



BOOK REVIEW:

*Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the
Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*

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Cohn, Jesse S. *Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*. University Press of Mississippi, 2024.

The 2024 US elections have once again marked a before and after in the reality in which we live. The global rise of authoritarian governments has blurred the boundaries between speculative fiction and genuine experience, as scenarios once confined to the realms of science fiction and fantasy increasingly reflect the political and social realities faced nowadays by certain segments of society. Once again, we seem to inhabit a world in which a select few – defined by specific markers of race, gender or class – are chosen and granted privilege, while those who fall outside of normative categories are perceived as threats to the established order and are subsequently marginalized.

According to Jesse S. Cohn in his monograph *Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*, the fantastic can both reflect our anxieties over contemporary political dilemmas and operate as spaces of resistance and epistemological reconstruction (11). Within this framework, Cohn introduces the concept of “the New Black Fantastic,” a category that challenges and reconfigures the conventional narratives of “purification” in science fiction, which have excluded certain social groups, as authors of the New Black Fantastic “walk the same Earth but do not necessarily share the same world” (13). By this, Cohn refers to authors who, through their works, transform the established paradigms of science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres to make visible their historical and social experiences that have been systematically marginalized by the narratives in these genres. Figures such as N. K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl, and other exponents of contemporary science fiction find their place in the New Black Fantastic, as they are all new artists

who are not content with taking up old science fiction tools, so that with their approach they become authors of new narrative and political horizons in the face of the ideological closure of the present (13).

“What kind of times are we living in?” (9) and “Which world are we in, and what can be done in it?” (11) are the central inquiries driving *Hot Equations*, which is structured into four main sections, twelve chapters, and an appendix. The first part, comprising chapters one to four, examines the contemporary context in which Cohn’s work was written, shaped by the Covid crisis of 2020 and the political instability that followed. In Cohn’s view – as the modern capitalist system and the nation-state framework are failing even in their own terms, resulting in a pervasive sense of uncertainty and hopelessness – radical imagination is not an escape but an essential strategy for developing alternatives to a decaying system (3). In chapter one, Cohn delves into the relationship between science fiction and politics, arguing that the stories that get promoted or rejected in the social imaginary reflect larger power struggles, as “the question of who owns ... the power to conceive worlds, has always been a question of who owns the future” (17). Cohn references Tom Godwin’s short story “The Cold Equations” (1954) and Bruno Latour’s concept of the “black box” to expose how power structures justify exclusion and structural violence under the guise of inevitability. The author cleverly plays with the title of Godwin’s well-known story to name his monograph, using “hot” as a signal of radical rethinking of the “blackboxed” logic that reduces life to something impersonal. This is further analyzed through the parallels between N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy and real-world calamities such as Hurricane Katrina and the Border Crisis, as ways to examine how power systems eliminate uncomfortable factors from the public equation and construct narratives that exonerate the perpetrators (21). Chapter two discusses how the boundaries between the human and the mechanical become blurred, and how this is represented in science fiction. Cohn uses the term “*biotechnical sublime*” (36) to describe the astonishment that arises when the mechanical nature of what we consider human is revealed: “the revelation that you, too, are a machine” (35). He then sets up a major paradox: on the one hand, acknowledging that humans are machines can lead to a sense of “*disenchantment*” by reducing life to mere material processes; on the other hand, it can produce a sense of “*reenchantment*” by revealing the material interconnection between all beings and phenomena in the universe (36). Chapter three follows this with a criticism of the tendency to consider texts as passive, inert things by fetishizing textuality and interpretation in literary theory (61). Through different reflections, Cohn proposes a “methodological metafetishism,” a methodology to study and change the world by thinking beyond the subject-object categories (62). Chapter four closes the first part with a discussion on how science fiction rethinks Lacan’s “Barred Other” through the figure of the alien and its various shapes (83), using it as a “vehicle,” for fantasies of “the Other” and human concerns (86).

According to Cohn, there is a need for a general rhetoric of the fantastic that will allow us to understand how works within this genre persuade audiences, and that will consequently help to uncover how the collective imaginary is constructed. This general rhetoric is the object of discussion in the second part of the monograph, in chapters five to seven. In the fifth chapter, Cohn provides an extensive list of aspects and techniques inherent to the

fantastic, such as “monstrosity” (105), or Bloch’s “novum/antiquum” (102), in order to establish the narrative strategies that succeed in rendering as believable the types of scenarios and events that, in theory, defy the logic of the real world. In chapter six, Cohn follows this by examining the impossible in works of the fantastic, taking twentieth-century superhero comics as a key example of how the impossible cannot, in fact, alter the system because these stories consistently insist on restoring the world to its *normal* state after each disruption (122). Cohn’s further exploration of the impossible considers Spade’s “impossible people” (129) whose identities as black, queer or disabled, “the people for whom life is made impossible” (134), defy normative categories. In addition to Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy, Cohn makes use of literary works such as McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* to achieve a deeper understanding of this category and to further illustrate the virtual absence of marginalized people in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres – further noting that even the rare appearances of such characters are usually limited to dystopian stories (129). Hence, Cohn demonstrates how the narratives of the New Black Fantastic provide a safe space for “impossible people,” clearing the path for other marginalized voices and transforming social impossibilities into sources of power and imagination. Relying on the New Black Fantastic, chapter seven concludes the second part as it shows how these insurgent voices – sometimes called “co-futurisms” (145) – push genre boundaries claiming a discursive sovereignty, spaces in which non-Western epistemologies and ancestral knowledges can thrive along with the scientific component (147).

The third part of Cohn’s study examines the intersection of science, fiction, and power, focusing on how the boundaries between scientific knowledge and imaginary narratives are often more permeable than commonly acknowledged. While in the 1960s humanities scholars were criticized for inappropriately adopting scientific concepts and language, in chapter eight Cohn discusses a range of examples to demonstrate the fluidity of such boundaries. A series of equations from Karl Marx to Donna Haraway, some mathematically valid and others not, illustrate this permeability (165-173). Chapter nine then examines the 1920s utopian vision of the Gordin brothers who, through their literary and philosophical work, challenged existing laws and proposed a radical vision that rejected the authority imposed by both natural and social conventions. Their alternative, what they called “pantechnics” (186), reflects their rejection of traditional authority structures. Through Colson’s interpretation of the affinity between anarchism and alternative modes of thought, Cohn explores how the Gordins’ *The Land of Anarchy* – a hyper-modern utopia that novelizes their nonfictional *Pananarchist Manifesto* (184) – articulates an anarchism that transcends Western traditions, connecting to various ways of imagining freedom and rejecting authority. In *The Land of Anarchy*, five newcomers – “the union of the five oppressed” – are introduced to attack the “separation of powers” (183), with which the Gordins develop their concept of multiplicity, a promising but ultimately insufficient notion, according to Cohn, as it fails to account for intersectionality (188).

The fourth and final section of Cohn’s study discusses how the world is increasingly mirroring the realities depicted in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres, where “the public, political realm is itself becoming increasingly science fictional ... in character” (221). Chapter ten studies the varying

connotations that fantastic figures can acquire through what he calls “Unicorn Rhetoric” (221). Here Cohn surveys how, depending on the moment, context, and the individuals applying it, a fantastical creature such as the Unicorn comes to be used as anything from a representation of purity and innocence to an emblem of queer camp aesthetic (226), or even an ironic metaphor for fraud in politics (228). This leads to the central conclusion of the chapter that instead of concerning ourselves with the role of politics in fantasy, we should consider the question “How does the fantastic enter into the realm of politics?” (232). In chapter eleven, Cohn dives further into how, instead of remaining a marginal subculture, science fiction has become a main component of the global public imagination (234). This led to the widespread adoption of symbols typical to these narratives as tools for interpreting and addressing complex social issues, including climate change, economic crises, and geopolitical tensions – also within the political sphere. Several political movements, for instance, have found in cosplaying and Live Action Role-Playing a strategy for protest and mobilization (243). This was apparent, for example, when Palestinian protesters used a work of fiction as symbolism to voice opposition to the Israeli occupation in 2010, by dressing up as the Na’vi from *Avatar* (244). Closing the last part of the volume, chapter twelve introduces Peter Nicholls’ “Monster of Anarchy” as a representation of the anarchist desires for science to recognize that it is indebted to the mystical and the magical (251). In this discussion, Cohn condemns modern scientificity with the intention of breaking with capitalism, statist realism and the Modern Constitution, which constitute “the forces currently throttling the planet” (260).

Unfortunately, Cohn does not provide a concluding chapter. This is probably due to the *quasi*-improvised and at times essayistic character of his monograph, which takes the reader seamlessly through distinct ideas and shifts between various text types, from an academic essay in one chapter to something styled more as a collection of diary entries in another. Instead of a conclusion, Cohn follows chapter twelve with a “Provisional Manifesto for Nonmodern Anarchism” (261) as an appendix which, while original and pertinent to the subject and the shape of the work, leaves the conclusion of his study very open. A structured closure would have been helpful to clearly highlight the prolific ideas the author explores.

Nevertheless, *Hot Equations* is an essential work for those who are concerned with how science fiction, fantasy, and horror mirror the political and social tensions of our time. Cohn’s study should not be considered an introductory text, however, as it is a dense discussion, at times philosophical and more suited to readers already familiar with science fiction and its sociopolitical implications. Cohn’s work is particularly valuable for those wishing to rethink the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of the fantastic while challenging the conventional critical reading of the genre.

Whereas the book offers useful insights, it is not without its limitations. The already-mentioned broad variety of themes and text forms that Cohn uses throughout its chapters creates a sense of dispersion, and although it strengthens the concept of his book, at times this undermines the coherence of the text. Additionally, the monograph exhibits a narrow scope in its geopolitical analysis despite the global implications suggested by the title. The book primarily focuses on American political contexts, rarely and only briefly mentioning other scenarios and literary situations. This makes the book’s claim

of addressing global issues feel subtly overshadowed by its Americentric approach. Nevertheless, the contribution that Cohn makes with *Hot Equations* to the field of the fantastic is unquestionable, as it is necessary to acknowledge works of fiction that attempt to open up the panorama of science fiction and fantasy to other voices, especially given the current times.

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