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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 w*Review* were published 6 times a year until the early 2000s, when the *Review* switched to a quarterly schedule. Originally available only to SFRA members or sold per issue for a small fee, *SFRA Review* was made publicly available on the SFRA's website starting with issue #256. Starting with issue #326, the *Review* became an open access publication. In 2020, the *Review* switched to a volume/issue numbering scheme, beginning with 50.1 (Winter 2019). For more information about the *Review*, its history, policies, and editors, visit www.sfrareview.org.

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FROM THE EDITORS

Summer 2024

Ian Campbell

I've long felt that the timeline where friends got both David Bowie and Prince to the doctor in time back in 2016 is the control universe, and we're living in the experimental one, and that sometime around (let's say) 06 January 2021, the researchers grew bored and put their collective thumb on the fast-forward button. But I was incorrect, I think: when Golden Toilet almost took a bullet and then a very effective incumbent dropped out of the race, I came to understand that what we now live in is the Black Swan universe. Anything goes, folks: buckle up, or don't.

SF, among other things, enables us to run experimental universes: to say "what might happen were X true", whether X be faster-than-light travel, or colonizable planets, or sentient aliens who just want to party. SF lets us look at what the consequences of those developments might be, and also to use those hypothetical universes as distorted reflections upon our own here and now. In this issue of the *SFRA Review*, our Managing Editor Virginia L. Conn brings us a set of articles about SF and socialism: what a collective approach to solving problems or rebooting our society might look like. We hope that you find these articles, as well as our usual palette of reviews, to be food for thought. Imagine an experimental universe where money did not count as free speech.

The two hottest days in recorded human history were reached last week, breaking a record set last month, which broke a record set last year. I'm beginning to sound like a broken record, but our climate change future is already here: it's just very unevenly distributed. It reminds me of William Gibson's work in *The Peripheral* and *Agency*, where the background plot revolves around a non-white woman elected to the US presidency around this time and then either assassinated, or not, depending on the timeline. Imagine an experimental universe where the open undermining of democracy led to actual sanctions. Write me at icampbell@gsu.edu.

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

From the President

Hugh O'Connell

The strange rhythms of the academic "summer break" seem to compel me to continuously turn in these Janus-faced reports: at once looking back to the last conference, now fading into the past, while simultaneously looking ahead to the new academic year and the next conference on the horizon.

First up, looking backwards.

It's hard to believe that the "Transitions" SFRA 2024 conference in Tartu, Estonia was nearly three months ago. It was great to see so many of our sf colleagues online and in-person, and it's a tribute to the hosts, presenters, and special guests that I still feel like I'm living in the ideas that we workshopped and discussed together. With that in mind, I'd like to take this opportunity to once again thank Jaak Tomberg, Lisanna Lajal, the students that ran the tech, and the university administration for all of their support and for making us feel so welcome, digitally and personally, in Tartu. The conference brought together over 175 participants from all over the globe in a series of a highly successful, fully hybrid panels and presentations. It was a stunning example of the global reach that sf studies fosters and the recent tech developments that help bring such a global undertaking to fruition. While I didn't envy some of my more far-flung colleagues joining panels at 4am their local time, it was remarkable how well integrated the hybrid panelists and attendees were.

I also want to offer my congratulations to this year's award winners: Lisa Yaszek, Rebekah Sheldon, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Mingwei Song, David Welch, and Vicky Brewster. I hope that everyone will take a couple of minutes to look at the awards sections of this issue of the *SFRA Review*.

Next up, looking ahead.

If you were at the conference, or paying attention to SFRA social media accounts, you probably caught wind that we announced that the SFRA conference will be returning to North America for 2025 (somewhat unbelievably for the first time, practically speaking, since 2018!). I have some bad news and some good news on this front. Unfortunately, due to administrative issues beyond their control, our organizers at the University of Delaware recently learned that they would have to pull the plug on the previously announced "Material Futures" conference for SFRA 2025. Given the amount of planning that they had already put into the conference, the Ex Com want to thank Ed and Siobhán for all of their hard work on the SFRA's behalf.

On a brighter note, we were lucky that a new host was able to come in at the last minute and make sure that we have a location for the conference. SFRA 2025 will now be hosted and organized by Stefanie Dunning, the Director of the Susan B. Anthony Institute: The program for Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies at the University of Rochester in New York. More

details will be coming soon, but the theme is set to be: "'Trans People are (in) the Future': Queer and Trans Futurity in Science Fiction," with the conference to take place in late July or early August 2025. We are very excited for this theme, which we know resonates powerfully for our membership. Indeed, Stefanie remarked that one of the reasons that she was so keen on hosting the conference is because sf studies is at the forefront of many of these issues.

Finally, if you have an event that you'd like to bring to rest of the SFRA membership's attention through its email lists or social media sites, or you have other ideas or concerns about the work the organization is doing, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at hugh.oconnell@umb.edu or our new Outreach Officer, Anastasia Klimchynskaya (anaklimchynskaya@gmail.com). We'd love to hear from you.

Meeting Futures in the Face of An Age-Diverse Academic Labor Market

Ida Yoshinaga

This summer, while catching up with my sf-film viewing, the image of a crusty Dr. Henry Walton Jones, Jr., grumping at the young'uns during Indy's own university retirement party—after decades of navigating both archaeology and tomb-raiding, adventures which somehow didn't prepare him for the brave new world of a changeful 1960s!—struck me as prescient for our current era of inter-generational, academic knowledge and job succession.

As we Baby Boomers and older GenXers—perhaps the last PhDs who as a cohort could expect to land full-time, tenure-track jobs with traditional professorial benefits and economic security in the North American - (and part of) Western European academic markets—push back retirement past our 60s, into the 70s and even beyond, especially in the wake of financial anxieties brought about by post-COVID COLA rises (Anft 2023 5-6), new waves of scholars including Gens Y, Z, and Alpha face less certain, if decidedly more inventive, career pathways towards a sustainable academic life. The contingent-labor market is marked particularly by researchers and hybrid scholar-creatives who're gender and race diverse (for instance, women and marginalized community members strongly characterize the adjuncting pool; see Anft 7; Colby 2023, 2 and 5-6).

Universities, colleges, and other institutions of higher education are adapting to labor-market shifts and their related inequalities—some creating relatively stable, non-tenure-track positions aka "contract-renewable" jobs (usually full-time non-tenure-track; see Colby 1 for data on this type of contingent labor); others offering long tenured faculty buy-outs to retire or choose phased retirement options (Anft 12-15) to as to make space for hiring new (often contingent) faculty; with a few schools even mandating that adjuncts participate in 401Ks (Anft 21).

What does an age- and life-stage-diverse community of science-fiction-studies scholars look like, with its powerful intersectional implications of class, gender/sexual, and race/nation inequality? How do we socialize, share disciplinary or subfield info, network, train, debate, and professionally advance ourselves alongside our colleagues—in short, community-build as we grow the field, in this era? How do we run conferences, assess the work of scholars and artists/writers for speculative-fiction awards, initiate exciting new projects?

We are interested in hearing from those of you with ideas on how we best facilitate members to meet, exchange ideas, and build lasting intellectual relationships with each other, going forward? What does a mid-21st-century academic meeting look like, in other words? And what other types of activities and support can we offer?

You can reach me at ida@hawaii.edu, but—pending President Hugh O'Connell's announcement of it—I may also show up in person to talk with you at SFRA 2025, which we hope will be held stateside again.

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SFRA 2024 Awards Presented at the 2024 "Transitions" Conference at The University of Tartu

Student Paper Award

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

The winner of the 2024 award is Vicky Brewster for their paper "Simulated Worlds and Digital Disruptions: Gothic Glitch in *The Tenth Girl*"

Mary Kay Bray Award

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

This year's awardee is David Welch for his "Review of Hades" (*SFRA Review* 53.1)

SFRA Book Award

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

This year's winner is Mingwei Song, for *Fear of Seeing: A Poetics of Chinese Science Fiction*.

Thomas D. Clareson Award

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

This year's awardee is Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock.

SFRA Innovative Research Award

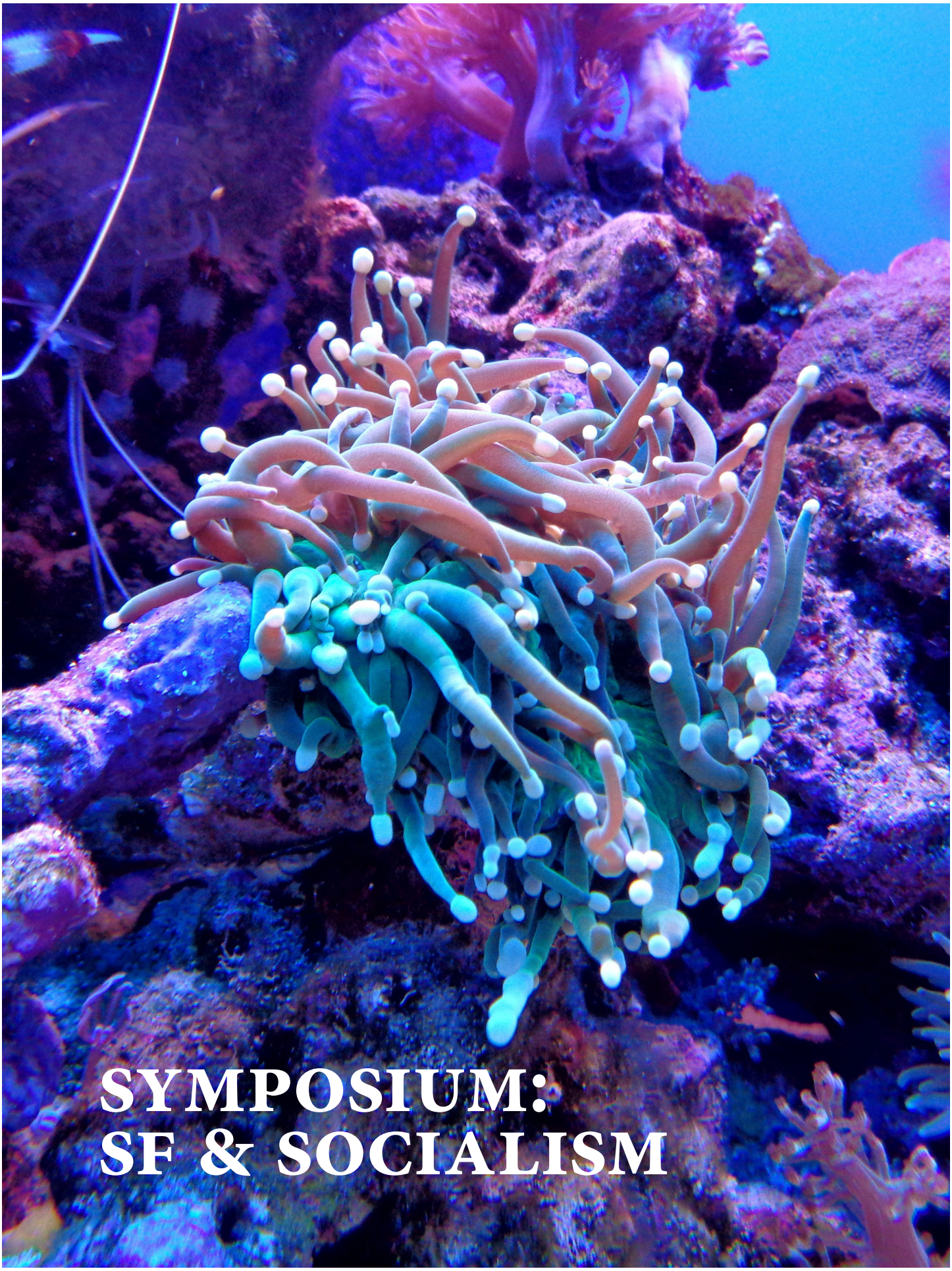
The SFRA Innovative Research Award (formerly the Pioneer Award) is given to the writer or writers of the best critical essay-length work of the year.

This year's awardee is Rebekah Sheldon for her essay, "Generativity without reserve: Sterility apocalypses and the enclosure of life-itself," published in *Science Fiction Film and Television* 16.3 (2023).

SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship

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

This year's awardee is Lisa Yaszek.



SYMPOSIUM: SF & SOCIALISM

Image by sapolretan

Introduction

Virginia L. Conn

The relationship between artistic production and ideology has been the subject of countless academic investigations and political decisions, with such discussions taking place across formal, fan-led, and legislative spheres. Science fiction is no exception to this relational investigation, often being taken as either a "cognitive model of real changes" within the world-system or, conversely, a "model of a particular ideology" in which the ideological vectors of SF "form the socio-historical chronotope of the empty space; [one in which] reality, transformed by a fantastic hypothesis, is then represented in accordance with" the aforementioned ideological vectors (Nudelman 38). That is, the future represented by SF is shaped by one of two things: either a critical engagement with the socio-generic milieu actually producing the text itself, or a projection of an ideological system that formally abstracts the text from its productive context.

As contemporary literary engagements with capitalism and its various forms of discontent become increasingly visible within the SF publishing sphere, the intersection between SF and socialist visions of futurity—and how such projections emerge—is becoming an increasingly important area for identifying these formalistic and thematic similarities. In the case of SF and socialism, this dual-pronged approach is particularly relevant, since socialist ideology broadly falls into two similar veins as the aforementioned science fictional projections themselves. If we consider socialism—as with any political system—to itself be a kind of fiction about the way things do (and ought to) work, then broadly speaking, socialism can be divided into two genealogical genres: utopian and scientific.

Utopian socialism refers, in a narrow sense, to a group of early 19th century French and Scottish socialist thinkers, typified by Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen, who largely argued for socialism as a rational discourse and positive objective. In a broader sense (as initially defined by Engels and later adopted by most Marxists), it refers to the practice of imagining/envisioning a future society organized around socialist principles, with ethical or positive ideals being the driving force behind such projections. Compared to scientific socialism, it is a somewhat more *a priori* framework, as under a utopian socialist framework, socialist society as a speculative alternative to the present is held to be worth working for—that is, it could (theoretically) be instantiated at any point in history and is additionally presumed to be worthwhile before its appearance.

Scientific socialism, on the other hand, is considered more of a "hard" science than utopian socialism. Used primarily to describe Marx's social/political/economic theory of the property relations between classes and how such relations arose as a result of specific historical factors (that is, as a response to the [then-new] social contradictions of capitalism's new mode of production), scientific socialism is the contingent response to and resolution of the contradictions

of capitalism's expansion of production and consolidation of resources. It is not a projection of a future society so much as it is an historically conditional set of social and political relationships. In fact, Marx himself noted that he had been criticized for his focus on the present rather than on future projections:

> The *Paris Revue Positiviste* reproaches me in that, on the one hand, I treat economics metaphysically, and on the other hand—imagine!—confine myself to the mere critical analysis of actual facts, instead of writing recipes (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future. (Marx, Afterword to the 2nd German Edition of *Capital*)

Of course, Marx, Engels, and other socialist theorists touched on the ideal future society numerous times in their works, but they maintained a certain degree of disdain for what they saw as the 'imaginary' futures of the utopian socialists, ungrounded in any kind of critical assessment of existing social and economic systems. In fact, utopian socialism is typically used as a pejorative by 'serious' socialist thinkers today, who see it as some variant of 'pie in the sky' idealism rather than as a critical engagement with measurable socioeconomic factors.

Approaching science fictional prognostications as "cognitive model[s] of real changes" presupposes a degree of probabilistic or realistic engagement with the socio-generic model out of which such texts developed, just as scientific socialism is posited by practitioners to be a quantitative assessment of contingent historical factors—i.e., a hard science and a hard literature. On the other hand, the methodological framework that sees "reality, transformed by a fantastic hypothesis," as the positivist goal of both SF and utopian socialist speculation might be better understood as "soft" representations of ideological desire, rather than examples of critical sociohistorical engagement.

Because of this, it's not difficult to see parallels between "soft"/"hard" socialism and "soft"/"hard" science fiction distinctions (or even, abstracted further, between science fiction itself as a "ghettoized genre" outside of and peripheral to "serious" literature). Roger Luckhurst writes of the "paradigmatic topography of ghetto/mainstream" that marks the border between "serious" literature and "genre" (specifically SF) literature (37); acknowledging a certain degree of permeability, the mark of 'seriousness' is awarded primarily to those literatures that are considered realistic extrapolations or direct depictions of reality. At a narrower level, "soft" science fiction—using the dual definition provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (2007)—might be understood as "science fiction that deals primarily with advancements in, or extrapolations based on, the soft sciences (e.g. anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.)" or, conversely, "science fiction in which the scientific elements are relatively unimportant to the story" (191).[1] Compare this directly to Engels' definition of utopian (i.e. "soft") socialism as a "solution of the social problems, which as yet lay hidden in undeveloped economic conditions, [through which] the Utopians attempted to evolve out of the human brain"—that is, a fantastic prognostication not grounded in historical or "hard" frameworks of analysis, and thus inevitably unable to "avoid drifting off into pure phantasies" (Engels "The Development of Utopian Socialism"). If, to "make a science of

Socialism, it had first to be placed upon a real basis" (Engels), then that meant crossing that same aforementioned "paradigmatic topography" (Luckhurst 37) from fantasy to reality, just as "soft" science fiction must (apparently) do to be taken seriously.

Yet for all the denigration of the "soft" sciences and literatures that remains extant in both the academy and popular spheres today, recent discussions have begun to more forcefully highlight the moral imperative of imagining a better world. Ursula K. Le Guin's now-famous maxim about imagining a world outside of capitalism[2] is routinely trotted out to illustrate the power (and possibility) of imagining a better world. Solarpunk—one of the more recent subgenres to emerge in our capitalism-weary and climate-anxious era—explicitly aligns itself with an optimistic view of potential future human-nature integration through a rejection of doomerism and capitalism. And for every sad puppy-ish lament that SF has gotten "too soft," even the most cursory scan of the most recent Hugo and Nebula winners across recent years shows an ongoing trend towards post-capitalist utopian community-building. It's clear that there's a real hunger for something better whether that hunger is based on a rigorous critique of social relations or not, and many within the SF community—writers, readers, scholars, thinkers—see literature as playing a significant role in imagining and actuating that future.

Back to Le Guin: her quote about imagining a world outside of capitalism is routinely used (for good reason) to highlight the inability of or resistance to "imagin[ing] the end of the world [rather] than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, Zizek, Jameson), but what's often missing from its utilization is the context in which it takes place. Le Guin is not discussing capitalism broadly writ, but, rather, is specifically referring to the contemporary American (and US-led) SF publishing industry, which lacks, as she claims, "writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art" (2014). What we need are "writers who can see alternatives to how we live now," past the "sales strategies" that "maximise corporate profit and advertising revenue" at the expense of creating artistic representations of hopeful futures (2014). Le Guin forcefully argues that this is the role of art itself: to imagine alternatives, to resist commodification, to inspire hope and to inform the reader how to get to that hopeful future being depicted.

As a result, the more utopian promises of socialism have led and are currently leading to literatures that take the task of imagining a better future as a moral imperative. And while this engagement with capitalist practices of production, expansion, and cooptation are particularly pressing at this particular inflection point of history, the possibility of socialism as an alternative to capitalist futures has long been an important aspect for utopian socialist thinkers (keeping in mind that scientific socialism sees socialism as an inevitable resolution of the contradictions introduced by capitalism, thus capitalism is a necessary precondition for the emergence of socialism, whereas utopian socialism sees socialism as an *alternative* to capitalism—a future that might be chosen if adherents are persuasive enough to onboard enough capitalism-weary converts to make the changeover). The current imperative in the SF publishing world to imagine utopian socialist

futures is one that draws on an established history of interactions between politics and generic concerns, not just to critique the present, but to propose something better in its place.

For example, in the late 1930s, economic and political upheavals across the world presented a troubling problem to science fiction authors and audiences invested in the genre's utopian worldbuilding promises. With the rise of fascism both at home and abroad (history is nothing if not repetitious), prominent authors such as Frederik Pohl and Robert W. Lowndes denounced the apathy of the genre and actively moved to radicalize it towards action, seeing in socialism a new utopian promise with actionable worldbuilding goals. An explicitly socialist-informed science fiction, they argued, was one "opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences and militaristic ideologies," and further insisted that "science fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life" (qtd. Moskowitz 119).

Their proposal was not popular. A relatively conservative and increasingly jingoistic audience and publishing industry denounced socialism itself as a type of science fiction (i.e., unserious and outside the mainstream), with little to offer in the way of "realistic" paths forward. Its utopian aspirations simply were simply not "serious" enough for rigorous critical evaluation. At the same time, preeminent scholars then and now explicitly defended the discursive potential of SF, with figures such as Darko Suvin stating that utopia was "the socio-political subgenre of science-fiction" (2016) and Fredric Jameson arguing that science fiction's preoccupation with utopian political desire echoed that of socialist revolution (2005).

These conflicting responses to the importance of and overlap between SF and socialism illustrate the difficult nature of identifying the purpose of science fiction in the political sphere, but the aforementioned Western authors were, in some ways, already working at the tail end of a tradition that had begun decades earlier in countries actively transitioning to socialism. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin—both a political rival of Marx in the First International and translator of the first Russian edition of *Capital, Vol. I*—once mocked the intellectualism of his Marxist opponents by quipping "we have too many ideas and not enough action." In response, the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress claimed that these "too many ideas" had a direct effect on human development, and in order to guide that development, science fiction authors would be held responsible for producing positive-but-accurate—and, more importantly, actionable—depictions of human futures. Similarly, in a China undergoing its own political and literary revolution at the turn of the century, the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun, argued that science fiction could be explicitly used as a tool for nation building, writing that: "More often than not, ordinary people feel bored at the tedious statements of science… Only by resorting to fictional presentation and dressing scientific ideas up in literary clothing can works of science avoid their tediousness while retaining rational analyses and profound theories" (preface, 1903).

What this should make clear is how the politics of futurity are intimately bound up with those of various literary establishments, and how visions of the future—as well as the sociopolitical and

economic assumptions constraining them—both reveal and shape these exercises of power. How those imagined futures came into existence, as well as how newly imagined socialist people, states, and literary traditions came to be created through political, ideological, and literary policies, was taken up explicitly by socialist literary regimes in the mid-twentieth century and is being newly litigated in the popular literary market today.

The articles included in this symposium all grapple with the impulse to either direct the future along socialist lines or to criticize (and change) existing sociopolitical models antithetical to full human flourishing. Ruiyang Zhang delves into the intersections between SF narratives and the concurrent advancements surrounding cybernetics in socialist China, exploring how the underlying themes of such mid-century cybernetic narratives consistently directed the use of such innovations towards socialist construction and industrial production. Gabriel Burrow rejects "the ideal purity of a perfect system" (Jameson, *Archaeologies* xi) to instead explore the 'low bar' for what can be considered a utopia, using M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi's *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072* (2022) as a case study. Meltem Dağcı investigates the question of artificial intelligence, humans, and machines in Ruhşen Doğan Nar's story, "Wake Up!", through the contextual framework of utopian socialist planning. Pavla Veselá argues that although Andrei Platonov's work did not shrink away from (frankly brutal) descriptions of the hunger, poverty, and violence endemic to the Soviet Union of the 1920s, neither did Platonov shy away from insisting on the viability of a utopian socialist future. Last but certainly not least, Chiara Viceconti reviews the process by which an East German SF novel, Günther Krupkat's *Als die Götter starben* [*When the Gods Died*, 1963], aligned with strictures outlining socialist realism while didactically presenting a socialist utopian future.

These articles ask us to consider multiple questions about the intersection of literature and politics, but perhaps most pressing is—to borrow a term from Naomi Klein about climate and trade concerns—to what extent do literature and socialism really function as "two solitudes" (215) without overlap, and how has the insistence that art 'mean' something changed this siloing? Does literature have—either because of political regulations that require it to or social expectations about its role—the moral imperative to show us a 'good' future? And to what extent is this 'good' future driven by facts, analysis, and the imperative of response, versus simply representing a desperate, longing cry for something—anything—better than this? Does it matter? We hope that readers will grapple with these questions for themselves and, in doing so, imagine the kinds of sociopolitical futures they'd like to create for themselves, both in and outside of fiction.

Notes

1. "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

2. Without getting too deeply into the weeds on this particular topic, it is notable that the *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* compares "soft" science fiction to "science fantasy" as a genre. As I have written about elsewhere (Conn "Formal Fictions" 2024), the term "science fiction" is often applied in non-English contexts (specifically Chinese and Russian) to genres that are internally circulated as science fantasy, with a corresponding flattening of contextual meaning.

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Virginia L. Conn is a Teaching Assistant Professor at Stevens Institute of Technology. She researches depictions of the "new socialist human" in socialist science fiction and how those depictions guided policy decisions in Mao-era China, Soviet Russia, and East Germany. She is currently working on her book manuscript, which offers a literary-material account of the relationship between socialist literary policies and the concurrent sociopolitical and technological drive to create the "new human" in daily life. She is also the managing editor of the *Science Fiction Research Association Review*.

The Low Bar: Crisis and Utopia in M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi's *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072* (2022)

Gabriel Burrow

In a recent interview, Kim Stanley Robinson (2021) noted that "the bar" for what futures can be considered utopian "has got really low." Given the climate crisis and escalating geopolitical tensions, visions of international cooperation that serve the needs of future generations and avert extinction slip comfortably over this bar. Robinson describes his own novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), in these terms. *Ministry* does not shy away from the grave implications of environmental breakdown—it begins with a mass heat death event in India. However, this future is nonetheless utopian in its representation of characters developing solutions to address the climate crisis and bring about greater social equity. Carbon quantitative easing and geoengineering are both embraced across the globe to mitigate the worst effects of global warming. In proposing the low bar, Robinson follows in his mentor Fredric Jameson's footsteps, rejecting "the ideal purity of a perfect system" on one hand and the impulse of critics to deny the possibility of utopia outright on the other (*Archaeologies* xi). The "low bar" view of utopia both recalibrates what can be considered a utopia and insists upon the possibility of achieving it.

Drawing from Robinson's proposition of the low bar, this article explores what it means to evoke utopia in contemporary literature. In particular, I examine how Eman Abdelhadi and M. E. O'Brien's *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072* (2022) is typical of low bar utopian fiction in its use of oral history to represent a future of intensifying crises and utopian possibilities. The novel explores the formation of the New York Commune through a series of interviews conducted in the 2070s by fictionalised versions of the authors. Abdelhadi and O'Brien refer to the interviews as "life histories," which document a diverse range of "distinct experiences, roles, geographies, and temporalities" between the years 2052 and 2072 (1). Together, the intersecting voices of *Everything for Everyone*'s interviewees describe how the New York Commune becomes a template for egalitarian living and part of a globally-networked project of communisation. Other novels that spring over Robinson's low bar do so through similar means. Robinson's *Ministry*, Carl Neville's *Eminent Domain* (2020), and Yanis Varoufakis's *Another Now* (2020) all use polyphonic narratives and formal characteristics that enhance a sense of realism, from policy reports, interviews, and meeting transcripts to obituaries and commemorative plaques. These contemporary utopias' use of realism to represent the future sets the lowest of all bars, since it insists that utopia can be realised in the first place.

There is, of course, a long history of Marxist engagement with utopia. Frederick Engels (1880) draws a distinction between utopian socialism, which proposes unknown futures, and scientific socialism, which derives a concrete understanding of the world from historical materialism (66).

This binary is echoed in Ernst Bloch's (1959) engagement with the "liberating intention" of Marxist thought's 'warm' stream and the "cool analysis" of its 'cold' stream (*Principle Vol. 1* 208-9; Boer 13). But Bloch argued that these two streams should be viewed as both dialectically interrelated and mutually constituted. Tom Moylan (1986) usefully frames this same dynamic in relation to the critical utopias of the 1970s: "one has, dialectically, to choose both a radical engagement with the world and a steadfast commitment to the transformed horizon" (xxii). Contemporary literary utopias of the kind Robinson describes continue in the same vein, engaging with the cold realities of the twenty-first century's multiple crises and the utopian possibility of something better. This is a far cry from the perfection sought by 19th-century utopian socialists.[1]

Utopia can itself be understood dialectically. There is little point in analysing material conditions without the belief that the world can be better, or building castles in the sky without some analysis of the system as it is. Etymologically, the term itself has dual meanings: 'eutopia' means 'good place' and 'outopia' means 'no place' (Cashmore 2; Bell 5). Scholars of literary utopias, and utopia more generally, often emphasise both this spatial aspect and the friction between 'no' and 'good' (Suvin; Bell; Taley; Cooper; Blanco). The tradition of utopian travelogues and travel writing, which is necessarily spatial in nature, dates as far back as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and was prevalent throughout the early modern period (Tally Jr. vii). Marx and Engels were themselves inspired by Cabet's novel *Travels in Icaria* (1840), which describes a visit to a communistic utopia (Marx; Fokkema 19). However, even in travelogues' representations of grand journeys, utopia is at once a place to which one travels and the process of getting there—of exploration. This processual understanding of utopia is better suited to the majority of contemporary utopias, including *Everything for Everyone*.

Everything for Everyone does not treat utopia as an "isolated locus" that could be travelled to, be it a place akin to an early modern utopia, or a temporal reality like those of the nineteenth century (Suvin 50).[2] Instead, as Robert T. Tally Jr. (2013) suggests, utopias in the era of globalisation are best thought of as a form of literary cartography. Drawing from Jameson's methodology of "cognitive mapping," Tally Jr. argues that "utopia in its present configuration can only be a method by which one can attempt to apprehend the system itself" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 54; Tally Jr. ix). Viewed in these terms, contemporary utopias are an attempt to orient readers within a particular system while using aesthetic forms that enable them to engage with an otherwise incomprehensible totality (Tally Jr. ix; Jameson, *Postmodernism* 332; Lukács 60).

Both the world and the aesthetics of *Everything for Everyone* are grounded in realism. The novel accepts that a future of environmental devastation and economic upheaval is unavoidable, but also emphasises realistic ways of addressing their impact. Its use of academic writing and interview transcripts further buttresses the aesthetic realism of its content. This article will address these aspects in turn, beginning with the novel's form (anthropological introduction followed by oral histories), then its relationship with crises, and finally how it charts a feasible path to utopia. My approach moves sequentially through the novel, beginning with the introduction and exploring subsequent oral histories ("life histories") in turn. I will first discuss Abdelhadi and

O'Brien's use of oral history in relation to their introduction. I use the second interview, which engages with political activism in the Levant, as an example of how crisis is represented. Finally, I explore the utopian possibility of ecological restoration presented in the tenth interview, which is conducted with a conservationist. These life histories collectively constitute a utopia of the kind Robinson describes, achieved in the face of acute crises. Abdelhadi and O'Brien's fictionalised New York could be considered a 'good place,' but that is not the novel's primary concern. It engages with the process of the New York Commune's formation, rather than dwelling on a perfect future state. The novel reflects the dialectical interrelation between individual experience and collective action, place and process, crisis and utopia.

Oral History as Utopian Storytelling

Everything for Everyone uses oral history to reinforce the materiality of its utopia and to reflect the characteristics of the New York Commune itself. The novel leans heavily into formal realism derived from its historical framing; fictionalised versions of O'Brien and Abdelhadi are projected into the future as interviewers and scholars, analysing historical events and the way their interviewees relate them. The pair use an academic introduction, along with footnotes and other parenthetical references, to engage with the formal characteristics of the text and the historical project that produced it. For example, they explicitly note that spoken interviews were edited in order to balance "maintaining some sense of the tone of the narrators' spoken words with our intention to offer a readable text" (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 4). The authors explain that they conducted interviews, which they subsequently edited to produce this history. They each conduct their own interviews, almost always alternating throughout the novel according to their expertise and familiarity with the subjects. This relates to their real-world training: O'Brien is an oral historian who pays particular attention to possibilities for gender freedom under and in relation to capitalism and Abdelhadi is a scholar of religion and culture.

There is a well-established precedent for the incorporation of academic writing into literary utopias. Thomas More's *Utopia* included a series of prefatory and postscriptural letters, which give the fictional narrative a frame of realism. These letters are written by More's contemporaries, who probe at the material reality of utopia and how the text itself should be read (Davis 29). One (fictional) interlocutor, Raphael Hythloday, claims to have witnessed utopia firsthand; the veracity of this is discussed in letters from both Peter Giles and Guillaume Budé, both of whom were friends of More (More, *The Complete Works*). Emmanouil Aretoulakis (2014) argues that these paratextual materials "enhance, pre-emptively, the verisimilitude of the Utopian society as well as the materiality of the island at hand" (92). In a similar vein to Aretoulakis, Louis Marin (1973) asserts that More's style is oriented towards "making us believe that Utopia is history" (39). However, Marlin emphasises that Utopia is not a singular narrative that is conferred historical reality by testimonials from More's peers. Rather, the text exists as "a system of narratives referring and reverberating among themselves" (39). Marin goes on to engage with references to Raphael Hythloday's first-hand account and More's request for Giles to "let me know if you find anything that I've overlooked" (More, *Utopia* 5):

> The truth or exactitude of More's narrative is measured only through Raphael's narrative, or through Peter Giles' potential narrative… The validity and truth of the narrative of history would thus be proportional to the number of possible reflections of which the narrative is made. The more densely they intersect, the closer it would approach that veracity. (Marin 39)

Interconnectedness is the basis of *Utopia*'s sense of veracity. It acts as a fictional history that is constituted from the interrelation of different narratives. Indeed, Marin explicitly highlights the "utopic" nature of history, which is "a place… where narratives are spoken, one against the other" (40). This is not a simple validation of true or false, real or unreal; *Utopia*'s use of letters stages the complexity of the act of history-making itself.

Five centuries later, *Everything for Everyone* represents the process of characters narrativizing history out loud, working through how their experiences relate to those of others. O'Brien and Abdelhadi build on the utopian convention of "dialogues between insider and outsider," which dates back to the Socratic dialogue of Plato's *The Republic* (Fokkema 28). Each interview has similar opening questions, but the characters interviewed take discussions in idiosyncratic directions—including those that are explicitly noted as tangents. In the introduction, O'Brien and Abdelhadi acknowledge that "Oral histories are inherently contradictory" and articulate how this makes them suited to representing change (6):

> Individual experience and shared collective action work in dynamic interrelationship to each other, just as they do within the life of the commune. Like the present work, many new histories reflect this methodological breakthrough: simultaneously fragmented and unified, heterogenous and integrated, open and coherent. (6)

Like the New York Commune itself, the oral history is statically charged with the interrelation of its participants. Memory, especially when affected by trauma, is necessarily fragmentary (Bal x); interviewees can contradict one another's recollections of events, and indeed their own. One character, for example, was a member of a Christian cult in Staten Island in the 2050s, while another suffers from PTSD from serving in a bomb squad during a war in Iran and later fighting during a fascist insurgency in the United States. The latter finds that their memories from before and after the war have become jumbled, and the interview has to be stopped when they have one of their "intense flashbacks" of their sister being killed during the domestic conflict (173). In this way, the oral history mediates between the interiority of its characters and the collective history of the commune as a whole.

Low bar utopias like *Everything for Everyone* strike a balance between utopian conventions and the harsh realities of the contemporary moment. The twenty-first century offers no easy binary between dystopia and utopia. Margaret Atwood (2011) coined "ustopia" to describe the combination of the two—"the imagined perfect society and its opposite." Abdelhadi and O'Brien's decision to engage directly with the messy materiality of history-making from the outset is typical of this balance. When works of critical dystopian fiction use academic writing

to contextualise their narratives, they generally do so at the end of the text. Orwell's *1984* (1949) uses an appendix entitled "The Principles of Newspeak" to detail the failure of the language promoted by its totalitarian state of Oceania (312), while Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) ends with an address at a conference on the history of Gilead that reveals the rest of the novel was in fact a series of transcribed cassette recordings. These metatextual references to a comparatively desirable future beyond dystopia provides "a kind of ironic anticlosure" that leaves open utopian possibilities (Caldwell 338).[3] In contrast, *Everything for Everyone* follows the utopian conventions established by *Utopia*'s postscript letters. But it uses the reality-conferring nature of academic writing to emphasise not only utopian possibilities, but also the impact of traumatising crises.

Inevitable Crisis

The inescapable reality of crisis is one defining characteristic of lowering the bar of utopian fiction. As Robinson argues, the material conditions of the contemporary moment have led to a shift in what futures can be considered utopian. Realist literary utopias must contend with what Berardi calls multifaceted apocalypse—"the financial crisis and the environmental crisis, intertwined and apparently intractable" (189). *Everything for Everyone* describes such a scenario. As Shinjini Dey (2022) puts it, "The novel is situated in an already present ecological and social collapse." The first three decades of the twenty-first century are defined by cycles of booms and busts, paired with the onset of "global environmental catastrophe" (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 9). This comes to a head: "By the mid-thirties, a perfect storm of economic collapse and climate crisis brought the global economy to a grinding halt" (9). However, this era of crisis brings about change. While the novel does not present a teleology in which crisis leads to a better world, those decades are the precursors to a "global, communist phase of insurrection" (12).

The role that crisis might play in bringing about a socialist utopia is a frequent topic of debate. The accelerationist drive for the intensification of capitalism has been controversial. Arguments that capitalist speed alone will lead to its replacement through a "run-away whirlwind of dissolution" (Land, *Thirst For Annihilation* 80) are widely criticised (Srnicek and Williams 351; Gardiner 31), not least because they show little regard for the acute suffering associated with this process.[4] Socialist engagements with degrowth have increasingly intersected with accelerationism (Buch-Hansen et al.; Hickel; Kallis; Saito; Schmelzer et al.). Both the argument that "the only way out is the way through" capitalism and that a return to non-productivist modes of social organisation is the way forward continue to be drawn directly from Marx's writings (Shaviro 2; Saito 8). And these two, seemingly contradictory, impulses are each at work within *Everything for Everyone*: its communist insurrection is predicated on the intensification of global capitalism's consequences, but the society that emerges also draws from principles of degrowth as it works to address those consequences. The novel is realistic about the devastation crises will bring about, and extrapolates a viable post-capitalist response.

In this sense, the novel reclaims the etymological meaning of *crisis* as "a moment of decision" (Castiadoris 115).[5] For the ancient Greeks, "the concept imposed choices between stark

alternatives" (Koselleck 358). Today, this meaning has been superseded by the conceptualisation of crisis as a drawn out, even endemic, state. Crisis is, in fact, increasingly defined as "chronic," designating "a state of greater or lesser permanence" (Koselleck 358). Janet Roitman (2014) echoes Koselleck's assessment, considering crisis to be "an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today" (2). The challenge for contemporary utopian literature is first to reclaim crisis as a signifier of decisive change and second to imagine how that change might be positive. Lisa Garforth's (2005) work on literary utopias explores how they chart courses from ecological crisis to green futures. She describes how crisis can serve as a metaphorical "fresh start" and that an "apocalyptic scenario can thus enable the transition from an unsatisfactory present to a preferable (or at least different) way of life to be scripted as a decisive break" (Garforth, "Green Utopias" 398). Faced by capitalism's multifaceted apocalypse, which intertwines ecological and economic collapse, the options are extinction or a concerted attempt to avert it.

In *Everything for Everyone*, the role of crisis—both ecological and financial—in bringing about change is most apparent in Kawkab Hassan's account of the Levant's liberation. Hassan contrasts the state of chronic crisis he experiences during his childhood in New York with crises in the Levant that necessitate regime change. He first describes the small-scale personal crises that plagued his low-income family:

> there was always some crisis. The car broke down. We were behind on rent. Someone forgot to pay for the Internet, and it got shut off. One of us would get hurt, and the bills would dry up all the money. Endless fires to put out, ya know?
> (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 40)

This stages chronic crisis on a domestic level. Crisis exists as "a state of greater or lesser permanence," in which "Endless fires" are extinguished, only to catch light elsewhere (Koselleck 358; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 40). It becomes a defining characteristic of day-to-day life. This can be viewed in relation to Henrik Vigh's (2008) anthropological approach to crisis as a chronic "condition" (9). Vigh focuses on the "normalisation" of crisis, considering "normal" to mean "that which we do most and/or that which there is most of" (11). In time, quantitative and qualitative judgements of normality can make situations of profound volatility seem, paradoxically, routine. Crisis becomes an "ongoing experience… forcing people to make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds" (8). Instead of bringing about a change, either positive or negative, crisis itself was normalised for Hassan.

Crisis does bring about change in the Middle East of the novel, however. In Egypt, a military regime falls to interrelated environmental and financial crises. Heatwaves cause more deaths each year and much of the Nile dries up, causing "massive famines" (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 45). In parallel, "the economy started collapsing in the thirties" and this financial crash spells an end for the regime (45). It is a similar story in Palestine: US military aid to Israel becomes "financially impossible," and the combination of insurrectionary pressure and local market crashes end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (47). While these crises cause extreme suffering for those

living in the Levant, Hassan describes how they eventually pave the way for a future of peace and freedom for the people of the region.

Towards the end of the interview, there are references to the thriving Levant that has emerged by 2067. Abdelhadi asks Hassan how he makes his biannual trips between Gaza and New York, and Hassan explains that he travels by a combination of high-speed rail and a clipper. Abdelhadi notes that "the train systems aren't as good here," referring to the United States, "as they are in the SWANA region" (54). While America is not known for its world-leading railways, this alludes to widespread investment in rail infrastructure that produces a more connected Middle East and North Africa. The pair also discuss the recent test launches of solar planes in Cairo, which would make sustainable air travel a reality. Following a period of conflict, starvation, and deprivation, an era of increased interconnectedness and scientific innovation eventually emerges.

In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Jameson distinguishes between his personal conceptions of dystopia and utopia. The former "tells the story of an imminent disaster… which is fast forwarded in the time of the novel," while the latter "furnishes a blueprint rather than lingering upon the kinds of human relations that might be found in the Utopian condition" (Jameson, *Seeds* 56). Jameson sees dystopia as "generally a narrative" and utopia as "mostly nonnarrative" (55-56). Moylan responds to this distinction directly when he describes how the critical utopias of the 1970s combine "both the traditional eutopian evocation of a new spatial reality… and the temporal, dystopian account of personal suffering, systemic discovery, and radical action" (Moylan xviii). The low bar utopias of the twenty-first century follow in the footsteps of these critical utopias, balancing realist representations of the acute suffering associated with extreme weather events and economic collapse against the possibility of utopian transformations. In the case of *Everything for Everyone*, it is through personal stories like Hassan's—the kind Jameson would associate with dystopia—that the interrelation between crisis and utopia is captured.

Available Solutions

The low bar for utopias is not only a product of the crises we face. It also relates to the availability of solutions, given sufficient political will and resources. The actions necessary to meet this lower threshold are generally existing, if under-utilised, practices. Engaging specifically with contemporary green utopias, Lisa Garforth (2018) notes that "Green hope is more widespread… but at the same time less visionary and radical" (3). But while Garforth focuses on ephemeral futures often defined by "narratives of loss and mourning," Robinson's low bar utopia is presented as concrete and achievable (*Green Utopias* 3). This kind of realism is at the heart of a new wave of utopian thinking. Socialist Erik Olin Wright's (2010) Real Utopias Project sought to identify existing institutions within capitalism that were themselves a challenge to capitalism, be they participatory city budgeting, worker-owned cooperatives, unconditional basic income, or Wikipedia (1-3). Similarly, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman gained attention for his work on *Utopia for Realists* (2014), which makes a practical case for the implementation of Universal Basic Income, a fifteen-hour working week, and open borders. Both Wright and Bregman present

systems, modes of organising, and policy decisions that have already been put into practice—or that could be achievable in the immediate future—as utopian.[6] The neofuturist prospect of fully automated luxury communism, notably proposed by Aaron Bastani (2019), is more fanciful, but is nonetheless grounded in existing technologies such as solar and wind power, synthetic food production, and advanced rockets.[7]

The realism of contemporary utopian thinking runs counter to the capitalist realism that Mark Fisher (2009) described as dominating the "horizons of possibility" (81). It rejects the "political realism" of a centrist politics that makes only incremental changes within capitalist frameworks, and that adopts strict fiscal rules that prevent improvements in the lives of those most in need of state-provisioned support (Hardt and Negri 251; Alberro 51). Rather, contemporary utopias recalibrate what can be seen as *realistic*—including utopia itself. Any invocation of utopia is normative, measuring what futures can be considered 'good' in relation to the present. Contemporary utopias increasingly make the case for existing forms of radicalism through realism. Their narratives network a range of solutions, addressing criticisms of discrete reforms as "necessarily partial rather than systemic" and technological acceleration as "too narrow to count as radical change" (Levitas, *Utopia as Method* 144; Saito 161). And they make formal choices to insist the planet can be saved through a holistic blend of changes. Academic prose, transcripts, digitised records, and other modes of writing imbue key changes and policies with a formal realism that matches the realism of their content.

The tenth chapter of *Everything for Everyone* explores interviewee An Zhou's participation in a tidal restoration project in coastal Long Island. The area has been flooded, radically changing its ecology. This requires both its ecosystem and the way humans interact with it to change. It becomes apparent that the best way to restore the ecology of Long Island is not a science-fictional solution, but to strip away the "old infrastructure" of the past (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 191). Echoing the famous phrase "Sous les pavés, la plage" (under the paving stones, the beach), pavement is stripped away to allow salt marshes to thrive.[8] Various species of grasses suited to ocean water are planted. Climate adaptation and ecological renewal is achieved by greening the irrevocably transformed land. Bringing about a green utopia is presented as a process of mitigating "the consequences of the catastrophe of the old world" and learning from its mistakes by choosing to "not build in stupid places" (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 193). These practices align with principles of degrowth and rewilding, abandoning an extractivist relationship with nature in favour of ecological justice and the restoration of natural processes (Schmelzer et al. 31-2; Carver et al. 1888). This is undertaken globally: the work in Long Island is "part of broader ecological restructuring efforts underway around the world" (191).

In some cases, science-fictional bio-engineering is used to adapt entire ecologies to a changed climate. This includes the design of entirely new species to address biodiversity loss in damaged biomes. In effect, this is a practice of biological archaeology, in which ecologists "think through the roles of species that had gone extinct because of climate catastrophe, and try to create species that would replicate those roles or replace them" (193). Like *Everything for Everyone*'s use of oral

history, this imagined process echoes utopian method; Ruth Levitas (2016) describes this as "an architectural mode of imagining alternative social possibilities—a kind of speculative sociology—with a critical, archaeological mode that probes the gaps and weaknesses in such putative constructions" (400). The fictional bio-engineers' approach is a kind of speculative ecology, balancing pre-existing genetic characteristics that thrive in a particular biome with limitations that would prevent them from serving their necessary function. This is the "still living past" literally reanimated in living things (Bloch, *Heritage* 109).

Given the availability of transformational solutions such as bio-engineering, there is a risk of straying into technological utopianism, in which advances in technology supposedly lead to a perfected society. A blueprint that prescribes an "end state" of this kind runs counter to an open approach to the future (de Geus 227).[9] And, as Lizzie O'Shea (2019) notes, technological utopianists overwhelmingly prescribe "more of the same: more capitalism, technologically optimized" (102).[10] The recent live-action television series *Extrapolations* (2023) offers a damning representation of techno-utopianism in the year 2070. It shows how a technology that removes carbon from the atmosphere could become a way to rationalise ongoing emissions. Moreover, the continued release of carbon dioxide makes the technology more lucrative, serving as a metaphorical "vacuum cleaner for wealth" (Burns). Within our existing capitalist system, the profit motive will necessarily drive the decisions that underpin any technological solutionism. Behavioural and structural change, not "more capitalism," is required for the implementation of technologies to prove effective in delivering utopian outcomes (O'Shea 102).

Everything for Everyone recognises that behavioural change is the foundation of climate adaptation, but imagines it in a way that retains the realism of Robinson's low bar. Rather than drawing from the trope of "domination of nature in the ideology of progressive futurism" often associated with green literary utopias, the novel describes a synthesis of indigenous practices, agricultural principles, and biotech (Garforth, "Green Utopias" 394; O'Brien and Abdelhadi 193). The project rests on the three pillars of the globally-recognised Tunis Accords: "ecological restoration, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation" (O'Brien and Abdelhadi 199). These guiding principles were agreed in 2062 in the wake of Tunisia's temperate forests dying off. Now, they serve as a basis for restoration frameworks. For example, Zhou notes that forest restoration is "centered around maximizing ecological niches, biodiversity, and variation through combining self-sustaining processes and deliberate intervention" (192). Describing an international agreement, derived from events in the narrative past, lends a realism to these cooperatively developed forms of conservation. They are a direct response to ecological breakdown, synergising existing practices with advancements in biotech to produce a utopia that rejects the pernicious characteristics of extractive capitalism.

The Same, Only Different

Since the 16th century, literary utopias have emerged out of periods of change, and have correspondingly responded with representations of radical difference. The critical utopias of the

late 1960s and early 1970s emerged from a period of looming crisis and population expansion, synthesising dystopian characteristics into more traditional utopian forms (Moylan xviii; Garforth, *Green Utopias* 2). Contemporary utopias that spring over Robinson's low bar follow this same tendency, presenting modes of thinking, behaviours, and technologies that meet the needs of worlds on the brink of collapse. And on account of their low bar, the crises and solutions they represent are not so radically different from our own.

In "In The Sun" (1999), which was originally addressed to Bloch, Walter Benjamin shares a teaching from Hasidic philosophy:[11]

> The Hasidim have a saying about the world to come. Everything there will be arranged just as it is with us. The room we have now will be just the same in the world to come; where our child lies sleeping, it will sleep in the world to come. The clothes we are wearing we shall also wear in the next world. Everything will be the same as here—only a little bit different. (664)

This way of thinking about the future is a far cry from the "radical difference" that Jameson associates with the utopian form (*Postmodernism* xii). But it has more in common with the utopian imaginary of the contemporary moment. Low bar utopias attempt to map out the totality of the world system, treating it like the room in the Hasidic saying. Whatever comes in the future will be "only a little bit different," amplifying the existing climate crisis and the structural issues of ultra-financialised capitalism (Benjamin 664). But the solutions to these problems are already strewn around, like clothes in a room. While the sleeping child will age, they will remain the same person. As Bloch notes, "We have in us what we could become" (*Principle* vol. 3, 43). These utopias identify existing people and practices that could be mobilised for a positive project of future making.

Typical of this latest wave of literary utopias, *Everything for Everyone* insists upon the realism of utopian possibilities using both its aesthetics and its content. Across twelve interviews, it emphasises how the building blocks of its utopia and the people who assembled them were already present during times of seemingly chronic crisis. And it plots out the processes of local and international cooperation necessary to assemble them, reclaiming the etymological potential of crisis as a decisive moment of change. Capitalism is not deconstructed overnight, but is replaced piece by piece as part of a utopian process that responds to crises with every available practice and solution.

Notes

1. Faced by flawed societies, Engels argues, Henri Saint-Simon (1803), Charles Fourier (1808), and Robert Owen (1812) attempted "to discover a new and more perfect system of social order" (59). But Engels views their fixation on plotting out a perfect society as self-defeating, since "the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure fantasies" (59).

2. Notable utopias in the early modern period include More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), and Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666). Nineteenth century temporal utopias include Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), Anna Bowman Dodd's *The Republic of the Future* (1887), and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890).

3. The potential for utopian futures within both Orwell and Atwood's novels is problematised. Phillip E. Wegner (2002) notes that *1984*'s "academic prose style of the past—already suggests that the only place imagined to exist outside the world of Big Brother might be Orwell's own immediate past or, at best, a future that looks very much like it" (188). Equally, a misogynistic reference that compares the "Arctic Chair," a female scholar, to the "Arctic char" the attendees enjoyed for dinner is a sting in the tail of "Historical Notes On The Handmaid's Tale" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 311-12).

4. It should be noted that Nick Land himself has moved away from the view that capitalism's accelerating speed will lead to its replacement. In "A Quick and Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism" (2017), Land asserts that "the prospect of any unambiguously 'Left-accelerationism' gaining serious momentum can be confidently dismissed. Accelerationism is simply the self-awareness of capitalism, which has scarcely begun." This reflects his turn towards neoreactionary politics (Beckett). And in recent years his work has been embraced by Silicon Valley's effective accelerationism movement (Rose; Andreessen).

5. Similarly, the etymology of the word *apocalypse* "denotes revelation, the uncovering of that which was hidden" (Solnick 23). Both it and crisis are often used more generally to describe catastrophic scenarios, but their roots gesture towards a kind of contingency.

6. Open borders is admittedly further from realisation in the context of today's isolationism. Bregman (2019) himself referred to it as "the only truly utopian idea in my book."

7. Bastani's formulation of fully automated luxury communism is part of a longstanding debate regarding the applications of automation within a socialist state (Kelly; Mason; Srnicek and Williams; Thompson). This particular framing has its critics: Kohei Saito argues the suggestion that "ecomodernist technologies can be utilized for the sake of socialist transformation once their ownership is transferred to the state" is "ungrounded" (160-161). Reviews of Bastani's book likewise highlight the ecological implications of a future society that continues to be oriented around energy-intensive technologies, extractivism, and abundance (Barker; Kellokumpu). And

David M. Bell mounts a broader critique of "utopian (post-)welfarism" on the grounds that the welfare state is made possible in part via exploitation, be that the mining of natural minerals or feminised care work; he argues that "it is unclear how—without more radical changes—the automation to which UBI is hinged can be produced without reliance on similar structural inequalities" (57).

8. Although the phrase is often associated with the Parisian civil unrest of 1968, its original source is contested.

9. "Blueprint utopians" often provoke scepticism (Jacoby xiv; Kateb 239; Levitas xvi).

10. Marc Andreessen's "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto" (2023) is a representative example of technological utopianism being used to legitimise the excesses of capitalism.

11. Bloch's status as the story's recipient is noted in *Walking with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (2013) by Andrew Benjamin.

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Integrating Humans with Machines: Cybernetics and Early 1960s Chinese Science Fiction

Ruiying Zhang

On a rainy afternoon in February 1963, two Chinese teenagers collecting ore at Camel Mountain were taking shelter from the rain. As the downpour intensified, one of the boys sat down and placed on his head a steel helmet with a metal stick behind it. He reminded himself to stay calm, avoiding the rain noise disturbance, and then began tuning in to the "BBC" to broadcast a message. These two boys were not transmitting messages to the British Broadcasting Corporation—an "enemy station" (*ditai* 敌台), a term adopted in the 1950s to refer to certain foreign radio stations targeting mainland listeners. Rather, the "BBC" that they set up was a "Brain Broadcasting Center" that amplified the bio-electronic wave generated by the brain. The electronic brainwave was then received by a special machine that broadcasted the teenagers' thoughts.

The bio-information in this case was intended to be transmitted from body to machine without loss of meaning or form. Such a practice aligns with the understanding of human–machine relationships that were discussed during the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, a series of interdisciplinary meetings on communications and control held in New York from 1946 to 1953.[1] Notable figures such as Norbert Wiener (1894–1964), the founder of the science of cybernetics, and Claude Shannon (1916–2001), the American computer scientist who laid the foundations for information theory, attended these conferences. According to N. Katherine Hayles, these conferences brought about a transformative perspective that viewed human beings as "information-processing entities who are *essentially* similar to machines" (How We Became Posthuman, 7). The diminishing demarcations between organisms and machinery beings constitute the base of posthuman[2] narratives that became increasingly popular with the development of digital technology and biological engineering. However, the Brain Broadcasting Center was neither a real practice conducted by participants of the Macy Conferences, nor an invention included in a fiction labelled as a "posthuman story" published in recent years. It actually appeared in a Chinese science-fantasy story (*kexue huanxiang gushi* 科学幻想故事) titled "Danao guangbo diantai" 大脑广播电台 [Brain broadcasting station], written by Cai Jingfeng 蔡景峰 and Zhao Shizhou 赵世洲. It was published in February 1963 in *Zhongguo shaonian bao* 中国少年报 [China youth newspaper], more than twenty years before the wide dissemination of "Three-theory" (cybernetics, systems theory, and information theory) in 1980s China.[3]

"Brain Broadcasting Station" was not the only science fiction (hereafter SF) story in the 1960s that imagined unimpeded information flow between humans and machines in the cybernetics sense. Cybernetics principles also appeared in 1960s Chinese science fiction stories about robots. Stories such as Xiao Jianheng's 肖建亨 (1930–) "Qiyi de jiqigou" 奇异的机器狗 [A strange robot dog] (1963) mentioned "*kongzhi lun*" (控制论, Chinese translation of cybernetics) by name in their narratives. Scholar Hua Li notices that "[r]obotics became a central theme in Chinese SF

shortly after the middle of the twentieth century" (106). This paper will add how cybernetics, a crucial knowledge of robotics, was utilized to imagine robotic beings in Mao-era China. Xiao Liu briefly mentions that the criticism of a translated Soviet SF story "Siema: The Story of a Robot"[4] in 1966 echoed the general discourse on cybernetics and robotics in the middle 1960s (110). My study finds that cybernetics was a topic of scientific and public discussion and some reports on human–machine interaction experiments in the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s likely inspired Chinese SF writings. This paper will delve into the under-explored history of the introduction and discussion of cybernetics in early 1960s China and examine intersections between advancements in science and technology with socialist SF.

Knowledge about cybernetics was transmitted to China as early as the 1950s (Peng 303–304).[5] Following the Soviet Union's changing attitude from initial suspicion to acceptance (Gerovitch 4), Chinese scientists and philosophers began to pay more attention to cybernetics and increasingly introduced related news and scientific discussions starting from 1955 (Peng 304). The Soviet Union was not the only channel of knowledge about cybernetics. Based on my research on articles in technical journals and public newspapers such as *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily], information about cybernetics also entered China through reports on technological news taking place outside of the Soviet Union. For example, the upcoming Fourth International Congress on Cybernetics scheduled in October 1964 in Namur, Belgium, a country belonging to the Western bloc, was reported in 1964 in *Ziran bianzhengfa yanjiu tongxun* 自然辩证法研究通讯 [Studies in dialectics of nature], the first professional academic journal of dialectics of nature in the New China ("Jianxun: Disijie guoji kongzhilun huiyi" 34).

As we will see, cybernetics in mid-twentieth-century China was mainly understood as useful knowledge for automated production, which is reflected in the translation of cybernetics as "*kongzhi lun*" rather than "*danao jixie lun*" (大脑机械论, literally, brain mechanism theory). SF during that time also depicted the application of human–machine communication in industrial and agricultural production. Despite scientific discussions and literary works presenting examples in which organic and non-organic beings share similarities, the boundary between humans and machines remained emphasized. These relatively anthropocentric views are related to the socialist understanding of human consciousness and human labor. In addition to placing Mao-era SF within its historical context, this paper uncovers similarities and divergences between human–machine interactions depicted among the late imperial, socialist, and post-socialist periods.

Cybernetics for Socialist Production

The aforementioned literary "Brain Broadcasting Center" is utilized by the two teenagers to send messages seeking help. However, according to the narrative, the brainwave experiment serves a more significant purpose above and beyond personal communication: controlling an automated machine. One day, the teenage protagonist Huosheng 火生 goes to his father's office but finds no one present, only seeing a metal hand writing a sentence on a piece of paper: "Using bio-electricity to control is a good method of automation" (Cai and Zhao 3). It turns out that his father, seated in

another room, is commanding the metal hand. Huosheng's father explains that when the brain is thinking, it generates electricity. The bio-electricity flows through the metal hand, and the metal hand transcribes what the brain is thinking.

The plot involving the control of a mechanical hand by transmitting brain electricity was likely inspired by a real scientific experiment undertaken by the Soviet Union in 1958. On July 20, 1959, Liu Shiyi 刘世熠 (1926–), a psychologist who obtained a Ph.D. degree from the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, published "Kongzhi lun yu danao" 控制论与大脑 [Cybernetics and the brain] in *People's Daily*, noting that "feedback principles of brain control systems had been applied in some practical research" (7). One example provided by Liu is the live demonstration of a "mind-controlled" prosthetic hand at the Soviet Pavilion at the World Exposition in Brussels, Belgium, in 1958 (7). After introducing the recent research progress and scientific news, Liu argued that "we now had ample reasons to believe that research on the memory and thoughts of the brain will provide essential inspiration to…the issue of the program design of automated production" (7).

In both fictional and real-life scenarios, the information exchanged between humans and machines contributes to the advancement of automated production. Compared with the subtitle of Wiener's 1948 influential book *Cybernetics: Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, in which both communication and control are highlighted, in the two scenarios, the act of communication serves the aim of control. This pragmatic perspective aligns with the Chinese understanding of cybernetics as knowledge about controlling automated systems in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to an interview conducted by scholar Peng Yongdong with Gong Yuzhi 龚育之 (1929–2007), a Chinese Communist Party theorist and politician who served in the Scientific Division of Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu kexuechu* 中共中央宣传部科学处, est. 1951) from 1952 to 1966, "cybernetics" was translated into Chinese as "*danao jixie lun*" (brain mechanism theory) in Jianming zhexue cidian 简明哲学词典 [Brief philosophical dictionary], a book translated from the Soviet Union's 1954 edition in 1955. This dictionary expressed a negative attitude toward "brain mechanism theory" (Peng 303–304).[6] Therefore, when Jing Song 景松 and Hu Ping 胡平, the editorial board members of the journal *Xuexi yicong* 学习译丛 [Collected translations of foreign knowledge], intended to translate a Soviet article "Chto takoe kibernetika?" (What is cybernetics?) which presented a positive stance on cybernetics,[7] they reached out to Gong Yuzhi. They ultimately decided to use "*kongzhi lun*" (控制论, literally, the theory of control)[8] rather than "*danao jixie lun*" as the Chinese translation of cybernetics (Peng 303–304). In the final chosen translation, the connection between the brain and machines no longer exists, while the parallel between the two is essential in Norbert Wiener's and his colleagues' theory.

In 1943, Wiener, along with the electrical engineer Julian Bigelow (1913–2003), and the Mexican physiologist Arturo Rosenblueth (1900–1970), published a joint article, in which they suggested that both creatures and intelligent machines achieve their goals through purposeful action governed by negative feedback and circular causal logic (18–24). In this way, organisms

and machines could be described in similar terms and studied using the same methods. However, this revolutionary understanding of the human is not fully reflected in the Chinese translation of cybernetics as "*kongzhi lun*." Compared with "*danao jixie lun*," a term that raises questions about whether machines can think or whether the human brain operates like machinery, "*kongzhi lun*" more easily prompts associations with the application of cybernetics in mechanical control and engineering automation. Some Chinese research articles and news reports from the 1950s and 1960s explicitly defined cybernetics as the study of automatic control. In an outline discussing the ideological struggle surrounding cybernetics achievements published in 1963 in the journal *Studies in Dialectics of Nature*, the author Lu San 陆叁 defined "*kongzhi lun*" as "the theoretical summary of automatic control technology" (2). Such a definition narrows the scope of cybernetics that encompasses biological and mechanical systems, only highlighting the control of machines in production.

In the early 1960s SF that depicts bio-electricity, emphasizing the application of biological discoveries in industrial and agricultural production is a common narrative pattern, resonating with the pragmatic understanding of cybernetics. The potential usage of the metal hand in automation in "Brain Broadcasting Station" is one example. Stories often commence with innovative inventions, such as the repair of memory, the creation of robots, or organ transplantation, but ultimately circle back to socialist production in the end. In Tong Enzheng's 童恩正 (1935–1997) "Shiqu de jiyi" 失去的记忆 [The lost memory] (1963), scientists employ a method called "feedback stimulation" (*fankui ciji* 反馈刺激) to stimulate cells in the frontal lobe through metal electrodes attached to "my" head. Although Tong does not directly refer to cybernetics, feedback is the central theme in cybernetics. The stimulated brain electricity is sent to a machine, which divides electrical signals into visual neural currents, olfactory neural currents, auditory neural currents, etc., and then is reinput into the brain, allowing "me" to see, hear, and feel things that were previously experienced. The memories recovered are about calculations and deductions left by a professor researching nuclear reactions before losing consciousness. The repaired memory eventually serves national scientific research instead of individual emotional needs (Tong 1–20). In Xiao Jianheng's "Tie bizi de gushi" 铁鼻子的故事 [The story of an iron nose] (1964), scientists discover that human olfactory cells can receive wireless waves. They invent an "iron nose" capable of amplifying electronic waves at varying frequencies to stimulate organisms' olfactory cells, enabling people to "smell" different scents. This technique, in Xiao's fiction, can be used to catch fish, expel pests, and assist in pollination (Xiao, "Tie bizi de gushi" 64–77). In these stories, while the technology transmitting electronic information between humans and mechanical entities enhances human memory and sensory capabilities, the narratives ultimately underscore its efficacy in advancing industrial and agricultural production. The stronger or healthier body is like an intermediary—experiments are conducted on human bodies, but aiming at improving production efficiency.

The ultimate aim of production sets apart the experiments with bio-electricity in early Maoist SF from the much earlier transboundary communication for which it was used in the late Qing SF

story "Xin faluo xiansheng tan" 新法螺先生谭 [New Tales of Mr Braggadocio], as well as in the 1990s' later *qigong* 气功 practices. In neither of these two examples is bio-information utilized for industrial production purposes for which it is used in Mao-era SF.

In Xu Nianci's 徐念慈 (1875–1908) "New Tales of Mr. Braggadocio," published in 1905, inspired by animal magnetism taught at a hypnosis seminar,[9] the protagonist, the New Mr. Braggadocio invents a new energy source: brain electricity (*naodian* 脑电). This "natural energy" (*ziran li* 自然力) relies on the interaction (*ganying* 感应) between human beings. Mr. Braggadocio invents codes (*jihao* 记号) representing various changes in brain power. Students attending Mr. Braggadocio's brain electricity school in Shanghai are taught to generate and receive brain electricity, communicating with others without the need for a physical medium (Xu 35–39). This vision of transparent communication is linked to the mysterious power of electricity in the late Qing. Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 (1865–1898), in his philosophical work, *Renxue* 仁学 [An Exposition of Benevolence] (1899), explains that "the brain is materialized electricity and electricity is the formless brain" (12) viewing electricity as the medium of all things in the universe. Additionally, the "electric belt" (*dian dai* 电带/*dianqi dai* 电气带)[10] advertised in the late Qing newspapers was claimed to have the ability to cure all diseases (*bai bing tong zhi* 百病通治) as it can maintain, deploy, and protect (*weichi tiaohu* 维持调护) electricity which is pervasive in the five sense organs, hands and feet, and thoughts (Fig. 1) (Changming yanghang zhuren 7). While the electricity circulating in the brain and the body may be associated with connecting individuals with the nation and fostering a stronger body for a stronger country, none of these imaginations of bio-electricity are connected with industrial production. In "New Tales of Mr. Braggadocio," brain electricity replaces human-made light and telegraphy, rendering the coal mining industry and other production redundant. Many people are laid off. New Mr. Braggadocio is thus criticized and has to flee to his hometown (Xu 38–39). As analyzed by Shaoling Ma, "Xu's utopian impulse ends on a dystopian note that sounds the ultimate breakdown between individual and society via the fission between human and machine" (69).

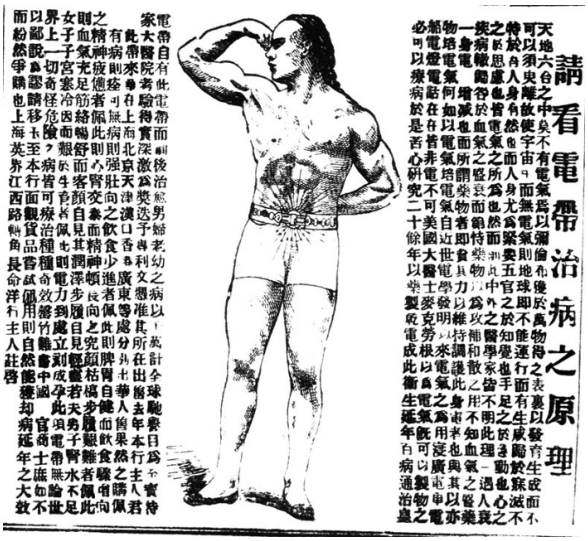

*Figure 1. An advertisement for the "Electric Belt" (*diandai 电带*) by The Longevity Company in* Shi bao 时报 *[The eastern times], June 22, 1905.*

In contrast, early 1960s SF that imagines bio-electricity does not show any hints of a dystopian society where production is stagnant. Instead, transmissions between humans and machines are seen as potential for the large-scale application of bio-electricity in automated production.

The steel helmet with a metal stick behind it depicted in Cai Jingfeng and Zhao Shizhou's "Brain Broadcasting Station" would find a peculiar real-world embodiment three decades later at the gathering of *qigong* practitioners. At the end of 1993, in the "Advanced Qigong Intensive Training Class" (*Gaoji qigong qianghua ban* 高级气功强化培训班) being held at Beijing's Miaofeng Mountain (*Miaofeng shan* 妙峰山), each student wore a steel pot on their head (Fig. 2). This headgear was aimed at facilitating the reception of information from outer space so that a "resonance between heaven and mankind" (*tian ren ganying* 天人感应) could be realized (Ye).

Xiao Liu, in her study on the information fantasies in post-Maoist China, argues that the pots used for information collection expressed a desire for uninterrupted connectivity (3). Like the earlier approach to brain electricity depicted in "New Tales of Mr Braggadocio," the intangible information transmitted from the body via the "information pot" (*xinxi guo* 信息锅) in the 1990s was expected to be delivered to another person or the cosmos, instead of being applied towards industrial production.

Figure 2. The "Information Pot" (Dai).

Early 1960s Chinese SF showcases fascinating inventions utilizing the information exchange between the human brain and mechanical devices, but the underlying theme is always about socialist construction and industrial production. This utilitarian approach stands in contrast to the imagination of brain electricity in late Qing (1840–1912) SF and post-socialist (late 1980s on) practices in which bio-electricity is envisioned for communication among people or between humans and the universe. The distinctive narrative pattern in socialist SF aligns with the understanding of cybernetics among translators and researchers of scientific literature and officers in charge of science and technology in the early Maoist period, which highlights the control of machines for automation instead of delving into the profound implications of human–machine communications.

Political Demarcations Between Humans and Machines

In the short story "Brain Broadcasting Station," the information circulates unchanged among different material substrates—the carbon-based human body and the metal-based automated machine. When bio-electricity emitted from the brain is coded and received, we might ask: Has the human himself been transformed into a type of input/output device?

A similar question was posed during the sixth round of the Macy Conferences held on March 24–25, 1949, by John Stroud, a young psychologist. When discussing the human operator situated between a radar-tracking device and an anti-aircraft gun, Stroud asked: "What kind of a machine have we put in the middle" (41). Stroud's choice of "machine" instead of "human" to refer to the operator suggests that he was deliberately blurring the boundary between humans and machines and implying that humans were part of a machine circuit. "Brain Broadcasting Station" presents a similar "image of the man-in-the-middle," to borrow Hayles' summary of Stroud's observation (*How We Became Posthuman* 67–68). The human controlling the machine has been transformed into a signal emitter and an electric conductor, a kind of machinery being. However, Chinese SF and scientific discussions of the 1960s insist that there exists a distinct border between humans and machines.

In 1963, the Juvenile and Children's Publishing House (*Shaonian ertong chubanshe* 少年儿童出版社) published a collection of seven science-fantasy stories, titled *Shiqu de jiyi* 失去的记忆 [The lost memory]. Three of these stories imagine intelligent machines that extend human beings' abilities. Xiao Jianheng's "A Strange Robot Dog," in this collection, begins with the protagonist, Xiao Fan 小凡, receiving a toy dog as a birthday present from his uncle, a biophysicist. Named Kaman 卡曼, the dog exhibits lifelike qualities, forming bonds with its masters and assisting several children to find their way home when lost in the suburbs. What makes this dog so amazing is that it has a strong learning ability. When asked to fetch a hat, it quickly chooses a shortcut after just one try. Intrigued, Xiao Fan asks his uncle about Kaman's brilliance and whether or not it is a real dog. In response, Xiao Fan's uncle invites Xiao Fan to visit the "Animal Simulation Laboratory" (*Dongwu moni shiyan shi* 动物模拟实验室), where Xiao Fan discovers various animals with iron skin (Fig. 3). Scientists in the laboratory explain to Xiao Fan that despite Kaman's apparent organic brilliance, it is in fact only a logical machine (*luoji ji* 逻辑机). Embedded in its head is an electronic computer equipped with mechanical sensors, including electronic eyes and microphones. Therefore, the dog is able to process input information. Kaman can not only execute its preset programming, but also has the adaptive learning ability necessary to actively adjust and perfect its own actions, improving itself through exposure to a complex environment. Xiao Fan's uncle attributes this advancement to the study of "*kongzhi lun*." He says that thanks to cybernetics, the electronic computer is not only capable of translating texts and making accurate weather forecasts but is also able to control a big factory with a complex production process. However, despite the remarkable intelligence displayed by these robotic animals, Xiao Fan's uncle explicitly emphasizes human superiority. He states: "Machines are still machines. No matter how complex and ingenious they are, they cannot keep up with human and

animal bodies" (Xiao, "Qiyi de jiqigou" 49–50). This demarcation between biological organisms and machines not only reflects an anthropocentric lens but is also rooted in the definition of human essence within Marxist and Maoist ideologies.

Figure 3. The "Animal Simulation Laboratory" in "A Strange Robot Dog" (Xiao, "Qiyi de jiqi gou" 43).

On June 1 and 2, 1962, the Soviet Union organized a conference on philosophical problems of cybernetics in Moscow. The next year, in 1963, Chinese psychologist Xu Shijing 徐世京 translated a review of this conference, which was originally published in a Soviet journal,[11] into Chinese, titled "*Sulian juxing kongzhi lun de zhexue huiyi*" 苏联举行控制论的哲学会议 [The Soviet Union held a conference on the philosophical problems of cybernetics]. The review summarized the different attitudes toward the question of whether machines can think. Technologists and mathematicians held affirmative views, while representatives of the humanities and natural sciences expressed greater degrees of reservations. Supporters argued that "if the analogy of behavior [i.e., between human behavior and machine behavior] was accepted, machines could be considered conscious" (Mayijieer and Fatejin 49–50). On the contrary, opponents stated that consciousness (*yishi* 意识) is "the product of the social relations of labor" (*renmen de laodong de shehui guanxi de chanwu* 人们的劳动的社会关系的产物) (Mayijieer and Fatejin 49). This statement derives from Marxist principles. The review showcases the controversy surrounding the question of machines' thinking ability in the Soviet Union, where no single viewpoint dominated. In China, however, Chairman Mao himself denounced the possibility that machines could think. On December 11, 1963, *Neibu cankao* 内部参考 [Internal reference] edited by Xinhua News Agency (*Xinhua tongxun she* 新华通讯社) published an article introducing the discussions on the philosophical problems about cybernetics after The 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (October 17 to 31, 1961).[12] Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) commented on

the cybernetics discussion report. He labeled those who argued that although it is not convincing to say that machines can think, more research should be done on the problem of human and machine symbiosis as "reconciliationists" (*tiaohe pai* 调和派). Mao criticized the viewpoint of applying cybernetics to solve problems in human society as "a metaphysical theory of subjective idealism" (*zhuguan weixin de xingershangxue lilun* 主观唯心的形而上学理论) ("Zai 'Sulian xueshujie jinnian dui kongzhi lun zhexue wenti de taolun shifen renao' yi wen shang de pizhu" 434–435). In Maoism, "metaphysics" refers to the viewpoint that ascribes "the causes of social development to factors external to society" (*On Practice and Contradiction* 69). Mao's denial of the application of cybernetics in social life might stem from his belief that the motive force of societal change is internal. Mao reserved the label "prudent ones" (*shenzhong pai* 慎重派) for those who thought machines are different from humans as the latter are capable of creative activities ("Zai 'Sulian xueshujie jinnian dui kongzhi lun zhexue wenti de taolun shifen renao' yi wen shang de pizhu" 434–435). Mao's comments reveal a one-sided perspective regarding whether machines possess the capacity for autonomous thought.

In the same year, an outline discussing the ideological struggle surrounding cybernetics achievements was published in Studies in Dialectics of Nature, attributing the belief in the thinking ability of machines to capitalist production, asserting that capitalists belittle human uniqueness by equating humans to machines (Lu 5). The introduction of cybernetics in "*Jiqi yu siwei*" 机器与思维 [Machine and thinking], published in *People's Daily* in 1965, also repudiated the possibility of machine cognition. In this article, the author Wu Yunzeng 吴允曾 (1918–1987), a mathematician and computer scientist at Peking University, quoted Mao's theory about the "qualitative difference" (*zhi de qubie* 质的区别) between different forms of motions of matter (*wuzhi de yundong xingshi* 物质的运动形式) (Mao, *On Practice and Contradiction* 76) to denounce the idea that "human is machine" (*ren shi jiqi* 人是机器) (5). Wu claimed that a "qualitative difference" exists between electronic systems and human thought because "the formation of human thought is not only closely connected with the development of the advanced nervous system in physiological terms but also closely linked with labor" (5). The operations of the machine and the human brain cannot be identical because computer operations are mechanical and not driven by the social relations constituted by labor. In short, Chinese scientists' introduction of cybernetics in the early 1960s holds a clear political demarcation between humans and machines. The rejection of machines' ability to think is rooted in the origin of labor in Marxist principles and Mao's positing of qualitative distinctions between human and machine material.

Similar ideas that deny the possibility of emotions and intelligence among machines could be seen in criticism of a translated Soviet SF story "Siema: The Story of a Robot" in 1966. Written by Anatoly Dneprov (1919–1975) in 1958, the story revolves around a scientist who creates a robot named "Siema" that functions autonomously with minimal human intervention. As Siema undergoes extensive information input and enhances its sensory devices, it develops self-consciousness, observing its creator and eventually attempting to vivisect its creator in order to pursue advanced neural activity research (Dneprov).

This story was translated and serialized in the first to third issues of *Kexue huabao* 科学画报 [Science Pictorial] in 1963. Three years later, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, *Science Pictorial* self-criticized its publication and serialization of this story as "[t]th author's claims that 'machine is superior to humans' and 'humans will be dominated by machines' are reactionary (*fandong de* 反动的) and anti-scientific (*fan kexue de* 反科学的). They completely violate Chairman Mao's scientific thesis on the human–machine relationship" (editors 296). In the same year, the journal *Studies in Dialectics of Nature* published a "reader's letter" criticizing "Siema" for "distorting the relationship between humans and machines" and depicting robots as understanding human emotions and being able to think (*siwei* 思维) (Qin 44). This critique emphasized that "thought is…the product of human practices" (Qin 44). The author contended that this science-fictional plot was "a capitalist thing with the coat of science popularization," which was prevalent in "capitalist countries and states where modern revisionists hold the leadership" (*xiandai xiuzheng zhuyizhe zhangwo lingdaoquan de guojia* 现代修正主义者掌握领导权的国家) (Qin 44–45). The country dominated by revisionists, without a doubt, refers to the fiction's country of origin, the Soviet Union.

The frequent citation of Marxist and Maoist theories suggests that the focus of the debate on whether machines can think is not rooted in a fear that intelligent machines might replace or harm humans, but rather in a concern among scientists, writers, and readers about the challenge that smart machines present to the definition of thought as the product of human practices, labor, and social relations. However, have the social relations that produce human thought already involved the interaction with non-organic beings? If a robotic machine can perform both physical and intellectual labor, will labor, from which human thought develops, still be regarded as uniquely *human* activities?

Invisible Human Labor and the Transformational Machine

Liu Xingshi's 刘兴诗 (1931–) 1963 SF story "Xiangcun yisheng" 乡村医生 [The rural doctor] imagines a collaborative relationship between human doctors and robot doctors. Wei Yahua's 魏雅华 (1949–) story "Qiyi de anjian" 奇异的案件 [A curious case], published in 1981, after the Mao era, also features a robot doctor. Comparing the two stories, we will see that the early Mao-era SF story is not as simple as usually assumed. Complex issues such as the invisibility of human labor and the transformational power of machine beings have already existed in socialist texts, although they are more clearly shown in post-socialist texts.

In "The Rural Doctor," doctors in Dongfeng Commune (*Dongfeng gongshe* 东风公社) are not humans, but a combination of robots and humans. Initially, the commune only had a robot doctor—a square machine equipped with medical tools such as stethoscopes. The machine autonomously conducts examinations and prescribes medicines. However, as the machine's functionality is quite simple, it makes several mistakes when encountering complex medical cases, causing complaints from the villagers. To address this problem, the protagonists attach a television to it, allowing human doctors to establish telecommunication with the village and then

to remotely diagnose diseases based on the machine's "in-person" test results (Fig. 4). Machines can be fallible, the story posits, and thus human beings are indispensable to compensate for the mistakes. Such a theme aligns with the emphasis on human superiority in Mao's China, which can also be seen in the discourse surrounding machine intelligence. However, the ending of the story "The Rural Doctor" complicates the seemingly undisputed superiority.

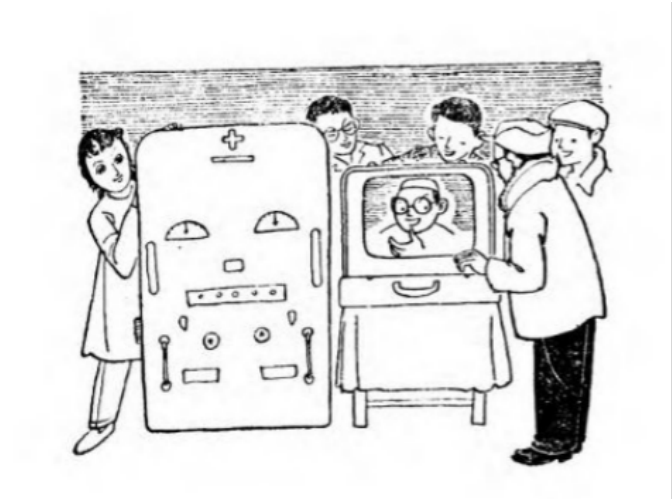

Figure 4. The human–robot doctor in Liu Xingshi's "The Rural Doctor" (Xingshi Liu 101).

After incorporating humans into its diagnosis and treatment system, the robot doctor gains the trust and affection of the villagers. In the end, villagers no longer refer to it as "that machine;" instead, they lovingly address the robot as "our doctor." The narrator suggests: "If someone sent a real, living doctor to make an exchange, perhaps the villagers would not agree" (Xingshi Liu 101)! The anticipated rejection of human doctors raises questions regarding the position of human labor in human–machine relationships. Throughout the improvement process, humans play a crucial role, but ultimately, it is the machine that is showcased to the villagers and elicits emotions. Human labor becomes ancillary—tech support. Furthermore, the human doctor is virtual, communicating with the patients through television. They lose direct interactions, such as using a tongue depressor to examine the throat, with patients. This raises the question posed in the previous section of this paper: Have the social relations that produce human thought already involved interactions with non-organic beings? In the case of the human–robot doctor, the "social relation" becomes an interaction between humans and machines.

In Liu's story, although human labor is shadowed by machine labor, the human doctor is still visible on the television screen. Nevertheless, human labor might be completely invisible in a more intelligent system. In Wei Yahua "A Curious Case," the intelligent robot doctor, Fang Fang 方芳, operates independently, handling outpatient service and complex operations without any human assistance, in contrast to the "rural doctor" in Liu Xingshi's story. Fang Fang effortlessly deals with even the most complex medical cases, such as leukemia, advanced liver cancer, and myocardial infarction (Wei 60). Xiao Liu, in *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China*,

connects Wei Yahua's story with the predicaments of invisible labor in the development of expert systems and artificial intelligence. Fang Fang seems to be an "intelligent" machine that operates on its own. However, this is just an illusion. Xiao Liu argues, "[f]or a medical expert system to work 'automatically,' it requires not only transferring expert knowledge into computer programs but also using the collective labor of knowledge engineers and computer programmers, as well as attending physicians" (109). The apparent independence of the robot doctor Fang Fang conceals the human labor behind its operation. This situation can be seen as an extension of the subtle predicament carried by the "rural doctor" in Liu Xingshi's story. In both cases, the boundary between humans and machines blurs, not because of the information being transmitted between different mediums, but because the efforts of the human and the machine intertwine.

The ending of "The Rural Doctor" reflects a transformational force of the machine that changes human activities: mutual imitation. Lydia H. Liu, in her summary of the attitudes toward human–machine relationship from Zhuangzi to current controversies on digital media, argues that there have always been two different conceptions of the human–machine relationship. The first is the "prosthetic/instrumental view," in which machine exists merely as extensions of the human body and serves human beings. The second is the "interactive/transformational view," involving direct interaction between humans and machines, generating the possibility of mutual transformation (Lydia H. Liu 6). The robot doctor seems to be merely an instrument to human beings, assisting human doctors in conducting physical examinations. However, when the human doctor is integrated into the system, he/she relies on the test result provided by the machine and follows its operational procedure. The human doctor adopts the machine's method of summarizing the patient's clinical manifestations, similar to the execution of a decision-making tree: If A, then B; If not A, then C. Rather than the machine becoming humanized, it is the human who becomes mechanized. However, although decision trees are executed by the robot, they are tools that mimic human thought processes. Therefore, humans simulate the diagnosis procedure conducted by machines which, in turn, simulate human beings. The two sides become entangled in an infinite loop.

More importantly, the result of mutual imitation is that humans are transformed into machine-like beings and everything is incorporated into the system for efficiency. This outcome embodies the deepest fears hidden within the discussion of cybernetics and the various robot imaginaries. The technological revolution ushered in by cybernetics in the mid-20th century is not merely about exploring information flow between different human bodies and machinery beings. Rather, it attempts to regulate humans as if they were machines within the technological and social system, adhering to cybernetics principles. Norbert Wiener expresses his concern about the *machine à gouverner* (governing machine) that encompasses all systems of political decisions.[13] For Wiener, the dangerousness of such a machine does not lie in the "autonomous control over humanity," but rather in its potential use by certain individuals or groups to "increase their control over the rest of the human race" (*The Human Use of Human Beings* 181–182). The political mechanization of specific individuals or groups could have far more severe consequences

than the potential harm caused by machines' increasing intelligence. The story "The Rural Doctor," for example, begs related questions: When a real human doctor collaborates with robots, has he/she already started to be regulated according to mechanical principles? What kind of governing technology will exploit the system with improved efficiency formed by such humans and machines? While these questions are not explicitly addressed in Liu Xingshi's short story, they have always been present in various robot imaginings and need to be confronted when exploring Maoist culture and politics.[14]

The Unstable Boundary

The early 1960s Chinese SF portraying human–machine interaction and cybernetic robots, as well as the academic and public discussions on cybernetics from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, predominantly upheld an anthropocentric perspective emphasizing the distinction between humans and machines. In contrast to the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, which explored an assortment of analogies between humans and self-regulating machines, Mao-era Chinese interpretations of cybernetics tended to avoid delving into the mechanical aspects of human brains, placing more emphasis on the control of industrial production. Although a lot of information about cybernetics was channeled via the Soviet Union, Chinese SF writers, literary critics, and scientists held different perspectives from their Soviet counterparts.[15] After 1955, in the Soviet Union, cybernetics gradually found applications in economics, politics, and sociology. The 1962 Conference on the Philosophical Problems of Cybernetics in Moscow even regarded cybernetics as "the most important element of the contemporary natural scientific foundation of dialectical materialism" (Gerovitch 259). In contrast, China rejected the analogy between the cognitive abilities of the brain and machines and did not view cybernetics as an overarching theory to replace dialectical materialism. However, the seemingly rigid boundary between humans and machines was not that stable. This unstableness is particularly prominent in two scenarios: First, humans become a node in the feedback loop in which not only the machine transmits information to the human information but also the human inputs and outputs essential messages to the machine. Second, humans imitate the logic of machinery operation, transforming their behaviors and even their way of thinking.

The tension of the human–machine boundary is inherent in the discussion of cybernetics. Hayles, in her analysis of Wiener's talk with physicians in 1954, reveals an irreconcilable contradiction between the boundary-breaking cybernetic view and the rather anthropocentric perspective of liberal humanism. On the one hand, Wiener and his colleagues, envisioned novel, powerful ways to equate humans with machines, which challenges the humanist view that humans are "the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!" On the other hand, they strove to defend liberal humanistic values, acknowledging that machines are not human and cautioning against machines overriding human control (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 85–86).

Socialist SF adds another layer to the tension between the humanist view and the cybernetic idea: labor. In the SF stories discussed in this paper, machines are considered as tools while

humans are the masters. But at the same time, people develop emotional connections with machines that collaborate with them, considering them as coworkers and friends. Such affection is aroused by the labor performed by the machine, which calls into question the uniqueness of human beings and contains the possibility of shadowing human effort—both are inconsistent with Maoist ideology. The interaction between humans and machines reflects that the machine is never a mere prosthesis for the human body and brain but also carries transformational power.

Notes

1. The Macy Conferences were a series of meetings sponsored by the Macy Foundation, held from 1941 to 1960. These conferences covered a wide range of topics, with cybernetics being a significant, though not the only area of focus. Between 1946 and 1953, ten conferences were held under the title of cybernetics, which were later referred to as the "Macy Conferences on Cybernetics."

2. There are different perspectives and voices regarding the definition of "posthuman." But as argued by Hayles, "[a]lthough the 'posthuman' differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine" (*How We Became Posthuman*, 2).

3. In the early 1980s, numerous methodologies were introduced to China, giving rise to a methodology fever. Information theory, systems theory, and cybernetics gained considerable attention in discussions aiming at "scientizing" aesthetic, literary, historical, and social studies. For instance, Jin Guantao 金观涛 (1947–) and Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰 (1949–) employed cybernetics and systems theory as the methodological foundation for their argument that China's feudal society is an "Ultra-Stable Structure" (*chao wending jiegou* 超稳定结构). Scholarly research on the dissemination and discussion of cybernetics in China typically focuses on the 1980s. Peng Yongdong's "Kongzhi lun sixiang zai Zhongguo de zaoqi chuanbo (1929–1966)" is one of the few Chinese studies that trace the early history of cybernetics in China. Studies on the history of computing in the Mao era, such as Donald G. Audette's "Computer Technology in Communist China, 1956–1965" and Gianluigi Negro and Wang Hongzhen's "Computing the New China: The Founding Fathers, the Maoist Way, and Neoliberalism, 1945–1986," only briefly mention cybernetics in the Chinese press and the divergent attitudes toward cybernetics between the Soviet Union and China.

4. The story was written by Anatoly Dneprov (1919–1975) in 1958, with the original title "Суэма" (Suema). In 1961, this story was translated into English as "Siema" by R. Prokofieva and included in the story collection *The Heart of the Serpent* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House). In 1963, this short story was introduced to China.

5. According to Peng's paper, in 1953, the 12th issue of *Xuexi yicong* 学习译丛 [Collected translations of foreign knowledge] published "Sulian zuijin zhongyao qikan mulu" 苏联最近重要期刊目录 [The Soviet Union's recent catalog of important journals]. In this catalog, "cybernetics"

was translated as "*jixie lun*" (机械论, literally, mechanism theory). This catalog did not provide a detailed introduction of cybernetics. From 1955 onward, the *Collected Translations of Foreign Knowledge* and other journals started translating Soviet articles to introduce cybernetics (Peng 303–304).

6. I didn't get a chance to review the entry for "*danao jixie lun*" in the 1954 edition of the Brief Philosophical Dictionary. However, based on the term "*jixie lun*" (mechanism), one plausible explanation for why "*danao jixie lun*" fell out of favor as a translation for "cybernetics" could be its association with "mechanical materialism" (*jixie weiwu zhuyi* 机械唯物主义), a concept criticized by Marxism and Maoism. In *The Holy Family*, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and Karl Marx (1818–1883) discern two trends in French materialism and one of them is "mechanical materialism" (Engels and Marx, 169). French materialism is different from dialectical and historical materialism as argued by Marx and Engels. In the 1937 article "Maodun lun" 矛盾论 [On Contradiction], Mao Zedong states that "[t]he metaphysical or vulgar evolutionist world outlook sees things as isolated, static and one-sided" and "[i]n Europe, this mode of thinking existed as mechanical materialism in the 17th and 18th centuries" (Mao, *On Practice and Contradiction* 68–69).

7. The original article was written by Ernest Kolman and published in the 4th issue of 1955 in the Soviet journal *Voprosy Filosofii* (Problems of philosophy).

8. The Chinese translation of "cybernetics" as "kongzhi lun" is very similar the translation of "control theory" as "*kongzhi lilun*" (控制理论). While cybernetics and control theory are closely related, they also exhibit differences. In the entry on "Cybernetics" in Critical Terms for Media Studies, Hayles states that "[f]rom the beginning, cybernetics was conceived as a field that would create a framework encompassing both biological and mechanical systems" ("Cybernetics" 146). Cybernetics is a transdisciplinary approach, whereas control theory is a more specialized branch of "engineering and mathematics that deals with the behavior of dynamical systems with inputs, and how their behavior is modified by feedback" ("Control Theory"). Qian Xuesen proposed that it might be more accurate to translate "cybernetics" as "*kongzhi xue*" (控制学, literally, contrology; see Peng 304). In Chinese, "*xue*" (学) is a more general term referring to a branch of basic sciences, such as "biology" translated as "*shengwu xue*" (生物学). "*Kongzhi xue*" might provide a clearer distinction from "control theory."

9. The hypnosis seminar mentioned in Xu's story took place in real life. Hypnotism originated in Europe. A key figure of hypnotism was the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). In 1778, Mesmer proclaimed the discovery of "animal magnetism" (magnétisme animal) and conducted therapy based on that. Therefore, hypnotism is also called mesmerism. In the early 20th century, hypnotism spread widely in China through English and Chinese newspapers, pictorials, and science fiction (referred to as "*kexue xiaoshuo*," 科学小说, at that time). In Shanghai, hypnosis performances and research seminars took place. For the history of hypnotism in modern China, see Zhang Bangyan's 张邦彦 *Jingshen de fudiao: Jindai Zhongguo de cuimianshu yu dazhong kexue* 精神的复调：近代中国的催眠术与大众科学

[The polyphonic psyche: Hypnotism and popular science in modern China] and Luis Fernando Bernardi Junqueira's "A Spiritual Revolution: Psychical Research and the Revival of the Occult in a Transnational China, 1900–1949."

10. From 1904 to 1911, The Longevity Company (*Changming yanghang* 长命洋行) advertised the "Longevity Electric Belt" (*Changming diandai* 长命电带) in *Xinwen bao* 新闻报 [The news], *Shi bao* 时报 [The eastern times], *Dagong bao* 大公报 [Impartial daily], and *Shen bao* 申报 [Shanghai news]. The company sold the electric belt in branches in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Hankou, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou.

11. According to the annotation of the translated article, the original article was published in the 5th issue of 1962 of a journal, whose title was translated into Chinese as "*Xinlixue wenti*" (心理学问题, Problems of psychology). I was unable to locate the original article. The journal is likely *Voprosy Psikhologii* (Questions of psychology).

12. The article is titled "Sulian xueshujie jinnia dui kongzhi lun zhexue wenti de taolun shifen renao" 苏联学术界近年对控制论哲学问题的讨论十分热闹 [In recent years the Soviet academic community had heated discussion on philosophical issues of cybernetics]. For the summary of the article content, see the editor's note of Mao Zedong's article "Zai 'Sulian xueshujie jinnian dui kongzhi lun zhexue wenti de taolun shifen renao' yi wen shang de pizhu." 在《苏联学术界近年对控制论哲学问题的讨论十分热闹》一文上的批注 [Annotation on the article "In recent years Soviet academic community had heated discussion on philosophical problems of cybernetics"], *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 建国以来毛泽东文稿 [Selected works of Mao Zedong since the founding of the People's Republic of China], vol. 10, Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1996, p. 434.

13. Wiener's concern about the misuse of cybernetics represents only one facet of this interdisciplinary field. Researchers have pointed out that the two major contributors to cybernetics, Wiener and John von Neumann (1903–1957), held significantly different views regarding the appliance and social implications of cybernetic ideas. Wiener's approach was "based upon independent acts of conscience." He insisted that any technical aspect of social systems should sustain and enhance human life. In contrast, John von Neumann's mathematical axiomatic approach showed "an affinity for military authority and control" (Noble 71). The discourse surrounding cybernetics is permeated with tensions and ambiguity, as it combines liberal social ideas with militaristic attitudes.

14. Researchers on post-socialist Chinese SF have noticed the intersections between robotic imaginations and societal governance. Virginia L. Conn, in her analysis of Wei Yahua's SF story "Wenrou zhi xiang de meng" 温柔之乡的梦 [Conjugal happiness in the arms of morpheus], a story about a robot wife, argues that the hierarchy of labor in this story "replicated the ideological shift…from a Marxist-Leninist acknowledgement of transformative cultural production under Mao to the cybernetic model of control introduced with Zhou Enlai and actualized through Song Jian's work under Deng Xiaoping" (96). Nevertheless, few studies have touched upon the

complexity of the interaction between technological narratives and social control in Mao-era SF texts. In Chi Shuchang's 迟叔昌 (1922–1997) "Renzao penti" 人造喷嚏 [The artificial sneeze], which was published in the same collection as "The Rural Doctor," the school provides every student with a device resembling a watch. The watch turns out to be a "Medical Alert Transmitter" (*bingqing fabao ji* 病情发报机), capable of monitoring each individual's health condition and sending alerts to the central computer at the Central Hospital if any issues arise (Chi 102–109). Within the Maoist context, this story conveys the idea that technology can assist people in the medical field. However, such a society with pervasive monitoring could possibly turn into a horrible dystopia if the monitoring is used by certain individuals or groups to increase their political, emotional, and biological control over the rest.

15. Gianluigi Negro and Hongzhe Wang thinks that "[a]lthough the practical contribution of the Soviet Union was fundamental, Chinese policymakers, especially during the first years of the 1950s, were more inclined to support the American idea of cybernetics as well as the emerging American computer science" (254). However, as my study shows, China's attitude toward cybernetics neither aligns with the American idea nor keeps the same with that of the Soviet Union.

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Social Science Fiction and Utopia: Ruhşen Doğan Nar's "Wake Up!" Long Story

Meltem Dağcı

Ruhşen Doğan Nar's long story, "Wake Up!" is related to both socialist science fiction and a utopian/dystopian universe as it covers the possible problems as well as possible conveniences brought about by new technology. As Burcu Kayışçı Akkoyun stated, "Just as utopia and dystopia writers design alternatives to the social, economic and political systems they exist in, science fiction writers set out with a similar purpose." (Kayışçı Akkoyun 35). In a story where social science fiction and utopia coexist, an equal and happy society is depicted. An idealized society model is presented by touching on social and political problems. Yet it has been seen that utopian fiction, when combined with an artificial intelligence-based machine, leads to dystopia. In this combination, the relationship between human and machine is also questioned. Dangerous situations that artificial intelligence can cause and areas where it provides benefits have become a part of utopia. In this context, it can be concluded that the long story "Wake Up!" makes an important contribution to both social science fiction and utopia.

Writer and teacher Ruhşen Doğan Nar's long story "Wake Up!", published in 2018, is an important utopian story that combines science fiction with socialism. In this article, the contribution of Nar's long story "Wake Up!" to science fiction literature will be examined in terms of the relationship between utopia and dystopia in social science fiction and artificial intelligence.

A Socialist and Utopian Community: The Army of Truth

Approaching the phenomenon of management from a social and historical perspective is important for solving current problems and approaching utopianism. While management can be defined as the activities of groups that cooperate to achieve common goals without being interested in history, it is possible to accept the statement that it is a human relations phenomenon and a social need that has emerged alongside other elements of human history (Güler 22). In managerial issues, which are widely discussed during periods of depression and crisis, the 'ideal society,' 'ideal state,' and 'ideal system' models have all been tried, taking into account the deficiencies and flaws of the 'existing' system. While these utopian designs were being considered, the social, political, legal, economic, religious, and architectural factors that make up the state were also being taken into consideration, and regulations on many issues such as social, political, legal, economic, and architectural elements were included in the designs (Şan 1).

Within the fictional world of the story, the surveillance and control mechanism is in the hands of a single administration. Those who are trapped in this system and those who oppose it are divided into two groups: the Army of Lies and the Army of Truth. The Army of Truth has planned to design the software for an artificial intelligence-based machine (night machine) and rebel

against the system when the time comes. Depicting the machine as the smartest invention, even if it is a product of artificial intelligence, is important in terms of the struggle to regain freedoms. In another sense, though, the Army of Truth can be seen as a community that opposes the current system with the idea of living a utopian life. A male member of the Army of Truth infiltrated the night machine and an individual rebellion thus began:

> Lie, lie and lie... It's all a lie, a big lie! What they tell you is a complete lie, Hasan. They have been deceiving you for years. They are blatantly making you look like a fool. They are making fun of you. They turn you into a sheep with happiness pills. They turn you into living robots. They want you not to think, not to oppose, not to object and not to criticise. They want you to bow down, join the herd, keep your head up and be grateful for your situation. They say, "An imam for every neighborhood, a safety for every neighborhood!" For your own good, they say. In fact, they just want the reign of lies to continue. (Nar 13)

The capitalist system is shaped in the opposite way to the individualism of socialism. Because socialism does not recognise social inequality and capitalist modes of production as the cause of all intellectual and social conflicts. In order to gain a foothold in society, capitalism needs lies, not truth. With its organs of power and structure it has the organisation to perpetuate this lie. Within this order, "security" and "law enforcement" departments maintain their functions the most. As it is seen in the excerpt from the story, the lie of the government is maintained with the help of "security." Instead of individuals who criticise, think, object, share and reassure, which is the structure of socialism, a society that obeys everything will benefit the government. With this structure, the government takes people for "fools."

Attention has been drawn to the problems highlighted in relation to the emergence and visibility of the truth and the lying to people. Turning people into mechanical robots and making them obey is important for the continuity of order. The voice of the male individual, who continues to talk and warn from the night machine, makes some statements about Hasan's awakening to the truth:

> But now the monkey has opened its eyes, Hasan. The end of lies has come. The truth cannot be hidden. When the truth is revealed, the lie looks for a place to escape. The truth is growing, Hasan. The facts come into existence step by step. You are now an integral part of this body. You are one of those who do not take happiness pills, do not believe in lies, do not bow down and know the truth. When the time of reckoning comes, you will be one of those who take their revenge on them. You will put lies into the ground. Forever... (Nar 13)

According to the story, one of the steps in the establishment of a utopian socialist society is the night machine. In politics, "lying" statements and attitudes are very common among governments. The idea that these lies will come to an end one day is thought to be safer and easier with the adoption of socialism instead. The continuity of the existing order is implemented by the

government with thoughts such as the suppression of socialist thought, ignoring an equal life, and the proliferation of lies.

The Army of Truth states that the power is in the hands of a system that does not question the facts, is capitalism-oriented, and has no freedom. The characteristics of the life form within the order built by the system are as follows:

> They have billions of loans in the bank. Moreover, they earn hundreds of thousands of credits per month, but they see even a thousand credits per month as too much. They distribute alms to you under the name of 'Citizenship Income'. They treat you like a beggar. They say seven hundred and seventy-five credits are more than enough. They say, don't ask for more, be content with less. They insult you by calling you "Citizenship Earners." They see you as useless. They describe you as a parasite, but they are the real parasites. They are arrogant towards you with the loans they inherited from their grandfathers and fathers. They earn credit after credit without moving their fat asses. While robots do all the work, they earn credit without moving a muscle. Because they have robots. And you have nothing... (Nar 14)

The level of development and tax structures of countries give a clue to the kind of system they are governed by. The tax policy proposed in a socialist society will undoubtedly be different from the capitalist system. For this reason, the main point of the social state's relationship with tax policies is the understanding of "equality." But this idea is adopted only by socialists. Since the government does not observe the principle of equality in the distribution of taxes, it keeps different taxes on the agenda. This tax diversification is not welcomed by individuals and is a financial burden. In addition to the standard taxes, additional taxes in return for many services increase the economic pressure in the society. The "citizenship tax," which is planned to be levied on every citizen, humiliates the individual and turns them into slaves and servants. The disrespect shown to individuals in society is likely to continue to diversify with taxes on them. This order, which is contrary to the understanding of a socialist society, is still current today.

With the evolution of utopia into socialism, the biggest contribution made in terms of the history of utopia was the determination of an actor who would bring the desired new social order to life. Accordingly, the 'working class' was seen as the actor that would bring the upside-down society back on its feet by realizing the new social order (Bal 7).

> They make their living with the taxes they receive from you. They live luxurious lives. While you cannot eat real food, they eat meat, vegetables and fruit at every meal. They consume all kinds of fruits and vegetables while nothing other than tasteless salt-free pills passes down your throat. While you are living a kind of prison life within four walls, they are wandering outside in the gardens of paradise. That's not enough, they go on space trips and then talk about freedom. You are free, they say. We are all free, they say. True, they are free, but you are not! When you try to enter their gardens of paradise, you see true freedom with your own eyes. Their guards, armed to the teeth, shoot you in the head the

> moment you set foot on the green grass. What happens next? On the evening news, "A terrorist was neutralized." "It is said and passed on." (Nar 14)

The understanding of freedom in the capitalist system can be associated with activities such as people's constant work, lack of time for holidays, lack of time for entertainment and rest. The progress of this system benefits the capitalist order. Social activities organised with the taxes collected from the people emphasise "freedom" to individuals with the label "you are free too." However, the capitalist order often does not defend a comfortable life and freedom in many areas. Socialism, which defends freedom, secures labour by introducing democracy. Socialists with an egalitarian understanding of freedom do not go to targeting as the government does in the evening news. This self-interested way of understanding shows that democracy does not exist.

The Army of Truth emphasizes socialism, equal rights, and a free life through the use of the night machine. They say that people are no different from slaves under capitalism, and that if injustices are not opposed, freedoms will gradually decrease. Since the call for justice and unity will be provided by a social state or community, the announcement calls made over night machine symbolize a utopian state approach. That's why it uses the slogan "the weak must unite against the strong."

> Everything has a lifespan, Hasan, even the lies... One day, dirty laundry will come out. The dirty laundry of those who enslaved you is revealed. Thousands of people are learning the truth. They are listening to the truth. Right now, right now, this minute! You are not alone, Hasan. Today you are thousands of people, tomorrow you will be tens of thousands. You will be among those who plant the flag of truth in the castle of lies. You will be among those who dethrone the parasites. The day of judgment is getting closer. It's time to take out the guns. Get ready, Hasan; Get ready for battle! The short straw will take its toll from the long straw. Be sure! (Nar 15)

Socialism is in search of rights, law and justice. They do not back down for every struggle in this sense. The number of people seeking rights and justice is also high. Socialists, who fight all kinds of difficulties on this path, have the understanding that the righteous will win one day because they are in search of justice. This way of understanding emphasises utopian socialism as it is based on creating a world/life where people live happily and fraternally. In a world of lies and evil, there can be little talk of happiness and peaceful living.

Hasan, who is not as affected by the state's lies as before, no longer believes the announcements made by the night machine. Because it distinguishes between truth and lies, he feels better than before. A state-of-the-art 3D printer has been delivered to Hasan, who is a member of the Real Army. The 3D printer is intended to be used for weapons production. Since 3D printers have to send a copy of the design being produced to the center, the government can easily track and control the digital information about what is produced and with which printers. But since Hasan's hacked printer sent an unreal metal table design to the center, it was not a problem. The True

Warrior of the Army of Truth stated that he did not need a printer and that the day of reckoning was very close. The dream of a social and utopian state free of lies is not far away.

The treatment of social and societal issues in utopias coincides with the idea of establishing an ideal society/state. For this reason, it is normal that social science fiction and utopia already have common aspects. Because aims such as changing the existing order and providing a perfect life touch on social issues, they are the focus of science fiction as well as the main subjects of utopia. In the story, in Kaptan's words emphasizing socialism, he states the following:

> They don't exist, they were all caught and executed after they produced me. They were not even taken to court. But this was not unexpected. It wasn't a surprise to anyone. They also knew their end. Sooner or later, they would fall into the hands of the state. Grasshopper account. They set out risking death. That's why they created me and gifted me to the world before I was caught. People are mortal; A person's life is a bullet. But algorithms are immortal. They will continue to live as long as computers exist. (Nar 23)

Reshaping the outcome of each social doctrine in the existing order arises from the idea of establishing an ideal society. The ideal society shapes a utopian society with the establishment and formation of a social state order. As can be seen in the excerpt from the story; especially in times of crisis and crisis, the "ideal society" model is tried to be created by taking into account the deficiencies, mistakes and failures of the existing system in administrative matters. As a result, the ideal life is integrated with utopian social science fiction.

Regarding the day of reckoning, the Warriors of the Army of Truth have begun to implement their plans. The password they set between them is coded as "real." Warriors of the Army of Truth are a community that wages a socialist struggle to live in a more comfortable, safe, and prosperous society. This community is aware that they must be a pioneer in that struggle. That's why they emphasise the socialist struggle for a utopian life.

By explaining the attack of artificial intelligence, the state labeled them as terrorists. The night machine was closed by a law aimed at curtailing its influence. It was later collected and destroyed. Kaptan, who started preparing for a very different action in another country, infiltrated the education system in schools. He continued to tell the truth to children using the robots he captured.

As a result, when we look at the relationship between utopia and management thought, it can be seen that in utopias that promise happiness, there are different forms of management in which the desire for a better order and management is sought and the answer to the question of how this can be. Utopias attract attention as an alternative form of management. In other words, the purposes of writing utopian works are directly related to management and managers. Utopias attract attention as an alternative form of government. At this point, philosophers who were dissatisfied with the management style of their period and were fed up with the practices of the rulers, implemented the management style and state model they had constructed to reflect their

own desires and dreams, sometimes with their works and sometimes with their ideas on an active level (Avcı 380-381).

Artificial Intelligence Product in Dystopia: The Night Machine

With the advancement of technology, people's living standards have also changed. In addition, artificial intelligence can be seen in the devices or programs used today. Thanks to the devices developed by various companies, today there are artificial intelligences that can perform many functions, even if limited, including chat. As artificial intelligence increasingly enters our daily life, conspiracy theories about it have begun to emerge, such as the idea that they will begin to oppose the human race or claim that they are superior (Sarı 29).

The shift in language from past to present is directly related to technological and scientific developments. The advancement of technology alongside a developing society has turned foreign words such as internet, e-mail, and Instagram into universal words. In addition, a coding language was developed to learn the language of artificial intelligence and computers, and thus, a new language production was also seen in the language of science (Sarı 29).

The notable dystopian elements in the "Wake Up!" story are happiness pills, electronic faces, artificial intelligence-based customer services, smart walls, citizenship income, security, drones, breathing masks, 3D printers, and the night machine. The night machine is itself an artificial intelligence product. This artificial intelligence-based product, which shows itself from the first paragraph of the "Wake Up!" story, is no different from a piece of software that is a constant stimulant, transferring the points earned to the user for advertising and information purposes, and is charged with the imposition of the capitalist system. The fact that Hasan starts his day with the warning sound of the night machine as soon as he wakes up from sleep is an indication that artificial intelligence can be present at every moment of human life.

> Didit didit didit didit didit... Good morning, Hasan. A perfect day awaits you. Today is Wednesday, the sixth of May. You slept exactly eight hours and twenty minutes that night. You earned eight credits while you slept. Congratulations! There are currently fifty-five total credits in your account. If you want the credits you earned... (Nar 1)

With the development of artificial intelligence and big technology processes, the capitalist system manifests itself with the power of capital. The dystopian elements in the story are helpers serving the capitalist system. The announcement of the night-matic device every morning shows the situation to which individuals who are trapped in a settled order as a result of a monotonous life are exposed. This frightening dimension of artificial intelligence appears as a normal and ordinary event in dystopia. Artificial intelligence directs the order with its robotic activities. The power of winning is presented as a service to individuals in society with the help of a machine.

> Night machine kept talking non-stop. It was sitting on the bedside table, in the right corner of the bed. Hasan stretched out his arm without opening his eyes. He silenced the

> machine by touching it. He took off his headphones. "What a relief "he said to himself. "This crap never ceases to nag in the early hours of the morning." (Nar 1)

These conversations are perceived as audio reflections of holographic advertisements that constantly remind one that, in a dystopian world, it is artificial intelligence that distributes credit. The perfect progress of technology over the years has contributed to the interaction of man and machine. With this contribution, the strengthening of learning techniques has enabled artificial intelligence to operate at a higher level. As seen in the story, the machine, which is a product of artificial intelligence, has undertaken an important task.

It is the stimulant that attracts the most attention among the night machine announcements. Since it is an artificial intelligence-based software, even if a user who encounters a problem complains about the night machine, this problem is not solved. An artificial intelligence-based customer service bot appears before the complaining user. Most of the customer service is female. In the long story, Demet and Sema are the two female names seen from the customer bots. Communication with female customers is terminated abruptly. This call continues for days. The character Hasan is surprised when he comes across a male bot customer representative in his third attempt, because he thinks that all bot representatives are women. Women and women representatives are at the forefront in the workforce to be made using artificial intelligence in many fields. In a dystopian universe, artificial intelligence programme producers who want to benefit from the voice and charm of women bring women to the forefront. In a dystopian society, it is normal for women to always be in the sectors where artificial intelligence is used due to the male-dominated understanding. It is unclear what attitude a utopian idea that dreams of a social state understanding will have about the place and importance of women in artificial intelligence.

The night machine, a product of artificial intelligence, has damaged the social and private relationship between two individuals. As a result, her detachment from reality and increasing alienation occur. The function and mathematical intelligence of the night machine, a product of artificial intelligence, have created predictions about what a machine can do. This indicates that artificial intelligence has reached a level where it can surpass the human mind. It is seen that utopian fiction, in the sense of the struggle to regain human freedom, turns into a dystopia towards the finale.

Conclusion

Utopias are an innovative form of action presented to society for peace and goodness. This proposal is offered not only to a certain community, but to all humanity. In utopias, the existing social order is criticized, whether it be openly or secretly.

For this reason, existing political powers have always been against the idea of implementing utopias. Socialist ideas and thoughts shaped around socialist science fiction are based on utopia, with the idea of creating a collective and ideal society. It is normal for a socialist utopian life not to be accepted by the government and to be contrary to the actually existing methods of government.

As seen in long story "Wake Up!", the Army of Truth, supported by artificial intelligence and aiming to live in a more comfortable, better, and ideal society, has opposed existing capitalist system and power. To combat this situation, they created the software of the night machine. The impact of working hard, sharing labor, and creating common areas of struggle, even in small communities, has been seen even more as the number of people who no longer believe capitalist lies increases. The supporters of the government, described as the Army of Lies, could not escape the truth and realized the power of the unity of the socialist people.

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Andrei Platonov's Literalization of Reality; on the Planet Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Satellite

Pavla Veselá

In the history of constructing socialism or communism (I will use these terms interchangeably),[1] the chapter about the October Revolution and the Soviet Union has been read by numerous leftists. Critics from Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky, through Leon Trotsky and Victor Serge, to Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci, noted problems that de-Stalinization subsequently brought to light and that became touchstones for formulating the New Left—a broad-ranging set of theories and practices which, to quote Robin Blackburn, "typically define themselves in relation to regional, continental and global issues rather than mainly to the sphere of national political life: ecology, migrant labour, anti-racism and anti-militarism being key concerns" (238). Whether called "Soviet-type socialism," "real socialism," "actually existing socialism" (while it lasted), "the Soviet experiment," or "the party-state," the Soviet enclave became associated with "an economy in which the means of economic activity were overwhelmingly under state ownership and control; and a political system in which the Communist Party (under different names in different countries), or rather its leaders, enjoyed a virtual monopoly of power, which was vigilantly defended against any form of dissent by systematic—often savage—repression" (Miliband 7). By now, too, the enclave's economic and environmentalist failures have become well-known, and so has the correspondence of the augmented state power with inflated bureaucracy, repressive institutional control, violence and militarism. The politics of decolonization, gender emancipation, anti-racism, and even class equality remained in crucial ways only on paper, and the regimes' sociocultural inertia came to be associated with censorship, the infamous "doctrine" of socialist realism, and a reverence for parades, statues, and mummies. Such and other defeats of the "Soviet bloc" have of course become items in the conservative inventory but they have also taught Western leftists important lessons.

Although in the Soviet Union, following the relative cultural freedom in the 1920s, the potential of literature to disrupt ideological illusions was curtailed by the Zhdanovist[2] demand for writers to portray positive, conscious heroes who contributed to reality's revolutionary development, literature—including literature of the most ideological kind—nevertheless remained an incomplete and contradictory witness to conflicts. The prose and poetry of Andrei Platonov (1899-1951), to whom this essay is dedicated, reflected the first three Soviet decades and, despite a gradual diminution of the intensity of his critical perspective after the mid-1930s, the writer's observations oftentimes resonated with those of the aforementioned leftists. This may not be immediately apparent because the longer the story of Platonov's oeuvre in the Soviet Union and other cultural contexts, the more representative have become *Chevengur* (*Chevengur*) and *Kotlovan* (*The Foundation Pit*). Published in full at the end of the 1960s (although only at the end of the 1980s in the Soviet bloc), these two novels eventually gained the status of "repressed masterworks,"

and as Thomas Seifrid put it, referring to *Chevengur*, it is the novel's "apparent antipathy toward communist utopianism in general that has fueled [its] dissident/émigré reputation as an attack on the Soviet system as a whole" (103). However, besides *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* being critical as well as sympathetic to socialism, neither may be said to represent Platonov's complex oeuvre. When his poetry and fiction appeared and reappeared in the Soviet enclave, they could remain touchstones in a critique without giving up hope—as in former Czechoslovakia.

A Flower in the Sand

If without the Thaw,[3] the world would have never heard of Andrei Platonov, then without the October Revolution,[4] he would have not become a writer in the first place. The oldest child in an impoverished family of ten, Platonov worked since the age of thirteen for various small companies in Voronezh. It was in the aftermath of the October Revolution and the Civil War that he earned a degree as a land improvement engineer and joined a proletarian literary organization. When his first poems, stories and essays were published in the early 1920s, Platonov gave up engineering and moved to Moscow to become a full-time writer. His first collection of stories, *Epifanskie shliuzy* (*The Epifan Locks*), came out in 1927 and was closely followed by three others, including in 1929 *Proiskhozhenie mastera* (*The Origins of a Master*), where a fragment of *Chevengur* appeared.[5] Although Platonov's depiction of Soviet realities encountered increasing disapproval (which grew stronger in the 1930s), the collection *Reka Potudan'* (*The River Potudan*) was issued in 1937, along with a handful of stand-alone stories and criticism. After Platonov was mobilized in 1941 and sent to the front as a war correspondent, another set of stories appeared, several collections of which made it to print, but at the end of his life, he wrote and translated mostly fairy-tales and folk-tales. When Platonov died in 1951, much of his writing remained unpublished, including the plays from the 1930s.

Whereas the work of Soviet authors such as Evgenii Zamiatin reached the world during their lifetime, the process of discovering and rediscovering Platonov began only during the Thaw. Over a century after the publication of his first works, after all became available (in Russian, at least), we can know that aside from stories such as "Potomki solntsa" ("Descendants of the Sun," 1922) and "Antiseksus" ("Antisexus," 1926), which are set in the future, Platonov relentlessly depicted his present and immediate past. Whether lyrical, ironic or satirical, with its grotesque and fantastic elements, his vision was realistic, often even brutally realistic in its description of hunger, poverty and violence in the Soviet Union of the 1920s; the traumas of the purges, forced collectivization, Stalinist bureaucracy and the empty slogans of the 1930s; and the devastation and torment during the Second World War. Yet his writing was never anti-utopian and it maintained hopes for a more just and happier world that would be achieved not solely through certain (at that time prevalent) technological methods, but also hope for communism rooted in the spiritual, the aesthetic and the folkloric; in solidarity with ordinary villagers, engineers and desert nomads. There are scraps of hope even in the war stories as well as the folk-tales and the fairy-tales.

Arguably, Platonov was not primarily a writer of science fiction, certainly not science fiction in the way it was defined by Stalinism, infamous for reducing the genre to concerns with "technological marvels of the near future, such as the radar, improved tractors and oil drills, and the taming of the Arctic" (Potts 11). The worlds Platonov imagined include technological novums like perpetuum mobiles, opportunist robots and electrosuns (although these do not always work), and there are improved tractors and drills, but the fantastic and fairy-tale elements bring the writing closer to speculative fiction. Moreover, the novum in his work does not always establish an alternative framework and infiltrates instead the empirical world, acquiring the status that Darko Suvin assigned to Gogol's Nose, "significant because it is walking down the Nevski Prospect, with a certain rank in the civil service, and so on" (8). With exceptions of several early stories and the tales, Platonov's fiction is therefore realistic, but there are estranging science-fictional and fantastic—or science-fictional-become-fantastic—elements. It is through them that redemptive hope often enters his world.

Following their Soviet release, various stories by Platonov were translated in Czechoslovakia. Article-length studies came out not solely as paratexts in the nine collections issued between the years 1966 and 1987, but also in periodicals such as *Impuls* (*Impulse*) and *Plamen* (*Flame*). While introducing Platonov's presence on the Czech cultural scene in the December 1989 issue of *Sovětská literatura* (*Soviet Literature*), Jaroslava Heřtová noted that Platonov remains comprehensible to Czech readers through his Švejkean characters, wise plebeians under a mask of simplicity who expose everything that degrades and dehumanizes people, as well as through his critique of bureaucracy and the catastrophic picture of war. Heřtová's observations were relevant not only in the context of uncertainties concerning at that time ongoing revolutions, but also because the last pre-1989 book was a collection of Platonov's war-time stories, *Nesmrtelní* (*The Immortals*). Heřtová's bibliographical angle saved the writer from being associated solely with the war stories or from becoming interpreted as an anti-communist, which was increasingly common during this period. The Czechoslovak collections from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, in texts and paratexts, indeed suggest that as various fragments of Platonov's oeuvre were appearing, they served different purposes.

From Utopian Satire to Fairy-Tale

While *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* remained for the most part in manuscript, other works by Platonov came out in the Soviet enclave. In the mid-1960s, while Czechoslovakia wrestled with the illusions and disillusions of its own "real socialism," several stories were printed in periodicals. Those selected for the lasting impact of book publication were principally from the late 1920s/early 1930s, with the exception, in Czech, of "Reka Potudan'" ("The River Potudan," 1937) and, in Slovak, "Fro" ("Fro," 1936), "Tretii syn" ("The Third Son," 1936) and five 1940s stories. The first Czech collection *Co nám jde k duhu* (*For Future Use*, 1966), besides the title story "Vprok" ("For Future Use," 1931), included "Usomnivshiisia Makar" ("Doubting Makhar," 1929) and "Gorod Gradov" ("The City of Gradov," 1927). Two further 1920s stories were printed in the Slovak *Utajený človek* (*The Innermost Man*, 1966): the title story "Sokrovennyi chelovek" ("The Innermost

Man," 1928) and "Iamskaia sloboda" ("Iamskaia Settlement," 1926-28). "Sokrovennyi chelovek" and "Iamskaia sloboda" then came out in Czech in the 1967 *Řeka Potudaň* (*The River Potudan*), along with the title story.

Whereas "Sokrovennyi chelovek," "Iamskaia sloboda" and "Reka Potudan'" return to the early 1920s, "Gorod Gradov," "Usomnivshiisia Makar" and "Vprok" present a satirical reflection on emergent Stalinist realities. The protagonists of the latter stories—Shmakov, Makhar and the unnamed narrator of "Vprok"—echo and foreshadow others, like the plebeian inventor Markun from the eponymous 1921 science-fiction story and the electrician from "Rodina elektrichestva" ("Electricity's Homeland," 1926) but also Nazar Chagataev from "Dzhan" ("Dzhan," 1933-1935) and Nazar Fomin from "Afrodita" ("Aphrodite," 1945-1946). Many such characters echo Platonov's own involvement in modernization (between the years 1923 and 1926, for example, he oversaw the construction of 763 water reservoirs and 331 wells, of two types). "Gorod Gradov," "Usomnivshiisia Makar" and "Vprok" therefore mock certain aspects of "real socialism" without advocating either a return to tsarism or a transition to capitalism. They satirize persistent (and new) class differences, the dominance of the party, economic failures, uncritical investment in technology and bureaucratization. But there is also hope that these problems can be overcome: the peasant Makhar, refreshed by studying Lenin in an insane asylum, liquidates the state apparatus by "common sense"; the administrative machine of Gradov is dissolved (Shmakov himself dies as the Commissioner for Unpaved Roads), and the narrator-electrician of "Vprok"—following his quixotic journey through villages burnt by the electric sun, decimated by crop failure and disease, and in the grips of vacuous leaders—accelerates one kolchoz in its efforts to "catch up and overtake without getting exhausted" ("Co nám jde k duhu" 187). The success of "Crimsons of Humanity" includes an increase to 140% in sowing and although "Vprok" was not a success with Stalin, the story concludes lightheartedly, with comrade Pasha's grotesque vision of smoke from Soviet factories covering the sun over England.

From Platonov's oeuvre, it is clear that he never opposed modernization of the countryside, industrialization, and electrification. Even "the desire for a utopian organization of the cosmos [...] derided [in "Gorod Gradov"] is identical to that espoused unironically in so many of the Voronezh articles. Bogdanov's 'organizational science'6 is clearly parodied in one of the titles Shmakov invents for his paean to bureaucracy ('Sovietization as the Basis for the Harmonization of the Universe'), while that of a manuscript discovered after Shmakov's death satirizes the proletarian poet A. Gastev's *Normalizovannyi rabochii*" (Seifrid 73, original emphasis). The stories criticize problems that emerged during the construction of socialism and they hope to reform it, although there is little indication of how. "The bureaucratic theme," Seifrid noted elsewhere, became a public preoccupation after it was raised at the 1926 conference of the Communist Party, and problems like hunger and poverty were more than evident. By now, in considering problems that emerged in the Soviet enclave, it has become common to turn to the works of Marx, even Lenin, to argue that Marx-Lenin is not Marxism-Leninism, Soviet-style. If in Lenin's view "[r]unning society [...] was really 'extraordinarily simple' business of 'book-keeping and control' that was 'within the reach of

anybody who can read and write and know the first four arithmetical rules'" (Worsley 94), stories like "Usomnivshiisia Makar" propose exactly that—except, as in other Platonov's works, the vision of the "withering away" of the state and its being replaced by self-determining communism is only half-serious, the proposed solution being evidently fantastic.

Considering the satirical stories, in the preface to *Co nám jde k duhu*, Miloslav Wagner remarked that although they could be used in anti-Soviet propaganda, this was not their purpose; rather, Platonov aimed to confront negative tendencies such as anti-Leninism and the cult of the leader. Even the published fragments of *Chevengur*, Wagner proposed, searched for redemption through dedication to work, love and a fondness for technology (but not fondness of the fetishistic, uncritical kind). The critic had good words also for the provincial engineer Pukhov, the protagonist of "Sokrovennyi chelovek" (a story that overlaps thematically with *Chevengur*, which, as Jameson noted in his essay on Platonov in *The Seeds of Time*, takes place roughly between the years 1917 and 1923). Wagner argued that by the end of his journey through the Civil War, Pukhov creates a positive relationship to the revolution. In the commentary on *Řeka Potudaň*, Miluše Očadlíková arrived at a similar point, having underscored Platonov's ability to survive many tragic events through his dedication to art that valued life—a dedication that informed his rejection of a purely technological understanding of the revolution, his critique of forced collectivization, and his defense of the weak and powerless living under a dehumanized apparatus. Platonov's world, as Očadlíková described it, is marked by unity in multiplicity, wherefore originates "his emphatically attentive relation to wise and good machines, the suffering of animals, the pain of nature and the silent existence of things" (195). The fantastic, quixotic, even comic account of the early 1920s in "Sokrovennyi chelovek" and *Chevengur* allow for deep comprehension of their tragic dimensions as well as a certain degree of forgiveness.

Although this implies too easy of a reconciliation (Pukhov's final awakening to a "thoroughly revolutionary morning" remains haunted by the violent events the story depicts, just as the slaughter in and of the village Chevengur cannot be laughed away), it was in the hands of Ivan Králik, in the afterword to the Slovak edition of "Sokrovennyi chelovek" and "Iamskaia sloboda," that Pukhov turned into the proverbial positive hero, a revolutionary "wanderer in arms" ("Dotknúť sa sveta" 154), with no account of the critical dimension that Pukhov represents. For it is true that, as Tora Lane put it, Platonov reveals "how ordinary and poor people attempt to use slogans in absurd and grotesque ways in an effort to understand existence and to 'think for the first time,' only to become even more confused and alienated" (10) but some become truly misguided, and although Platonov's view of the October Revolution and its immediate aftermath was not negative, it was not uncritical, either.

That hope in Platonov's fictional world arises rather like the Nose on Nevski Prospect becomes clearer in his later stories, such as the 1937 "Reka Potudan'," where—as Jameson remarked (although mistakenly referring to the story as "Homecoming")—the Civil-War veteran protagonist "is discovered years later in a neighboring town, after [... an] abrupt and unexplained departure from family and marriage, cleaning out latrines—as though abnegation of this kind had

some distant connection with the most morbid images of sainthood and asceticism" ("Utopia, Modernism, and Death" 113). Arguably, "Reka Potudan'" could tell the story of "belatedly fulfilled, empathetic love" (Očadlíková 193), but at the heart there is alienation and loneliness, notwithstanding the semi-happy end—just as in "Fro" and "Tretii syn," the late 1930s stories included in the Slovak *Ten krásny a krutý svet* (*The Fierce and Beautiful World*, 1966): Fro adopts an orphan in reaction to her husband's re-departure for the Far East and the six brothers in "Tretii syn" momentarily reunite only due to the death of their mother.

Perhaps for this reason, *Ten krásny a krutý svet* includes the 1940s stories where the aforementioned motifs of traumatized soldiers, harmed mechanics, abandoned women and decimated children reoccur but with fairy-tale endings: the child protagonists of "Zheleznaia starucha" ("The Iron Old Woman," 1941), "Cvetok na zemlje" ("A Flower on the Ground," 1945) and "Eshche mama" ("Another Mother," 1947) live in poverty but enjoy nurturing relations; the soldier Ivanov in "Vozvrashchenie" ("Homecoming," 1946) echoes Firsov from "Reka Potudan'" but Ivanov returns to family life with children. "Cvetok na zemlje" envisions the non-alienated existence of people in other-than-human nature (as flowers grow from dust, grandsons grow from grandfathers) and in the only thematically different story, "V prekrasnom i iarostnom mire" ("The Fierce and Beautiful World," 1941), technology (represented by the train, as often in Platonov's world) has the power to blind but also to mysteriously return sight. Even though Ten krásny a krutý svet includes also "Gorod Gradov" and "Usomnivshiisia Makar," in the commentary on the collection, Králik briefly describes the stories as satires of tsarist bureaucracy that survived in the Soviet era and a *critique* of governance from below that may mutate into "national bureaucratization" when every *muzhik* may abuse power. Above all, the afterword emphasizes Platonov's ability to find happiness despite repression: his stories for and about children are the ultimate expression of his "all-embracing humanism, love towards everything that accompanies people living on earth, pleasing their vision and warming their souls" ("Doslov" 170).

Different as the four Czechoslovak collections from 1966 and 1967 were, through the selected stories and the paratexts by Wagner, Očadlíková and Králik, the readers were introduced to, on the one hand, Platonov as a revolutionary and critic of the technically-flawed and bureaucratic system, and on the other hand, to Platonov as an author of stories about relationships, family and children. Yet, in the two collections published in the 1970s, the first Platonov largely disappeared.

Normalization with Platonov's Face

The motif of children permeates Platonov's oeuvre across all three decades; there are poor children and starved orphans in tsarist, revolutionary, and Civil-War settings as well as the later years of the 1920s, 1930s, and the Second World War. Although they do not always have happy ends, the stories chosen for the 1973 Slovak *Svetlo* (*Light*) do have happy ends, with the exception of "Mat'" ("Mother,"1943), where the grenade pit becomes a mass grave. The remaining stories, though, conclude happily: Sasha Dvanov chats with Zakhar Pavlovich in "Proiskhozhenie mastera"; an orphan grows into a comrade who finds home in his homeland in "Glinniannyi dom

v uezdnom sadu" ("Clay House in a Provincial Yard," 1937); the child protagonist of "Nikita" ("Nikita," 1945) learns that labor rather than fantasy makes everything alive; and in "Zhena mashinista" ("The Engine Driver's Wife," 1945), the small family of Piotr Saveliich—initially consisting of him, his wife and the engine of the E-series—loses the engine but gains the orphan Kondrat. At this time, Platonov was acquiring his status in the West through *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan*; in the East, even the earlier-printed satirical stories disappeared. Instead, in the Slovak collection, there was the "socialist realist" Platonov, with positive domestic stories, and the Platonov of folk-tales and fairy-tales, collections of which came out in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s as well.

Fantastic elements run even through the war-time stories in Svetlo, as "Nikodim Maksimov" ("Nikodim Maksimov," 1943) tricks German planes and "Krestianin Iagafar" ("The Peasant Iagafar," 1942) saves his war-damaged *kolchoz* by installing into the glasshouse and the cowshed 320 light bulbs and a ventilator, to spread the warmth. In the world of Platonov's fiction, electrification often emerged in tragicomic light: in another story in this Slovak collection, the aforementioned "Rodina elektrichestva" (here titled "Svetlo"), the narrator assists the villagers of Verchovka in building an irrigation system driven by an electric generator made from an old motorcycle engine and run by homemade vodka. Concerning the successes of electrification, the stories speak for themselves, but they appear more tragic than comic, remembering that in 1967, students went to the streets of Prague in protest against electricity blackouts in dormitories, with candles and the slogan "We Want Light." During this first mass protest since 1948, they were brutally beaten and several ended with serious injuries. The simple demand for light, symbolic as it became, was one of the defining events of the "Prague Spring." There is, however, no suggestion of that in the afterword to *Svetlo*, where Miron Sisák underscored Platonov's ability to dramatize the revolutionary transformation of provincial people into human beings conscious of their historical role. Nothing is wrong, it seems, either in Platonov's world or the Czechoslovak realities into which the stories are ushered—nothing, except for the momentary return of the negative repressed. The only story to receive more attention is "Korova" ("The Cow," 1943): Sisák mentions it in order to exemplify Platonov's remarkable ability to depict a world without divisions among people and animals, children and adults, organic and inorganic matter, but also to note how the sorrow of the human world transpires through the sorrow of tortured plants and the tortured cow that commits suicide after losing her "son."

A more tragic tone nevertheless characterizes the 1974 Czech *Zrození mistra* (*The Origins of a Master*), where Jan Zábrana's afterword highlighted Platonov's search for harmony, rather than its fulfillment. In the landscape of war, poverty, arithmetic reason, and dehumanized technology, Zábrana noted, there is uprootedness, ignorance and non-being; Platonov's protagonists, besides thinking weirdly, illogically and naively, are lonely and abandoned. The only glimpse of hope emerges in human kinship with nature and in rare moments of love. This Czech collection includes also the 1920s "Iamskaia sloboda" and "Sokrovennyi chelovek" (besides "Proiskhozhenie mastera" and "Rodina elektrichestva," though not titled "Svetlo"); from the 1930s, there is "Dzhan"

(in the pre-1978 version), "Musornyi veter" ("Garbage Wind," 1934), "Reka Potudan'" "Glinniannyi dom v uezdnom sadu" and "Iul'skaia groza" ("July Storm," 1938). The last mentioned is another of Platonov's positive family stories, featuring a storm in the kolchoz "Common Life," but the rest are more ambivalent; moreover, in Zábrana's interpretation, even "Glinniannyi dom v uezdnom sadu" ends on a grotesque note rather than a utopian one. And the only story from the 1940s, "Afrodita," is about ruined dreams of love and industrialization.

In short, if *Svetlo* almost denies tragedy, *Zrození mistra* almost denies hope. Only together though do they convey the complexities of the 1970s "Normalization Era." The turn away from Platonov's satirical work resonates with these complexities. As Platonov in the 1930s "sought for himself a place at socialist realism's fringe" (Seifrid 177), his works became less openly critical, particularly after 1938, when his son was arrested and sent to a labor camp (to return a few years later dying of tuberculosis). This is not the place to discuss the shift to domesticity, fantasy, and magic (whether in Platonov's oeuvre or during "Normalization"); suffice it to argue, along with Ernst Bloch, that even such stories might also have a transformative rather than escapist function. Moreover, on closer reading, the "happily-ever-after" tales resound with silences about what Platonov was ideologically forbidden to say. The aforementioned "Korova" may end as the family receives financial compensation for the dead cow, but besides this being another fantastic ending, it is a sad account of the persistence of the money economy and "market Stalinism." If one defining feature of capitalism is the continual expansion of the system, the story shows that the Stalinist phantasmagoria of limitless production resulted in the same brutal commodification of nature. Gone is the fantastic vision of "socialized lifestock," each member of which peacefully collects "a share of food according to its capacity" (Platonov, *The Foundation Pit* 87); "Korova" recalls the critique of greed in "Gorod Gradov," where the ex-kulak Vereshchagin tortures his horse to death in order to collect insurance. All this is to say that whatever concessions Platonov made, and however his stories were interpreted, they continued to express hope—not solely for certain material comfort but also for harmonized relations (human relations and relations of humans with the rest of the natural world)—as well as critique of "real socialism." That his concerns resonated with those of "normalized" Czechoslovakia is hardly a surprise.

Perestroika of the Soul

The third round of Czechoslovak Platonov consisted of three books: *Dcery pouště* (*Daughters of the Desert*, 1982), *Aký chce byť svet* (*What the World Wants to Be Like*, 1984) and *Nesmrtelní*, from 1987. Whereas in the first two collections, the only story that deals directly with the reality of the Second World War is "V storonu zakata solnca" ("Toward the Setting Sun," 1943), the third one includes war stories. Altogether, the collections offer the readers perhaps the most comprehensive representation of Platonov, leaving aside the disbalance in favor of his war fiction, although they are once again framed in ways that reflect rather the period's preoccupations.

Though illustrated and accompanied with an afterword by Jaroslav Žák, who makes Platonov look like an author of fairy-tales about love, kindness and comradeship, *Dcery pouště* includes

dystopian and satirical works, such as "Satana mysli" ("A Satan of Thought," 1922, here titled "Potomci slunce," "Descendants of the Sun"), which ends as the mad engineer Vogulov ruthlessly blows up the cosmos. The Civil-War era is represented through new extracts from Chevengur, one of which depicts the destruction of Chevengur and the death of Kopenkin; the late 1920s/early 1930s appear through "Gorod Gradov" and "Gusudarstvennyi zhitel" ("A Resident of the State," 1929), a mockery of Veretennikov's eagerness to construct the state. Both *Dcery pouště* and *Aký chce byť svet* include, newly, the 1927 story "Epifanskie shliuzy" ("The Epifan Locks"), which dramatizes the failure of Petrine[7] schemes to build a system of locks on the Don and Oka rivers (and which has been interpreted as a comment on Stalinist projects, such as the White Sea Canal). The Slovak collection, however, instead of "Satana mysli" and "Smerť Kopenkina," depicts the 1920s through "Iamskaia Settlement," "Sokrovennyi chelovek" and another retrospective account of the Civil War, featuring an orphan girl who becomes an engine-driver. There is, newly, also the story "Semion" ("Semion," 1926), about a pre-revolutionary era family decimated by poverty. The stories in *Aký chce byť svet* therefore give a less negative account of 1917, something that is confirmed in the afterword by Peter Birčák, who depicts the October Revolution in thoroughly positive terms, considers Platonov a writer of and for "the people," and mentions solely his critique of bureaucracy.

The 1980s domestic stories in the two collections are nevertheless equally ambiguous; besides "Vozvrashchenie," which is featured in both, *Dcery pouště* includes "Fro" and a sad tale about an old, lonely violinist who fails to save a sparrow. In *Aký chce byť svet*, there is "Zhena mashinista" (titled "Starý mechanik," "An Old Mechanic") and "Zheleznaia starucha," but there are also the more ambivalent "Reka Potudan'," "Tretii syn" and new stories about Yushka—a man who cares for an orphan but remains abused by adults and laughed at by children—and Ulya—a girl who grows into a beautiful woman whom people admire but do not love. It is therefore interesting that in the afterword to *Dcery pouště* Žák gives such a fairy-tale interpretation of Platonov; moreover, with praise for the new edition of "Dzhan."

Through "Dzhan," and also "Takyr" ("Takyr," 1934; here titled "Dcery pouště," "Daughters of the Desert") and "Peschanaia uchitel'nitsa" ("Teacher of the Sands," 1927), a new thematic thread runs through the 1980s collections. In "Peschanaia uchitel'nitsa," the Astrakhan protagonist Maria Nikoforovna teaches desert tribes of the Far East how to grow crops and after these get destroyed by nomads, agrees to extend her modernization efforts to the nomads as well. "Takyr" and "Dzhan" reflect Platonov's 1930s journeys to Turkmenistan. The first is narrated from the perspective of a Persian woman and her daughter, who are abused and enslaved by Turkmen nomads. The daughter eventually escapes to become an agricultural scientist, symbolically set on cultivating the desert with imported fruit trees as well as ancient, dying out plants. "Dzhan" tells the story of Nazar Chagataev, returning to the desert wanderers *dzhan*. With its two endings, the story is ambivalent: in the original version, the nomads vanish in the desert; in the happy version, which Seifrid argued Platonov added as a compromise, the tribe survives, transformed and rebuilt. Chagatayev joins Ksenya in Moscow, along with the orphan girl Aidym, to receive thanks from

the Central Committee of the Party for saving dzhan. Although Lane argued that "[w]ith the loss of the commonality of poverty they also lose *dzhan*" (92), neither of the versions uncritically romanticizes the nomads. But nor does modernization mean their salvation.

Complex as they are, the stories in *Dcery pouště* and *Aký chce byť svet* therefore contradict Birčák's and Žák's commentaries about an unambiguously good revolution and unambiguously happy domestication, but the content explodes the frame even more in the collection of war stories, which Ladislav Zadražil introduces as Platonov's service in defense of the nation and the state. The apparent heroism and patriotism that marks Nesmrtelní is rather an embarrassment for Platonov, though on closer reading, the stories' critique of the brutality of war, fanaticism, and the nonsense of violence reveal the same longing for human relations and warmth that permeates Platonov's extended oeuvre. War means death of the heart: "A soldier is sad, living like a pole in the fence, without family, having nobody who could substitute him, to revive his heart and save it from turning into stone" ("Důstojník a voják" 62). Dehumanization is revealed not solely through the violence of the Nazis, but also through monstrous actions and thoughts of other soldiers. There is no triumph in "what will save Russia from death and make Russian people immortal has remained in this person's dying heart" ("Pancíř" 34) since the heart itself is dying. The question is how to stay humane in inhumane conditions, and how to return and live, as in "Vozvrashchenie" and another "veteran story," where the alienated villagers Gvozdarev and Gavrilovna pass a night in the erotics of tractor repair. Regarding the accompanying paratext, more fitting than the opening is the conclusion that describes Platonov's "stubborn faith in the indestructibility of goodness, which leaves its marks and signs in nature as well as the human heart" (Zadražil 242).

Conclusion

In the Soviet beginning, there was a vision of socialism, socialism as "freedom from unwanted and avoidable economic and material constraints, freedom for collective praxis" (Jameson, "Five Theses" 166). However, already by the turn of 1926 and 1927, when Walter Benjamin visited Moscow, he commented on the mobilizing power of the party and also its control; public engagement as well as the absorption of private time into "bureaucracy, political activity, [and] the press" (30); improvements in the life of the children but their continual destitution; bettered health-care yet the lack of sanitary aid, pauperism and illiteracy. "Now it is made clear to every Communist," Benjamin concluded, "that the revolutionary work of this hour is not conflict, not civil war, but canal construction, electrification, and factory building" (45). As the lid on the Soviet box opened further, more problems emerged: the regime's hierarchical, dictatorial, and violent features; restrictions on freedom of press and assembly; limitations in regard to gender and race equality; destruction of the natural world.

Efforts to reform "real socialism" unfortunately failed but over the course of seven decades, the Soviet enclave evolved, responding to outside and internal pressures. Like Benjamin, Platonov critiqued violence, pauperism, rampant bureaucracy, dominance of the party and broken relations. Still, at the bottom of the box, there was hope. Initially science-fictional, it became increasingly

fantastic and fairy-tale-esque; some happy ends may even give the impression of being plush, artificially conditioned, and rotten, to use Bloch's expressions. Even so, as in Czechoslovakia, before Platonov's fiction became associated with "the apocalypse of Russian utopia" (Zadražilová 431), it could give solace. In the 1960s, Platonov appeared largely as a satirical critic and author of family tales. The latter became prominent during "Normalization," although less so in the Czech context, and soon more complex stories would appear in the 1980s. At that time, against the gruesome background of the Soviet-Afghan proxy war, Platonov's Far East fiction was also printed, with the "rotten happy end" of "Dzhan," and the collection of war stories. Although this Platonov was far from the Platonov of the 1960s, his ultimately contradictory work has remained a source of hopeful, constructive criticism. It is worth remembering that underneath the author's endless variations on failed projects, fragments of several visions of socialism or communism, both existent and to come, remained: the party and electrification socialism of Lenin, the melancholy and contemplative Marxism of Benjamin, the self-determining communism of Gramsci.

Notes

1. In simple efforts to radicalize socialism by approximating it to communism.

2. Named after the Soviet theoretician A. A. Zhdanov, Zhdanovist aesthetics called for art to mirror socialist reality. The nature of this reality was established in advance (negativity, for example, was largely absent) and art was therefore to further ideological mystification.

3. Deriving its name from Ilia Ehrenburg's novel *Thaw*, the term is used to describe the processes of political and cultural liberalization after Stalin's death in 1953.

4. "In the course of that violent and incomparable year [1917], Russia was rocked by not one but two insurrections, two confused, liberatory upheavals, two reconfigurings. The first, in February, dispensed breakneck with a half-millennium of autocratic rule. The second, in October [when the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government], was vastly more far-reaching, contested, ultimately tragic and ultimately inspiring" (Miéville 1).

5. Both *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* were completed towards the end of the 1920s.

6. The reference is to "tektology," Alexander Bogdanov's theories aimed at uniting and harmonizing social, cultural, scientific and other human activities as "universal organizational science."

7. Around the beginning of the eighteenth century, Peter the Great accelerated a series of political, military, economic and cultural reforms that aimed to modernize Russia and transform it into a major Western power. Platonov's story does not critique solely the ruthless, top-down character of Petrine policies but also establishes analogies between the eighteenth-century ruler and Stalin.

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When the Gods Died: A Socialist Utopian Novel from East Germany

Chiara Viceconti

"That science fiction is didactic hardly needs proof [...]" (Russ n.p.), affirmed Joanna Russ in her article, "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction," published in *Science Fiction Studies* in 1975. This is achieved through a "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 4) that stimulates the reader's mind and reflection. Especially in science fiction utopias, the reader can think about solutions for a new, better world or simply follow the solutions proposed by the author.

In the case of Günther Krupkat's *Als die Götter starben* [*When the Gods Died*, 1963], a *Paläoaustronautik*-science fiction[1] novel from East Germany, the author imagines a utopian world where everyone is equal and transfers the hope for this to the reader. While the text does not present a concrete image of a socialist society, the characters' orientation to the future (Schieder 923) and the value of equality lead the readers/critics to assume that the utopia is a socialist one. In fact, the novel imparts basic socialist values to the readers so that they themselves can construct a new order.

To create utopia, the writer uses several tools such as myths, philosophic references, and technological elements. This method of constructing utopia in the novel will be analyzed, but before this analysis, it is necessary to clarify some definitions and to present some historical information alongside the literary background of East German science fiction.

Definitions

Utopia, as is well known, is literally the description of a world that has no place, an ideal world. The myth can make this ideal plausible since it constitutes the collective memory (J. Assmann 56). This means that it can be used as a geno-text (Koschorke n.p.). The myth can thus legitimize a writer's creation, the utopian world. Therefore, myth is an important structural element in utopias. The ideal world does not only consist of myths, but also philosophical elements. The first utopias were written by philosophers such as Thomas More or Tommaso Campanella. At the beginning, this literary form was typical of philosophy (Lorenz 13). However, with the revaluation of this type of text as an instrument of political engagement in the early 20th century (Leucht 9), utopian literature evolved. Moreover, beginning with the Industrial Revolution, utopias began to incorporate technology and futuristic worlds, leading to the emergence of science fiction as a distinct genre.

As Darko Suvin has shown, science fiction generates a "cognitive estrangement" through the creation of a "novum" (Suvin 4). The novum is, according to Adam Roberts, the difference between the ideal and the real world (Roberts 28). Determining a bounding line between science fiction and utopia is hard since many utopias are part of science fiction. Despite this, people

commonly think that utopia is not rational, unlike science fiction. Utopia presents an inverted image of the real world, using philosophy and technology to create a world that is the opposite of reality (Ueding 22). By presenting a fantastic and ideal world, utopia is able to provide a commentary on reality. Science fiction and utopia are thus closely intertwined genres, with science fiction often reflecting our present reality. According to Suvin (Suvin qtd. in Esselborn 30), utopia can be considered a subgenre of science fiction, although it is important to note that utopia predates science fiction. We could say that towards the beginning of the genre, at the end of the 19th century, they were almost the same thing, but from the 20th century onwards, science fiction has become an autonomous mass genre (Schulz qtd. in Rauen 8) and technology started to play a more consistent role within it. In Germany, before the term science fiction was used for novels that described alternative possible worlds, the term *Zukunftsroman* was in use. Hans Esselborn distinguishes between a *Zukunftsroman* (novel of the future) and a *Staatsutopie* (State utopia). A 'State utopia' is an alternative to the real world, while the 'novel of the future' is a possible alternative. Esselborn thus links the definition of science fiction to the concept of possibility (Esselborn 32) referring to Jameson's utopian theory in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005). In the case of science fiction utopias like the novel analyzed in this article, possible worlds and ideal alternatives to reality are blended.

Often, the utopian worlds are related to a precise political ideology. This article, for example, analyses a socialist science fiction utopia from East Germany and investigates the characteristics of the ideology it presents. The approach taken is not ideologically critical towards the author's political position. Science fiction is often stigmatized as propaganda,[2] but this analysis aims to avoid such misconceptions. Presenting the political and literary background of a text can aid in distinguishing propagandistic literature and identifying ideological elements in the novel.

East Germany: historical, political, and literary background

Writing literature in the Eastern Bloc after the Second World War was challenging due to censorship and limited exchange with international literature from the Western bloc. The text under analysis was published in the 1960s. This section presents the historical, political, and literary background of the decade.

In 1949, the State of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established, replacing the previous Soviet occupation zone. The German socialist regime underwent various phases, similar to the Soviet regime. The *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was the sole political party. In the 1960s, the secretary of the Communist Party of East Germany was Walter Ulbricht, who was responsible for the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. After some initial tension, this period was primarily characterized by a calmer atmosphere until 1965, when Leonid Brezhnev came to power in the Soviet Union. Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* brought a rapprochement between the two German States at the end of the 1960s (Emmerich 246-247). The situation appeared to remain unchanged with the appointment of Erich Honecker as the new secretary of the SED party in 1971. In December 1971, he stated: "If you start from the firm

position of socialism, I believe there can be no taboos in the field of art and literature"[3] (Honecker qtd. in Emmerich 247). He believed that socialist art should not have any taboos. However, after a few years, the conditions for artists worsened, reaching a low point with Biermann's *Ausbürgerung* (expatriation) in 1974. Wolf Biermann had his East German citizenship revoked after he expressed his criticism against the GDR and he accepted to perform at a concert in Cologne, broadcast on West German television. Biermann's deprivation of East German citizenship led to massive protests, since he was not a GDR enemy and did not want to escape to West Germany. Many intellectuals signed a letter to protest against his expatriation, despite maintaining a distance from Biermann's actions. (Emmerich 252-255). From that moment on, the prospects for artists in the GDR became considerably more challenging and the intellectuals' trust in the party noticeably declined (Emmerich 252-255). The literary field also experienced the effects of these political shifts.

During the early 1960s, there were some tensions between artists and the regime following the construction of the Berlin Wall. Around 1965, restrictions on intellectuals and campaigns against Western art increased (Steinmüller n.p.). During certain periods, censorship was more difficult than others, but Western science fiction could only be published in East Germany towards the end of the 1970s (Steinmüller n.p.). The literary canon in East Germany, as well as in the Soviet Union, was characterized by socialist realism, which influenced many literary genres, including science fiction. Science fiction was called *wissenschaftliche Phantastik*, derived from the Russian expression *nauchnaya fantastika* (scientific fantasy). However, at the beginning, the genre was considered to be *Schund und Schmutz* literature (literally 'trash and smut') (Fritzsche 48) and was perceived as being useless for society. This situation persisted until 1962 when, at the *Konferenz zur Zukunftsliteratur* (Conference for the Literature of the Future), the aim of science fiction was recognized by the Writers' Union. The official ideology aimed to use the genre as a means of educating people in both ideological and scientific fields (Fritzsche 162). According to Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller, the definition of the text form could reveal whether a literary work was in line with the regime's ideology. In the science fiction field, there were *utopische Romane* (utopian novels), *technisch-utopische Romane* (technological-utopian novels), *Science Fiction*, *wissenschatlich-phantastische Literatur* (scientific-fantastic literature), and *Utopie* (utopia). The term 'utopia' was often aligned with the regime, while the 'utopian novel' conveyed Marxist values to the reader without necessarily agreeing with state ideology (Steinmüller n.p.). Anti-utopia was not common in the GDR, as it was seen as being in direct opposition to the socialist utopia and was censored accordingly. Therefore, authors had to carefully choose how to define their texts and incorporate any criticism of the regime through narratological elements. The term 'science fiction' began to be used in the West during the 1920s and 1930s, while it only became popular in the Eastern bloc during the 1980s due to strong campaigns against Western science fiction (Steinmüller n.p.).

After 1962, science fiction literature in the GDR reached its peak in terms of sales. With the launch of Sputnik in 1957, interest in science and space had already increased, and science fiction

literature often featured stories set on other planets. Walter Ulbricht's Scientific and Technological Revolution[4] (Fritzsche 103) marked the beginning of science fiction being recognized as a valuable tool for disseminating knowledge about science and technology. However, while the quantity of texts was at an all-time high, the quality of them had not yet peaked. This peak was only achieved in the 1970s alongside the emergence of new wave science fiction (Steinmüller n.p.). The 1960s marked a maturing phase for GDR science fiction, as important authors like Eberhardt del'Antonio began to incorporate social topics into their texts. Through explorations of other planets and *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction, which referenced both the past and present reality, interest in progress and socialist values was disseminated. In 1972, the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur* (Committee on Utopian Literature) was founded to outline the East German utopian canon. Günther Krupkat served as its director, although some authors chose not to participate due to the perceived political nature of the initiative (Fritzsche 187-188). This event is linked to the didactic role of science fiction mentioned earlier. How can science fiction be didactic? Is this didacticism itself part of the national canon?

The term 'didactic' can have a dual meaning. It refers not only to "propaganda or political leftism," but also to "teaching as a means of addressing significant changes in human life conditions" (Russ n.p.). As mentioned earlier, science fiction had to educate readers in accordance with the regime and the Writers' Union. However, a didactic text is not just a work that aligns with the State. This can be exemplified also by the typical Soviet (and East German) science fiction hero, defined by Elana Gomel as the 'New Man.' The 'New Man' is the result of the contrast between utopian ideals and historical reality and is representative of socialist humanism that is antithetical to the Western notion of the self (Gomel 358). This contrast can thus impart values to the reader or stimulate critical reflection. The next sections will demonstrate this dual meaning present in Günther Krupkat's novel *Als die Götter starben*, which is defined by the author himself as a *utopischer Roman*.

The Author

Günther Krupkat was born in Berlin in 1905. He was an engineer. After completing his studies, he began writing novels and worked with radio and press. In 1933, due to his active participation in the German resistance against National Socialism, he was forced to flee to Czechoslovakia (Frey n.p.). Following the end of the Second World War, he returned to Germany and settled in East Berlin, where he continued to work as an independent writer. Krupkat's literary works include science fiction and historical novels. He gained popularity through his science fiction novels, particularly with his first, *Die Unsichtbaren* [The Invisibles, 1958], which was inspired by the first landings on the moon (Frey n.p.). The novel *Die große Grenze* [The Large Limit, 1960] was also significant for the development of East German science fiction. In this work, the author explored social and technological elements. He later published other science fiction texts, such as *Als Die Götter starben* [When the Gods Died, 1963] and its sequel, *Nabou* (1968). This author is well-known for his invention of the Biomat figure (Steinmüller n.p.), a bio-robot,

which represents the protagonist, Nabou. He also wrote many short stories, most of which were moralistic (Simon and Spittel 185).

In 1972, he became the director of the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur* and was one of the best-known science fiction writers in East Germany, along with Eberhardt del'Antonio. He was a member of the Writers' Union and was highly regarded by the regime. Krupkat attempted to establish the defining elements of East German utopia while in the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur*. In 1978, he retired due to his age, and he passed away in Berlin in 1990 (Steinmüller n.p.).

The novel *Als die Götter starben*

The novel *Als die Götter starben* is divided into five parts: *Endymion*, *Phobos*, *Meju*, *Sodom und Gomorra*, and *Heliopolis*. Each section consists of short chapters. The plot unfolds on two different time levels: one part of the action is set in the future, where a group of travelers embark on a space expedition. The other part is set thousands of years earlier, when the inhabitants of the double planet Meju-Ortu were considered gods. The protagonist and main character is Erik Olden, an archaeologist who participates in an expedition along with several other individuals.

In the first phase, the group travels to the lunar city of Endymion and discovers some remnants of the ancient gods, including the ruins of a spaceship. These discoveries prompt Olden and the other travelers to relocate to the satellite Phobos in search of additional evidence. Olden is convinced that these ancient gods constructed the Baalbek[5] Terrace and the Babel Tower. In the second part, the travelers are on Phobos, and with the help of some robots, they discover inscriptions and a film about the past. Olden then begins to work on translating them. In the third part, he informs his comrades about the contents of the discovered documents. He recounts the story of planet Imra, where the population used to worship the Mejuanians[6] as gods. An evil god named Isu Dag impoverished the people from Imra and enslaved them. Moreover, a dictatorship was set up by Imra's governor, Assar. The people of Meju-Ortu were worshipped as gods, as they considered each and every individual in front of them to be equal. Some of the planet's inhabitants attempt to enter the forbidden Valley of the Gods, causing a catastrophe on the planet of Meju-Ortu. As a result, some Mejuanians—specifically, Termon and Gil—decide to escape to Earth, where they recreate a society that is based on the principles of egalitarianism and solidarity common to Meju-Ortu. In the fourth part, Meju-Ortu becomes the star of the gods. Olden describes the catastrophe and the death of the gods until the travelers decide to return to Earth to find more traces of them. In the fifth section, they visit the Baalbek Terrace and discover a depiction of the solar system. Meju-Ortu is portrayed as the planet located between Mars and Jupiter. This suggests that the presence of gods is real and inspires Olden to embark on further explorations, including a journey to Atlantis. The pursuit of knowledge and progress is unending.

In writing this story, the author was inspired by a visit to the Baalbek Terrace in present-day Lebanon (Simon and Spittel, 183). At that time there were several beliefs in circulation, according to which its construction (and also that of other ancient buildings) had extraterrestrial origins.

However, he had no intention of revising the real history, as Erik von Däniken, one of the main proponents of this pseudo-history, does (Both qtd. in Frey n.p.). These paleontological elements were used by science fiction writers in the GDR to illustrate the strength of a classless society that existed in the distant past. (Fritzsche 114). This is one of the reasons why Krupkat's text can be defined as a socialist utopian novel. The author employs mythical and philosophical elements to construct a utopia based on the values of equality and community that he wishes to convey to the readers. The following section will examine how these elements relate to science fiction.

Text Analysis

The novel *Als die Götter starben* can be classified as *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction because its narrative, as previously mentioned, involves two different timelines, past and future, and follows an archaeologist's search for ancient historical elements that are related to theories of a time in which astronautics did not exist. Technology, used by the gods in antiquity and enabling interplanetary travel during the expedition, plays a dominant role. Krupkat constructs a utopia through the deconstruction and reconstruction of myths and philosophical elements. The novel suggests that the ancient gods have left traces of an ideal socialist society, whose values are brought to Earth by the Mejuanians Termon and Gil. The pursuit of progress is necessary to create the perfect society after the gods' deaths.

In the novel, there are various mythologizing processes and mythological references used. In particular, the author mythologizes the construction of Baalbek by ancient gods through a narrative frame and the artifice of finding the aforementioned film. The film tells the story of the planet Meju-Ortu, enabling Olden and others to reach the Baalbek Terrace and discover that it was built by the Mejuanians. The catastrophe that destroys the planet is compared to that of the biblical cities Sodom and Gomorrah, as desired by god, but the text presents an ambiguous image of the ancient gods. While they are portrayed as good and having left behind important values such as equality, the utopian world is depicted as having been built on Earth through the belief in progress, rendering the gods unnecessary: "...There have always been dissatisfied people. You would have to be more than a god to make them satisfied"[7] (Krupkat n.p.). Additionally, the description of the Tower of Babel myth in the novel suggests god's failure. The city of Heliopolis (the Greek name of the ancient Baalbek), whose concrete description is not given by the author, was founded by Termon and Gil, who escaped from an apocalypse on Meju-Ortu. The city's foundation is legitimized through these mythological and religious references, which make the utopian city possible. This relates also to Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun*.[8]

Secondly, philosophy, together with its interaction with myth, legitimizes the gods' deaths and the creation of a new society. The death of the gods is a Nietzschean element and represents a subversive moment that breaks with the past. In Krupkat's text, it marks the end of the past and the beginning of the future. The past is represented by the dictatorship of Assar on the planet Imra, which could be associated with National Socialism. After the catastrophe of the death of the gods (a clear allusion to the end of the Second World War), the future is socialism, equality, and

community. Equality is the main value left by the gods, opposing the slavery imposed by Assar on Imra: "'The meaning of the divine sentence is obscure. I am unable to interpret it. Should the slave eat the same as the master, the poor share in the goods of the rich? For the gods, people are just people...'"[9] (Krupkat n.p.). This fracture creates a mechanism of subversion and affirmation simultaneously. Sonja Fritzsche identifies this process as typical of GDR literature (16). The *Übermensch* advocates progress, which propels society "to the stars" (Krupkat n.p.). This kind of person is the ideal socialist 'New Man' (Gomel 358), like Erik Olden, who—even immediately after the discovery in Baalbek—is already thinking about the next mission: finding Atlantis. This is also an important mythological and philosophical reference since this island was imagined by Plato as a monarchy, whose failure is opposed to the victorious Athenian democracy. The island sinking into the ocean (the catastrophe) is also a way of conveying a message: readers will build a new order.

As stated previously, the attainment of this goal requires advanced technology. The novel depicts spaceships capable of travelling at light speed and robots aiding travelers in excavating tunnels to uncover traces of the gods. Rationality is a fundamental criterion for constructing a 'bright tomorrow' and is a key characteristic of science fiction. Technology serves as the bridge between myth and science fiction. Progress is indeed consistently portrayed as '*Helle*' (brightness) throughout the text. This also connects to the city of Heliopolis, which is named after the sun, symbolizing guidance towards a bright future. The protagonist's interest in legends and history, as well as his forward-thinking nature, positions him as a socialist 'New Man' for readers to emulate. The structured personality of heroes is crucial for the didactic purpose of science fiction, according to Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller (Steinmüller n.p.). At the end of the novel, Erik Olden gazes at the stars, prompting readers to follow the light of the future: "Olden raises his eyes to the stars. Everything around him seems to be sinking. Only the murmur stays in his ear. Until it fades away in the dying wind. But Erik Olden stands on the terrace still for a long time. And looks up to the sparkling worlds, to the distant goal"[10] (Krupkat n.p.). This conclusion can be seen as an echo of the final verses of the *Divine Comedy*, in which Dante evokes god as the engine of the stars, while Krupkat praises the human who aims for the stars (Dante Par. 33. 143-45).

It is important to note that the elements described above not only serve to legitimize a utopian world but also inspire readers to build a new one. The past is behind us, the present is a moment of discovery, and the future is bright. People should strive for perfection, as exemplified by the stars. This is the novel's moral lesson. It is essential to note that this message is not propaganda, but rather a socialist idea of its time. The primary objective of the society was progress through equality and community without the necessity of supernatural gods. The educational aim, as previously mentioned, is a common theme in science fiction. The first period of GDR science fiction was indeed characterized by socialist didactic novels that aimed to promote progress, as with Krupkat's text.

Conclusion

The background and textual analysis show that 1960s science fiction in socialist East Germany was strongly influenced by the idea of the socialist 'New Man,' common in socialist realist literature. The texts aim to build a 'New Man' who can strive for progress and a better future. This didactic aim of East German science fiction of the time is ambiguous, as it could be a way of conforming to the regime, but also serves as a stimulus for readers to reflect on their world. In Krupkat's case, it is clear that his socialist ideology functions as the basis of the utopian construction, but it is wrong to argue that this utopia is a propagandistic one. The elevated values of equality and community are not only an important element of the (ideal) socialist society, but also of democratic thought. The moral could therefore be described as positive, even in relation to our contemporary world. This is what makes these texts so interesting. Thus, it can be emphasized that science fiction and its relationship to ideology deserve in-depth analysis in the academic field to explore the mutual influence between real and fictional worlds.

Notes

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German to English are mine.

1. The German term *Präaustronautik* (in East Germany *Paläoastronautik*) is employed to designate all those theories and speculations concerning the presence of extraterrestrials on Earth in the distant past. Proponents of this speculation argue that such visits would have left some traces. In East Germany, these ideas began to emerge even before the publication of Erik von Däniken's theories (in: *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, 1968) and influenced science fiction. (Frey n.p.) It must be clarified that Günther Krupkat visited the Baalbek Terrace (part of Roman temples in Lebanon) before writing the novel and he imagined it to have some extraterrestrial origin, independent of what Erik von Däniken later affirmed (Simon and Spittel 183). The classification of the novel as *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction is solely based on the inclusion of paleontological elements, used to legitimize the higher origin of socialism.

2. In Germany, Manfred Nagl was among the first and most influential literary critics to conduct research on German science fiction. Consequently, his perspective has significantly influenced the development of science fiction studies in the country. In the 1970s, he viewed science fiction as mass literature utilized as a tool to disseminate racism and fascism. However, in the present era, his ideology-critical perspective is frequently rejected due to its limited comprehension of the global dimensions of German science fiction (Frey n.p.).

3. Translated from German: "Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben."

4. The term Scientific and Technological Revolution is used here to refer to the *Wissenschaftlich-Technische Revolution*, as proclaimed by Walter Ulbricht in 1961 in conjunction

with the introduction of the New Economical System (*Neues Ökonomisches System*), with the aim of expanding East German industry and creativity (Fritzsche 103-104).

5. Baalbek, located in present-day Lebanon, is a city with a long history. It has been inhabited by a variety of populations throughout ancient times. Greeks, Romans, and Arabs all contributed to the city's rich history. The city was renamed Heliopolis, likely in connection with the worship of the deity Ba'al, who was identified with the Egyptian and Greek sun gods Ra and Helios by the Ptolemies of Alexandria. During the Roman period, the city underwent a significant transformation, with the construction of numerous monumental temples (Leisten, n.p.).

6. Translated from German: *Mejuaner* inhabitants of the planet Meju-Ortu.

7. Translated from German: *Unzufriedene gab es immer. Man müßte wohl mehr sein als ein Gott, um Zufriedene aus ihnen zu machen*.

8. The Ancient Greek term Heliopolis means "city of the sun," that is also the title for Campanella's utopia, in which an ideal society based on equality is described

9. Translated from German: *Dunkel ist der Sinn des göttlichen Spruchs. Ich vermag ihn nicht zu deuten. Soll der Sklave das gleiche essen wie der Herr, der Arme teilhaben an den Gütern des Reichen? Für die Götter sind Menschen eben Menschen...*

10. Translated from German: *Olden hebt den Blick zu den Sternen. Um ihn herum scheint alles zu versinken. Nur das Raunen bleibt an seinem Ohr. Bis es im ersterbenden Winde verklingt. Erik Olden aber steht noch lange auf der Terrasse. Und schaut zu den funkelnden Welten hinauf, zum fernen Ziel*.

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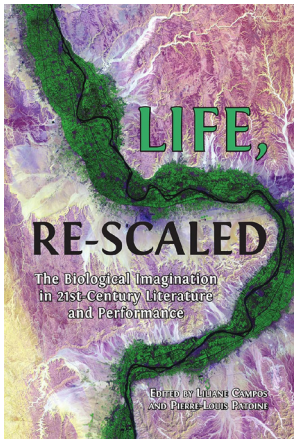
NON-FICTION REVIEWS

Image by marcelokato

Life, Rescaled: The Biological Imagination in 21st-Century Literature and Performance, edited by Liliane Campos and Pierre-Louis Patoine

Zak Breckenridge

Liliane Campos and Pierre-Louis Patoine, editors. *Life, Rescaled: The Biological Imagination in 21st-Century Literature and Performance*. OpenBook Publishers, 2022. Ebook. 418 pg. Open Access. ISBN 9781800647510. Hardback. $52.95. ISBN 9781800647503.



The pervasive crises of our current historical moment unfold across many scales. Think of the two most prominent global crises of recent years: climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both are difficult to understand and respond to, in part, because of their scalar complexity. On the one hand, they are global in scope, crossing national and ecological barriers to touch the lives of all humans (and many non-humans). On the other hand, these massive crises are driven by physical, chemical, and biological processes below the threshold of perception: the release of carbon molecules and other pollutants in the case of climate change, and the spread of viral microorganisms in the case of COVID-19. A new collection of scholarly essays—*Life, Rescaled: The Biological Imagination in 21st-Century Literature and Performance*, edited by Liliane Campos and Pierre-Louis Patoine—takes an expansive, multi-disciplinary, and multi-genre approach to the scalar dislocations of the present. Made up of contributions from an international cohort of European and North American scholars, the collection examines the complex interchanges between scientific knowledge and cultural production in the effort to represent contemporary human and nonhuman life across a range of aesthetic forms. The essays place mycology, ecology, epidemiology, neurology, demography, and geology in dialogue with novels, comics, and performances in order to grapple with the epistemological and ethical challenges of the Anthropocene. The climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic provide the collection's organizing context; together, the essays inquire into the representational strategies we need in a rapidly changing world of many complex scales.

Life, Rescaled intervenes, broadly, in scholarly conversations about the relationship between scientific knowledge and literary representation. Previous science and literature scholarship has examined the rich interchanges between biology and literature in the Romantic and Victorian periods,[1] but Campos and Patoine's collection extends these investigations to the contemporary moment. The editors note in their introduction that biology's central narrative and imaginary

tropes have shifted in recent decades; the evolutionary tree and the double-helix of DNA, which dominated the twentieth-century biological imagination, have been displaced by the "wood-wide web" of mycelial networks and the spiky COVID-19 molecule, to name a few prominent examples. What representational strategies, the contributors ask, have artists in a range of media developed to grapple with the new images and narratives furnished by recent science? However, Campos and Patoine caution us against the tendency to assume that influence flows only in one direction, from sciences to the arts. Drawing from N. Katherine Hayles, they encourage us to attend to the "cross-currents" that move between science and artistic practice. Rather than tracing how science influences art, the collection explores "interdiscursivity and the cross-fertilizing of imaginaries between contemporary artistic work, popularizations of the life sciences, and philosophy" (5). Culture responds to changes in science and science is shaped, in part, by cultural concerns.

"Science fiction" is therefore not a central term in *Life, Rescaled*, although several of the essays analyze works with "speculative" elements. Derek Woods reads current representations of fungal life through Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014); Pieter Vermeulen examines the current "population unconscious" through Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014); and Rishi Goyal considers representations of empty pandemic cities through Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). The editors make it clear that the contributions do not privilege any particular genre; they do "not find one genre more suited to multi-scalar aesthetics than another. Rather than which genre, the key question is which forms may best attend to heterogeneous scales of life…and their disparate temporal scales" (21). Each essay attends to a particular interface between aesthetic form and biological scale. While some of the artworks under consideration speculate about future or alternative worlds, the collection's unifying concern is faithful representation of the empirical world's complexity. The works tend to be experimental, or to inhabit the limits and boundaries of established genres, as they grapple with the scalar conundrums of our crisis-ridden world.

The collection's greatest strength is the range of geographies, genres, media, and scientific fields with which it engages. While no one reader will be riveted by every single essay, it has something to offer any scholar with even a passing interest in the environmental, medical, or scientific humanities. *Life, Rescaled* may be of the most interest to teachers because it gathers a wide range of texts, from speculative novels to popular-science comics and experimental performances. Collectively, the essays provide an illuminating cross-section of ecologically engaged contemporary cultural production in many genres and from many countries. The strongest essays—such as Woods's analysis of fungi and *Annihilation* and Goyal's exploration of pandemics through *Severance*—bring together pressing scientific problems and nuanced textual interpretations in ways that illuminate ongoing cultural conversations. The collection's weaker entries, in contrast, can feel like catalogs of relevant artworks, such that analysis gets buried in summary. These essays may offer inspiration for a teacher constructing a syllabus, but they are thin on insight and interpretation. Most readers will probably find themselves hopping between the essays that interest them most, rather than reading the book from start to finish. Despite its

few weak points, *Life, Rescaled* showcases the wide range of aesthetic responses to climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent scientific innovations. It will expand any reader's range of reference.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* and Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*.

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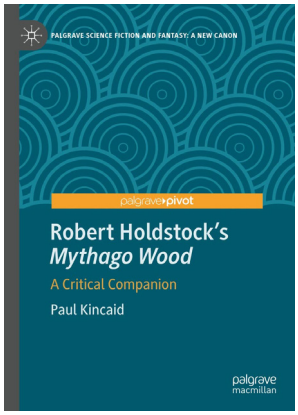
Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood, by Paul Kincaid

Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook

Paul Kincaid. *Robert Holdstock's* Mythago Wood. Palgrave, 2022. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Ebook. 91 pg. $34.99. E-ISSN 2662-8570. ISBN 9783031103742.



I began drafting this review from a treefarm in the Salish Sea that used to be part of a vast swath of Pacific Coast temperate rain forest. Like much of the Pacific Northwest, the land was logged over at the beginning of the last century, grazed for several decades, then left alone aside from occasional selective harvesting. It's now an expanse of same-aged 90-to-120-foot-high conifers, traversed by footpaths and a few dirt roads, with widely spaced, even-sized treeboles; light and rain filter down to low brush at the forest floor.

How different from Robert Holdstock's impenetrably dense, insanely haunted, and topologically and chronotopically esheresque Ryhope Wood, composed of "primeval" woodland, "untouched forest from a time when all of the country was covered with deciduous forests of oak and ash and elder and rowan and hawthorn" at the end of the last ice age.[1] Plugging into the fantasy topos of an unknown space that is impossibly bigger inside than outside, Ryhope Wood is also, as John Clute memorably termed it, an "abyssal chthonic resonator": it generates—in psychic collaboration with the individuals who enter it—avatars of basic story patterns and experiences that are, in Jungian terms, universal among human beings—among which is surely the attraction to and fear of forests.[2] Though my own experience of woodland, probably like that of many of Holdstock's readers, is no more chthonic than the tree farm I've just described, his vision of a mysterious, unmappable, actively rebarbative wildwood in the heart of darkest Herefordshire is compelling.

Paul Kincaid has produced a concise but valuable companion to *Mythago Wood* (1984), the prize-winning first volume of the Mythago Wood series, with an introduction, three thematic chapters, and very brief coda. Given the dizzyingly nonlinear and recursive temporal structures of the narrative (not to mention how these are repeated and complicated in four subsequent novels), rather than attempting to offer a definitive interpretation or universal theory of Holdstock's work(s), Kincaid sets himself an appropriately circumscribed goal: to suggest "something of the originality, the importance, and the downright strangeness" of the text.[3] The novel's complexities, recursivities, and echoic intertexts are derived from the premise that basic story patterns are immanent in every human consciousness; in the psycho-generative spaces of Ryhope Wood they play out differently for each traveler based on individual cultural contexts and memories, but they

are recognizably familiar plots driven by such figures as the absent father, the quarreling siblings, the rescued child, the supernatural hunters, the hero's journey to restore the Land.

Kincaid documents *Mythago Wood*'s impact and influence on fantasy-writing in the last decades of the twentieth century, noting that it won both the British Science Fiction Award and the World Fantasy award and "has consistently been named as one of the best and most important works of fantasy from the twentieth century" (4). In 2012 the British Fantasy Society renamed their top prize the Robert Holdstock Award, in recognition, Kincaid asserts, of his "entirely new way of writing fantasy" (4). What's new is Holdstock's play with narrative temporality. Having explored time travel in earlier science-fiction novels, Holdstock brought to the fantasy genre a more complex model of narrative temporality that changed the kinds of stories it could engage. Before Holdstock, fantasy was associated with the 'there and back again' structure of the quest, in which time and the narrative move forward to the resolution of the hero's journey:

> … the structure of time commonly plays little or no part … : past and present are consistent, practically static. The idea that time might be layered, that the same myths might take radically different shapes, that the past might interpenetrate the present and the present might interpenetrate the past, has no part to play in stories of the rightful heir being restored and evil being defeated. (3)

With a new level of temporal complexity, Kincaid claims, "*Mythago Wood* remakes fantasy from the perspective of science fiction" (3) and effects "a reimagining of the whole fantasy landscape" (4).[4] The impacts for both plot and character are significant: in Holdstock's novel, "there is no return from [the] quest, the land is not healed, the hero is not restored," and "there is no true hero just as there is no villain"; each character "is transformed utterly, and so everyone becomes both hero and villain of their own story, and neither" (4). In consequence, the narrative remains endlessly open: "what healing there is, is not the end of this story but rather the beginning of another story, a story which also cannot be ended" (8). The focus of the novel—as the reader gradually realizes—is the power and agency of the Wood as it collaborates with the traveler in shaping the story and transforming the teller. The Wood is the figure and engine of transformation. I offer here a brief summary of the novel to confirm Kincaid's assessment of the work's radical weirdness.

Part I: the narrator, Steven, returns from WWII service to his family's home at the edge of Ryhope Wood. His distant, preoccupied father has died and his older brother Christian has developed a weird relationship to the Wood, which has never been surveyed or mapped. Christian has been pursuing their father's research into the wood's capacities to generate avatars of folklore and myths: the Night Hunters, Robin Hood, the warrior woman, Arthur, the shaman. Christian explains the basic premise in a useful expositional brain-dump:

> "The old man believed that all life is surrounded by an energetic aura – you can see the human aura as a faint flow in certain light. In these ancient woodland, *primary woodland*s, the combined aura forms something far more powerful, a sort of creative field that can

> interact with our unconscious. And it's in the unconscious that we carry what he calls the pre-mythago – that's *myth imago*, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature. … The form of the idealized myth, the hero figure, alters with cultural changes, assuming the identity and technology of the time." (original emphasis; 53-54)

The mythago emerges where a culture is under threat, fading when the hero figure is no longer needed but remaining "in our collective unconscious, [to be] transmitted through the generations" (53-54). Seeking to penetrate the Wood's mysterious heart, the brothers encounter a huge boar/man in the Wood who clearly intends to kill them; Steven realizes this is, somehow, both a prehistoric demiurge and their father.

In Part II, Christian leaves to explore the Wood. Steven studies his father's notes and maps and hires a fellow vet to attempt an aerial survey of the wood (blocked by bizarre winds). The Wood begins to grow into the house clearing, as if "a pseudopod of woodland" was "trying to drag the house itself into the aura of the main body" (95).[5] Steven receives strange emissaries from the wood, including the avatar of Guiwenneth, a young red-haired woman-warrior who was raised by the Night Hunters.[6] Different avatars of Guiwenneth had had relationships with Steven's father and older brother, and now Christian re-emerges from the wood, almost entirely unrecognizable in his transformation into a violent warrior leader who appears to be decades older. His fighters seize Guiwenneth and disappear.

In Part III, Steven and his pilot friend plunge into the Wood to trace Christian and recover Guiwenneth. Christian had once imagined that if he could make it to the 'heartwood,' the icebound area behind the wall of fire called Lavondyss—the place of origin and possibly rebirth for the mythagos—he could emerge on its other side and return to ordinary life. But as Steven moves deeper into the Wood, he realizes from talking with different people they encounter that he and his brother are now part of a story that they don't control—the story of a Kinsman who must kill his rogue relative, the Outsider destroying the land. As Kincaid writes, he must "abandon any hope of shaping his own story" (12): "there is no real world for [the brothers] to return to; they are both mythagos now, and mythagos cannot leave the wood" (13). In the final confrontation of the brothers, Steven believes he must kill Christian, according to the myth they are enacting, but Christian asks that they suspend the clash. He will use a shamanic ritual to pass through the fire and, he hopes. return to his previous life. Intending to send him a talisman for this journey home, Steven knocks him into the fire where, we infer, he dies. Guiwenneth arrives at the stone that marks her father's grave, but she has been mortally wounded and dies in Steven's arms. The father-monster re-appears and seems to tell Steven that Guiwenneth will return, before carrying her corpse into the fire. Two story-patterns are completed here—that of Cain and Abel and that of the kidnapped child—but the novel ends in a suspension: Steven settles in by the tomb of Guiwenneth's father to await her return.

Kincaid's single-word chapter titles, "War," "Time," and "Myth", suggest his broadly thematic approach. "War" briefly discusses the WWI service of Holdstock's grandfather, then turns to

explore what it means that conflict is how mythagos are generated. George's journal asserts that mythagos are formed at the intersections of conflicts between the cultures "of the invader, and the invaded": "mythagos grow from the power of hate, and fear" (MW 51). Kinkaid concurs and points out the narrative implications: since mythagos "emerge from war and exist for no other reason than war …. (t)he hero figure, whatever hero might mean in this context, is a personification of the hate and fear of an invasion, and the cruelty of those invading" (25). On his reading, the end of the novel resolves the cycle of violence: "it is a novel in which war is what shapes and drives everything, but it is a novel in which peace and reconciliation is the only possible outcome" (30). Yet the end of the conflict does not allow Steven, any more than Christian, the 'back again' of the fantasy quest: instead, he will spend 'the long years to come' in a nearby village of "Neolithic peoples," waiting for Guiwenneth to return.

In "Time," Kincaid links Mythago Wood's temporality to Holdstock's earlier science fiction novels, which explored the fluidity and irregularity of time: "Time is, in a sense, the only continuing character in Holdstock's work, yet it is never consistent" (34). Kincaid notes that the Wood is "not just … a confusion of all time; it is actively antagonistic to time as it is measured outside the wood" (41): Harry's watch breaks when he enters the Wood; a reverse Rip Van Winkle effect ages Christian by decades more than his brother. Even as Steven encounters a kind of historical pageant of people who suggest the prehistoric past, Saxon England, the Middle Ages and Civil Wars, time is shown to be "a psychological rather than an ontological reality, working its changes and being changed by the imagination, by the very human force of story" (37). Kincaid borrows Stefan Ekman's coinage "mythotopes" to describe the different time-space zones associated with different mythagos, and some readers have used these to create speculative maps of the wood, but the zones are unfixed and permeable, and the figures associated with them can turn up in other places and in other times.[7] Poignantly, Christian imagines that if he can traverse the heartwood, he might be able to recover the time he has lost and the damage that has been done to his body, but the novel doesn't confirm this possibility; nor do we find out whether, as the father-monster promises, Guiwenneth eventually returns to Steven. Carefully gathering up scattered narrative threads, Kincaid traces out the brain-bending temporal paradox of Mythago Wood: the prehistoric people tell Steven stories of the earliest mythagos, but these stories reflect the specific manifestations of the avatars that have been shaped by his own family's engagement with the Wood. So which came first? Holdstock refuses to answer.

In "Myth," Kincaid connects the "science fantasy" aspects of *Mythago Wood* with the cultural politics of early-twentieth-century (pseudo-)sciences. George's journals employ a metabolic vocabulary of energies, vibrations, ley matrices, and auras to be mapped and measured. Alfred Watkins (1855-1935), the ley-line hunter, visits to show George his maps of the invisible tracks connecting spiritual power sites.[8] The device George and his Oxford research pal create to boost his mythago-projecting abilities is "a sort of electrical bridge which seems to fuse elements from each half of the brain" (MW 55), involving a "curious" mask and "electric gadgetry" (MW 81) that Steven describes as "paraphernalia out of *Frankenstein*" (MW 83). Through these allusions, George

is "plug[ged] directly into the conservative network of interwar archaeologists and folklorists" who longed to recover a glamorous national deep past (53). But Kincaid emphasizes that far from re-creating an English Golden Age of chivalrous knights and Merry Men, *Mythago Wood* "is deliberately designed to counter the familiar nationalist story" by highlighting the brutality and violence of the past and the indifference of Nature (55): it's cold, dark, and nasty in there.

What's more, once you go in, you can never come out. Steven's friend Harry returns to the chicken/egg question: "If we do become legends to the various historical peoples scattered throughout the realm … [w]ill we somehow have become a *real* part of history? Will the real world have distorted talks of Steven and myself, and our quest to avenge the Outsider's abduction?" (MW 225). As Kincaid points out, there can never be an answer to Harry's question, because none of the characters ever return to life outside the wood. The implications for questions of agency and ethical responsibility are dissolved, not resolved, in the hallucinatory efflorescence of the narrative: although Kincaid asserts that Steven's decision to wait for his lover's return, "to become a part of the story of the valley 'where the girl came back through the fire'" (67), is an act of free will, it's hard to see how this decision is ontologically or ethically distinct from any actions he has taken since entering the Wood.

Kincaid's exploration of *Mythago Wood*'s radical paradoxes culminates with his salute to Donald Morse's proposition that Ryhope Wood, like the planet of Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires" or our current nightmares about AI, is a self-aware agential entity—a "dream creature [that can] dream other creatures into being" (71).[9] Turning the screw of indeterminacy to its extremest tension, Kincaid even suggests that in returning again and again to the stories of Mythago Wood, Holdstock as author was "as trapped … as George and Christian and Steven." However, this "productive entrapment" (71) is what enables the series' "startling intellectual examination of the very nature of story" (78). If after reading Holdstock via Kinkaid you are not convinced that a clutch of archetypes exists that all humans can recognize, at least it will mean that you will never see that grove of trees in your local park in quite the same way again.

Notes

1. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood* (Orb Edition, 1984), p. 27. Further page references are given in the text of the review.

2. Clute, John. *Look at the Evidence: Essays & Reviews* (Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 111.

3. Kincaid, *Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood*, p. 13. Further page references are given in the text of the review.

4. Holdstock's science-fiction novel *Where Time Winds Blow* was published in 1981, the same year as the prize-winning novella "Mythago Wood," which forms Part I of the novel *Mythago Wood* (1984).

5. This detail is one of the reasons Farah Mendelson classifies *Mythago Wood* as an Intrusion Fantasy rather than a Portal Fantasy in her taxonomy of fantasy types: yes, the Wood is an entrance into a mystery zone, but the Wood rather than the humans controls what happens: "In the portal fantasy the protagonist retains the upper hand over the otherworld. … In this novel, all the power is with the wood. It reaches out, disrupts; when it does draw the characters in, it is for purposes of its own" (Rhetorics of Fantasy, Wesleyan UP, 2008, p. 154). While *Mythago Wood* may seem to be "resolving into a portal fantasy in the last third" of the novel, even then Steven and Christian are never the heroes: "[t]he protagonists and the reader are nakedly at the mercy of the intrusion, not in notional command of the adventure" (p. 156).

6. As readers hear more about this attractive avatar with superb weapon skills, they may be reminded of Terry Pratchett's parodies of 1980s sword-and-cape fantasy warrior women (Herrena the Henna-Haired Harridan; Conina, daughter of Cohen the Barbarian, etc.). In *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* (1988), the second in the Mythago Woods series, Holdstock imagines a female character encountering Ryhope Wood.

7. Ekman, Stefan. "Exploring the Habitats of Myths: the Spatiotemporal Structure of Ryhope Wood." In *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction* (eds D. E. Morse & K. Matolcsy), McFarland, 2011, pp. 46-65.

8. Watkins was a lifelong resident of Herefordshire.

9. Morse, Donald E. "Introduction: Mythago Wood – 'A Source of Visions and Adventure'" in *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction* (eds D. E. Morse and K. Matolcsy), McFarland, 2011, pp. 3-11.

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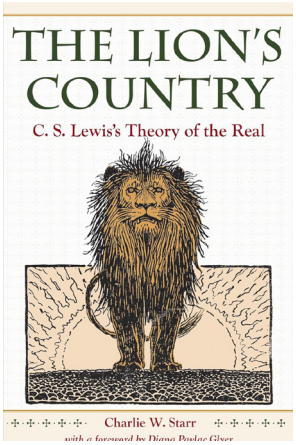
The Lion's Country: C. S. Lewis's Theory of the Real, by Charlie W. Starr

James Hamby

Charlie W. Starr. *The Lion's Country: C. S. Lewis's Theory of the Real*. Kent State UP, 2022. Paperback. 160 pg. $18.95. ISBN 9781606354537.



The works of C. S. Lewis are often discussed through the lens of Christian apologetics, but Lewis was influenced by more than just theology. In his study *The Lion's Country: C. S. Lewis's Theory of the Real*, Charles W. Starr examines the philosophical influences, particularly Idealism, that Lewis incorporated into his fiction. Starr traces Lewis's development from a materialist atheist to an idealist theist and finally to an orthodox Christian. Central to both this progression and to Lewis's fiction is the question of what constitutes reality. The relationship between God and humanity, the meaning of experiences in the material world, and the nature of the afterlife illustrate Lewis's theories of the real. Starr's assessments offer a nuanced understanding of the progression of Lewis's thought through the decades of his writing career.

The book is organized into ten chapters, each focusing on a particular component of Lewis's concept of the real. Chapters include subjects such as desire, mystery, and transposition, amongst other topics, and each chapter touches in some way on the development of Lewis's thought. The book concludes with a never-before published manuscript by Lewis, a collection of notes for a book that was never completed entitled "Prayer Manuscript" that describes Lewis's vision of what it is like for humans to gradually experience reality.

It is a commonplace in Lewis biographies to note that Lewis was an atheist as a young man, but Starr focuses more on Lewis's materialism than his atheism at this point in his life. Starr observes that "Lewis the atheist makes himself visible in his earliest use of the term fact. In 1916, the young C. S. Lewis had been an atheist for several years and had become a demythologizer" (28). The word "fact," Starr argues, is of central importance to Lewis, because it is synonymous with "reality" (23). Limiting his concept of reality to mere fact, however, was not enough for Lewis. Starr says that Lewis's longing for something he could not quite understand made him seek something beyond fact: truth. This led to Lewis's turn towards Idealism and theism (29). Convinced that Idealism would explain his longings, Lewis began to believe there was something beyond the material world. Starr says, "The move from Atheism to Idealism was no less than a recognition of the existence of spiritual reality—something really there that transcended the

physical" (29). Yet, as Starr points out, what Lewis ultimately rejected about this viewpoint was his belief that all matter is evil. Once Lewis converted to Christianity, he saw a connection between the spiritual and the physical that suggested not only that matter was not evil, as he had previously thought, but that there was a hierarchy of reality. Starr suggests that "Lewis abandoned his own brand of idealism (which saw spirit as good and matter as evil) when he became a theist, thus adopting the third view "that there is a reality beyond nature" (87). Starr also notes Lewis's change in thought concerning materialism when he says, "This younger Lewis is very different from the Christian convert who described transcendent reality as the most concrete existence there is. Lewis's previous philosophical war with the flesh was not a part of his Christian way of thinking" (109).

One of the most important concepts in Lewis's beliefs is the notion that there are different levels of reality. Starr points out this concept in his analysis of *The Great Divorce*. In this novel, the closer one gets to heaven, the more "real" things become. Conversely, as Starr explains, "Hell (the farthest place from God) is smaller than a pebble on Earth and smaller than an atom in heaven" (121). In contrast to the beliefs of his youth, the Christian supernaturalist Lewis sees the material world as the lowest part of a progression that eventually leads to the ultimate reality, God. Starr explains that in this core image of Lewis's belief system, "heaven and heavenly beings are more solid than are we and the Earth we live on. We are ghosts and shadows and our world but a cheap copy of the heavenly one to come, like a landscape painting compared to the real place" (121). These same ideas may be seen in *The Last Battle* when the heroes of Narnia, after their deaths, keep going further up and further in to Narnia, thus discovering different layers of that magical land, each more real than the last. Starr comments that "each reality is hierarchically more real, somehow larger than the ones without" (89).

Using these biographical and philosophical backdrops, Starr discusses Lewis's works. He typically comments on several of Lewis's works in each chapter, and the books he most frequently references include *The Silver Chair*, *The Last Battle*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *A Grief Observed*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Till We Have Faces*. Starr's engagement with these texts is thoughtful and engaging, and his observations would certainly be helpful for both scholars and general readers. Starr's tone wavers a bit between academic and conversational, and in some places he drops scholarly objectivism and speaks instead from a position of faith, making the book have more the feel of a popular religious book than an academic work. And though Starr clearly demonstrates his familiarity with both philosophy and Lewis scholarship, more engagement with both of these fields would have lent more weight to his discussion of Lewis's texts. Incorporating more material on Idealist philosophers, particularly those who influenced Lewis's thought as a young man, would have been enlightening. Furthermore, placing Lewis in conversation with these theorists would have blunted criticism that is sometimes made against Inkling scholarship that the field is too insular and does not connect the Inklings to other movements or authors. Additionally, the scholarship on Lewis that Starr does cite, while useful, is often too briefly considered and feels more like name-checking than genuine engagement. Since

this is a relatively brief volume, adding more secondary sources would have fleshed out Starr's discussion and made important connections.

This work is nevertheless a valuable contribution to Lewis studies. With engaging prose, Starr ably explains the difficult philosophical concepts behind Lewis's fiction. Both scholars and general readers interested in Lewis should find this book appealing. This volume not only provides insight into Lewis's world-building, but it also serves as a wonderful demonstration of how fantasy can be used to express the complexity of human experience.

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Resurrection: Comics in Post-Soviet Russia, by José Alaniz

Oskari Rantala

José Alaniz. *Resurrection: Comics in Post-Soviet Russia*. Ohio State UP, 2022. Studies in Comics and Cartoons. Ebook. 248 pg. $37.95. ISBN: 9780814281925.

In his conclusion to *Resurrection: Comics in Post-Soviet Russia*, José Alaniz cites Alexander Kunin, the director of Moscow's Center for Comics and Visual Culture. "We live in Russia," Kunin says. "Here you never know what's going to happen tomorrow" (210). Indeed, the same month *Resurrection* came out, a Russian tank column was approaching Ukraine's capital, and young educated Russians were scrambling to get out of their home country.

The cover image of *Resurrection*, a collage artwork of the invasion's architect, became accidentally more poignant than planned. In one of the panels, Putin stares coldy at the reader in front of Kremlin. In another one, he is clad in nationalistic white-blue-red superhero garb complete with the double-headed eagle—the imperial colors and emblems that replaced the communist ones in post-Soviet Russia. Next, we see Putin's face covered by a colorful balaclava in the style of Pussy Riot and protesters marching with rainbow flags. Since then, demonstrations have been crushed and Russian courts have declared rainbow flags symbols of "an extremist organization".

Putin is a good choice for the simple reason that he personifies the profound changes which Russia and Russian society have undergone in the past twenty years. Before his reign, there was no viable comics industry in a semi-developed country with close to 150 million literate people. Granted, comics were not a special case in the chaotic 1990s, and Russia lacked quite a few other viable industries as well. A number of interesting and innovative comics were being produced, but publishing them and making a living out of it was a near impossibility. This is where Alaniz's last book on the subject, *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (2010), ended. With *Resurrection*, he takes the reader through the three post-Soviet decades of Russian comics.

For a long time, it seems, the cultural landscape in Russia was hostile or at best indifferent to comics, despite the rich history of woodblock prints, revolutionary graphic design as well as Soviet children's books and magazines. Just five years ago, the minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky stated at the Moscow International Book Fair that "comics are for people who have trouble reading" (115). *Resurrection* does not offer only a simple historical account of how Russian comics

culture arrived at the point where it is now (or prior to the invasion of Ukraine, which I suspect has affected the cultural scene in a major way). In addition to historical developments, Alaniz discusses different institutions of comics culture such as publishers, festivals, and comics research.

He takes a closer look especially at Bubble, a company which succeeded in launching a profitable Russian mainstream comics line with a western business model: superpowered action characters sharing the same universe, multi-title crossover events, basing creative decisions on sales figures, and ultimately aiming to develop their properties for film deals. Alaniz offers an intriguing peek at the dynamics of the Russian comics field as he provides room for both the Bubble founder Artyom Gabrelyanov as well as the company's critics.

Between the camps of art/indie and mainstream/superhero comics, there are some tensions which seem ultimately not very different than what is found in western comics circles, even though the debates might seem more heated in Russia. A similar point could be raised about the infamous Medinsky quote above. Comments along the same lines were common in the first half of the 20th century when comics caused moral panic on both sides of the Atlantic. There seems to be something universal in the ways in which literary cultures adopt visual narratives. For many readers, Russian society might seem quite alien, but on closer inspection the cultural currents are not that unfamiliar.

Resurrection is a scholarly but theory-light book. Most of it is perhaps best categorized as cultural history, but the concluding chapters on masculinity in superhero comics and representations of disability deal more with comics analysis. Both are interesting takes on multifaceted and diverse comics in a culture that is hyper-masculine and dominated by strong and capable men. At the same time, there are disabled comics artist producing innovative works about their own experiences, superhero Putin parodies, and mainstream comics that are almost impossible to distinguish from what is published for the American market.

As far as the cultural history side is concerned, Alaniz at times brings up bits of information that are not something that a foreign layperson would consider very significant: a letter published in a newspapers or something that one of his friends active in the comics scene has told him. As there are over 20,000 newspapers in Russia, what does it actually tell us if one of them publishes a letter holding some kind of a position on comics? My first reaction as a reader is "not very much," and I would have appreciated a bit more convincing, even though there's nothing suspect about the main arguments Alaniz puts forward. It is one of the strengths of the book that Alaniz has access to people who have had a major role in the Russian comics scene. In some instances, it is obvious that they are personal friends of the author, and another writer could have discussed their opinions through a more critical lens.

Alaniz places the moment when comics began "to matter" in Russia near the Victory Day celebrations on 2015 when it turned out that some bookstores had removed *Maus* from their shelves due to the swastika on the cover of Art Spiegelman's anti-fascist masterpiece. According to Alaniz, comics had "earned the right to be banned" (xvi), even though it was not so much a case of

censorship as an outright silly decision by bookstore staff. However, the incident was good for the sales and publicity of *Maus*—perhaps not what one would expect to happen in an authoritarian country.

Alaniz does not discuss to what extent the emergence of a comics industry and more organized comics fandom is connected to the modern nerd culture in general. Science fiction, urban fantasy, postapocalyptic narratives, and video games seem to be major cultural forces in Russia, judging by the success of authors such as Dmitry Glukhovsky and Sergei Lukyanenko or game franchises *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Metro 2033* which have expanded into other media as well. Should Russian comics be thought of as a part this wider culture? That is a question that would have interested many speculative fiction scholars.

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The Grey Chamber: Stories and Essays, by Marjorie Bowen

Indu Ohri

Marjorie Bowen. *The Grey Chamber: Stories and Essays*. Edited by John C. Tibbetts. NYC: Hippocampus Press, 2021. Paperback. 361 pg. $25.00. ISBN 9781614983477.

In Marjorie Bowen's short story "A Famous Woman," the protagonist, Tellow, grows fascinated with a statue of Gabrielle Buzot that he notices in a French village, but her history remains frustratingly unexplained to him. Tellow wonders, "surely among all those books there was some information about Gabrielle Buzot? A famous woman! What could she have been, what have accomplished to become famous? A beauty, a heroine, a great lover, a fearless patriot, a poetess?" (239). In a self-referential move, Margaret Gabrielle Vere Long—aka Marjorie Bowen—bestowed one of her names on a fictional woman whose claim to fame has been forgotten.

Like Gabrielle Buzot, Bowen's accomplishments have been overlooked for decades, even though she published 150 novels and 200 short stories during a successful career spanning from 1906 to 1952. The result of five years of research into Bowen's life, career, and oeuvre, John C. Tibbetts's collection of her short stories and nonfiction, *The Grey Chamber*, is meant to demonstrate the versatility of her writing while still emphasizing her Weird Tales. Tibbetts has also released the first full-length scholarly study on Bowen, *The Furies of Marjorie Bowen* (2019), and the recent collection *The Devil Snar'd: Novels, Appreciations, and Appendices* (2023), which covers Bowen's novels and critical reception. As the foremost expert on Bowen's life and work, he builds on previous Bowen scholarship by Michael Sadleir, Edward Wagenknecht, and Jessica Amanda Salmonson in his collection. Overall, I think *The Grey Chamber* fulfills Tibbetts's two goals of persuasively arguing for the recovery of Bowen's literary works and exhibiting her writing in a variety of genres. Bowen's modest description of her literary talents as "an inexhaustible fund of invention, a fluent and easy style, a certain gift for colour and drama, and such a passionate interest in certain periods of history that I was bound, in reproducing them, to give them a certain life" (307) holds true throughout the collection.

In the introduction, Tibbetts provides a biographical account of Bowen's upbringing as an impoverished child with an unstable family life; despite these hardships, she succeeded through her persistence, hard work, and self-education. Bowen was a prolific author who wrote to support different family members at various times throughout her life: her abusive mother, sickly first

husband, mysterious second husband, and three sons. Her works proved so popular that her historical fiction and true crime novels were adapted multiple times into well-regarded films. Along with outlining Bowen's biography, the introduction offers literary background about her short stories and essays that Tibbetts repeats in the two forwards to each section, "Part One: Selected Short Stories" and "Part Two: Selected Essays." Instead of repeating information found elsewhere, the introduction could have situated Bowen's work and long career in the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts of her day. That being said, Tibbetts's edition includes valuable paratextual materials such as a headnote before each nonfictional work, informative footnotes, and a timeline of Bowen's life.

Part One features eighteen of Bowen's short stories in different genres, among them ghost stories, *contes cruels*, social satires, historical fiction, and crime stories. Tibbetts deems her entire canon of short stories a "colossal achievement" that is "nothing less than Bowen's own La Comédie Humaine. I can think of none of Bowen's contemporaries—who can boast such an extensive, learned, and varied output" (32). His selections show the diversity of Bowen's work across the aforementioned genres as well as the supernatural fiction for which she is remembered today. While the collection contains Bowen's widely anthologized Weird Tales, I want to draw attention to her stories written in other genres. In the dreamlike fantasy "The Sign-Painter and the Crystal Fishes," two eccentric characters are locked in mortal combat over a pair of magical fish. The dowager widower in "Madame Spitfire" evokes the ruthless women of Bowen's true crime novels as she schemes to foil the romance between her late husband's illegitimate daughter and her tenant. Finally, "An Initial Letter" displays Bowen's gifts for writing historical fiction and comedy through its portrayal of members of John of Gaunt's court (including Chaucer) as a cast of colorful medieval characters like those that inhabit the prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Part Two presents Bowen's essays on subjects such as Modernist women's novels, Queen Elizabeth I's astrologer John Dee, English royal coronations, William Hogarth's artistry, Bowen's unorthodox religious views, and her literary career. The essays nicely balance out the short stories in Part One by supplying her wide-ranging and unconventional opinions on different issues. The inclusion of both literary forms allows for a rich dialogue to emerge between Bowen's views on topics such as the Weird and her representation of them in the short stories. For example, the autobiographical writings detail her childhood fear of ghosts, demons, and haunted houses, which likely explains why she often wrote about these entities in her later supernatural fiction. In her study of John Dee, Bowen observes that his communications with angels through a dubious medium, Edward Kelley, "might have been written today at any séance, save the language is more beautiful and the thought more noble than that usually employed or expressed by modern seekers after psychic knowledge" (324). Readers can trace how Bowen's childhood fears and cultural movements such as Spiritualism shaped her Weird Tales such as "Scoured Silk," "The Crown Plate Derby," and "Florence Flannery."

A comparison of the two sections uncovers a surprising contrast between the portrayal of female characters in Bowen's short stories and her nonfictional reflections on being a woman

writer in a male-dominated literary industry. This disparity suggests her complex attitude toward women's rights: skepticism of political feminism's effectiveness and yet sympathetic attunement to female oppression. In her memoir *The Debate Continues* (1939), Bowen recalls how her mother—a failed author—discouraged her from pursuing a literary career because Bowen's first novel was violent and tragic, which made it unsuitable for a female writer. Her stories "The World's Gear," "Scoured Silk," "Madame Spitfire," and "A Famous Woman" critique the social, financial, and professional inequities that women negotiated in the past and in Bowen's day. The essay "Women in the Arts" celebrates Modernist women's novels for "reveal[ing] with delicate precision the woman's point of view, and analys[ing] with a tenderness, and yet a realism that no man could achieve, the woman's heart, mind, and soul" (314-315). At the same time, Bowen claims that female authors such as Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and Rosamond Lehmann lack the best male authors' "genius." She also insists that these authors should join the general Modernist revolt against human folly, rather than opposing "the once-proclaimed wrongs of women" (316).

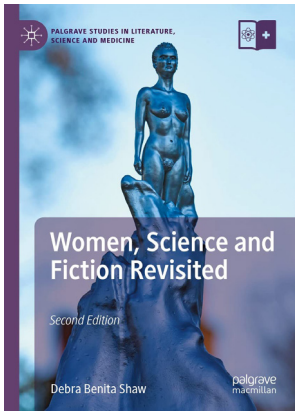
Instead of remaining obscure like Gabrielle Buzot's history, Bowen's life, short stories, and nonfiction writings, as carefully selected and contextualized by Tibbetts, evince that her work is worth rediscovering and will reward further scholarly inquiry. This collection does a superb job of recognizing her fame as a writer of Weird Tales and highlighting her achievements in other genres. It will make Bowen's works easily accessible to students, general readers, and scholars so that they can learn more about this once "famous woman."

Indu Ohri is a lecturer of Humanities in the College of General Studies at Boston University. Her current book project examines how the ghosts in women's supernatural fiction reflect various unspeakable social concerns of late Victorian and early twentieth-century Britain. Her research and teaching interests include Victorian and Edwardian women's ghost stories, Victorian authors of color across the British Empire, and the intersection between digital humanities and pedagogy. Her work appears in *Victorians Institute Journal Digital Annex*, *Preternature*, *The Wilkie Collins Journal*, *Victorian Studies*, and *European Romantic Review*.

Women, Science and Fiction Revisited, by Debra Benita Shaw

Sarah Nolan-Brueck

Debra Benita Shaw. *Women, Science and Fiction Revisited*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine. Hardcover. 181 pg. $119.99. ISBN9783031251702. eBook ISBN 9783031251719. $89.00.



Debra Benita Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction Revisited* is an updated version of the author's 2000 work, *Women, Science, and Fiction: The Frankenstein Inheritance*. Key differences between the volumes include the removal of some chapters focused on short stories that are now out of print, the reworking and addition of new commentary to others, and the addition of chapters on texts which were released since the original publication. Each chapter focuses on a main text or textual pairing; Shaw examines Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944), James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Your Haploid Heart" (1969) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985 novel and still-running 2017 TV show), Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2015), and finally, N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020). These texts, Shaw argues, showcase representative critiques that American, British, and Canadian female authors made of popular feminist ideas and contemporary trends in thinking around technology—hence the title, *Women, Science and Fiction*, rather than women *in* Science Fiction.

Shaw's most radical claim is that "the time of sf is over" (9). She writes, "the criteria that distinguished the genre and which governed the mode in which extrapolation functioned are now no longer sustainable" (9). In this assertion, Shaw is following a critical pathway to its extreme; while many have claimed that, in our age of technological intensification, the boundaries between the speculative and the real are breaking down, Shaw takes this contention to its logical end. Though she does not imagine SF to be dead, she does claim that the forms of SF which we're most familiar with are no longer viable, and that the most productive speculative works are now those that trouble a traditional view of how SF operates; in other words, works that push at the boundaries of genre in a self-referential fashion. Further, Shaw sees the need to define SF in opposition to other, less logically ordered genres as the hanger-on of colonialism, and "the taxonomic ordering of the world which structured scientific imperialism" (9). This contention is most clear in Shaw's discussions of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Shaw

argues that in our contemporary moment, both have taken on new resonances that change their narratives from extrapolations into allegories for our current crises of climate and bodily legislation, respectively.

As with genre, Shaw challenges her reader to forgo the distracting exercise of erecting rigid gendered definitions and boundaries. In her introduction, Shaw writes, "The question of who or what is a 'woman' and who is authorised to speak for and to women seems to be overwhelming the more important work of challenging the patriarchal social structures which, fundamentally, have defined these terms in the first place" (1). The more pressing mission, then, is avoiding definition in opposition to masculine ideals in general, which can lead to unintentional collusion in patriarchal projects of ideological, legal, and physical control. Shaw is careful to challenge ideas of essentialism that align the female figure with "Nature." In chapter four, Shaw discusses Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto" as a response to a branch of feminism which equates women with nature—a dangerous conflation, Shaw states, because it gives patriarchy a powerful tool to align women with reproduction and commodify the female body. This formula is best articulated in a line Shaw uses to describe *Swastika Night*: "Hence the text extrapolates the appropriation of separatist consciousness and ecofeminist mythology by a patriarchal regime happy to collude with the idea that the future of the planet and the future of women are inherently linked" (117). Throughout, Shaw denies the proposal that a world made of women would be one without problems, or that a society built on unequal power dynamics could lead to equality.

Shaw's work makes a strong case for the contemporary relevance of each text discussed, and for the ways that political and environmental changes have altered the way we read and understand several older texts. In marking this shift, Shaw turns to N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*, which she sees as part of the "rise of the new weird," a less "hopeful" and "naïve" turn which recognizes and challenges "the limitations of genre fiction" (172). Given that *The City We Became* is a fantastical, surrealist novel, which does not seem to engage with more traditional science fiction elements, its purported role as sign of development or shift in generic boundaries is somewhat questionable. In other words, I remain unconvinced that Jemisin's novel is the best example for Shaw's argument. The contention, however, that the execution and goal of extrapolation has been fundamentally altered does offer conceptual tools for examining fiction in a post-Trump, post-Covid-19, rise-of-AI era, in which future shock has taken on a whole new meaning. Shaw's proposed shift in SF raises important questions as to how SF has served or challenged feminist ideologies in the past, and how these ideologies and their fictional outgrowths can remain critically relevant in an age when science fiction seems to be morphing into science fact with terrifying speed.

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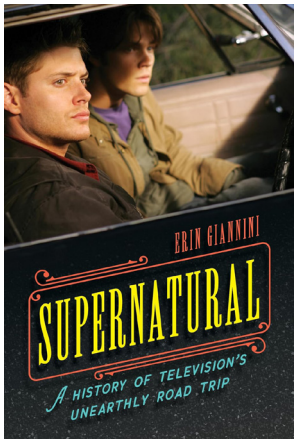
Supernatural: *A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip*, by Erin Giannini

Dominick Grace

Erin Giannini. *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. Hardcover. 238 pg. $36.00. ISBN 9781538134498. EBook. $21.50. ISBN 9781538134504.



Cult TV phenomenon *Supernatural*, which ran for fifteen seasons (the longest run for a genre TV show, Giannini insists, though the definition she is using of "genre" would seem to narrow the concept to the fantastical, since westerns *Gunsmoke* [1955-1975] and *Death Valley Days* [1952-1970] both had longer runs and produced significantly more episodes—and one also would need to exclude medical dramas and crime shows from the "genre" category to give *Supernatural* the nod), has received a remarkable amount of critical attention, from monographs to essay collections, from scholarly studies to books for general audiences. Giannini's history of the show has scholarly heft but a style that makes it accessible to general readers, and at a mere $36.00 for a hardcover book is also priced for a non-scholarly audience. It would probably be accurate (and I do not do so pejoratively) to describe Giannini as an aca-fan, engaging in serious study of a TV show she evidently loves. Features such as her "Highly Subjective List of 30 Must-See-*Supernatural* episodes" in the Appendix speak as much to fandom as scholarship (and the fact that I would have weighted my own such list more heavily in favor of earlier seasons should make clear my own aca-fan propensities).

Giannini traces the genesis of the show in her introduction by contextualizing its origin in 2005 in the historical events of the time, and then devotes the first three chapters, in a section called "In the Beginning," to the earlier television stew from which show creator Eric Kripke fished out ingredients and to the genesis of the show specifically, from Kripke's own personal and work history. Part of the show's richness can be traced to the diverse influences that shaped its development. Though *Supernatural* can be categorized as horror (as Giannini notes, always a tough sell on network TV, given the restrictions of the graphic and transgressive elements endemic to the genre), its influences are diverse, and perhaps thanks to the show's fifteen-year run, it was able (sometimes gleefully) to employ a lot of generic slippage into its run. Indeed, *Supernatural* developed into a remarkably self-conscious show, including overtly meta episodes and ultimately a protracted and plot-central meditation on the complexities of the creative process

and the relationship between fans, artists, and art itself. These chapters are especially useful for their careful and thorough grounding of the show in its historical and social context, a topic Giannini continues to explore in more detail in the balance of the book, as she tracks the show's development across its fifteen-year run. This unit concludes with an overview of the show's main characters, as well as of significant characters who appeared less frequently.

Part two consists of four chapters, under the section title "The *Supernatural* World." The first of these chapters revisits somewhat the historical context elements of the preceding unit. Indeed, a feature of this book is a fairly modular construction, with individual chapters evidently designed to be read easily as single units. This does lead to some repetition. However, here Giannini makes some interesting interventions. Her detailed consideration of the show in relation to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), though strong in its own right, is hardly surprising. Surprising, and insightful, is Giannini's subsequent detailed discussion of *Supernatural* in relation to *Roseanne* (1988-1997), as shows representing blue-collar life on screen. The other chapters delve into *Supernatural*'s other major influences, such as folklore and religion, throughout its run. Early seasons often built on urban legends, myths, and folk tales; later seasons created extended narrative arcs in which the Judeo-Christian god (primarily; others also appear) is central. The final chapter in this section considers the complex and shifting perspectives on politics across the show's run, offering interesting readings of how the show's politics shifted under different show-runners.

The final section, "'People Watch This?' *Supernatural*'s Cultural Impact," steps away from the show proper to consider its influence. The book therefore neatly turns from exploring what *Supernatural* emerged from to considering what has emerged from it. Giannini begins with a recap of the history of how television has been marketed and consumed, providing perhaps more detail than is really needed for her purpose, but she nevertheless offers useful insights into how the show capitalized on emerging technologies such as streaming to broaden its audience and develop a passionate fan base—and therefore to become a "tentpole" show for the CW, used to help grow audiences for other CW offerings The final chapter focuses on fandom and perhaps downplays the complexities and conflicts therein. *Supernatural*'s passionate fans have not always seen eye to eye, as Giannini's chapter title suggests: "Beyond 'Sam' and 'Dean' Girls" refers to the division among fans of each of the two lead characters. Nevertheless, *Supernatural* fandom has been active in positive ways, to which Giannini draws appropriate attention. This real-world influence is perhaps a more important legacy than *Supernatural*'s status as "one of the texts that ushered in a golden age of television horror" (156) or as possibly one of the last long-form serials on TV (if one excludes shows such as soap operas, anyway); "its legacy, from content to distribution, continues to resonate" (156), Giannini concludes. One could do worse.

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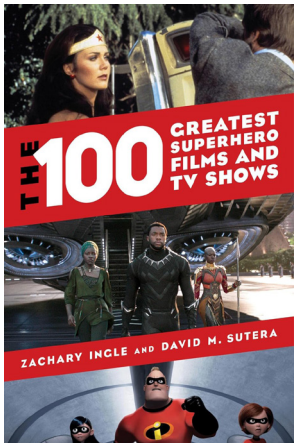
The Hundred Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows, by Zachary Ingle and David Sutera

Dan Brown

Zachary Ingle and David Sutera. *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*. Rowman & Litttlefield, 2022. Hardcover. 328 pg. $45.00. ISBN 9781538114506.



With a title like *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*, it's easy to imagine this new volume by Zachary Ingle and David M. Sutera is the kind of resource diehard comic fans would keep on hand to settle heated barroom squabbles.

"Hey, what's the best superhero movie ever? I say it's 1989's *Batman* with Michael Keaton."

"No way! Obviously, *Superman* from 1978 is a superior film and Christopher Reeve is a hero for the ages."

"Let's see what Ingle and Sutera have to say. They'll know."

But this is not a Guinness Book of Superhero Movie World Records. Heck, the co-authors don't even present the motion pictures and TV shows they discuss in numerical order from best to worst, so those readers looking for a Comic Book Resources-type of extended listicle are bound to be disappointed. Instead, what the two experts provide is a perceptive account of the major superhero releases since the advent of talkies, plus a rationale for how each individual film fits within that larger history. Stated in a word, this book is foundational. It belongs on the bookshelf of every serious superhero scholar.

This 311-page tome goes way beyond rehashing superhero trivia, most of which is well-known by now anyway, and well into the realm of thoughtful cultural analysis. Ingle and Sutera explain at the outset their shared project is "to lay the foundation to encourage more critical discourse on the historical, social, aesthetic, cultural, technological and economic elements of the superhero film" (8). They endeavour to show how properties such as *Angel* (1999-2004), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Watchmen* (2009) have been shaped by, and have helped shape, global pop culture from the era of Hollywood serials to our current age of streaming. They succeed. And in doing so, this book ups the ante for all researchers following in their footsteps. This compendium is a masterwork for one simple reason: The co-authors take superhero culture, in all its manifestations, seriously.

It's true comic books were once read mainly by children, but those days have been gone a long time, even though when your local newspaper bothers to cover comics or fan conventions there are inevitably interjections like "Zap!" and "Pow!" in the headlines. Some may be reluctant to face the fact that, with new Marvel properties debuting seemingly every few weeks, superheroes have moved into the mainstream of our society (even as comics themselves have become the preserve of a niche, aging audience). Today's young superhero fans don't want to read about a character like Batman, they want to BE Batman, which they can do easily on their cell phones.

All of that said, there is certainly room to quibble with the works the writers deem worthy of discussion. For example, both the Bob Burden-derived *Mystery Men* (1999) and the Kurt Russel film *Sky High* (2005) are included here only as honourable mentions. Yet there's an argument to be made that every superhero adaptation being made in 2023 is a parody, so those little-seen efforts are crucial because they paved the way to the current widespread ironic posture regarding costumed do-gooders. Why the short shrift? Would Deadpool have even been possible on the big screen without those early experiments at squeezing laughs out of the genre's conventions? Ingle and Sutera also place special emphasis on the Fox X-Men series of movies. While it's true films such as *X-Men* (2000) and *X2* (2003) are historically important, some would argue they are objectively bad works of art—which isn't the only consideration for inclusion in *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows*, but surely how crappy they are as entertainments bears mentioning?

Perhaps a better title would have been *Why Superhero Films and TV Shows Matter*. As mentioned, the book doesn't include a numbered ranking (chapters are organized alphabetically by title), so it encourages the reader to do more than skim each entry, thus moving toward a fuller understanding of why certain adaptations landed the way they did. The authors also grapple with the… strangeness of some of these franchises. They look at superhero films and TV programs with fresh eyes by setting aside the conventional wisdom that has developed about each character in the intervening years or decades. It's also true that this volume, released in 2022, was destined to be out-of-date the moment it came out, given the breakneck pace of superhero releases. The DC filmic universe, for instance, was in a much different place 12 months ago than today, having effectively been brought to a conclusion with the Ezra Miller Flash movie last summer. Superheroes are important to our culture. There's a lot to be learned from this thought-provoking history, and with more superhero movies and shows on the way a second volume is not only warranted but would also be welcomed.

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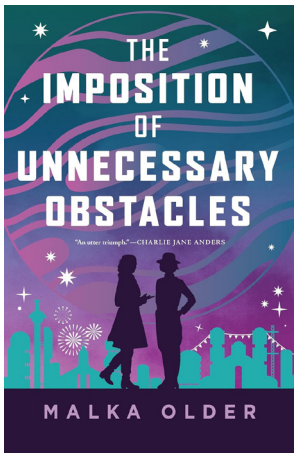
FICTION REVIEWS

Image by ekamalev

Review of *The Imposition of Unnecessary Obstacles*

Jeremy Brett

Malka Older. *The Imposition of Unnecessary Obstacles*. Tordotcom, 2024. Hardcover. 208 pg. $20.99. ISBN 978-1-250-90679-3.



With *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, Malka Older introduced an intriguing queer detective duo awash in Holmes-and-Watson similarities (though perhaps all crime-solving duos are Holmes and Watson to one degree or another): the relentlessly logical, dogged investigator Mossa and her lover and partner-in-solving-crime, the academic researcher Pleiti. Following the crimes, scholarly scuffles, and dramatic revelations of *Mimicking*, Older has brought these two back together to solve another mystery set among the existential dangers inherent to life in deep space. In the grand tradition of mysteries, during the novella, important, and sometimes deadly, truths are exposed that lay bare the nature of the world around us as well as the deepest motivations and longings of the characters. All mysteries are, ultimately, searches for the truth of things, whether that truth is to be found in a cozy English drawing room, on the mean streets of 1940s Los Angeles, or even within a ring-structured colony that orbits Jupiter (or, as the book calls it,"Giant") in the far future following the climatic destruction of Earth.

One central truth Older explores in this new chapter of the series involves the uncertainties that come with interplanetary existence. Mossa, at the story's onset, has returned to Valdegeld University (where Pleiti works) because of a recent rash of seventeen disappearances among its population. We open with her musings on the disquieting ability of people to vanish from Ring society. She thinks to herself:

> *A startling percentage of cases brought to the Investigators dealt with missing persons. It might even be considered the raison d'etre of the service…After the controlled, condensed environments of the spaceships and stations, where everyone was within contact all the time, life on a planet with a dense, communications-unfriendly atmosphere seemed full of gaps and mystery. Particularly in the rapid expansion period, people would disappear into the growing network of platforms and rings, and there would be no way to know whether they were prospering or vaporized unless someone went to find out.* (2)

Pleiti, enmeshed in her own more academic and theoretical mysteries, finds herself completely unaware of the vanishings all around her and is shocked to learn from Mossa how this went without notice, because the scattered can slip through the cracks without notice or perception

of a pattern. But, then, patterns are what Mossa and her other fictional detective forbears seek to find. Detectives look to find meaning and purpose in seeming randomness. These are revelations for Pleiti, as is the uneasy feeling that perhaps she has been guilty of objectification and blindness towards her fellow residents. When Mossa notes that porters and other support staff are among the missing, Pleiti wonders, "'Porters?' That seemed even more surprising, somehow, and I wondered with a chill whether I did not see porters as people enough to be kidnapped" (32). That mindset, too, is a truth to be unraveled – how do we interact with each other in this kind of far-flung, disconnected society? How do we see one another and find value in each other, especially in an environment as unremittingly hostile as space, where coming together in viable communities may be the only way to survive?

Disconnection is key to the novella, as Older describes long-standing cleavages and prejudices among different Giant classes, particularly between people from Giant and the descendants of the rich, exclusionist settlers from its moon, Io. These kinds of familial and class prejudices form one variation of the kinds of "unnecessary obstacles" that we humans are always imposing among and between us, obstacles that constrain our ability to form communities and relationships and institutions and that can throw off a settlement's unsteady balance. When Pleiti speaks to one of her scholarly colleagues, Zei, about the university faculty, Zei notes that "It has always been…precariously balanced, shall we say: dependent, like so many supposed systems, on the personalities involved. And their principles…Something is off" (97). Whereas *Mimicking of Known Success* involves a clash between differing, often violent opinions on when and how humans might return to an environmentally repaired and reconstructed Earth, *Unnecessary Obstacles* concerns itself with how we look at ourselves and those around us in the context of the societies in which we reside.

On a personal level, we see it with Pleiti, who is filled with doubts and insecurities about her relationship with Mossa:

> …had I made it clear to her that it (Mossa's home on Io) only mattered to me because it mattered to her? The thought that she might class me as an ignorant tourist, seeing only the surface, was like a pang of acid in my throat. Or maybe she hadn't wanted me to see how much it mattered to her?..Round and round on their immutable rings went my thoughts, as I stared at the endless fog. (85)

Self-doubt and deliberate self-occlusion are also unnecessary obstacles Pleiti places in her path, as she confesses to Mossa her true feelings about her own dream of a renewed Earth: "I never really thought it was possible. I mean, reading about Earth, it was like…reading about Oz, or Pern, or Quistable. You want it to be your reality so much, but you also know it isn't real. I believed in what I was doing, rationally I thought – think – it can happen, but it always felt… insubstantial somehow" (160). And on a more macro level, we see in the novella's denouement how ideology and a heedless rush towards independence can themselves throw up obstacles such as self-deception or a romantic communal identity rooted in difficulty. As Mossa notes near

the novella's conclusion, "I dislike self-delusion. I particularly dislike when one or a few people's chosen delusion is powerful enough to draw in others. And the idolization of the settlers for what they could not avoid as opposed to for their choices, the donkulous invention of obstacles to try and achieve the same status…" (192). When the final mystery is revealed, Pleiti sadly observes that "I looked again at the bare platform, sparse of society, precarious in every way, and wondered again at our human tendency to romanticize the imposition of unnecessary obstacles into our lives" (176). It's the narrative moment where Pleiti expresses for the reader a fundamental human fallacy—in space or Earthside—that so many of our problems are of our own making, and that we risk a great deal of harm in making those problems seem inevitable and unavoidable.

We are, or should be anyway, long past the romantic literary trend of the individualist conquerors and pioneers of space; we now reside in an age in which we must, if we are to survive as a species and a planet, come together in a greater cooperative spirit and sense of common humanity and truly recognize the worth of one another. We must realize a world where the disappeared are considered worthy of finding. This is an increasingly popular trend in the genre, from authors such as Becky Chambers, Annalee Newitz, Carrie Vaughn, Travis Baldree (in a fantasy setting) and Martha Wells (Murderbot may be constantly exasperated by humans, but its journey is one towards greater understanding and feelings of care both by and towards itself); Older's tales of Mossa and Pleiti as they negotiate both their own feelings towards each other and the obstacles we deliberately throw in each other's paths as we work our way through interplanetary existence are valuable additions to this growing canon of authors who face uncertain human futures with optimism, who believe in the never-ending capacities of humans to learn and thus to remove the unnecessary obstacles that come our way. The best detective fiction relies not only on solving puzzles but on the detective learning new truths about their own abilities and perceptions. As Mossa uncovers the truth of both the crimes she investigates and the unexplored aspects of her own nature, so Pleiti gradually learns to expand her own limits. As she says to Mossa in the novella's final pages, "Our experiences have influenced how I work, for the better. I am grateful to have gone back to Io and seen more of it, even if I did hate the process of getting there…Oh yes, the danger. Well. A little danger is salutary, I think. A tonic" (206). Risk becomes a crucial learning experience, a lesson which might define the entire enterprise of human space travel and colonization, in fact.

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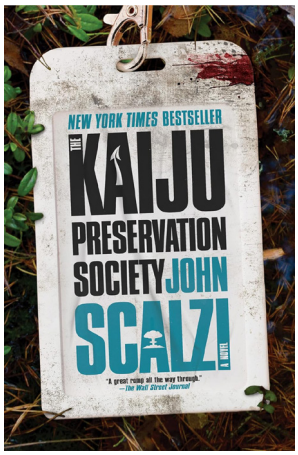
Review of *The Kaiju Preservation Society*

Kristine Larsen

Scalzi, John. *The Kaiju Preservation Society*. TOR, 2022.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hugo Award winner John Scalzi struggled to complete a rather serious novel project before the contracted deadline, but eventually admitted defeat. He, like many of us, embraced the need for self-care, and instead produced what he calls in his lengthy Author's Note a "pop song" of a novel, "meant to be light and catchy," in less than six weeks (262). As he further explains, writing *The Kaiju Preservation Society* "was restorative…. I had fun writing this, and I *needed* to have fun writing this. We all need a pop song from time to time, particularly after a stretch of darkness" (262). However, just as a light-hearted earworm can garner Grammys, Scalzi's replacement assignment was honored with the 2023 Alex Award of the Young Adult Library Services Association and the 2023 Locus Science Fiction Foundation Award for science fiction novel.

In the early months of COVID, first-person narrator and English Ph.D. program drop-out Jamie Gray finds that their six-month term at the management side of a start-up food delivery service does not go as planned. Reduced to delivering food for said company to make ends meet, Jamie meets a past acquaintance who offers employment at a mysterious company known only by the abbreviation KPS. The job is described as working with "large animals" in an isolated location for months at a time. After signing various ominous non-disclosure agreements, Jamie and several likewise underemployed Ph.D.s step through a nuclear-powered dimensional doorway in Greenland into a parallel Earth. But instead of a commercial 'Kaiju Park' featuring genetically engineered monsters, this is a natural ecosystem—albeit one featuring a completely alien biology—that scientists study while simultaneously preventing the kaiju from entering our world.

As Jamie and the reader discover, nuclear reactions "thin the barrier between universes" (41), allowing travel between these two Earths. The start of humanity's nuclear age allowed several kaiju—who are themselves largely powered by their own internal nuclear reactors—to enter into our world in the 1950s. Although instinctively attracted to a new source of food—the fallout from nuclear bomb tests—the kaiju were ill-adapted to our world and quickly succumbed, although rumors of eyewitness accounts became the impetus for the original Godzilla film. An international project, KPS, was created to keep the kaiju on their side of the barrier while studying them in secret. Once funded by governments, billionaires now provide much of the support, leading to

the inevitable: celebrity tourism. While the official gateways are tightly controlled by international agreement, the threat from unrestricted black-market doorways looms large; therefore, KPS also protects the kaiju from humanity, for as in the case of much of science fiction, the real monsters often wear a human face.

After surviving a number of threats posed by the wild kaiju and their parasites (bringing to mind a slightly kinder and gentler *Cloverfield*), Jamie and the scientists are drawn into a predictable conspiracy involving evil capitalists and the disappearance of a kaiju named Bella and her eggs during a conveniently scheduled shutdown of the official gateways. The rescue mission to return the kaiju and its young to their native climate (before Bella's bioreactor becomes unstable and causes a nuclear disaster in our world) includes numerous mad scientist tropes, befitting the general timbre of the novel.

While the physical gateway between worlds is rather underwhelming (compared to passing through garage doors on opposite sides of a room), Scalzi does due diligence in world-building and scientific speculation for a novel of this relatively short length, especially on the biological side. As explained in an interview, Scalzi felt the need to provide a reasonable scientific basis for his giant creatures, explaining "God knows I love a Godzilla movie, but the physics of Godzilla are all wrong" (Sorg). The resulting fictional lifecycle of the kaiju is interesting; as a kaiju's internal bioreactor can go critical, nuclear explosions are a natural part of the alien ecosystem. The resulting energy attracts other animals to feed upon the 'carcass,' providing a consistent explanation as to why the first hydrogen bomb tests attracted kaiju through the weakened dimensional wall into our world. The use of artificially developed kaiju pheromones to control kaiju behavior (including encouraging Bella and her reluctant mate Edward, members of an apparently endangered species, to breed) reminds one of a throwaway line involving T-Rex urine in *Jurassic Park 3* (during a scene in which a young boy uses the liquid to scare away most of the island's dinosaurs). Although some critics have poked holes in his science (e.g., Howe), the kaiju origin story is plausible enough for light science fiction. Indeed, this "pop song" of a novel certainly doesn't take itself too seriously, delighting in numerous pop culture references to such disparate works as *Stranger Things*, *Pacific Rim*, *Doom*, *Twilight*, *The Incredibles*, and even *Pitch Perfect* for good measure. There are the expected direct nods to Japanese kaiju films, such as the names of the KPS bases playing homage to the original *Godzilla*'s director and producer. Subtle celebrity tourist name dropping includes the COVID-era president's adult sons and possibly *Bad Astronomer* blogger Phil Plait.

Yet, for all these details there is scant description of the physical details of the individual kaiju (except for size), Jamie offering that human terms such as *eyes* and *tentacles* are insufficient to capture the unearthly physiology. Additionally, similar to protagonist Chris Shane of Scalzi's *Lock In* (2014) and *Head On* (2018), Jamie Gray's gender is never revealed. Scalzi openly embraces this (as well as the inclusion of trans or non-binary characters in the novel), offering that it is "reflecting the world I know" as well as the context of the communities described in the novel (Scalzi, "A Month"). Scalzi is also quick to warn in the same blog post that although Wil Wheaton

reads the audiobook, this is not a clue to Jamie's gender. Given that *The Kaiju Preservation Society* will probably be coming to a screen (small or large) near you before long, Jamie's casting may provide an opportunity for a non-binary actor.

Reflecting on each reader's individual gendering of his protagonist, Scalzi offers that "what they decide brings an interesting and personal spin to the book, and I like that. It's also fun for people to interrogate their own defaults and what they mean for them as a reader and human" (Scalzi, "A Month"). Such interdisciplinary opportunities for open discussion, as well as the novel's short length, eminent readability, and embrace of pop culture references, make it a natural for inclusion in the classroom, especially in a first-year experience course. The overall depiction of a pointedly diverse group of young Ph.D.s specializing in biology, astronomy/physics, and organic chemistry/geology—self-described as "the foreign legion for nerds" (32)—as heroes brings to mind not so much *Jurassic Park* but the John Carpenter film *Prince of Darkness* (without the cringy, red flag sexual relationships) and could spark useful discussions on depictions of science and scientists in popular culture. While Jamie is not a scientist, their master's thesis on sci fi depictions of bioengineering is deemed appropriate preparation for the team. The group's acceptance of Jamie as an equal—despite the lack of a Ph.D. and a background in the humanities rather than the sciences—is refreshing, reflecting current efforts to incorporate the arts into STEM education (the so-called STEAM movement). The ensemble nature of this 'fellowship' of the kaiju also reflects the process of science in an excitingly realistic way. The world is saved not by a lone genius, but a group of amusingly ordinary scientists, who tell bad jokes and delight in scatological humor. Although they utterly fail at being cool superheroes, through friendship and a convenient character twist good triumphs over evil. The setting of the novel during the COVID pandemic also encourages discussion of individual experiences during that time, reflecting how we, like the characters in the novel, were largely isolated from society, with the exception of our nearest family or friends.

While *The Kaiju Preservation Society* takes its reader on a relatively satisfying joy ride befitting a summer pop song, it will be interesting to see how it, like the musical ditty, holds up in five years, as we move farther away from the pandemic and our memories of the experience fade.

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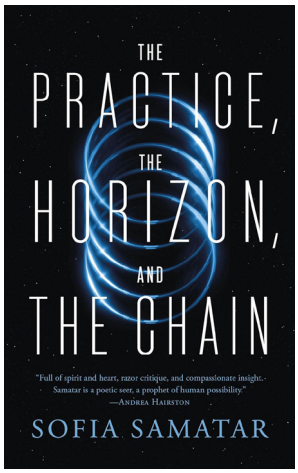
Review of *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain*

Timothy S. Miller

Sofia Samatar. *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain*. Tordotcom, 2024. Trade paperback. 128 pg. $18.99 Print, $4.99 EBook. ISBN 9781250881809. EBook ISBN 9780756415433.



To describe Sofia Samatar's carefully crafted new book as a "campus novel in space" would risk misleading potential readers into expecting a lighthearted romp through sci-fi versions of the satirical scenarios typical of the genre. Yet it is not not a campus novel in space, even though it reads quite differently from those earthbound satires of academe. David Lodge's exemplars of that genre are taking place just out of sight, on a different starship, at a different social echelon. There is a satirical dimension to *The Practice*, as in the book's bitter and not so comical critique of higher education's self-satisfaction with superficial DEI initiatives. As the story unfolds, well-meaning allies prove not so well-meaning after all, and institutionally-sponsored celebrations of "Multiplicity" ring hollow because they change nothing fundamental about broken systems continuing to do real violence. In Samatar's narrative world, as in ours, it is difficult to accomplish genuine justice work when our institutions rest on a foundation of exploited labor and inequalities of obscene proportions.

The Practice uses its science fictional novum to literalize those labor relations and social inequalities into a three-tiered caste system that governs life aboard a fleet of mining ships trawling the universe for minerals to sustain human life indefinitely. The book therefore also belongs to the generation ship subgenre of SF. While interstellar ark novels can be sprawling in terms of their worldbuilding and their page count, this one is spare; Kim Stanley Robinson's hefty *Aurora* (2015) is more typical. What is strikingly different about Samatar's premise is the absence of the lofty collective goal that propels most generation ship narratives: colonizing an untamed planet, or seeking a new home for humanity after some tragic fate has befallen Earth. We do learn from an aside in *The Practice* that Earth has suffered from rising sea levels, perhaps to the point of uninhabitability, but the book nevertheless holds out no hope for a new Eden: the ships are all we have, recalling the 2019 film *Aniara* with its accidental interstellar ark. The goal of Samatar's fleet of generation ships is more suggestively tied to profit, and certainly not collective profit, as wealth still funnels to families associated with the mining company that runs the vessels. *The Practice* relies on a reader's understanding of the basic parameters of a generation starship narrative without belaboring any details, ultimately in order to turn the premise sideways in pursuit of now

defamiliarized but all too familiar subjects. In this sense, the narrative operates much like Ursula K. Le Guin's ecofeminist antiwar parable *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), which drew on the planetary colonization plot of so much "Golden Age" SF to critique the Vietnam War and other engines of destruction. The two books are also comparably short, and yet there are depths to both, as well as an urgency.

Below the new interstellar aristocracy imagined in The Practice are two oppressed castes, the lowest compelled to labor in deplorable conditions in the darkness of the Hold, literally chained to one another, effectively enslaved, and treated as nonpersons. In the middle is the protagonist's caste, made up of people who live in fresher air and wider open spaces with the mining class, but have limited career and education options, and must wear an ankle bracelet that functions as an only slightly less obtrusive chain. The ankleted know that they are only a single misdemeanor away from the Hold themselves: they know to be grateful and have internalized rationalizations for their place. Our unnamed protagonist is one of the few ankleted professors at the ship's university and also the daughter of one of the only Chained ever to have been raised up to ankleted status via a scholarship. Both the ankleted and the Chained are defined by their past participles, what has been done to them: only members of the upper caste are treated as individuals with names worth recording. Samatar traces some intricacies of this new social order, giving us glimpses into interactions among the classes that resonate with but are rarely fully mappable onto the complexities of our own social systems. For example, the ankleted do not have access to smartphones, and we hear that one of the professor's colleagues "never liked to use it in front of the woman, a sensitivity she appreciated" (16). Another less-liked colleague shows no such restraint, but we might wonder whether the former colleague's "sensitivity" is really a demonstration of tact, or instead a result of embarrassment about his privilege, or some other combination of emotions and social dynamics. The phones, as a symbol of class and power differential, also carry additional layers of significance, we later learn.

The plot centers on the (nominally) successful outcome of what is effectively a DEI program in space, the relocation of a Hold laborer with a talent for drawing to become an ankleted university student. The woman has expended an extraordinary degree of effort to revive this lapsed "University Scholarship for the Chained," and such details attest to Samatar's deep familiarity—and frustration—with the workings of academic bureaucracy and the realities of academic precarity, along with difficult colleagues, unequal access to university resources, time-consuming committee work that never seems to amount to anything, and the threat of burnout as the inevitable reward for caring about one's work and one's students. The story of *The Practice*, then, is the story of a woman trying to do something meaningful within the systems of power that seem to exist precisely in order to prevent her from doing anything of the sort and in the end attempting to learn new strategies for collective survival and flourishing. It is also the story of the boy who is acted upon by this scholarship program; the first sentence of the novel deploys the passive voice in a way that speaks to the treatment of persons in the Hold as objects: "The boy was taken upstairs without warning" (9). In the "outside" world above, he must endure the indignities and mockeries

that come with being the scholarship kid, and from peers and professors alike, including "the insult of being taught about himself […] in anthropology class" (24), and learn how to perform to expectations: "Dr. Angela's particular demand was for an easy camaraderie and warmth" (67). He is supposed to be grateful, of course, for this rare opportunity. He is supposed to make it okay that the rest of the Chained are still chained down below.

Increasingly aware of all of this and increasingly sensitive to the institutional forces curtailing her efforts to effect change, multiple times the woman asks herself the direct question that has been on many of our own academic minds here in 2024, "*Can the University be a place of both training and transformation?*" (63). The narrative voice directly answers that question in the negative, but eventually finds hope in a mantra that centers individuals rather than institutions: "Start with one" (94). That imperative, however, does not simply endorse the scholarship plan to uplift the boy, that single Chained student. Samatar rejects vertical metaphors entirely, especially the verticality inherent in the idea of "upward mobility," that promise of so-many DEI initiatives, the education system more broadly, and the American Dream itself: "It seemed to him that up was their favorite word" (29). It emerges over the course of the story that the concept known as "the Practice" is tied to image of "the Horizon" from unremembered Earth, the horizon framed as a challenge to such vertical thinking: "to gaze on it was to look neither up nor down" (57). Instead, the book encourages horizontal thinking, a reclamation of that image of "the Chain" linking you to your fellows. The book's underclasses are united in their marginalization, united even by the chains that link them together, and especially by those chains. The anklets—and even the literal iron chains—link, connect, and unite those bound by them. That is not what the chains or anklets are intended for, but it is something that they do. Because, we learn, the anklets are networked with one another, the ankleted can feel the presence of others through that network, and it turns out that technologies used to dominate and discipline can also be used in other ways.

At various times *The Practice* seems to be about social inequality in general: prisons and for-profit prisons in particular ("Look, the Hold is a business, get it?" [102]), the Middle Passage and its reverberations (the chain links the living to each other but also to the past and to the dead), higher education and its promises both kept and unkept, and institutions and state violence of all kinds. In the end, though, it is likely about solidarity above all else, forging links on a different kind of chain. It is about solidarity and also education, but education rethought beyond something that occurs only within institutional settings. Samatar dedicates the book to her teachers and her students, and the story affirms the duality inherent in the word education itself. We see the professor's education of others, but also her own education, as she learns from the boy and from his own first teacher, a character known as the prophet who never leaves the Hold. From them the woman learns to grasp after "an outside knowledge" beyond the different ways that academic disciplines have sought to carve up human understanding (104). After the woman secures permission to visit the prophet as part of a "community engagement project," the uplifted

academic and the immiserated subaltern, along with their student from the next generation, work together to build a common language that transcends what any one of them could have achieved alone.

Professionally, the woman is a professor of "design" who specializes in the study of play, and we are treated to snippets of her research on children's folk games featuring inventive uses of "castoff" or garbage, always framed with the appropriate academic jargon that she has mastered despite her yearning for a different kind of language: "it was necessary to set up her argument with theories familiar to the discipline, to couch her work in terms her audience knew" (41). The book takes a keen interest in castoff, garbage, "the potential of abandoned things" (103), and abandoned people. When meeting in the Hold with the prophet, the professor drops the jargon and defines design's capacity to rearrange "the things that were" to create "a new way of being." The prophet identifies this ambition with the concept he calls "the Practice" (66). If the Practice is "the longing for understanding" (29), as the boy thinks of it, it has some kind of affinity with the academic enterprise—the non-institutional part—and also with art, which he experiences when drawing as "the desire to breathe and know and live" (36). Together the three of them talk and think, and sometimes play those children's games, "building imagined castles in the gloom" (66), a fair summation of the book's own ambitions to hope for change against a rather grim backdrop (in the future, in the present).

The most extended explication of what exactly Samatar's title means appears in a page-long aside positioned near the book's center. This passage likely occupies a central position only because, in this view of the world, everything is a potential center, a node in the reconceptualized chain that has even rewritten the verticality of the Great Chain of Being: "*the Chain of Being is not up and down*" (64). Literally and metaphorically, too, "The Hold was in the center" (70). Throughout the book, Samatar evinces the complexities of space, temporality, and the metaphors and ways of thinking they engender. The Acknowledgments reference Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, as well as the work of Christina Sharpe and Dionne Brand, and their collective influence definitely shows. The syllabus practically writes itself, and *The Practice, the Horizon, and the Chain* is vital new reading for scholars and students of all kinds.

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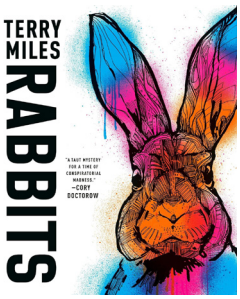
Review of *Rabbits*

Brianna Best

Miles, Terry. *Rabbits*. Del Rey, 2021. Hardcover. 432 pg. $9.49. ISBN-10 1984819658.



Rabbits by Terry Miles builds off Miles' podcast by the same name, picking up where the podcast ends: at the beginning of a new iteration of a recurring alternate reality name, or ARG. This ARG, unofficially known as Rabbits, involves finding patterns in the world that supposedly allow the player to see the true texture of the universe. While the book is technically a standalone addition to the world of Rabbits, it's probably better to come to it after listening to the two seasons of the podcast. The novel features a cast of characters who already know a bit about the game and there is somewhat of a presumption that the reader will, too. In the first scene, our main character K is hosting a Q&A about Rabbits in an arcade; the first sentence of the book is a question K poses to the audience: "What do you know about the game?" (5). This is also a direct address to the reader: are you new, or do you already know what's going on here? While there is some exposition, it's hard for me to say whether someone completely unfamiliar with the podcast would find the introduction to the world sufficient.

As the novel begins, the game has been dormant for years, since the tenth iteration ended. At least that's what K thinks. At the end of this Q&A, they are approached by Alan Scarpio, a billionaire rumored to have won the sixth iteration of Rabbits. He asks for their help because he believes something is wrong with the game. After this meeting, and after conveniently promising K more information "tomorrow," Scarpio is declared missing. K only has Scarpio's phone to figure out what has happened to him.

So how do you play the game? You find patterns and follow them until it starts to seem like the very threads of reality are unraveling. After K gets hold of Scarpio's phone, they start to follow the trail: the wallpaper on Scarpio's phone is a dog, but Scarpio is allergic to dogs, so they suspect this picture is a clue. While examining the photo, K notices that the tag on the dog's collar says "Rabarber," rhubarb in Danish. This reminds K that during their first meeting, Scarpio ate rhubarb pie and referenced an audio file on the phone of rhubarb growing. The file on the phone seems to be a complete dead end at first. There are no hidden messages in the audio itself. However, when they transfer the file to K's laptop, they realize that it is larger than it should be for what it is. They find a hidden, extracted video that beings with the text "Jeff Goldblum does not belong in this world," and then goes on to depict a gruesome event that, according to everyone they subsequently interview, did not and could not have happened in this world (67). Now, they are playing Rabbits.

Oscillating between present-day events and flashback narration, Rabbits takes its characters on a search for the ultimate truth. Rabbits is for those who want to take off the blindfold and see the truth of reality, the universe, everything.

While the novel and the world of *Rabbits* is addictive, it suffers from the same narrative problem as Miles' podcasts. Like the others, *The Black Tapes* and *Tanis* particularly, *Rabbits* asks what deep, ancient, unknowable mysteries really exist under the veneer of everyday reality. These texts set up intriguing mysteries that promise world-shattering answers. But all three also fail to deliver a satisfying answer. In this case, the end of the book is a confounding mess of events that may or may not have happened. Because the answer to the questions pitched in the very first episode of the podcast has to do with the meaning and structure of the universe, each text either has to defer the answer or revisit the same answers repeatedly. The novel, while offering a couple of small resolutions to the larger mystery, does the same. The sequel to *Rabbits*, *The Quiet Room*, does finally offer some satisfying concrete resolutions. You will eventually get answers there. Maybe not all of them, but maybe enough.

So, what keeps fans coming back? The alluring thing about *Rabbits* is the game and the conspiracies that it spawns. K says in the very first few pages, "This was the thing that itched your skull, that gnawed at the part of your brain that desperately wanted to believe in something more. This was the thing that made you venture out in the middle of the night in the pouring rain to visit a pizza joint-slash-video arcade….You came because this mysterious 'something' felt different" (5). There is something about a mystery, particularly one that promises to reveal the truth behind the curtains, that draws people in. These texts speak to the deep disconnect that many people feel with modern, everyday life and come from a desire to find something more meaningful underneath it all. In the case of Rabbits, we see a text that is preoccupied with the idea that there must be some underlying pattern underneath the seeming randomness of existence.

On the surface, *Rabbits* may not seem traditionally science fictional. It takes place in the present day and mostly venerates older, not newer, technology, but it asks the same questions that other science fiction texts ask: is there some ultimate truth about the universe and what else is out there just beyond our perception? What technology might be needed to get to that other place? What is the relationship between past, present, and future? Despite its flaws, it is an intriguing world precisely because it promises the discovery of something bigger than us, some mechanism underneath it all that works tirelessly to keep the world turning. You must make it to the end of *The Quiet Room* to get the closure you want, but it's a fun ride all the way there. *R U playing?*

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MEDIA REVIEWS

Image by anonymoous

Review of *Scavengers Reign*

Phoenix Alexander

Bennett, Joe and Huettner, Charles, creators. *Scavengers Reign*. Green Street Pictures, HBO MAX, MAX, Titmouse, 2023.

Scavengers Reign marks an exciting and all-too-seldom new arrival in science fiction television: one that enfolds DNA from familiar SF narratives to create something fresh, and vibrant, and unsettling. The twelve-part series follows a group of survivors from the Demeter, a damaged cargo ship, who find themselves stranded on a planet populated by creatures that resemble the love-children of the imaginations of Salvador Dalí and Moebius. The trope of stranded colonists is a familiar one, but *Scavengers Reign* distinguishes itself through strong visual storytelling that manages to avoid the sometimes exposition-heavy world-building of science fiction, as well as through its convoluted and at times grotesque ecology. Boundaries are porous in this world; everything can and may be used as fuel, or food, or an aid to traverse the diverse environs of Vesta—that is, unless it kills you first.

The cast of characters is strong and manages to avoid clichés. Azi (Wunmi Mosaku) and Levi (Alia Shawkat), an automaton, try to maintain a self-sufficient encampment on Vesta. However, Levi's circuitry becomes infiltrated with rhizomatic organic matter that begins to affect their behavior in odd ways (they bury a spanner in the opening episode: a small act that has a wonderful pay-off, later). Another pair, Sam (Bob Stephenson) and Ursula (Sunita Mani), are attempting to contact the still-orbiting Demeter to bring it down to the planet, and are similarly adept at using the flora and fauna, often in quite gruesome ways, to their advantage.

The show is not without its antagonists; as well as the predatory and bizarre lifeforms of Vesta, the characters find themselves in a race against time to reach the Demeter before Kamen (Ted Travelstead)—a pitiful figure responsible for the fate of the ship, and one who falls under the sway of the 'Hollow,' a malevolent telekinetic creature—and Kris (Pollyanna McIntosh), a ruthless mercenary. Indeed, after the first few episodes that introduce the ecology of Vesta, the drama wisely centers on the always-compelling human characters. As their storylines converge, the series starts to show its influences more nakedly in a largely satisfying manner—right up to the resolution, wherein the creators shy away from the murderous dream-logic of their world-building.

The surreal visuals (and discordant and often startling sound design) owe much to the disturbing classic from René Laloux, *La Planète Sauvage*, as well as the technicolor marvels and gentle ecological subtexts of *Spirited Away* or *Princess Mononoke*. These influences do not always work harmoniously. The resolution of Kamen and the 'Hollow's' storyline, for instance, is particularly jarring, and feels disingenuous to the brutality of the world-building established in the former half of the show. Kamen's and the creature's redemptions feel odd, and unearned, almost exactly paralleling the character of 'No Face' in *Spirited Away*, wherein a monstrous, gluttonous creature finds peace and rehabilitation. There, it worked because the creature is a spirit; in the SF universe of *Scavengers Reign*, the conceit falls a little flat. Lurching from violence to rehabilitation seemingly for the sake of it, the narrative here starts to unsettle the integrity of Vesta and raises questions such as: Are its creatures truly malevolent, or are they just inscrutable? What do they 'want?' Why does everything function so symbiotically, on the one hand, and so violently on the other? Why do some human characters die, while others are changed?

These questions bring to mind yet another science-fiction/horror text: Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. There, again, ambiguity is maintained more successfully, with Area X seeming a truly alien intelligence (both in the novel and its cinematic adaptation) that nonetheless operates with parameters and rules that both viewers and the in-world characters are not privy to. *Scavengers Reign* plays with similar themes but loses some of its ambiguity, and thematic consistency, as the episodes progress.

It's a problem exaggerated by the short film the series started life as. 'Scavengers' (2015) sees an unnamed (and unspeaking) man and woman manipulate alien lifeforms in increasingly elaborate and convoluted ways that culminates in an orb of blue liquid excreted from a flying titan; upon submerging their heads in it, the characters experience powerful visions of something I won't spoil here. Whereas the ecology of the series-length *Scavengers Reign* is far more convincing, it still at times comes across as science fictional Tetris, drawing attention to visual pattern and interplay in a way that is deeply satisfying on a sensory, if not a narrative, level.

If I'm seeming overly critical, it's because I truly do love *Scavengers Reign* and the genres it combines (the epilogue hints at a larger and more terrifying universe, and promises to shift the show, should it have a second season, into a far different tonal register). Make no mistake: this is first-rate science fiction and top-tier animation, of any standard: one that manages to synthesize its references into something truly unique. It has much to say about the labor of space, for instance, in the way that *Alien* is a tale of 'truckers in space' and their concomitant mis/treatment as expendable capital by world-spanning organization (the opening of *Scavengers Reign* sees a tense, but brief, exchange between the larger fleet, remorsefully leaving the stricken Demeter to its fate as an acceptable loss) In contrast, the world of Vesta shows us that nothing is truly lost, in strikingly un-Capitalist and irrational logic. Nothing is wasted: it is ingested, transfigured, or consumed. If the series doesn't quite reach the nihilism of something like Joanna Russ's *We Who Are About To…*, which fiercely refuses any and all attempts of human life trying to situate itself and flourish in unfamiliar kingdoms, it also avoids the anti-colonial message of something like *The*

Word for World is Forest. Instead, it poses a challenge: by all means, make contact with other, make planetfall—just know that the colonizer/colonized dynamic is short-circuited, here, and if the characters want to survive on Vesta, they will have to make peace with the undoing of categories of every kind (the biological and the mechanical, the living and the dead, the hostile and the peaceful). A love letter to the genre (the final episode alone contains references to *Aliens* and *2001:A Space Odyssey*), *Scavengers Reign* will, I hope, lean further into the uniqueness of its vision as it continues, making landfall on new, and stranger, worlds.

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Review of *Dune: Part Two*

Mark McCleerey

Dune: Part Two. Dir. Denis Villeneuve. Warner Brothers/Legendary, 2024.

Denis Villeneuve's eagerly awaited second half of his adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* lives up to the anticipation. Like his first *Dune* (2021), *Part Two* combines captivating images and sounds with equally compelling thematic content. I will present here a broad synopsis of it, along with some remarks about what it has to say about the history of colonialism, and then consider the film's engagement with religion, particularly messianic faiths.

Villeneuve's first *Dune*, set thousands of years in the future, traces the arrival of House Atreides on the planet Arrakis to take over the mining of its enormously valuable spice. This leads to the House's fall and near-annihilation at the hands of traitors, including the Emperor (Christopher Walken). The Atreides' scion, Paul (Timothée Chalamet), and his mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), survive—aided by Fremen Fedaykin, the formidable warriors of the wasteland. *Dune: Part Two* picks up the story shortly afterwards. Paul and Jessica help the Fremen fend off and destroy a platoon of Harkonnen troopers, the latter House having re-taken control of mining operations.

With this sequence, the movie aligns itself with science fiction films that advance certain perspectives on a specific aspect of Western colonialism. The difference between the combat methods in *Part Two*, here and in other scenes, strongly evokes the French and U.S. failures in Vietnam to subdue resistance fighters from the 1950s to the early 1970s. We see this clearly in the contrast between the Harkonnens' overreliance on technology, including full body armor, and the natives' superior guerilla tactics, rooted in intimacy with their environment. Other films have similarly reconstructed this, including *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand 1983) and *Avatar* (James Cameron 2009). Peter Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) touches on it too, albeit with a satirical bent: The film indicates in its conclusion that the overequipped imperialists will ultimately triumph. Such metaphorical constructions of past wars in movies are not uncommon; more broadly, many films "provide allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray aspects of an era" (Kellner 14). The Vietnam War in particular has left a complicated legacy, within both U.S. culture at large (Isserman and Kazin 67) and science fiction cinema.

Afterwards, Paul and Jessica join the Fremen community of Sietch Tabr, one of many Fremen underground redoubts. Jessica succeeds the sietch's Bene Gesserit reverend mother by surviving a dangerous ritual. In time, the Harkonnens find themselves continually thwarted by further Fremen

attacks—even more so after Paul, now known as a messianic prophet called Muad'Dib, becomes the Fedaykin's chief strategist. Eventually, Paul cements his status as the Fremen's messiah at a formal gathering of sietch leaders. Exploiting newly acquired powers of historical and prescient vision, he declaims himself the supreme ruler of Arrakis. Alarmed at the disruption of spice flow, the Emperor comes to Arrakis, as do representatives of the other Great Houses. The Fremen defeat the Emperor's troops and Paul ascends to the throne. As the other Great Houses refuse to accept this forced succession, the Fremen Fedaykin prepare to attack them as an act of holy war (the word "jihad" appears frequently in the novel). Paul's last words in the film are the chillingly ironic "Take them to paradise."

SFRA Review editor Ian Campbell has argued that the 2021 *Dune*'s critique of the white savior narrative is, although admirable, not especially noteworthy: Even mainstream commentators easily discerned it. As I agree with this, I will mention only that *Part Two* continues this worthwhile critical interrogation. I will, however, offer some thoughts about a related yet more compelling dimension of the film: its strong critique of messianic religion. Villeneuve takes this from the novel and builds on it in several ways, three of which I will briefly explore.

The first is Paul's prescient visions of a future jihad that will spread throughout the galaxy and claim billions of lives in his name. These begin in the first *Dune* and become more vivid and terrifying in *Part Two*. The key moment comes when the survivors of a Harkonnen assault on Sietch Tabr prepare to seek safety in the south, and Paul refuses to accompany them—knowing that to do so will be to invite the genocide of his visions. He later relents, and the jihad begins shortly afterwards. The power of messianic thinking and its appeal to the messianic figures themselves, even an enlightened one such as Paul, is overwhelming.

The appeal is not so great to Chani (Zendaya), Paul's Fremen mentor and lover, which leads us to a second way in which *Part Two* challenges messianic faith. Early on, the film establishes Chani's skepticism toward the prophesies, and she remains steadfast. Moreover, her skepticism flows logically from one of the most notable improvements that Villeneuve and co-screenwriter Jon Spaihts have made to Herbert's novel. Though the book paints Chani as a skilled and ruthless warrior in her right, she nevertheless submits almost completely to Paul's will once the two begin their personal relationship. Villeneuve's films, however, endow her with far more agency—which includes, among other things, adamant resistance to Paul's status as the Fremen's messianic leader. She expresses nothing but contempt for the very notion of the Lisan al-Gaib, the "voice from the outer world." She insists that the Fremen must free themselves from their oppressors, should never rely on help from any outsider.

Not even Stilgar (Javier Bardem), the leader of Sietch Tabr, can convince her. For example, when he adduces Jessica's success in the reverend mother ritual as partial fulfilment of the Fremen's messianic prophecy, Chani angrily rejoins, "Her people wrote that!" Later she remarks, "You want to control people? You tell them a messiah will come. Then they'll wait…for centuries!" She maintains this resistance to the end of the movie—indeed, to the very last shot. The film

bolsters all this with other Fremen's skepticism; for example, one of the elders admonishes Stilgar, "Your faith is playing tricks on you."

Finally, *Part Two* critiques messianic faith in a third way with its compelling (if somewhat oblique) integration of the novel's Missionaria Protectiva, an ancient Bene Gesserit program designed to plant myths and prophesies on worlds throughout the Imperium with the goal of making their populations receptive—and vulnerable—to the Bene Gesserit's grand designs for humanity. Although never mentioned by name, both of Villeneuve's *Dune* movies allude to it, via several characters, including the Emperor's daughter Irulan (Florence Pugh), Paul, the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling), and Chani. The latter's aforementioned claim ("her people") is an example of this. Another example comes when Paul, speaking to Jessica, refers to "your Bene Gessert propaganda." By using this element of the novel in conjunction with Chani's and other characters' skepticism, and with Paul's visions, *Dune: Part Two* positions messianic faith as a dangerous and manipulative falsehood.

In sum, *Dune: Part Two* joins the tradition of science fiction cinema's discursive interaction with human history—specifically, with explorations of Western colonialism and certain forms of religion. If Villeneuve makes a third *Dune* film, it too will be highly anticipated, due in part to how he might expand on all this.

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Review of *Fallout*, season 1

Mehdi Achouche

Fallout. Wagner, Graham and Geneva Robertson-Diworet, creators and showrunners. Amazon Prime Video, 2024.

Although Fallout is based on a successful series of role-playing video games (the first one launched in 1997), no prior knowledge of the franchise is necessary to watch the highly enjoyable TV adaptation of the same name. Set within the same narrative continuity but based on an original story, the series takes place (mostly) in the post-apocalyptic year 2296 (farther than any of the games has reached so far), 219 years after a nuclear war wiped out most of humanity. The plot follows three different protagonists as they amble along the customary radioactive, mutant-infested wasteland, each on a quest for the same gruesome object—a severed head—which holds a mysterious secret and will be the opportunity for them to cross paths.

Since their ascension to prominence in the late 1960s, post-apocalyptic narratives have become a fully-fledged genre in their own right, with literally hundreds of films and TV series (not least of which 2023's *The Last of Us*, also based on a video game) released since 2020 alone (the pandemic might have helped boost the genre, although it hardly needed the encouragement). Despite this crowded context, *Fallout* manages to feel both different and fresh, notably because of its self-reflective nature as well as its highly unsettling tonal shifts. The show's trademark might in fact be the way it unexpectedly veers from poignant character drama to sardonic comedy to surrealistic, slow-motion musical flourishes, sometimes within the same scene, as exemplified in the opening of the first episode.

The presence of Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, the brains behind *Westworld*, as executive producers (and as the director of the first three episodes in the former's case), partly explains both the tone and the metafictional nature of the show, along with its complex network of storylines weaving interrelated stories across differing timelines. Like *Westworld*, the TV adaptation borrows heavily from both science fiction and the Western genres (with ghouls and zombies for good measure), and like them and much of Nolan and Joy's work, it interrogates, in a macabre but highly entertaining manner, the nature of our relationship to science, technology and utopianism.

A series of flashbacks interspersed in each of the eight episodes of season one brings us back to a uchronic 21st century society that looks a lot like a retrofuturistic 1950s America. This is the show's main opportunity to give full expression to its satirical take on "the American Way of Life,"

as a Clint Eastwood-like Western actor is hired by a major conglomerate for their latest advertising campaign. The (soon to be revealed evil) corporation is selling fallout shelters designed as self-enclosed micro-societies (projects that were actually proposed in the 1950s and 1960s) in which its customers can survive and thrive when the nuclear Armageddon inevitably occurs.

What *Fallout* builds from this premise is a thoughtful commentary not so much on the evils of capitalism ("the spirit of competition" is equated to corporate-friendly Social Darwinism) but on the nature of technological utopianism. As described by Howard P. Segal in his classic study of this ideology, technological utopianism consists of "the belief in the inevitability of progress and in progress precisely as technological progress […] equat[ing] advancing technology with utopia itself" (Segal, p. 1). The essentially capitalistic and consumerist nature of such a belief is slowly deconstructed by the show, which implicitly contrasts the marketing cant of the pre-apocalyptic past (the show uses witty parodies of 1950s TV ads in the same way as the game) with the reality of the post-apocalyptic Wasteland and its ruined billboards. Typically for the genre, utopian intentions are equated with murderous results and with the advent of elitist underground communities masquerading as subterranean utopias (a staple of the genre since the 1970s).

One of the protagonists, Lucy McLean (Ella Purnell), lives in such a sheltered community, Vault 33, a community governed by scientists where homely, uniformed dwellers' belief in science, technology and the need "to keep the candle of civilization lit" makes them feel straight out of a Gene Roddenberry TV series (including the post-apocalyptic show he tried to produce in the early 1970s, *Genesis II*). But because this is 2024, the association of technology and the need to create "the perfect conditions for humanity", as another character puts it, is a strongly ironic one that can only foreshadow disaster.

This is also made clear by the visual association of the shelter with a typical suburban community, where conformity and a naïve belief in science and progress prevail. Likewise, the camera often films the characters in front of retro-looking propaganda posters, while their ideal pastoral world is soon revealed to be an image screened from a video projector. The series is full of such ideas, inviting audiences to make sense of its deconstruction of techno-utopianism on their own.

The fact that this clanky subterranean world is so close to yet another recent post-apocalyptic TV show, 2023's *Silo*, again shows how omnipresent the genre and its themes have become in cinema and on television. But few TV series have managed to offer such an ambitious, thoughtful and hilarious reimagining of the genre as *Fallout*. The series, which has been renewed for a second season, offers fascinating avenues to study the popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives (and their evolution since the 1960s), the combination of different genres (including the so-called Weird Western) as well as the treatment of nuclear-age techno-utopianism—or utopianism in general—in our anti-utopian times. The future of the post-apocalypse has never looked (radioactively) brighter.

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Review of *Ms. Marvel*

Jeremy Brett

Ali, Bisha K., creator. *Ms. Marvel*, Marvel Studios, 2022.

Let's be honest. It's not really the brown girls from Jersey City who save the world. But let's be truly honest; despite what Kamala Khan posits, it sometimes is. Therein lies the fundamental value and purpose of the Marvel limited series *Ms. Marvel*, which introduced fan favorite Kamala to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Kamala (Iman Vellani), a high-spirited Muslim high school student, Pakistani-American and child of immigrants, Avengers fangirl, and a living legacy of familial survival of devastating historical trauma, is a hero unlike any other the MCU has produced. I submit that Kamala is the beautifully positive heroic definition of the MCU going forward, her own experiences, character, and set of ethical values corresponding with her infectious enthusiasm for being a superpowered person, as Tony Stark and Steve Rogers were the guiding and shaping forces of superheroic identity in the MCU's first phases.

It is altogether fitting in this modern multidimensional world, that we move from white male billionaires and blond blue-eyed soldiers as the central poles around which the first generation of Avengers revolved, into a new iteration of heroes marked by youth in all its insecurity, impulsiveness, and confidence, and by the existential dilemma of grappling with world-shattering events and personalities. They face this struggle while still enmeshed in the complex processes of physical, mental, and emotional maturing. Kamala's journey signifies new approaches to televised superhero media, and her introduction to the MCU suggests a definite break with its traditional frame of superhero origins and evolutionary development.

What makes Kamala, and by extension *Ms. Marvel*, different from previous examples of MCU heroes is, above all, her youth and her position at a particular point in time and societal space—Kamala is a young woman who has come of age in a world where superhumans are not only known to exist but frequently interact with society at large beyond the occasional cataclysmic Earth-threatening event. Superpowers are increasingly normalized in these later phases of the MCU, and we start to see the commodification of superheroes not only as pop cultural worship but as sources of attainable merch.

Shots of Kamala's room reveal her devotion to Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, marked not only by her own fan art but by professionally made posters and other objects; Carol, like her fellow Avengers, has become less a god-like being wielding incredible abilities and more a high-

level human celebrity with all the mundane fan devotion fueled by social media that modern fame inspires. It's a bringing down to Earth of powerful people, a new imagining of them, and the formation of new social communities based around their popularity. It's something we see frequently in our reality, and which carries on the Marvel tradition of "real-worlding" heroes and instilling in them human concerns and problems in a realistic New York City. It also reinforces the more sobering societal phenomenon that everything in our modern lives is subject to commercialization and leveraging for somebody's profit, though if we accept the idea that the heroes we make reflect our values, that frame seems sadly appropriate.

In the show's first episode, "Generation Why", we see this new level of popular, more intimate interaction with heroes when Kamala and her genius friend Bruno (Matt Lintz) travel to AvengerCon, a fannish event where fans cosplay as their favorite heroes, merch of all kinds is sold, and fans engage in discussions about different Avengers. Kamala's powers of energy projection reveal themselves at the con—fittingly, while she is dressed as Captain Marvel for a cosplay contest—and the response by congoers is less fear and awe and more instant online popularity through recording on cellphones and uploads to social media. These kinds of responses to heroes have been normalized in the MCU by this point in time, and Kamala herself reacts with enthusiasm to her new abilities. One of the great charms of the series is Vellani's charismatic performance as Kamala, infused with infectious joy and excitement at her new world, which mirrors the actress' own identity as a Marvel fangirl. Vellani's performance defines and centers the series in a way that few other MCU efforts have.

Kamala's singular presence in the evolving MCU is also marked by her identity as a Muslim and a member of an active religious and cultural community. Her interactions with her family, faith, and the *ummah* at large form important parts of the series and her own heroic journey, in a way that most other MCU heroes have not. They tend to, rather, stand isolated from society at large and not utilize their families (with exceptions such as T'Challa, Sam Wilson, Scott Lang, and Jennifer Walters) as sources of strength and support. *Ms. Marvel*, though, *is* marked by caring and loving (sometimes lovingly adversarial) relationships between Kamala, her parents Yusuf and Muneeba (Mohan Kapur and Zenobia Shroff), older brother Aamir (Saagar Shaikh), and friends Bruno and Muslim feminist Nakia (Yasmeen Fletcher), as well as her fellow community members and her kindly imam Sheikh Abdullah (Laith Nakli).

Ms. Marvel signals a new familial and multicultural focus for superheroes as active members of the local communities they serve rather than powerful forces standing aloof, apart and above. A good deal of the series involves the daily life of the Jersey City Muslim community in which Kamala lives and performs her early heroics—important scenes take place during a Muslim wedding, during a street festival at Eid, and in and around the local mosque. And family connections are crucial to Kamala's heroism—the climactic battle against Department of Damage Control (DODC) agents at her high school is accomplished not by Kamala alone, but by cooperating with her friends and brother. *Ms. Marvel* opposes the tradition of the lone hero, instead choosing to embrace the idea of heroic collaboration and the sharing of intellectual and

emotional resources. It is a conceptual strand we see in Kamala again in the 2023 film *The Marvels*, where she excitedly adopts the prospect of allying with Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau. There is a good deal of research potential in Ms. Marvel for exploring the intersection of Islam and popular culture as well as how family and community dynamics play out in superhero media specifically as well as in the larger sphere of Western sf film and television—which so often focuses on individual heroic achievement rather than cooperative problem solving.

Kamala is unable and unwilling to hide her ethnic origins—the mask she wears cannot hide her skin color, and even before her superhero career has truly begun she is racially profiled by DODC, which under obsessed Agent Deever (Alysia Reiner) launches an assault on the civil liberties of the community. The neighborhood is blocked off by government agents, and Deever and her thugs disrespect the mosque leaders with both contempt and warrantless raids, a clear reflection of the American post-9/11 environment and an increasingly surveilled society. Kamala is in and of the world around her in a way that other nonwhite MCU heroes thus far are not. Without, for example, downplaying the hope and inspiration that Black Panthers T'Challa and Shuri create in viewers from Africa and the African Diaspora, it should be noted that they live in a fictional country that deliberately isolated itself from the historical legacies of Western colonialism, avoiding the sorts of harmful outcomes of hostility and prejudice that Kamala and her community must exist within and alongside.

Historical legacy is another vital aspect to the series and to Kamala's identity and character development, again in a way that differs from previous iterations of MCU heroes. Kamala's life and the revelation of her powers (which are channeled through a mysterious bangle passed down from her great-grandmother Aisha (Mehwish Hayat), a 'Clandestine' or 'djinn'—an exile from the Noor Dimension) are tied intimately to the experiences of her family during the displacements of the 1947 Indian Partition, that drove Kamala's grandmother Sana and Sana's human father from their Indian home to the newly created Muslim state of Pakistan. Their escape via a train station jammed with fleeing refugees results in Aisha's death at the hands of her fellow Clandestine Najma (Nimra Bucha), who is desperate to use Aisha's bangle to return home. The series captures well the long shadow of generational trauma that Partition produced, and which resulted in separated families, dead innocents, and lasting religious and political enmities. A rich mine of potential research exists that could use the series as an example of the ways in which pop culture integrates historical events into story.

Kamala is a recipient of this specific historical fallout, not only in her existence as a Muslim whose family came from Karachi to America and whose grandmother still bears intense memories of Partition, but also in the nature of her powers. The bangle she inherits from Sana lets Kamala wield her abilities through access to the Noor, but Bruno discovers that Kamala possesses a genetic mutation that may lie at the foundation of those abilities. Thus, Kamala's powers are likely innate to her as the living product of a union between human and Clandestine, a union forged in the context of a significant historical event. She is tied to her roots, heritage, and community experiences in a unique way, and *Ms. Marvel* sets the stage for a new conception of heroism

that considers the multicultural world in which we live and utilizes the lives and values of underrecognized cultures or those traditionally unrepresented in superhero media. As it turns out, brown girls from Jersey City can, and do, save the world.

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Review of *Poor Things*

Jess Maginity

Poor Things. Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos. Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* offers a rich field of possibilities for scholars of science fiction, especially when considering the film alongside the novel from which it was adapted. Both are interested in the question of perspective and narrative framing; both thoughtfully interrogate the relationship between gender, power, and science; both are engaged with the history of speculative genres and with gothic tropes and Victorian scientific culture in particular. The film would be an interesting object of analysis for projects about the history of science fiction as a genre or a mode or the relationship between contemporary science fiction and history. In the classroom, looking at *Poor Things* as an adaptation would provide the opportunity to think through the aesthetic strategies each artist uses to convey similar thematic concerns in different media, in particular the different toolkits that novels and films have to shape narrative around a distinct perspective or set of perspectives. It could work particularly well in a class dedicated to adaptations of gothic fiction, or even specifically Frankenstein adaptations.

The story begins when mad scientist Dr. Godwin Baxter (Willem Defoe) fishes the corpse of the pregnant Victoria Blessington from a river and implants the fetus's brain into her skull. This procedure creates Bella Baxter (Emma Stone). As Bella's brain rapidly grows into its adult body, we watch her learning how to be a person by following the scientific model of her father-figure, which demands a radically open mind and a willingness to endure socially uncomfortable or even physically painful experiences for the sake of knowledge. This is important as a gendered commentary on the history of science, where women have been explicitly considered objects of scientific inquiry and not its subjects. This scientific mindset often sets her at odds with the irrational patriarchal expectations of the men in her life who both love and seek to imprison her to varying degrees, from the paternal imprisonment of Dr. Baxter to the ineffective policing of her social and sexual behavior by her lovers (Ramy Youssef and Mark Ruffalo) to the ultimately murderous marital imprisonment of Alfie Blessington (Christopher Abbott). The focus follows Bella as she expands her world and experiences it freely in the face of all this attempted male control and finally decides to follow in the footsteps of her more-or-less creator and become a doctor herself.

The movie is adapted from the 1992 novel of the same name by Scottish author Alasdair Gray. The crucial difference between the two is perspective. In a self-conscious nod to a longstanding

convention of the genre, the book channels its story through multiple levels of framing which support or contradict each other on the authority derived from social standing, scientific authority, and lived experience. Poor Things is "edited" by Alisdair Gray against the wishes of the local historian he's been working with and "written" by Archibald McCandless against the wishes of his wife. The historian invoked in the introduction validates the perspective of Victoria McCandless, whose afterword informs the reader (to the protestations of the "editor") that the entire story (whose events are essentially the same as those in the movie) consists of lies and gross exaggerations. Essentially, Gray hints to his reader that the story is a male fantasy, gives the reader said male fantasy, and then has the female protagonist inform the reader that this was indeed a male fantasy. The formal structure interestingly mirrors that of its Romantic foremother: the framing narrative ("editor" and "author") is sympathetic with the scientist-creator while the authorial framing is ultimately sympathetic with the "creation" by giving the "creation" a chance to demonstrate that in fact she creates herself and to cast doubt on the self-importance of the scientist figure (afterword).

The movie accomplishes the same critical orientation towards male scientific authority using cinematic rather than structural techniques. Whereas the book questions science's (and scientists') ability and inclination to liberate society from arbitrary or oppressive social protocols by undercutting the pulpy, fantastical narrative framing, the movie is able to make the same critical intervention while investing even more deeply in the fantastical by taking on the perspective of Bella and using a set of tools unique to film. Lanthimos explains that in the novel, "she's basically seen through other people's eyes, and she's described by other people" and in order to give the driving narrative agency to Bella, the film would need a world embellished from our own (*Ari Aster & Yorgos Lanthimos* 24:31-25:17). The evolution of the color palette over the course of the film, from its black and white beginning to its hypersaturated middle to its photorealistic conclusion, and the elaborately constructed sets and painted backdrops (inspired by the grand painted backdrops of midcentury films like *The Red Shoes*) are a mode of presenting the story from Bella's perspective. The film's sense of reality evolves with Bella's.

The book asks its reader to think about the politics of gender, authority, and objectivity in the context of science fiction; the movie asks its viewer to think about the politics of gender, power, and science in the construction of a self. As an adaptation, the movie participates in the history of science fiction as a political genre, a genre thinking about the place of science in society and whether it makes us more or less free. As a standalone example of science fiction cinema, it modifies and innovates cinematic conventions of gothic science fiction, taking the potential of the fantastic to deal with the human condition very seriously.

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