropriate representatives of that vision: in their own quirky ways, they are always evolving into their better selves. That character development and purposeful optimism contrast with more recent Trek productions (such as *Picard*) that eschew confident 1960s SF for a grimmer, more cynical, and more pessimistic Federation populated by ruthless Section 31 agents and corrupt Starfleet officers. That attitude may well reflect our weary and traumatized present. *Lower Decks*, though, for all its irreverence and animated lunacy, is an interesting throwback extension of the *Trek* utopian tradition that demands a humanity moving ever forward towards a societal and technological ideal.

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