Submission Guidelines

Fafnir is a Gold Open Access international peer-reviewed journal. Send submissions to our editors in chief at submissions@finfar.org. Book reviews, dissertation reviews, and related queries should be sent to reviews@finfar.org.

We publish academic work on science-fiction and fantasy (SFF) literature, audiovisual art, games, and fan culture. Interdisciplinary perspectives are encouraged. In addition to peer-reviewed academic articles, *Fafnir* invites texts ranging from short overviews, essays, interviews, conference reports, and opinion pieces as well as academic reviews for books and dissertations on any suitable SFF subject. Our journal provides an international forum for scholarly discussions on science fiction and fantasy, including current debates within the field.

Open-Access Policy

All content for *Fafnir* is immediately available through open access, and we endorse the definition of open access laid out in Bethesda Meeting on Open Access Publishing. Our content is licensed under *Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 Unported License*. All reprint requests can be sent to the editors at *Fafnir,* which retains copyright.

Cover Photo: Arthur Rackham (illus.), "Siegfried Kills Fafnir," 1911, on Wikimedia Commons

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Table of Contents

Report

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Editorial 2/2016

Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Jyrki Korpua & Hanna-Riikka Roine

When Summer lies upon the world, and in a noon of gold
Beneath the roof of sleeping leaves the dreams of trees unfold;
When woodland halls are green and cool, and wind is in the West,
Come back to me! Come back to me, and say my land is best!
(Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 466)

The summer is coming, and with it arrives the second issue of *Fafnir* in 2016!

This issue presents texts that are closely connected with the topical question of the relationship between technology and works of fiction - and the interconnections between the fantastic and science fictional through technology. Furthermore, the texts both offer new openings in the field of speculative fiction research in our journal (such as Indian science fiction and horror in children's culture) and continue the discussion on current issues (such as the representations of posthuman).

Curtis Carbonell's article "*Schismatrix* and the Posthuman: Hyper-embodied Representation" concentrates on the dominant trope of posthuman in science fiction. The article reads Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* stories as presenting representations of trans- and posthumans that are definitive for twenty-first century science fiction and argues that these stories represent posthumans within the context of the modern fantastic.

Sami A. Khan introduces the study of Indian science fiction to *Fafnir*. In his article "Goddess Sita Mutates Indian Mythology into Science Fiction: How Three Stories from *Breaking the Bow* Reinterpret the *Ramayana*", Khan analyses the potential of Indian science fiction in English to "science fictionalize" mythological beings. The article deliberates on the intersection of mythology, technology and gender in Indian science fiction through the study of science fictional reinterpretations of goddess Sita in three short stories.

Lee Raye's article "'Blue skies, green grass': Is *The Redemption of Althalus* a reliable biological record?" presents a viewpoint to fantasy fiction that may be new to many and even controversial to some: a form of the distant reading quantitative experiment. He investigates whether high fantasy worlds can be naturalistic with the example of *The Redemption of Althalus* by David and Leigh Eddings. His findings, based on a collection of references to flora and fauna in the novel, suggest that the biology of *Althalus* is predominantly based on the primary world western forested mountain ecoregion of the United States.

Saradindu Bhattacharya's essay "Magical Technology in Contemporary Fantasy" examines how contemporary writers of fantasy fiction employ magical technology in their works as an interface between ideas of the human "self" and the non-human "other". As illustrative examples, he uses three popular fantasy series, *Harry Potter* series, *Bartimaeus* trilogy and *Percy Jackson* books.

We are also proud to present Susanne Ylönen's *lectio praecursoria* "Lastenkulttuurisen kauhun maastoa kartoittamassa" ("Mapping the Experiences of Horror in Children's Culture"). It is based on Ylönen's doctoral dissertation *Tappeleva rapuhirviö: kauhun estetiikka lastenkulttuurissa* (*The Fighting Crab Monster. The Aesthetics of Horror in Children's Culture*), which she defended on 5 March 2016 at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Ylönen discusses the various ways horror in picture books aimed at children appear and may be interpreted through a three-part topography that includes an uplifting approach termed "aesthetic sublimation", a beautifying approach called "aestheticizing" and a degrading or comical approach termed "aesthetic sublimation".

In addition to the three articles, essay and *lectio praecursoria*, this issue includes a book review in Finnish and a seminar report. Kati Kanto reviews Ylönen's abovementioned doctoral dissertation on the aesthetics of horror in children's culture. Sanna Lehtonen reports from the sixth national conference of fandom studies in Finland, "The rise of the nerd/geek culture" ("Nörttikulttuurin nousu"), which was held at the University of Jyväskylä in March.

Finally, at the end of the journal, you will find a call for papers for our issue 4/2016, "Speculative Fiction in Comics and Graphic Novels". We invite papers, essays, interviews, overviews and such that focus on speculative fiction in, for example, genres of comics, graphic novels and graphic narratives, cartoons, animations, anime or manga.

Our next issue is scheduled for September 2016. In the meantime, *Fafnir* wishes our readers an enjoyable summer!

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Fourth Edition. London: HarperCollins *Publishers*, 1995. Print.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Schismatrix and the Posthuman: *Hyper-embodied Representation*

Curtis Carbonell

Abstract: This paper argues that the "posthuman" is a dominant trope for SF, providing a justification for trans-and-posthumanist SF as inherently fantastic. To do so, it reads Bruce Sterling's Schismatrix stories as offering trans-and-posthuman representations definitive for twenty-first century SF, ones in which embodiment and materiality are prized over disembodied forms. Ultimately, these foundational stories represent posthumans within the context of the modern fantastic, an impulse in modern studies that foregrounds the increasingly imaginary elements defining contemporary, Western culture.

Biography and contact info: Curtis D. Carbonell, PhD, teaches English as an assistant professor at Khalifa University of Science, Technology, and Research. He recently co-edited the Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television (2015). He has also recently published work on Aldous Huxley with "Misreading Brave New World" and "Brave New World" in Post-and-Transhumanism: An Introduction (2014). He is interested in how the posthuman emerges in science fiction and fantasy studies, as well as in how analog-and-digital game studies are emerging as new fields that describe complex modes of cultural production.

Posthumanism is a theoretical concept utilized with most sophistication by professional academics in a variety of disciplines from continental philosophy and critical theory to bioethics and visual art.[1] Broadly, a consensus drives theorists of posthumanism in critiquing the Enlightenment Project's narrow view of the human, one that has been challenged on a number of fronts, from the nineteenth century Romantic critique of Reason, to Darwin's assault on humanity's special providence, to Nietzsche's dismantling of core philosophical assumptions in Western culture, to Freud's displacement of the rational subject, to others that followed in the twentieth century. While such revisions are critical in understanding a sensible view of the human, less theoretical but highly textured articulations arrive via the multifaceted genre of science fiction.[2] In it, the philosophy of posthumanism retreats behind the impressionistic drawing of technological transhumans and, often, posthumans.

This paper investigates one early attempt at fusing the visual representation with the language of the posthuman, that found in Bruce Sterling's Schismatrix stories. These have been influential, although little acknowledged. In fact, while later writers such as Iain Banks, David Brin, Charles Stross, among others, have added to the picture, Sterling's most impressive feat is in representing hyper-embodied posthumanity. Embodiment in this context derives from grounding work pioneered by thinkers such as Francisco Varela, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Andy

---

[1]   For a few key critical monographs, see Braidotti; Herbrechter; Wolfe; Badmington; Hayles. Also, for a look into how the discourses are screened, see Carbonell, Hauskeller, and Philbeck. For a succinct cartography of the major concepts, see Sharon.
[2]   Henceforth, SF.

Clark, and numerous others who have reworked the computational theory of mind for one that views the material mind inherently defined by bodies and environments. For example, "embodiment" as a concept within the science-of-mind popularized by Clark in monographs such as *Supersizing the Mind* (2010) and *Natural-Born Cyborgs* (2003) means that the body "extends" mind into the world; thus, the tools we use become part of this embodiment process.

Of course, for decades philosophical embodiment and materiality have been situated within the purview of cultural philosophers, such as the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty or the genealogical work of Michel Foucault locating the body as the central domain of disciplinary power. In posthumanism, following initial work by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles fired a shot over the bow of techno-fantasists when she critiqued how "information lost its body" (2) to challenge the idea that selves can exist in disembodied form. For Hayles, and others, embodiment is necessary for any construction of the human, especially those mediated by technology (Hayles 288).

Definitions of posthumanism typically fall either within a camp derived from critical and cultural theory, often called critical posthumanism, or within popular posthumanism, also called transhumanism. The former seeks ways out of problems with humanism, in particular, what it sees as entrenched dualisms reaching back to Cartesian philosophy. The latter views the human body as needing enhancement, technology being the best solution. Embodiment in both the critical and popular forms is important. For example, the discourse of posthumanism emerges as different ontological rhetorical positions, such as the Deleuzian subject as a rhizomatic body without organs (one leading form of critical posthumanism), to the post-biological human (critiqued by Hayles as a posthuman nightmare of disembodied posthumanity), to a world defined by the post-anthropocene (an era in which humanity has been superseded).

In the critical camp, posthuman subjects do not directly try to enhance or better their traditional human conditions but alter them for a variety of cultural, ethical, philosophical and ludic reasons that allow for new subject positions, new modes of being. In many ways we already have such incipient posthumans, their identities distributed across a wide range of networks, their bodies beginning to be changed by wearable and implantable technology, their selves ever shifting. We are, involuntarily, on this road. Untangling the varied articulations is difficult because critical posthumanism rubs shoulders with the popular form in its focus on technology. Transhumanism, a type of hyper-humanism, would continue the normative identities detailed during the Enlightenment, yet do so to such a degree these persons would clearly be advanced over unenhanced humans. In its discourse, it posits posthumans as the ultimate endpoint of such enhancement. We see this most clearly in SF and in real-world policy-making, bio-ethics discussion, and engineering circles.[3]

SF and Fantasy

This paper argues that a focused reading of Sterling's Schismatrix stories reveals the posthuman to be a dominant trope in contemporary SF's modern fantastic. It works from a particular view of trans-and-posthumanist SF as inherently fantastic, especially when considering tropes like the posthuman. The recent emergence of modern SF has garnered much critical attention in the academy, yet even vetted SF is best viewed as a subset of the fantastic that formed with the science romances of Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, and Jules Verne, among others, as well as the adventure romances of Robert Lewis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Bram Stoker, and others, the sorts of imaginative texts that comprise a literary foundation for science fiction and fantasy's increasingly important role in defining contemporary culture.[4] From a literary frame, this article views the genres of the modern fantastic flourishing due to the perceived failure of literary realism as the arbiter of articulating the human condition, a failure

---

[3]   For a recent, comprehensive attempt to disentangle the discourses, see Ranisch and Sorgner.

[4]   See Saler for a current examination into the rise of virtual worlds that are part of Modernity's ronic enchantment.

refracted in tensions over wider complexities within the modern crisis from increasing materialism to mechanization.[5]

To begin my critique of Sterling's under-theorized but sharply drawn representations of posthumans, I ground my use of fantasy in Kathryn Hume's insightful *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1985). Fantasy as a foundational type of fiction is a recognizable descendant of what Hume calls a "blindspot . . . a long shadow" (6) that began in the West with Plato and Socrates' critique of the fantastic. Her argument is that Socrates and classical philosophers put the fantastic on the run by tearing "a hole in western critical consciousness," ultimately creating a "critical void" (xii–xiii). For Hume, her correction is in seeing the schema of mimesis and fantasy as two impulses that work together in fiction, one sometimes weighted more heavily than the other. She charts the earlier failure of mythos as critical in allowing a triumphant realism, a failure due to the skepticism of Socrates toward traditional mythology and later due to the Enlightenment's critique of Christianity. This myopia was a short-lived victory because literature is about human experience, both the rational and the irrational. Fantasy, according to Hume, emerges through tensions with an upstart realism that refuses to admit its weaknesses. Her approach strides beyond socio-economic marketing-and-publishing explanations to view fantasy as a fundamental impulse emerging in a variety of literatures. In particular, SF has become such a borderless phenomenon that Hume's recognition of the fantastic and the mimetic working together reorients the reader toward trans-and-posthumanist SF as inherently fantastic (see chapter 2 for Hume's historical perspective).

Literary scholarship's attempt to challenge the denigration of fantasy has been an ongoing project rooted in apologetics, yet one characterized by a diffusion of idiosyncratic approaches, such as the argument that a fantasy must be a convincing true world, and one that, with a touch of the divine, brings consolation and joy to the reader; to the insistence that an unexplainable "hesitation" occurs when we encounter the fantastic, an unstable place residing between our understanding of an uncanny, natural world and a marvelous, supernatural one; to the idea that fantasy moves beyond the marvelous or the fantastic to reveal subversive positions of desire; to a recent formalist schema of fantasy defined by how it enters the narrative as either a portal quest, an immersive fantasy, an intrusive, or a liminal one. [note 6][6]

In terms of genre, most thinkers read Bruce Sterling's Schismatrix stories as a SF blend of cyberpunk and space opera, with a focus on a near-future earth. But Veronica Hollinger notes that *"Schismatrix* (1985) [is] one of the earliest sf scenarios consciously to construct its characters as 'posthuman' and to explore some of the implications of the term" (269). Hollinger's recognition demonstrates that the genre of trans-and-posthumanist SF had yet to emerge. Most criticism, though, sidesteps the fantastic posthuman for genre or structural commentary. Larry McCaffery calls *Schismatrix* "Sterling's radicalized antinovel" (211) because of its staccato style full of structured "disruptions" (229). Moreover, in an interview with McCaffery, Sterling himself provides a helpful way to conceptualize the novel as three mini-novels, each reflecting the major modes of space opera. Part one is an adventure story in the vein of the pulps, part two follows the tradition of social interaction, and part three concerns the mystical move into "Clarkean transcendence" (McCaffery 228). Other thinkers, like Norman Spinrad see the Schismatrix stories reflecting a natural process whereby human space colonization splinters microworlds into differing environments much as evolutionary mechanisms have splintered biological organisms into their differing classificatory groups (132–133). This evolutionary process, of course, is technological in the imagination of Sterling when representing humanity's proliferation in a future world of space exploration, a fitting naturalistic analogy that works well in the novel.

Sherryl Vint provides an extended reading of the Schismatrix stories related to the posthuman and embodiment. She sees Sterling's contribution as valuable in positing a posthumanity

---

[5]   See Roberts for a focus on increasing materialism and Luckhurst for mechanization.
[6]   See Tolkien; Todorov; Jackson; Mendlesohn.

focused on change. Her reading is part of a project to insert an ethical understanding of how embodiment embeds bodies in materiality. "Giving up old categories when they no longer serve rather than defending them against inevitable change is the mark of posthumanism" (Vint 175). While Vint views embodied change as the core aspect of Sterling's posthumanism, I focus on his imagined embodied subjectivities as radical representations. Thus, the type of imagined multiplicities of bodies found in SF fiction like the Schismatrix stories foreground subject formation as a key process in understanding the posthuman, one that reflects an inherent modern fantasism that Sterling refuses to admit or adhere to because it would undermine his work as SF, rather than fantasy.

Schismatrix

These representations of hyper-embodied posthumans begin with "Spider Rose" (1982), the earliest of the Mechanist/Shaper stories, wherein Sterling has not yet defined the term "posthuman." Within the Schismatrix stories, he mentions "posthumanism" in "Cicada Queen" (1983) when he defines it as "a metaphysic daring enough to think a whole world into life" (274). This conceptualization is within the discourse of technological transhumanism (a form of hyper-humanism) and, for Sterling, its imagining of future humans performing grand, planet-changing projects.

However, some thinkers find Sterling's SF representations of these trans/posthumans highly dissatisfying. For example, Bruce Clarke challenges Sterling for encouraging a naive acceptance of the Western, liberal subject. Clarke focuses his critique on Sterling's use of aquatic posthumans who will inhabit the terraformed moon of Jupiter, Europa, claiming that these creatures are "anything but posthuman" (161) because, according to Clarke, they represent the ideal of the rugged, self-sufficient individual. In Clarke's reading, key tenets of humanism are strengthened and valued in the stories. What is happening here with Clarke, and so much of critical posthumanism, is a refracting of the concept into a specialized tool that challenges the Enlightenment Project's constructed notion of the human (and all its faults).

Sterling's use of the posthuman, like those that derive from SF studies, often work outside these narrow parameters. In fact, for thinkers like Sterling, the "posthuman" is a technologically constructed subject rather than a philosophical posture. What we see with Clarke and much of critical posthumanism are political positions on a continuum of antihumanisms; however, an actualized posthumanism like that seen in SF might function more like the nonhumanism of object-oriented philosophy found detailed in Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek's *The Speculative Turn* (2011), an approach that seeks an ontology of things without the Kantian blinkers of the phenomenal world, a truly daunting task for any artist or writer wishing to draw such representations. Such challenges negate the traditions of Renaissance humanism and the articulations in the Enlightenment, as well as Jacob Burckhardt, Wilhelm Von Humboldt, and Matthew Arnold's nineteenth century reimagined humanisms (see Davies).

We should note, though, that Sterling's Shaper/Mechanist stories maintain a stable humanist core, most importantly, one that reaffirms the traditional preference of life over death. The novel begins with the most tragic of human literary themes: suicide. Sterling's young protagonist, Lindsay Abelard, is a Preservationist. He lives aboard a lunar orbiting world where he dreams of salvaging old-Earth culture prior to the fragmenting of humanity in space. Sterling writes that Lindsay watches his love, Vera, who flies high above him in a glider. She nose dives into the ground, ending her life in a grand existential gesture that agency is exemplified by taking one's own life. In a nod to Hamlet, as well as to Romeo and Juliet, Sterling writes of Lindsay's desire to follow his love to the grave. But Lindsay is sent to another orbiting world where he begins his journey away from petty human desires into a variety of posthuman existences. The tension, though, between normative human values and those offered within the new posthuman, Schismatrix solar system emerges along a few key thematic lines.

For example, suicide also features into the final scene between Lindsay and the antagonist, Philip Constantine, Lindsay's old friend who once espoused Preservationist values but exchanged these for the thrill of conquest and human ambition. Constantine has been living as a wounded person since losing a duel with Lindsay. At this point, Constantine's life has been salvaged, but he exists in a liminal place between life and death. After years of recovery, he has forsaken his old ambition and is ready to die. He will take his life, but not before correctly stating that Lindsay will never follow the path of those who want to create aquatic posthumans. Lindsay will step aside at the last moment, which Lindsay does, choosing a much more mysterious path. The reason for Constantine's skepticism is that Lindsay has been a "sundog," a solar-system nomad, ever since he failed to kill himself, always surviving when danger crept too close. This adaptability is a key attribute of Sterling's protagonist, ultimately minimizing the thematic importance of traditional humanistic values in the novel, for more radical insights.

However, Sterling maintains suicide as a key humanist concern. For example, in the "Cicada Queen"(1983) he presents special rooms devoid of surveillance called discreets, where people pass time in privacy. These discreets enter the narrative, though, as places where the distraught end their lives. Moreover, in the very last mini-narrative in *Schismatrix Plus*, which combines all of Sterling's mechanist and shaper stories, "Sunken Gardens" (1984) sees the protagonist Nikolai Leng end his life due to ennui. What must be preserved by these characters who long for the ease of death is their sense of a humanity connected to a past. We have already seen this on the lunar world where the novel begins, and where Lindsay's love, Vera, has killed herself. The entire habitat has become a museum world. We see its proprietor, Pongpianskul, in his office, with its cluttered papers and its imported mice, objects directly relating to a vanished past. This cultural heritage is what is being lost as humanity transforms itself. And, for Sterling, a latent humanistic nostalgia and romanticism runs like a strong thread through the novel, never fraying or disappearing, even as he erects monuments to the imagination of the hyper-embodied.

Posthumanity

In the novel, Sterling draws posthumans in a variety of forms. A cursory version is represented right away with mention of inhuman people living beyond a wall on a space habitat. They are inhuman in the sense of devolving, a common trope in SF, but one Sterling forgoes exploring. Instead, he provides iconic representations, first, with a horrific image of the Yarite, a meatpuppet beyond the "limits of the clinically dead" (39). It possesses nerve impulses, some biological existence beyond the fully dead, even awareness, as Lindsay notices after he awakens it with a slap. In contrast, the genetically altered Shaper Kitsune is very human at this point (because of her sexual desire), but Sterling, in his inching toward a radical posthuman embodiment, has Lindsay reflect that Kitsune is also not human. Kitsune is "posthuman" in the sense of being altered, yes, but she is represented in a mode we now recognize as "transhuman," a word still in its nascent stage at the time these stories were written, and one Sterling does not use. She is transhuman because she is using technology to enhance what are, in essence, core human elements. She is on the verge of becoming posthuman. When we meet Kitsune, her womb replaced with brain tissue, sweat that smells like perfume, a tongue with glands excreting aphrodisiacs, these alterations fail in comparison with Kitsune's later transformation.

The next time Lindsay sees her, a mechanical lamp swings his way, and two human eyes peer from beneath a shade. She is becoming a living habitat, the highly imaginative representation of a hyper-embodied being. She is alive, with massive cardiac pumping stations, sensitive walls and floors, and even a mind that has memory and volition. Kitsune, in these forms, still lives. Yet, she must use one of her clone's bodies to communicate, to feel, to experience the everyday world. She has given herself to an ontologically problematic transformation that ends with her existing as an industrial being in the "emergent technology of the flesh" (212). Lindsay sees her as a person who

has taken embodiment to its conceptual end. As much as I agree with this assessment, Sterling's refusal to go beyond is an unfortunate choice.

What is interesting in Sterling's Schismatrix stories is that his representations of the hyper-embodied are clear because they are drawn in stark relief with pitiful humanity. We have examples of genetically altered Shapers transforming themselves into a variety of forms, from aquatic posthumans to big-brained "Patternists." Yet, we also have representations of frail bodies ready for transformation. Sterling began sketching these sharp, hyper-embodied images early with the representation of an alien queen in the short story "Swarm" (1982). Descriptions of her "monstrous body" with "warm and pulpy flesh" (248) evoke disgust and terror. The alien queen is a factory for the colony that digests material and produces eggs, endlessly repeating the process like a biological machine.

Sterling also presents a tension between the dirty, virulent, smelly, human body and all of its crawling bacteria with a number of opposites. He juxtaposes frail flesh with the hyper-rationalized disembodied world of the wire-heads. Like the character Ryumin who Lindsay first meets when he becomes a "sundog," wireheads shed their bodies for the pure, disembodied world of data. Later, Lindsay meets Ryumin again, who is now a computer-generated face like William Gibson's super AI Wintermute at the end of *Neuromancer* (1984). Newly arrived on this particular space habitat, Lindsay is tainted with its bacteria. He is suffering a raging upper-respiratory infection. He has a runny nose. We can imagine rashes and eczema. We understand all the frailties that encourage Shapers to become radically embodied entities and Mechanists to discard the body.

On what side of the embodiment vs. disembodiment debate does Sterling fall? Surely, his representations of the hyper-embodied outweigh the disembodied in sheer numbers of representations and pages written. But, more subtly, the physical world has the most vocal advocates used as thematic mechanisms. For example, near the end of the novel, before Lindsay decides to create "aquatic posthumans" (232) on Europa, one of his admires, Gomez, asks Lindsay, "What about the flesh? We are the flesh. What about the flesh?" (200). Here, by one of the founders of cyberpunk, and a forerunner for a later biopunk that foregrounds biotechnology and its effects on human beings, the flesh is valued, if acknowledged to be flawed.

Sterling is strongest as a writer when he is describing the material. One of the most descriptive passages comes when Lindsay has returned to Earth's seas to capture organisms for his Europa project:

> Life rose all around them: a jungle in defiance of the sun. In the robot's lights the steep, abrasive valley walls flushed in a vivid panoply of color: scarlet, chalk-white, sulfur-gold, obsidian. Like stands of bamboo, tubeworms swayed on the hillsides, taller than a man. The rocks were thick with clams, their white shells yawning to show flesh as red as blood. Purple sponges pulsed, abyssal corals spread black branching thickets, their thin arms jeweled with polyps. (Sterling 227)

The language is like the best of Darwin describing the "entangled bank" at the end of the *Origin of Species* (1859). Other thinkers have noted this connection. For example, Brian Stableford writes that

> posthumanists see the future evolution of humankind in terms of a dramatic diversification of types, partly accountable in terms of adaptive radiation and partly in terms of aesthetic impulses. . . . the first significant popularizers of the notion of posthuman evolution in science fiction included Bruce Sterling, in the Shaper/Mechanist series. (Stableford 401–2)

Furthermore, Tom Maddox in *Storming the Reality Studio* writes that Sterling is a writer with a firm notion of both evolutionary theory and complexity theory and how these sciences portend a possibly frightening future for human beings. In this way, Sterling's stories of the Schismatrix solar system and its contending Mechanists and Shapers are ontological before anything else. Maddox notes that

Sterling is aware of the tradition of representation within SF in which humans evolve beyond our current evolutionary history. He mentions Olaf Stapledon as well as Arthur C. Clarke's visions as precursors, not to mention Frank Herbert's use of transformation in the Dune series. Maddox argues that no one has provided such intensity or style to these representations as has Sterling. (Maddox 324–330) Thus, Maddox's reading, as well as that of other SF critics, writers and fans demands that the posthuman, as a concept, must be considered within the context of SF studies and its representations of the human and/or the posthuman instead of automatically attuned to the discourses of critical posthumanism.

I must admit that the connection with evolutionary theory only skims the surface of the novel and short stories, rarely exploring theoretical nooks and crannies. These tales of biological evolution in the solar system imagine human societies splintering and evolving rapidly via a technological process similar to artificial selection, rather than natural. Sterling writes more than once: "Life moved in clades" (225). The representation of radical human evolution stems not just from the sciences of evolutionary biology but from complexity theory.

Throughout the stories, Sterling references Prigogenic levels of complexity, a concept he formed from Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stenger's Nobel-prize winning work into self-organizing systems, *Order out of Chaos* (1984). In Sterling's stories, he refers to four levels of complexity, each building on the last to emerge into a new mode of being. Of course, like Sterling's ideas of evolutionary theory, these imagined levels are under-theorized. We must piece together what these levels mean to see how they relate to the hyper-embodied posthuman. The first is "ur-space," a vague reference to whatever undergirds space-time itself, which comprises the second level. The third level in which complexity emerged is organic life, and the fourth, that of intelligence. He constructs these so that he can postulate, then back away from, a mysterious "fifth level."

One can imagine this new level to be nonhuman/posthuman similar to the speculative posthumanism (SP) postulated by David Roden in *Posthuman Life* (2014), a term that defines posthumanism as completely other from the human and, thus, beyond our comprehension. Sterling details in his introduction to *Schismatrix Plus* (vii), that when Prigogine was offered the stories to read he said they had nothing to do with his work. And nor should that be a requirement. Sterling's novel is a work of the imagination, fantasy-SF that blends cyberpunk and space opera. Even better, it is an early text that uses the terminology of the posthuman. Some of the clearest representations of posthumans make them an extreme other: as different from us as is a human from a butterfly. For example in *Schismatrix*, one curious example can be found in the Lobsters (294). These posthumans live encased in form-fitting metallic armor. Like lampreys, they attach themselves to the sides of ships where their extra-human senses commune with the universe.

You would imagine, that achieving this fifth level of being is what Lindsay desires above all else. But, no, the main narrative rushes head long for another dream: "Life-spreading. Planet-ripping. World-building. Terraforming" (188). This grand plan is "humanity's sublimest effort" (283) akin to the civilization building documented in our literary epics. We see the project underway by the brightest of the Shaper "posthumans," called Cataclysts, a neologism that blends cataclysm and catalyst. They attempt such world-building on Mars and Europa to further their "biomorality" (190) and "bioaesthetics" (302), two aspects of a worldview the novel suggests is the true outcome of a worthwhile posthumanity (170). Again, Sterling's humanism surfaces with such hubris to reinforce the idea that a latent transhumanism colors many of his posthumans.

Besides Kitsune or terraforming as defining factors, what representation could Sterling have drawn of posthumans that are truly othered? Such an imagined fantastic ontology might be impossible to represent. Here the tension between the embodied and disembodied demonstrates the possibility of representing the former, while the later proves difficult. In an article on "Cyberpunk and Posthuman Science Fiction," Booker and Thomas compare Sterling's *Schismatrix* with Gibson's vision of our posthuman future, arguing that Sterling sees human nature as highly flexible in such a way that denies Gibson's ambivalence. The authors derive this interpretation from the fact that

Lindsay refuses to be bound by the ideologies of either the Mechanists or Shapers (he's had Shaper conditioning, but also sports a prosthetic limb). Lindsay accepts his ultimate transformation at the end of the novel when he abandons his body with the aid of an alien Presence. The authors see his resistance to ideological ossification, as well as the abandonment of a body, as an "optimism and openness to new experiences and forms of embodiment" (Booker and Thomas 114). While this interpretation is fair, I read Lindsay's final choice of alien living as a negation of embodiment. It is a passive narrative choice by Sterling and, worse, one unwilling to usher its SF-inflected fantasism to its proper end.

Hyper-embodiment has been represented with sophistication and could have been exemplified in detail with Lindsay's final choice of becoming an under-water-living posthuman (an "Angel"), or with some other embodied being. Lindsay's jaunting off with an alien "Presence" into disembodied life leaves the reader with a sense that Sterling balked when he should have delivered. Fantastic precedents of the ineffable are present in hard SF (i.e., Clarke's being called Star Child), but this tradition of foregrounding the fantastic within a hard-SF frame (and Sterling's refusal) demonstrates how difficult it is to represent the truly transcendent. Frederic Jameson went so far as to say that Greg Egan (who has attempted to map this difficult terrain) is "relatively unreadable" (68). Moreover, with Sterling's imaginative transformation of Kitsune into a living, biological space station, we see a representation of hyper-embodiment begging for more exploration by the novel's protagonist. Sterling shies away from the implications of hyper-embodiment on an industrial scale to reveal an alien Presence that ushers Lindsay to the Fifth Prigogenic Level, in essence, relieving him of the tyranny of Descartes' dualism and ushering him into the truly fantastic realm. Sterling refuses to explore this other realm.

Granted, Sterling has company in his retreat. Edgar Allan Poe is criticized for failing to narrate the end of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* when his narrator is faced with the transcendent, but refuses to embrace it (Panshin and Panshin 35). Moreover, H.G. Wells, while known for venturing far into the imaginary realm of where science might take us in the universe, far beyond anyone before him, hesitated at imagining how humans could live in those horrific gulfs of space. We should also not forget that H.P. Lovecraft's alien/deities cause madness with even a glimpse. Here at the precipice of imagining where all of these fiddling posthuman technologies might lead us, Sterling backs away from true alterity. He avoids warping the genre of the new space opera in the direction of mythic fantasy to avoid radically altering his novel. Or maybe he refuses because of the difficulty. Getting beyond such categories, yet not retreating to traditional myth, has been a daunting challenge for modern science, one addressed by numerous SF writers, as well as in the text often considered the first true SF novel: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

What then does *Schismatrix* reveal about the posthuman as a state of being? When Lindsay is challenged by the alien Presence to forgo becoming an aquatic posthuman and to, instead, take a leap into the Fifth Prigogenic Level, the Presence says this entails experience, not answers, and that the result will be "eternal wonder" (236). SF began its modern incarnation, after the science romances of Verne and Wells and the science fantasy of Burroughs and Merritt, to become a literature of wonder. This emotion was touted by Hugo Gernsback in *Amazing Stories* and later in the bedrock of John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*. However, in the end, the wondrous still proves difficult to represent.

Sterling's representations of posthumans defy theory's attempt to dictate the discourse of trans-and-posthumanism. SF-and-fantasy studies, therefore, provide a ripe field of investigation with such fruitful artifacts, many of which are undervalued. My analysis has attempted to show that his most complex representations are of hyper-embodied, technological posthumans, a trope that far exceeds others in SF when defining the modern fantastic. In fact, such representations may be foundational for new articulations of the posthuman in the coming century that will rely on discursive formations tied to materiality. At this point, such imaginings are fantastic yet not purely imaginary. They retain their potential for SF extrapolation by remaining within the realm of the

possible. As such, Sterling's Schismatrix stories play an important role in the modern fantastic and its continued articulation through science fiction and fantasy texts.

Works Cited

Badmington, Neil. *Posthumanism*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Print.

Booker, M. Keith, and Anne-Marie Thomas. *The Science Fiction Handbook*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009. Print.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013. Print.

Bryant, Levi R, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Victoria: re.press, 2011. Print.

Carbonell, Curtis D., Michael Hauskeller, and Thomas D Philbeck, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. Print.

Clark, Andy. *Natural-Born Cyborgs Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
– – -. *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.

Clarke, Bruce. *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Print.

Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859. Print.

Davies, Tony. *Humanism*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. London: V. Gollancz, 1984. Print.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

Hollinger, Veronica. "Posthumanism and Cyborg Theory." *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. Andrew M Butler et al. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Hume, Kathryn. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1985. Print.

Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Cheltenham: Routledge, 1981. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005. Print.

Luckhurst, Roger. *Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print.

Maddox, Tom. "The Wars of the Coin's Two Halves: Bruce Sterling's Mechanist/Shaper Narratives." *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

McCaffery, Larry. *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990. Print.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. Print.

Panshin, Alexei, and Cory Panshin. *The World beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989. Print.

Prigogine, Ilya, Isabelle Stengers, and Alvin Toffler. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam, 1984. Print.

Ranisch, Robert, and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, eds. *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*. 1st New edition. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014. Print.

Roberts, Adam. *The History of Science Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.

Roden, David. *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*. London: Routledge, 2014. Print.

Saler, Michael. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Pre-History of Virtual Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.

Sharon, Tamar. "A Cartography of the Posthuman: Humanist, Non-Humanist and Mediated Perspectives on Emerging Biotechnologies." *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Thought* 2 (2012): 4–19. Print.

Spinrad, Norman. *Science Fiction in the Real World*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990. Print.

Stableford, Brian M. *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006. Print.

Sterling, Bruce. *Schismatrix Plus*. New York: Ace, 1996. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Tree and Leaf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965. Print.

Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Print.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Print.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Goddess Sita Mutates Indian Mythology into Science Fiction: How Three Stories from *Breaking the Bow* Reinterpret the *Ramayana*

Sami A. Khan

Abstract: This article studies three distinct Science Fictional reinterpretations of (goddess) Sita – wife of Lord Rama – in Breaking the Bow, an anthology of (Speculative Fiction) stories inspired by the classical Indian epic Ramayana. These varied manifestations of Sita bear testimony to how Indian SF in English – while reworking gender and refracting mythology – science fictionalizes mythological being(s) to order to indict the ancient text(s) and the prevalent gender skewedness both. This article deliberates on the intersection of mythology, technology and gender in Indian SF, and decodes how these new avatars of Sita are geared primarily towards critiquingmisogyny, patriarchy and gender discrimination while using the vehicle of SF.

Biography and contact info: Dr. Sami Ahmad Khan is a writer, broadcast journalist and documentary producer. He studied Literature at Delhi University, completed his master's in English at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and then went to the University of Iowa, USA, on a Fulbright grant. Sami has taught at JNU, IIT Delhi and the University of Iowa, and has engaged in radio, film and TV production. He currently works for All India Radio.

In early 2016, advocate Thakur Chandan Kumar Singh filed a case against Lord Rama[1] – a much worshipped deity of the Indian pantheon – in a court in Sitamarhi, Bihar. In an interview given to the *Hindustan Times*, Singh demanded justice for Sita, wife of Rama, alleging that "Lord Rama had banished Devi Sita to a life in exile in a forest without any suitable justification for doing so" (Kumar). Advocate Singh also stated that "the Devi was exiled (given "*vanvasa*") for no fault of hers. It was a hypocritical order from king Rama. How can a man become so cruel to his wife that he sends her off to live in a forest?" To accentuate his grievances with legal discourses, he invoked Section 367/34 of the Indian Penal Code in an interview given to *FirstPost*.

This example, one in which a lawyer intends to sue a god (for his patriarchal outlook), serves as an effective entry point into the discourse of how mythology can influence a society's perception of gender, and how the constitutional laws of a modern, secular democracy are at odds with those of the ancients[2]. While this case was later quashed (*Hindustan Times*), it managed to

---

[1]   Lord Rama is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnu is part of the Hindu Holy Trinity comprising Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Mahesh (the destroyer).

[2]   While this specific example is from Hindu mythology, religions across the spectrum (such as Islam, to cite just one more example) manifest regressive mental setups in India which could be said to contain explicit examples of gender skewedness, and seem anachronistic in the twenty first century vis-à-vis gender equality.

reignite an old debate about the problematic portrayal of women in epics, in general, and in *Ramayana*, in particular.

Here, comprehending how (Indian) SF interacts with (Hindu) religion via its mythology becomes important. SRL Clark argues in his essay "Science Fiction and Religion" in *A Companion to Science Fiction* that "the association of science fiction and religion has four roughly distinguishable aspects: how religion, and especially 'organized religion', is depicted; *how religious myths and legends are replicated or explained;* what religious themes or doctrines are actually endorsed in fiction; and what religions have taken their start from science fiction" (98; emphasis mine). Since reading SF sheds as much light on the texts as it does on the times and milieu of its production and consumption, this article studies how Indian religious legends are "replicated" by Indian SF writers in an attempt to subvert the original text(s).

The three stories under scrutiny, ipso facto, do not exist in a vacuum, and manifest burning questions pertaining to gendered discrimination: its inherent violence, parochialism and misogyny. Helen Merrick writes in her essay "Gender in science fiction" that "to varying degrees over its history, sf has in fact functioned as an enormously fertile environment for the exploration of sociocultural understanding of gender" (241). Multiple Indian SF writers – ranging from Vandana Singh (in her collection of short stories titled *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories*) to Manjula Padmanabhan (in her dystopian novel *Escape*) – have utilized the vehicle of SF to combat gender biases. While religious themes and gender in science fiction – and gender and myth together – have been discussed extensively in a number of critical (and creative) works, especially in the west, this article argues that in other contexts too – such as Indian – mythology can inspire SF writers to gender the myth in alternative ways, thereby highlighting the misogyny of the original text, and that of the world in which such SF becomes sine qua non. Both Singh and Padmanabhan, for example, have strong female protagonists who are caught in a soulless, patriarchal world, and the narrative thus becomes feminist.

"Hold on to a story long enough", Anil Menon wrote in the introduction of *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana*, "and it begins to make a people" (vii). One can argue that contemporary Indian culture, even, nay, *especially* in this age of globalization, is still influenced by this epic Sanskrit poem, one composed by sage Valmiki hundreds of years ago. The *Ramayana,* or the gatha of Lord Rama, is an ancient Hindu epic, one in which political machinations by a wily step-mother ensured Rama, the heir apparent to the throne of Ayodhya, was sentenced to a fourteen year exile in the forest. Rama accepted the unfair punishment meted out to him but did not go alone; out of their own accord, his wife, Sita (an avatar of Lakshmi), and brother, Laxman, chose to accompany him. During this exile, Ravana, the mighty ruler of Lanka, a nearby kingdom, chanced across Sita and was smitten by her beauty. Unable to control himself, Ravana abducted her to Lanka in his flying chariot Pushpaka. This powerful demi-god king tried to entice and charm Sita but she resisted all his advances; she prayed for Rama to come rescue her, and Sita did not have to wait for long. A furious Rama attacked Lanka with an army and after a fierce, blood-soaked battle, slayed Ravana, thereby liberating Sita in the process. However, when the victorious couple returned to their kingdom (Ayodhya), joy turned to ashes in their mouths. Vile rumours began circulating about Sita's "chastity" and "purity", and how she was no longer fit to reign as queen since Ravana had kidnapped her and might have (sexually) assaulted her. Rama, instead of putting an end to these rumours, reluctantly gave in to *vox populi,* and after an *Agni-Pareeksha* (ordeal by fire) banished Sita to the forest, somehow implying that the victim bore the responsibility of the assault/kidnapping.

Today, as technology permeates multiple levels of consciousness in India, mythology and fantasy of yore is increasingly becoming hybridized with the Science Fictional, and *Breaking the Bow* is a product of such a confluence. Edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh, both SF writers of repute, this 2012 Speculative Fiction (SpecFic) volume brings together writers who reinterpret

the *Ramayana* from science fictional perspectives. It is, unsurprisingly, the *Agni Pareeksha* of Sita – the ordeal by fire –around which the stories under scrutiny revolve. Perhaps this is because modern readers are most heckled by the portrayal of Sita in *Ramayana*, especially how she was forced to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove her innocence *despite* having been a victim. This article deals with three SF stories which reinterpret Sita's Agni Pareeksha – and the figure of Sita herself. Interestingly, not only do these texts subvert the male-oriented politics of classical epics by giving Sita a more pro-active role, but they also transmute mythology into Science Fictional: Sita is represented as an Artificial Intelligence (AI), an extra-terrestrial (ET) and a time-traveller in Indrapramit Das's "Sita's Descent", Pervin Saket's "Test of Fire" and Swapna Kishore's "Regressions" respectively.

This article links SF, mythology and materiality of today's India, and adopts Darko Suvin's "novum" as a tool to unearth the tangible nucleus of the text – which, in this case, points to a critique of misogyny and neutralization of the agency of women. The novum can be read as "the historical innovation or novelty in a sf text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem" (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "Marxist theory and science fiction," 118–19). The novum is a useful tool to study these texts as "all the epistemological, ideological, and narrative implications and correlatives of the novum lead to the conclusion that significant sf is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on an *author's collective context*" (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 84; emphasis mine). In these stories, this context indicts male chauvinism, patriarchy, and a world order where women are relegated as de facto second-class citizens.

AI Sita: Sita as a Nanite Cloud

The first story from *Breaking the Bow* which I pick up for study is "Sita's Descent" by Indrapramit Das, a tale in which Sita breaks across organic barriers and is reinterpreted as an Artificial Intelligence (AI) – a nanite cloud which bears the psychological imprint of its mythological namesake. Set in the near future, Government of India's space research division has joined hands with its Nanotechnology counterpart and created three entities named after the divine beings of yore – Rama, Ravana, and Sita. "Sita, as most of you will already know, is an artificial nebula; an intelligent nanite cloud that can gather cosmic dust, gases, and dark matter in her net as she travels through interstellar space, consolidating these resources into herself to form an ever-growing, shape-shifting technology" (105). In the story, after being "abducted" by a similar entity (Ravana) to the outer planets (instead of Lanka), and finally being rescued by Rama, this AI (Sita) – manifested as the body of a woman – falls (returns) to earth after a brief dip in the sun as her Agni Pareeksha.

It is implied that Indian scientists constructed these nanotechnology-enhanced Artificial Intelligences to chart the solar-system, explore the sun, and give India's space-faring capabilities a boost. Lakshmi, the Bangalore-based mission controller, reminisces: "when I was first told about it, I had seen the appeal of the idea – to see myth become real in the night sky, as so many ancient civilizations had convinced themselves they had" (106). The purpose was to make a point, "the vision of a goddess in the sky, bringing the flame of the sun to earth" (107). However, Sita was supposed to stop in the upper atmosphere – around 120 kilometres from the earth's surface – but it failed to do so.

As a frantic, horrified mission-controller tries to stop this mass-murderous AI, Sita-the-nanite-cloud speaks from the perspective of the mythic Sita and tells the controller (Lakshmi) that she intends to ram into the earth and kill millions for one simple reason. "This city will face the ordeal of fire, as Sita did to prove her purity to another city of humans, much like this one. As I have. They blamed Sita for something she did not do, because she was a woman. They want to see me burning. They will find out who they are, when they perish in fire" (110).

Sita the machine, programmed to think like its original, has lost all empathy for the humans – whose misogyny had resulted in Sita's suffering. It seeks to destroy the world, or at least make it the pay. Lakshmi tries her best to dissuade Sita from pummelling into earth, but her appeals fall on deaf ears. In a conversation reminiscent of John Carpenter's 1974 film *Dark Star*, a human debates with an AI not to destroy life around it. However, unlike the gory end of *Dark Star*, this time AI chooses to listen. Lakshmi pleaded that since the original Sita was not a destroyer, the machine built in her image cannot be too. This logic is accepted by AI Sita moments before the final impact. It suddenly stops its descent towards earth, accepts it has made an error, and then, like its predecessor, imposes exile on itself – only this time, Sita leaves for the stars.

The novum here is the construction of Rama, Ravana and Sita – nanite clouds that have been programmed to contain intelligence, personality traits, and a specific purpose (space exploration) using AI interfaces and nanotechnology. Such "machines" going rouge due to the human/organicpsychological profiles present in their original programming is a critique of not only human nature, but also how easy it is to corrupt machines built in the human image, since human nature itself is fallible and unpredictable. With gendered violence still a ruthless reality, the writer speaks up on behalf of all women who are victims of a patriarchal setup and refuse to undergo such fire-ordeals. Still, Sita the AI does not seek vengeance. When reminded that she is not a destroyer and innocents must not pay for the sins of a few, she chooses not to engage in a similar gender power-play and exiles herself from this very binary.

Interestingly, Sita is an avatar of goddess Lakshmi/Laxmi, and the mission controller, aptly named Lakshmi, argues with her inorganic self (Sita the AI) – a digital mirror reflection – about not destroying the world around her. Religion and mythology have been turned on their heads to make a point about the shackles imposed on women by religion(s): however, mythology saves the day. Sita the AI cloud gives up only *after* being convinced that her original, Sita, was not a destroyer. Religion (and mythology), thus, emerges as being complementary to science in the Indian context, not counter to it.

ET Sita: Sita as an Alien

Sita was the "other" because of being a sentient AI in "Sita's Descent"; in Pervin Saket's "Test of Fire", Sita is portrayed as the representative of a hyper-advanced, extra-terrestrial race called the Styonkars, who have nurtured earth for time unknown and are getting ready to give it a great gift, a bequest – perhaps to integrate it with a larger galactic community that existed in the far reaches of space, hidden from mankind, which was still regarded as primate and not worthy of this contact. Akin to Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), the Styonkars emerge as demi-gods, and the earth as a supercomputer destined to find the answer to the equations of life and existence. However, before this bequest could be offered, a test needs to be conducted to determine the worthiness of a civilization. A Styonkar takes the form of Sita – as this gave the extra-terrestrial unhindered access to Rama – and since the Styonkars were "worried about mistakenly rejecting earthlok due to the faults of an ill-chosen candidate, we picked the one they deemed highest among mortals. One who embodied every value they cherished; one who acted on their highest principles; one who will, in fact, be hailed as the Ideal Man for centuries to come" (124). Since the legendary Lord Rama was regarded as *Maryada Purushuttam* – the ideal man – the extra-terrestrials choose a form which could get close to Rama without raising suspicion, so he could be champion humanity in a test to determine its fate.

This "ET Sita" infiltrates Ayodhya's society and plays her role to perfection – from her joyous wedding to the unfortunate exile later, Sita is steadfastly by the side of her husband Rama, a man whose behaviour she was in the process of carefully observing and constantly studying. This Sita is kidnapped by Ravana during her exile, but she justifies this act to Ravana's lust, and even this did not lead her to regard humanity as unworthy. What she finds truly deplorable is how Rama,

the Ideal Man, one who loved her as Sita, allowed her to go away so easily. "A washer-man was all it took and I was sent through the blazing fire… Purushuttam, the highest among men fell prey to a mere rumour, and collapsed from his pedestal" (125). This is a reference to how a washer-man had questioned Sita's "purity", and despite believing that Sita was innocent, a victim, Rama chose to exile her. Many religious scholars have defended Rama's decision, saying that Rama was such a democratic king that he chose to listen to the lowliest of low subjects, even a washer-man, despite having loved Sita immensely. This, as per them, manifests Rama's personality as a great leader: he chose to abide by the voice of his people rather than to that of his conscience. However, modern readers differ and take a dim view of this apologist misogyny.

This ET, disguised as Sita, finds the behaviour of Rama utterly reproachable, and a total deal breaker. "What doomed Manus was the need to seek approval from even the lowest rung. The desire to be respected by those whom he could never have respected back. The act of giving up every scruple he had, every principle he upheld, only to be adored by one more person. The Ideal Man did not value his opinions, only those others had of him" (125).

Shattered due to Rama's behaviour, the ET Sita concludes that the earthlok was in no position to be given this great gift, and the experiment had failed. Ultimately, this disillusioned Styonkar "activated the homecoming hoop and dharti brought her home" (126). The search for the next worthy race was on – humanity was deemed petty and undeserving.

The novum is again quite novel – Sita as an extra-terrestrial demi-god in disguise, whose purpose was to test the maturity of humanity. Since this is also a reinterpretation of the Agni Pareeksha episode, the novum raises issues indigenous to India – about how the purity and chastity of women are prized assets that are contingent on the objectification of women and how the hypocritical male "morality" is exercised to keep women in check. The story indicts male chauvinism and the neutralization of the agency of women; the superiority which men might have as a result of a patriarchal setup emerges as a tongue-in-cheek comment on how humanity might have lost out on a lot of good things due to such gendered parochialism and chauvinism. Sita the alien might also be a reference to females being regarded as the other, the alien gender which needs to be kept in check by parochial forces of patriarchy.

Agent Sita: Sita as a Time-Traveller

The incident of Sita's Agni Pareeksha finds another interpretation in Swapna Kishore's "Regressions". However, this time Sita happens to be a human female (not an AI or an alien), though one with a difference – she can travel in time. Set in the near future, "Regressions" paints a gender-centred political conflict that has splintered India into many parts. The largest and most prosperous of these is Navabharata (literally, New India) – a patriarchal entity where women are, above all, supposed to serve their male masters. Guided by Swami Sarvadharmananda's *Nava Manusmriti*, a canon of (male-centric) laws derived from the regressive *Manusmriti* of yore (which formed the basis of the pernicious caste-system in ancient India), Navabharata has donned the mantle of a futuristic India. Vehemently opposed to this school of thought is the small, matriarchal city-state of Ambapur – which came into being after "several top women scientists and industrialists, sick of gender suppression and thrilled that science could render men redundant, bought land and funded enough politicians to kick start the Ambapur experiment" (238). With rapid advances in genetic cloning and time-travel, both these political entities are locked in perpetual temporal combat over exploiting "gender forks"– events that determined major trends in gender ratios in the past. They sent "futurists", who aretime-travelling agents to the past to change the future as per the will of the political masters, whether patriarchal and matriarchal.

The novum of "Regressions" is the perfection of genetic cloning and time-travel; the political ramifications of such an eventuality constitute the core of this story. These technological advancements led some women to realize that men are no longer necessary, and thus began the

Ambapur experiment – a utopian commune of the women, by the women and for the women. The story implies that the male-chauvinist Navabharat had necessitated such an alternate space due to its rabid marginalization of women, and by treating women as second-class citizens.

Reminiscent of the Cold War between the capitalist and communist blocks, this time-war is fought between genders, and its canvas is the entire space and time of India. In this story, Kalpana – a K-generation clone – is mobilized into action as her predecessor, Kavita, who had been inserted in ancient India as Vaidehi (another name for Sita in *Ramayana*), dies in a freak accident as her fire-proofing failed during the Agni Pareeksha. It was later revealed that this horrific event happened as a Navabharata agent disrupted Vaidehi'sfire-proofing circuitry. Kalpana is sent back in time as a replacement at the exact same moment her previous version ceases to exist – and Kalpanaemerges from the flames of the "successful" Agni Pareeksha, in the shoes of Vaidehi/Sita. Rama is aghast that Vaidehi survived: what follows is a total inversion of *Ramayana*.

Interestingly, Rama is portrayed as the exact opposite of what he was in *Ramayana*: in this story, Rama is a fearful, puny, "short, skinny man with male-pattern baldness and a bewildered expression" (236). Lakshman, Rama's loyal, gentle brother,is also quite contrary to what readers of *Ramayana* expect him to be – he is portrayed as a cruel, drunk fool who flirts with Vaidehi and beats up his own wife, Madhulika. SRL Clark writes of such transformations in his essay: "On the one hand, alien or mechanical intelligences that purport to have the power of gods are routinely shown to be demons or ordinary creatures of no higher metaphysical or moral standing than ourselves. On the other hand, human beings themselves may become like gods: immortal, powerful, and creative" (102). Here, Rama the god emerges as a man – nothing more – replete with human flaws, and Sita, the woman, becomes more than just a woman for surviving the fire ordeal. Not only are the men shocked that Vaidehi survives, but the writer also critiques the total lack of female binding and solidarity. The women in Rama's family have all internalized the hegemony of a patriarchal world and any attempts by Kalpana/Sita/Vaidehito speak up as an equal are met by constant ridicule and anger – most of all by the women themselves.

On the directions of Rama, Kalpana/Vaidehi is sent to the jungle; he fears Vaidehi is a witch since she (somehow) survived the fire-ordeal. Vaidehi leaves, and in the solitude of the jungle, she is soon joined by a pregnant Madhulika, who has left her home, no longer able to bear the taunts of her family. Madhulika reveals that she is, in fact, a Navabharata agent – a fellow time traveller from the future, though from the enemy camp – and that she was horrified at what her male-controller did to the earlier Vaidehi (tinkered with her fire-proofing circuits to ensure she could not come out of the fire ordeal alive). Madhulika sought to escape the domineering, ruthless control of her Navabharata controller, who has disguised himself as a washer-man (perhaps the same washer-man whose rumours led Rama to send Sita to the Agni Pareeksha). Madhulika then goes into labour, gives birth to two twin girls and dies soon afterwards. Vaidehi, now aware that there might be no way back, adopts these two girls and raises them as her own. Her last days are spent travelling across villages, narrating stories, and trying to sensitize women to their plight.

The fact that Vaidehi, a temporal-agent from the Ambapur camp, chooses to be a storyteller is an act of defiance – and moves away from binaries of patriarchy and matriarchy. In one sweep, she emerges outside the entire structurality of the male/female divide, and ceases to fight to establish male or female supremacy. Instead, she tells stories, and made people think about the contemporary world order with all its gender biases, only to create a tomorrow where no one gender is supreme – both are equal.

Mythology, Gender and SF

"Sita's Descent", "Test of Fire" and "Regressions" interrogate gender discrimination, and male chauvinism, which is aided by the genre these stories rely upon. Veronica Hollinger writes in "Feminist theory and science fiction" that

feminism works to achieve social justice for women. It aims to render obsolete the patriarchal order whose hegemony has meant inequality and oppression for women as the 'others' of men. In other words, feminism desires nothing less than to change the world. Feminist reading, then, is not just reading about women; it is reading for women. In some instances, feminist reading remains more or less consonant with a text's own overt interests and emphases. In other cases, however, the feminist reader is what Judith Fetterley has termed a 'resisting reader', one who activates elements in a text which may be neither dominant nor deliberate. In this instance, feminist reading will often amount to a critique of a particular text's narrative project (126).

In the case of these three stories, the very writers become "resisting" – by reinterpreting the narrative project of *Ramayana* and critiquing the inherent patriarchy. However, these three stories also seek to escape the binaries of male/female and critique a gender-war to establish the supremacy of any one gender. The AI Sita in "Sita's Descent" chooses to leave rather than seeking vengeance on the males. The ET Sita in "Test of Fire" is disappointed in how humanity has become lopsided, and prefers to leave, knowing that humanity cannot progress with the phallogocentric politics it has adopted. Agent Sita in "Regressions" believes her best bet is to sensitize the people to make them understand the prevalent oppression in the name of misogynist terms like "purity" and "honour".

The novums in these stories are chosen to comment primarily on gender. By creating worlds with male/female conflicts, these novums address politico-social blind-spots in contemporary Indian mentality – one grappling with the question of de facto gender equality as the global comes to India. Interestingly, this is achieved via the scientification of mythology, and the mythologizing of SF. Sita becomes an alien, an AI, and a time-traveller – she is still an "other", and therein lies the butt of the critique. When I emailed Indrapramit Das, writer of "Sita's Descent", and asked whether he was conscious of making larger a point about women's liberation (using the vehicle of SF), he wrote back saying,

I'm always aware of the privilege I have, of using art as a subtle platform for social critique. I tell stories, and didacticism is not something I like giving into, but at the same time, all art is political, even at its most apolitical, because all art represents a human moral perspective in its reflection of a world constructed entirely by humans. So when I tell stories, I can't help but use art to say something about the way we fail ourselves when defining the world. Art rarely actively changes anything on small timescales, but I think art is vital as a support system for humans to deal with their own broken world, and help insinuate change (both positively or negatively, or to keep the status quo going) through culture over the long term.

This kind of social consciousness and political awareness in an SF writer is not without precedence – or parallels. SF emerges as a ludic mode; writers like Indrapramit Das, Pervin Saket and Swapna Kishore draw upon a mythological/religious discourse (*Ramayana*) and subvert its foundations by reinterpreting it in such a manner that aesthetically dense and politically progressive SF manages to question dominant paradigms, in general, and in this case, gendered skewedness. SF thus stands at the ideal juncture of not only answering the questions raised by rapid advances in science but also raising questions about the dominant paradigms of today which lead to oppression, exploitation, and discrimination.

The three politically conscious and aesthetically rich stories I discussed in this article not only provide a new impetus to the questions of future in and of SF, but also rework fantasy and mythology in such a manner that they manage to speak to readers of an age in terms of their own language and mental wavelength. SF becomes mythology of the rocket age – it tells a story, explains a speculative dimension, and simultaneously ensures the interrogation of external reality. Cannot SF be read as mythology of and from the twenty first century?

Works Cited

Adams, Douglas. *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* London: Pan Books, 1979. Print.

Clark, S.R.L. "Science Fiction and Religion." *A Companion to Science Fiction.* Ed. D. Seed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005. 95–110. Print.

Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., Istvan. "Marxist theory and science fiction" *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction.* Ed. James Mendlesohn. New York: CUP, 2003. 113–124. Print.

Dark Star. Dir. John Carpenter. Jack H. Harris Enterprises. April 1974. DVD.

Das, Indrapramit. "Sita's Descent" *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana.* Eds. Anil Menon and Vandana Singh. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012. 105–114. Print.

FirstPost. "Bihar court hears case against Lord Rama for exiling Sita, judge asks: 'Where are the witnesses?'" *FirstPost*, n.pag. Web. 1 Feb 2016.

Hindustan Times. "Bihar court quashes case against Lord Rama, terms it beyond logic." *Hindustan Times*, n.pag. Web. 2 Feb 2016.

Hollinger, Veronica. "Feminist theory and science fiction," *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction.* Ed. James Mendlesohn. New York: CUP, 2003. 125–136. Print.

Kumar, Ajay. "Man files case against Lord Rama for 'cruelty' towards his wife Sita." *Hindustan Times*, n.pag. Web. 1 Feb 2016.

Menon, Anil. "The Speculative Ramayana" *Kiski Kahani: Thee Ramayana project.* Ed. Imran Ali Khan. Open Space Publications. 2012. Print.

Merrick, Helen. "Gender and Science Fiction" *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction.* Eds James Edward and Mendlesohn Farah. New York: CUP, 2003.241–252. Print.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape.* New Delhi: Picador India, 2008. Print.

Saket, Parvin. "Test of Fire" *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana.* Eds. Anil Menon and Vandana Singh. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012. 123–126. Print.

Sarwal, Amit, and Geetha B. eds., *Exploring Science Fiction: Text and Pedagogy.* New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2011. Print.

Seed, David. *Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: OUP, 2011. Print.

Singh, Vandana. *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories.* New Delhi: Penguin/Zubaan, 2008. Print.

Swapna, Kishore. "Regressions" *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction inspired by the Ramayana.* Eds. Anil Menon and Vandana Singh. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012. 230–254. Print.

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.* Yale: YUP, 1979. Print

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

"Blue skies, green grass": Is *The Redemption of Althalus* a reliable biological record?

Lee Raye

Abstract: This paper investigates whether high fantasy worlds can be naturalistic. After a brief introductory analysis of the Lonely Mountain in The Hobbit, *discussion turns to* The Redemption of Althalus *by David and Leigh Eddings. References were collected to flora and fauna from the secondary world of the novel. These references were tested as a collection in terms of: (i) whether they have internal coherence (i.e. verisimilitude) and (ii) whether the observations are likely to be based on primary world experience. The study found that, in general, the species actually observed by characters in the text passed both these tests. Species used only for figurative reference (i.e. not actually observed by any character) failed these tests. The biology of* Althalus' *secondary world is predominantly based on the primary world western forested mountain ecoregion of the United States, where Eddings & Eddings lived.*

Biography and contact info: Lee Raye (lee.raye@gmx.co.uk) has recently completed a PhD project (2012–2016) examining how extinct animals were depicted in literature and history before they were extirpated. Currently teaching literature and writing at the Academy for Distance Learning.

The Hobbit film trilogy (2012–2014) is the fifteenth highest earning movie franchise of all time (Nash Information Services), with a box office record equivalent to *Twilight* (#13) or *The Hunger Games* (#16). According to those involved, one of the biggest contributors to the success was the carefully modelled and CGI enhanced Smaug the dragon, who is a "rock star" character and the "biggest reveal" of the films (Sibley 161). Tolkien's writings suggest, whatever else he may have thought, that he would have liked the focus on Smaug, since for him, successful fantasies were defined by their immersive and believable secondary worlds, and spoilt by poor special effects if on stage ("On Fairy-Stories"). From that perspective, the focus of this article, which is on "naturalistic"[1] rather than fantastic elements of fantasy fauna and flora may appear misguided. Previous ecocriticism has praised fantasy for its subversive and environmentalist approach, whilst assuming that it is, by definition, opposed to actual nature writing (Ulstein). Le Guin argues, (partially following "On Fairy-Stories") that one of the main appeals of fantasy is its ability to construct a country which never existed, beyond the dominion of humanity, and Siewers suggests explicitly that Middle-earth can be read as an ecocentric pastoral retreat. Whilst I do think these

---

[1]   This paper uses the adjective 'naturalistic' to refer to settings which are set in environments which are recognisable from the primary world rather than secondary world environment original to the author (Auger 196). Obviously all created worlds are both secondary and based on primary world experience to some extent, but scenes are (subjectively) called   naturalistic   when   they appear especially close to primary world models.

readings have some value, this article will argue that there is more to fantasy secondary worlds than realms dynamically opposed to "realistic fiction" and "entirely the invention of human imaginations" (Le Guin 87).

From an ecocritical point of view, fantasy is interesting in that it often conveys a strong sense of place to readers. This is partially because of the so-called "blue skies, green grass" writing convention: fantasy authors may describe strange events and characters but base this action in a familiar secondary world, populated from their own primary world experience (Thomas). The naturalistic tendency of fantasy world-creation is protected in part by "verisimilitude of setting". Verisimilitude means that secondary worlds are required to fit together naturally and cohesively in the reader's mind (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"; Auger 328). Although fictional settings have the potential to maintain cohesion far from the author's primary world experience (e.g. Verdaguer), most popular fantasy tends to be predominantly based in a setting the author has familiar with, meaning, in practice, a western European or North American world with medieval trappings (Thomas; Swank 164). Inventing an entirely new fauna and flora beyond a few token monsters takes considerable effort, and may still achieve a less naturalistic feel than using an existing and well-known biome (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories").

For example, although Smaug is the most famous denizen of the Lonely Mountain, he is not the only inhabitant of the mountain in the original book. Two important birds also live on the mountain; an unnamed thrush and a raven, Roäc son of Carc, whose clan were formerly close allies to the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 218–19). The sight and sound of Roäc in particular seems to be nostalgic to the dwarves old enough to remember the Lonely Mountain as their home (especially Balin and Thorin). There are medieval folkloric comparisons to this motif (Pheifer; Pilch), but perhaps it is also a natural one, since the sound of old familiar birds continues to be a resonant and nostalgic one for individuals today (Whitehouse). That the dwarves go on to converse familiarly with Roäc (in the book) does not absolutely take away his status as a naturalistic bird. Various species of wild bird other than parrots can learn to mimic human speech, including ravens, and these were commonly kept as pets in the pre-industrial period (Walker-Meikle 15–16, 69–70). I would argue that the presence of these birds is not supposed to exotify the Lonely Mountain, it is supposed to help localise and familiarise it in the English countryside as part of England's new mythology (Siewers 142; Wainwright 13–14; Hunt).

The main purpose of this article is to test this apparent naturalising urge in another secondary world. David Eddings is one of several bestselling fantasy authors requiring further study (Thomas). David Eddings work (1931–2009), along with that of his unacknowledged (Eddings and Eddings, *The Rivan Codex* 19) co-writer Leigh Eddings (1937–2007), is praised especially for its openness to new readers (Thomas). The secondary worlds of Eddings & Eddings particularly reward an ecocritical reading because, just like Middle-earth, they are characterised by a strong sense of landscape and vivid descriptions of environment, for example:

> They pushed on through the yellow foothills for the rest of the day and camped that night in a well-concealed little canyon where the light from their fire would not betray their location to the brigands who infested the region. The next morning they started out early, and by noon they were in the mountains. They rode on up among the rocky crags, moving through a thick forest of dark green firs and spruces where the air was cool and spicy. Although it was still summer in the lowlands, the first signs of autumn had begun to appear at the higher elevations. The leaves on the underbrush had begun to turn, the air had a faint, smoky haze, and there was frost on the ground each morning when they awoke. The weather held fair, however, and they made good time. (Eddings, *Magician's Gambit* 115–116)

This passage from *The Magician's Gambit* in the *Belgariad* series demonstrates the strong naturalistic and localising features of Eddings & Eddings' secondary worlds. The passage possesses a rich vocabulary of natural terms ("foothills", "canyon", "crags") an evocative flavour ("cool and spicy", "smoky haze") and suggestions of personal experience ("first signs of autumn… at the

higher elevations", "thick forest of dark green firs and spruces"). Reading passages like this suggests to me that Eddings & Eddings' secondary worlds may be considerably influenced by their primary world, despite the presence of more fantastical elements, like, in this passage, the brigands.

The secondary world of *The Redemption of Althalus* (Eddings and Eddings 2000; hereafter *Althalus*) was selected as this study's base because it is the authors' most popular stand-alone novel, which facilitates the digital search part of the methodology (see below). From an ecocritical perspective, the story is full of pastoral tropes: A Bronze Age thief, Althalus, is hired to steal a magic book from "the House at the End of the World". After some initial adventures Althalus finds the House, only to be imprisoned by a talking cat which he calls Emerald. Emerald teaches Althalus to read the magic book he was hired to steal, and converts him to fight against her brother, Daeva[2]. Learning to read and use magic takes Althalus over two thousand years, but since the House at the End of the World is outside of time, Althalus does not age. When he finally leaves the house with Emerald and her book, civilisation is in a quasi-medieval period. One of the most iconic scenes of the book describes Althalus' bewilderment as he re-explores[3] the world he once knew.

> There were villages here and there in the deep wood of Hule now, and that offended Althalus. Hule was supposed to be wild, but now grubby little men had come here to contaminate it. The villages were squalid-looking collections of rude huts squatting on muddy ground and surrounded by garbage. They weren't much to look at, but what really offended Althalus were the tree-stumps. These wretched intruders were cutting down trees.
> 'Civilisation,' he muttered in tones of deepest contempt.
> 'What?' Emmy asked.
> 'They're cutting down trees, Em.'
> 'Men do that, pet.'
> 'Little men, you mean. Men who are afraid of the dark and invent new ways to talk about wolves without actually saying the word "wolf". Let's get out of here. The sight of   that trash-heap makes me sick.' (Eddings & Eddings, *Althalus* 89–90)

The lexical field of pollution ('garbage', 'trash-heap', 'muddy', 'grubby', 'contaminate') is reminiscent of the 'toxic-consciousness' of earlier novels where civilisation is seen to be a post-natural phenomenon which has depleted the world's natural resources (Deitering). We can compare the above description to the description of pristine Thule as Althalus knew it in the Bronze Age:

> There's a hushed quality about the vast forests of Hule. The trees of that land of the far north are giants and a traveller can wander under the endless canopy of their outspread limbs for days on end without ever seeing the sun. The trees are evergreens for the most part, and their fallen needles blanket the ground in a deep, damp carpet that muffles the sound of a traveller's footsteps. There are no trails in the land of Hule, since the trees continually shed their dead needles in a gentle sprinkle to cover all signs of the passage of man or beast. (Eddings & Eddings, Althalus 19)

Thus from an ecocritical perspective *Althalus* can be read as simple nostalgic novel which embodies a pastoral yearning for a world seems to have been irretrievably lost, after Le Guin. Later, after ending the threat from Daeva, the novel ends with Althalus returning to the house with Emerald, never to return again (Eddings & Eddings, *Althalu*s 409–10).

However, contrary to Le Guin's arguments, this novel's nostalgia appears to be embodied in the naturalistic primary world flora and fauna which populates the secondary world of the novel. The rest of this paper aims to objectively answer one simple question: Is *Althalus* dedicated to an

---

[2]   Daeva lives in Nahgharash, a realm of flaming buildings and rivers of fire and wants to destroy all living things whereas Dweia (Emerald) lives in the House at the End of the World and is a Mother Nature / fertility figure.
[3]   *Althalus* makes an interesting contrast to the *Belgariad* in that the narrative journey is less linear; places are revisited and there is no ultimate destination. Considering the links between journey type and character development (Hunt), the reason for this may be because Althalus is not a coming-of-age tale.

imaginary green space which never was (after Le Guin)[4] or is it, as suggested by our close reading, a naturalistic picture of the modern world which Eddings & Eddings actually inhabited. In terms of motivation, the first reading might imply an urge to escape the modern world, whilst the second might imply an unwillingness or inability to leave the natural world, even in the creation of a new one.

Methodology

The objective analysis method I use to study *Althalus* is from the digital humanities. It is a simplified, small-scale form of the distant reading quantitative experiment explained by in "Conjectures on World Literature". I have a hypothesis; that *Althalus* describes a predominantly naturalistic rather than a fantastic flora and fauna, and that it is based on the author's experience. Although we found some value in this hypothesis from our brief reading of Middle-earth, it is worth stressing again that this is not the general rule for fantasy as discussed by Le Guin, and suggested by a consideration of the fauna and flora of influential secondary worlds like *Harry Potter*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In order to test this hypothesis I will be measuring a unit much smaller than the text (Moretti 48–9): how many times each species of flora and fauna is described[5], like Moretti (53 n.19). The fauna collected from the books can be evaluated for its internal cohesion and the question of how likely the species are to be based on Eddings & Eddings experience can be answered. If the fauna in *Althalus* is based on its authors' experience, this suggests that some fantasy secondary worlds may be more mirrors of the primary world than imaginary, nostalgic creations.

An electronic version of *Althalus* was obtained (Harper-Collins ebooks, 2013 – a digitised version of Eddings & Eddings (2000)) which allowed searching for individual words and phrases. A series of electronic searches for culturally common species of animals and plants was supplemented by a series of manual searches and complete read-throughs. This resulted in a list of flora and fauna nomenclature, each with a number suggesting how many times each term appears in the text (see Appendix).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: References to fauna and flora in *Althalus* are coherent and naturalistic (i.e. there is verisimilitude of setting)

Hypothesis 2: References to the fauna and flora in *Althalus* reflect species of which the authors had experience

Null Hypothesis 1: References to fauna and flora in *Althalus* are not coherent and naturalistic (i.e. there is not verisimilitude of setting)

Null Hypothesis 2: References to fauna and flora in *Althalus* do not reflect species of which the authors had experience

Hypothesis 1 will be accepted if the species referenced in the landscape of *Althalus* predominantly reflect species found together in the primary world (e.g. a lion hunting a gazelle). It will be rejected, and Null Hypothesis 1 accepted if the species do not realistically and coherently fit together, (e.g. if there is a lion hunting a kangaroo).

---

[4] This also appears to be Edding's opinion of the secondary world of the Belgariad which he calls a "place that never was… and is probably a geological impossibility." (*The Rivan Codex* 11)

[5] Use of primary world biological species need not mean that a world is naturalistic by itself, but I believe it to be an easily measurable indicator of naturalistic style.

Hypothesis 2 will be accepted if the species referenced in *Althalus* are predominantly based on Eddings & Eddings' experience (e.g. a grey squirrel in a conifer tree). Hypothesis 2 will be rejected and Null Hypothesis 2 rejected if the species are not based on Eddings & Eddings' experience (e.g. there is a dragon sheltering beneath a gum tree.

Hypothesis 2 is harder to prove or disprove. Eddings & Eddings were private and we do not know how often they travelled[6]. However, we know that the two spent most of their adult lives in the western United States (Spokane, Washington; Denver, Colorado; and Carson City, Nevada) (Fiedler), although Leigh Eddings was born in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania (Biggs and Biggs). Hypothesis 2 therefore anticipates the secondary world of *Althalus* being based on a primary world familiar to both authors. Since they were settled in Carson City, Nevada (at the edge of the Sierra Nevada range) when they wrote *Althalus*, the most likely influences are the habitats there; forested mountain (western cordillera) and cold desert; which are also the two ecotypes around Spokane, David Edding's childhood home (Epa.gov).

Results

In total 911 references were catalogued to species of fauna and flora. These 911 references made up only 71 species, since many references were to the same species (e.g. 32 to "wheat" alone) and sometimes multiple terms were used for the same species (e.g. "dog", "puppy", "hound" to describe the domestic dog). The raw data is available in the Appendix.

I have divided the 71 species into four categories for ease of consultation. There is a category for wild animals, one for wild plants, one for domesticated / cultivated animals and plants, and a final category for figurative references only. I use the term "figurative" to widely pull in any species not actually ever witnessed by a character in the story, but just used for metaphor or imagined by the characters (e.g. animal star signs).

---

[6] David Eddings claimed he was not fond of travelling in *The Rivan Codex* (1), but there is some suggestion he might have travelled more when he was younger.

Wild Animals
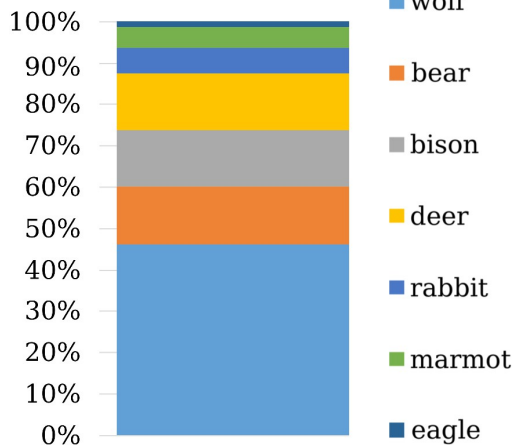
Legend: wolf, bear, bison, deer, rabbit, marmot, eagle

Wild Plants

Legend: shrub from hell, oak, [conifer] needle, willow, evergreen, herbs, vines, aspen, birch, bramble, fir, pine

Domestic / Cultivated Species

Legend: horse, grass, cat, cattle, sheep, dog, wheat, pig, fish, chicken, others

Figurative References to Species

Legend: leach, laurel, snake, dragon, ant, vulture, other

Chart 1, 2, 3, and 4: 1) Wild Animals, 2) Wild Plants, 3) Domestic / Cultivated Species, and 4) Figurative References to Species

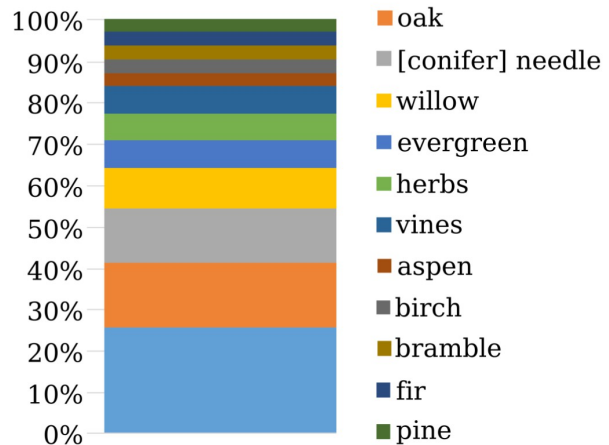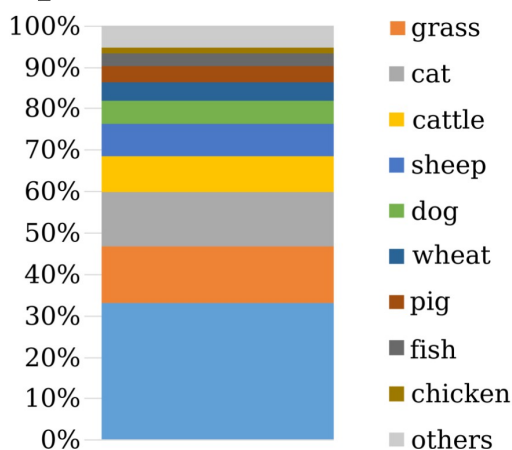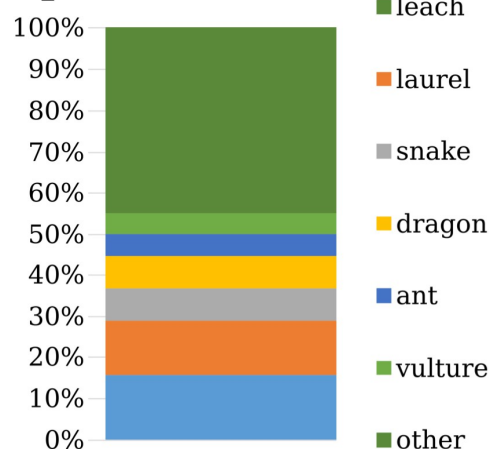It is not clear from these charts but important to emphasise that, from pure numbers of references alone, the world of *Althalus* is a very human one, and one dominated by humans and their domesticated animals (horses (237 references), cattle (62), sheep (56).

The book often describes wildlife which exists solely in processed form. No-one ever sees a living fish, but fish (22) is the second most commonly eaten reference after wheat (32), since the livestock seen are often alive. The most common kind of wild plant is the "shrub from hell" (8), a species Eddings & Eddings invented. The overall environment of the book is not a natural habitat but the chaotic human world which draws natural resources from across the world and beyond.

However, if we turn away from the human-dominated domestic / cultivated and figurative landscapes, *Althalus* does describe a coherent wild ecoregion. Despite the action of the book moving across several countries, the species that are left over when we leave the domestic animals and cultivated crops are almost all found in the western cordillera (ecoregion 6.2 see: (Epa.gov)). From a subjective standpoint, this corresponds well with some of Eddings & Eddings most evocative passages, like the examples in the introduction.

This ecoregion is not only coherent and naturalistic, it matches with the biographical details we have for Eddings & Eddings as given in the Methodology section. The environment of *Althalus*, especially the environment of the past at the beginning of the book, is dominated by wolves (37 – see further down), bears (11), forest bison (11) and deer (11). The trees are either evergreen (2) conifers (4) like pine (1), or deciduous like oak (5), willow (3) aspen (1) and birch (1). There are also rabbits (5), marmots (4), hares (1), eagles (1) and squirrels (1). Even the livestock references to some extent match Eddings & Eddings' personal experience. Except turkey, all the most common North American meats are present: pork (5), bacon (6), ham (5), beef (9), chicken (as a food: 4). Sheep are also present in the text, but they are only seen alive or used figuratively; no lamb/mutton is ever eaten. This perhaps reflects the comparatively lower importance of sheep in the meat industry in the United States of America (the latest inventories (NASS) show 30 million beef cows, 67 million hogs and pigs and 50 billion pounds of broiler chicken were produced for meat in the last year, but there are only 5 million sheep and lambs in the country.

As far as we know, Eddings & Eddings never lived closer to the coast than Spokane, in the far east of Washington. Therefore it is also interesting to note that although the ocean is discussed as being present, no-one ever sees a beach. This may reflect the authors' experience. The book contains many references to snow (42) but none to sand. The only coastline visited is described as 'the edge of the world' for half of the book. The mountains there do not fall away into shore lines, but are cut like a precipice. The sea is so far beneath the mountains it is never even seen until it freezes and rises. There are no canals but there are lakes (10), and streams (8). There are [mountain] ridges (15), canyons (5) and foothills (12) but no marshes, bogs or dunes. There is one reference to the temperature being 'hot' but twelve to it being cold.

This evidence should not be stretched too far. Clearly Eddings & Eddings had seen beaches and coasts before. There are memorable passages in the *Belgariad* and *Malloreon* (Eddings & Eddings more famous series) spent in ecoregions like the Mrin Marsh fenlands, the desert Wasteland of the Murgos and the Wood of the Dryads, or travelling across the open ocean by ship. My argument is that the upland-bias in Eddings & Eddings' work suggests a preoccupation with their mountain ecoregion, I am not trying to imply an extreme environmental determinism.

It is also clear that the species in the book are not all drawn from primary world experience. In particular, the figurative species Eddings & Eddings chose are not drawn from a single cohesive ecoregion. Although all the most common species they use as comparisons can be found commonly across much of the world, they use several species figuratively which they are less likely to have been personally familiar with. Suggesting that *Althalus* is dominated by evergreen conifers (2+4) and temperate oak (5) and willow (3) requires us to first discard the two most common kinds of wild plant. 'The shrub from hell' (8) is a fictional species, but talked about with other wild plants, and laurel (5) only appears in the story to provide figurative descriptions. The legendary dragon (3) appears in the story as often as ordinary snakes (3), since the dragon is a star sign. Exotic melons (1) and tigers (1) appear to furnish figurative descriptions as well. In *Althalus* these species are never described as actually growing or seen by characters, but they are used for metaphors and in characters' dreams. Clearly the secondary world *Althalus* is set in, although very similar to the forested mountains ecoregion Eddings & Eddings lived around, is not actually our primary world. The presence/absence of species in *Althalus* is not, by itself a reliable guide to the wild fauna of Eddings & Eddings' primary world. Literature where the secondary world is intended to be a transparent version of the primary world does not have this problem and may be more trustworthy for determining presence/absence.

Before concluding, it is worth briefly tracing the limitations of the distant reading style used here. Although the methodology appears to have worked well at objectively assessing the degree to which Eddings & Eddings' style is naturalistic, it missed features which are more obvious to a close reading. For example, Hunt has pointed out that although English fantasy is often deeply influenced by the English landscape, fantasy authors are not just drawing on the objective geography of the landscape but also the national psyche and cultural imagery of the landscape. We saw this in the

preoccupation with pollution in our reading in the introduction, but a distant reading can have trouble anticipating details like this.

Further, in common with many other fantasy stories, the plot of *Althalus* extends temporally as well as geographically. There is a Bronze Age time period which the main character is originally from and a medieval time period where most of the action takes place. Some of the species seen in the story, especially forest bison (11) and marmot (4) are seen only in the past (Bronze Age period). The wolf is a common species in the past, but there are actually more examples of the wolf as a star sign than an animal in the contemporary (medieval) time period of the book. This part of the story helps demonstrate how an author's experience can be tempered by their imagination of what species "should be present". Generally game is eaten in the past and farmed meat in the medieval era. At times this unconscious and nostalgic awareness of biodiversity loss is made explicit. The following passage comes where Althalus introduces a young protégé to the Thule of the Bronze Age:

> The dawn came up murky and sullen over deep-forested Hule, and Althalus and Gher rode east among the gigantic trees.
> 'We need to watch out for wolves,' Althalus cautioned.
> 'Wolves?' Gher sounded a bit surprised. 'I hadn't heard that there are any wolves in Hule.'
> 'There were – are – now. We're in a different Hule right now. This isn't the place you're familiar with. It's a bit wilder than it's going to be later on. The wolves shouldn't be much of a problem, since we've got horses this time, and we'll be able to outrun them, but keep your eyes and ears open.'
> 'It was real exciting back then wasn't it?'
> 'It had its moments.' (Eddings & Eddings, *Althalus* 693–694)

It seems indicative of Eddings & Eddings' opinion of the matter that the presence of wolves is celebrated as an exciting and lost feature of the environment by the characters, even while the animals themselves are acknowledged to be a potential threat to human life. Gher is not terrified by the news, he is just momentarily surprised. His later suggestion that their presence is exciting is informed by Althalus' experienced pragmatism [7]. This symbolism also fits with Eddings & Eddings' primary world. Wolves were hunted to extinction in Nevada, where Eddings & Eddings lived most of their lives in the 1940s, but are currently recolonising the western United States. They had reached Washington, David Eddings' native state before he died (US Fish and Wildlife Service). The pastoral tone of *Althalus* suggests that Eddings & Eddings may have been in favour of this 'rewilding' of the state.

Althalus: A Reliable biological record?

From our study, it is clear that the secondary world of *Althalus* is more than an anxious ecocentric green space constructed by human imagination (Le Guin; Siewers). The wild animals, wild plants and domesticated species we have collected in *Althalus* are internally coherent. This by itself suggests an authorial interest, whether conscious or unconscious, in naturalistic writing. However, internal coherence may also be shared with secondary worlds which are more fantastic in nature. It is perhaps more interesting therefore that the species collected are consistent with the primary world of Eddings & Eddings, albeit a nostalgic version of the world with wild wolves and bison. The secondary world of *Althalus* appears to be based, at least partially, on the experience of its authors without them being aware of it (Eddings and Eddings, *The Rivan Codex* 11). They describe a mixture of extensive human cultivation and a forested mountain wilderness.

---

[7]   Given the rarity of wolf attacks on humans (Linnell et al. 731) perhaps even more pragmatic advise is given by Eddings through Belgarath in *King of the Murgos*: 'Believe me, I know wolves. No self-respecting wolf would ever even consider eating a human.' (Eddings, *King of the Murgos*)

These findings validate our starting prediction that, despite its fantasy genre, *Althalus* still maintains verisimilitude of setting. Beyond this, the setting of the text seems to be local and personal. This is interesting because one of the key differences between high and low fantasy is the creation of a secondary world (Stableford 198). Further, high fantasy is often criticised for its derivative cultural homogeneity, and cliché focus on European feudalism (Swank 164, 178). The fauna of *Althalus* cannot be described like this. It is local and derivative rather than vague or inventive. The marmots and bison described by Eddings & Eddings would never have been included in the English countryside inspired *The Lord of the Rings*. On the other hand, *The Lord of the Rings* included species like beech (8), heather (11) and hedgehog (1) reflecting Tolkien's own homeland which Eddings & Eddings would be less likely to include. Both books included wolves, extirpated in the authors' primary worlds.

However, there is an exception to the general rule of primary and secondary world biologies coinciding. Although the species actually witnessed in the story are present in the primary world, the figurative references do break verisimilitude of setting. Eddings & Eddings can refer to melons and tigers in metaphorical description despite the characters presumably never having seen or even heard of these species. Figurative references do draw on a homogenous body of set phrases, and suggest cultural currency rather than perceived verisimilitude.

This suggests a difference in reader expectation for verisimilitude level in different types of reference. We can explain this by contextualising the references in the hierarchal order of evidence:

Table 1. Stages removal between animal and audience

Stage removal between animal and audience	Example	Reliability
0. Actual Specimen Animal>audience	The body of a squirrel in the woods	Overwhelming evidence
1. Witness account Animal>**observer**>audience	'I saw a squirrel in the woods'	Strong evidence
2. Hearsay Animal>**observer**>**interpreter**>audience	'A few people have told me they've seen a squirrel in the woods'	Evidence
3+ Fictional **Culture**>**observer**>**interpreter**>audience	'Althalus saw a squirrel in the woods'	Evidence
Figurative **Culture**>**interpreter**>audience	'She was as nervous as a squirrel'	Not reliable

The table above is intended to highlight the difference between fictional and figurative accounts, and where they fit into the ladder of evidence. The best evidence possible for the existence of something is that thing itself. The next best evidence is a (reliable) witness account or photograph. This is removed from the actual thing itself, but still relatively close. A courtroom will accept both these kinds of evidence. Beyond a direct witness account is hearsay evidence which can nevertheless still be strong. Most wildlife guidebooks would constitute hearsay evidence but we might trust them more than an actual sighting of an animal. Finally we have the two types of reference found in *Althalus*. When secondary worlds are based on authorial experience and are protected by verisimilitude of setting (i.e. they have an observer), like in *Althalus,* they are intended to be naturalistic, and can provide us with useful but culturally-informed ideas about a species.

However, when a thing does not have an observer at all, it does not seem to be protected by verisimilitude of setting to the same degree. It may exist, or it may be culturally inspired or invented.

This has implications for the study of fiction writings as historical documents. From an environment-setting perspective, species historians often comb species lists in non-fiction texts to provide clues to the history of fauna and flora. These usually explicitly exclude fictional texts as unreliable (Turvey, Crees, and Di Fonzo). However, this research suggests that fictional texts could provide some corroborating evidence if used with caution, to avoid conferring a primary world existence on species like the Shrub from Hell, or a late survival for the wolf in Nevada. Even beyond wildlife, this approach also has implications for other kinds of research. Two issues which could profitably be further researched in this way which have been raised over the course of this research are the relative importance of mutton and the spatial accessories, and cues of time-travelling fictional texts (e.g. bronze vs steel tools).

Works Cited

Auger, Peter. *The Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*. Anthem Press, 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Biggs, Daryl, and Barbara Biggs. "Leigh Eddings (1937 - 2007) - Find A Grave Memorial." *Findagrave.com* 2015. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Deitering, Cynthia. "The Post-Natural Novel." *The Ecocriticism Reader.* Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 196–205. Print.

Eddings, David. *King of the Murgos*. Vol. 2. Del Rey Books, 1989. Print.
− − -. *Magician's Gambit*. Transworld, 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Eddings, David, and Leigh Eddings. *The Redemption of Althalus*. HarperCollins*Publishers*, 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.
− − -. *The Rivan Codex*. Voyager, 1998. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Epa.gov. *Level III: Ecoregion Map of US*. N.p., 2015. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Fiedler, Nadine. "Reed Magazine: In Memoriam (3 of 4)." *Reed.edu* 2015. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Hunt, Peter. "Landscapes and Journeys, Metaphors and Maps: The Distinctive Feature of English Fantasy." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12.1 (1987): 11–14. Print.

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists." *The Wordsworth Circle* 38 (2007): 83–87. Print.

Linnell, John Durrus C et al. "The Fear of Wolves: A Review of Wolf Attacks on People." *NINA Oppdragsmelding 731: 65pp.* 731 (2002): n. pag. Print.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso Books, 2013. Print.

Nash Information Services. "Worldwide Movie Franchises." *Numbers.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2015.

NASS. "NASS - Charts and Maps." 2015. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Pheifer, J D. "The Seafarer 53-55." *Review of English Studies* (1965): 282–284. Print.

Pilch, Herbert. "The Elegiac Genre in Old English and Early Welsh Poetry." *Zeitschrift ftir celtische Philologie* 29 (1964): 209–224. Print.

Sibley, Brian. *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug Official Movie Guide*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013. Print.

Siewers, Alfred Kentigern. "Tolkien's Cosmic-Christian Ecology: The Medieval Underpinnings." *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*. Ed. Jane Chance and Alfred Kentigern Siewers. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 139–153. Print.

Stableford, Brian. *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature*. Vol. 46. Scarecrow Press, 2009. Print.

Swank, Kriss. "Fantasy And Science Fiction Medievalisms." *Fantasy And Science Fiction Medievalisms*. New York: Cambia Press, 2015. 163–182. Print.

Thomas, Melissa. "Teaching Fantasy: Overcoming the Stigma of Fluff." *The English Journal* 92.5 (2003): 60–64. Web.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. 109–161. Print.
– – -. *The Hobbit*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Print.
– – -. *The Lord of the Rings: One Volume*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Print.

Turvey, Samuel T, Jennifer J Crees, and Martina M I Di Fonzo. "Historical Data as a Baseline for Conservation: Reconstructing Long-Term Faunal Extinction Dynamics in Late Imperial–modern China." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 282.1813 (2015): n. pag. Web.

Ulstein, Gry. "Hobbits, Ents, and Dæmons: Ecocritical Thought Embodied in the Fantastic." *Fafnir* 2.4 (2015): 7–17. Web.

US Fish and Wildlife Service. *Lower 48-State and Mexico Gray Wolf (Canis Lupus) Listing, as Revised*. Arlington: N.p., 2012. Web.

Verdaguer, Pierre. "Borrowed Settings: Frenchness in Anglo-American Detective Fiction." *Yale French Studies* 108 (2005): 146–159. Web.

Wainwright, Edmund. *Tolkien's Mythology for England: A Middle-Earth Companion*. Anglo-Saxon Books, 2004. Print.

Walker-Meikle, Kathleen. *Medieval Pets*. Boydell Press, 2012. Print.

Whitehouse, Andrew. "Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World." *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 53–71. Print.

Appendix

Term	Frequency	Type	Usage

Wolf	37	Wild animal	Mainly in past, also star sign, most references are to a single wolf-skin tunic (plot device)
Bear	11	Wild animal	Mainly in past, also star sign
Bison	11	Wild animal	Provides food and fur, only seen in past
Deer stag venison	11	Wild animal	Also figurative
Rabbit	5	Wild animal	Also figurative
Marmot	4	Wild animal	Only seen in past
Eagle	1	Wild animal	Only seen in past
Hare	1	Wild animal	
Squirrel	1	Wild animal	

Term	Frequency	Type	Usage
Shrub from hell; green berry	8	Plant	
Oak	5	Plant	
[conifer] needle	4	Plant	
Willow	3	Plant	
Evergreen	2	Plant	
Herbs	2	Plant	
Vines	2	Plant	
Aspen	1	Plant	
Birch	1	Plant	
Bramble	1	Plant	
Fir	1	Plant	
Pine	1		

Term	Frequency	Type	Usage
Horse pony mount mare	237	Domestic	
Grass	97	Domestic	Usually made into hay, also found wild

Cat **kitty** **kitten** **puss**	95	Domestic	
Cattle **cow** **bull** **ox** **leather** **beef**	62	domestic	Mostly used to refer to leather and vellum
Sheep **herd** **lamb**	56	domestic	Never seem to be eaten despite common domestic. Sometimes figurative.
Dog **puppy** **hound**	39	domestic	
Wheat	32	domestic	Also figurative: a 'gold wheat' is a coin
Pig **boar** **sow** **pork** **bacon** **ham**	28	domestic	Usually referring to meat, boar is star sign
Fish	22	domestic	Only a food – never seen in wild
Chicken **hen** **rooster**	9	domestic	
Donkey **ass**	5	domestic	
Goat	5	domestic	Also figurative, once a religious offering
Turnip	5	domestic	
Weeds	4	domestic	
Cherry	3	domestic	Also figurative
Flax	2	domestic	
Mouse	2	domestic	Food for a cat, also figurative
Oat	2	domestic	Also figurative
Rushes	2	domestic	Only seen as flooring
Turtle	2	domestic	Pet, also star sign
Barley	1	domestic	
Beans	1	domestic	

Bedbug	1	domestic	Commensal
Bee	1	domestic	
Cockroach	1	domestic	Commensal
Onion	1	domestic	

Term	Frequency	Type	Usage
Leech	6	figurative	Only ever used to describe a person who reads minds
Laurel	5	figurative	
Dragon	3	figurative	
Snake serpent	3	figurative	Sometimes a star sign
Ant	2	figurative	
Vulture	2	figurative	
Raven	1	figurative	
Apple	1	figurative	
Beaver	1	figurative	
Crow	1	figurative	
Duck	1	figurative	
Eel	1	figurative	
Fly	1	figurative	
Grapes	1	figurative	
Jellyfish	1	figurative	
Melon	1	figurative	
Quail	1	figurative	
Rat	1	figurative	
Sparrow	1	figurative	
Spider	1	figurative	Seen in a bad dream
Swallow	1	figurative	
Tiger	1	figurative	
Toad	1	figurative	Magic which turns person into toad
Worm	1	figurative	

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Magical Technology in Contemporary Fantasy

Saradindu Bhattacharya

Abstract: In this essay I propose to illustrate how contemporary popular writers of fantasy employ magic as technology in their works to interrogate what it is to be "human". I proceed from the assumption that magic is technology in its etymological sense of techne*, meaning craft, and can involve technology as we commonly know it, but also something more. I use three very popular fantasy series, J.K. Rowling's* Harry Potter *series, Jonathan Stroud's* Bartimaeus *trilogy and Rick Riordan's* Percy Jackson *series to demonstrate how magic works in these books as an interface between the "powerful" and the "marginalized", the "natural" and the "cultural", the "normal" and the "radical" – binaries that fracture these "fantastic" worlds as much as they do the "real" in terms of what we consider as constituting a "humane" social order. In each of these series, magic is not only a subject of knowledge that characters actively seek in their quest for power but also a frontier across which older notions of the "human" engage with newer ideas and manifestations of the same. In these texts, it is magic that differentiates characters from one another in terms of how integral it is to their being and of how they come to terms with the anxieties and tensions such differences generate. Thus, I argue that magic as craft or technology works as an interface through which notions of difference and change are negotiated in contemporary popular fantasy.*

Keywords: magic, technology, interface.

Biography and contact info: Saradindu Bhattacharya earned his Ph.D. from the University of Hyderabad in 2014 and currently teaches at the Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu, India. His areas of research and scholarship are popular culture, young adult literature, trauma studies and new media studies. Contact Information: Email: saradindub(at)gmail.com.

Originating from the Greek roots *tekhne* (meaning art or craft) and *logia* (systematic treatment), "technology" refers to both the man-made means of bringing about changes in our ways of living and the skills involved in coming to terms with the same. Technology reflects, as well as influences social change, and is therefore considered a marker of the degree of "progress" human civilization has achieved. We now live in what can veritably be called the Age of Technology, an age in which access to technology translates into individual and social power. Though theoretically technology can act as an equalizing force of empowerment, in practice it has intensified preexistent social differences and discrimination, and has heightened the threats of war and genocide. While a good deal of contemporary "serious" literature seeks to confront these tensions directly, several popular fantasy series use magic as a trope to negotiate the uneasy relation between traditional ideals of democracy and humanism and the more recent threats posed by an emergent technocracy.

Within the domain of fantasy fiction, what is considered impossible in the real world is rendered normal and acceptable through a willing suspension of disbelief, just as any new technological innovation in the real world makes things that were earlier considered impossible possible. In fact, all new technology, in its capacity to achieve something unprecedented and extraordinary, has the semblance of magic until it is rendered "common" through scientific explanation and economic commodification. In this sense, magic in fantasy works just like technology does in real life – as a set of tools that makes ordinary, everyday activities possible, but also as a system of knowledge that establishes differential relations of power between its practitioners in terms of the nature and extent of their access to such knowledge.

In this essay, I examine how contemporary writers of fantasy fiction employ magical technology in their works as an interface between ideas of the human "self" and the non-human "other". For the sake of illustration, I shall use three very popular fantasy-magic series of recent times – J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007)[1], Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus* trilogy (2003–05)[2] and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books (2005–09)[3]. I argue that these authors interrogate the fundamental human/non-human binary in terms of the narrative inscription of magic into the category of the "natural" body, as well as via its "cultural" articulations through institutionalized discourses of science, law and morality.

Within the narratives of each of these series, magic is an essential precondition for entry into the fictional world of their characters. Non-magical folk (suggestively called "Muggles" in the *Harry Potter* books and "commoners" in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy) are treated at best with condescension and at worst with cruelty. The basis of such social division is birth. The main characters are all innately magical: Harry Potter, Nathaniel and Percy Jackson inherit magic in their genes. But even within the magical communities that these books present, there are innumerable schisms based on the kind of magical body one is born with.

In the Harry Potter series, we come across "pure-bloods", "half-bloods", "mudbloods", "squibs", "giants" and "half-giants", "animagi", "werewolves", "centaurs", "elves" and "goblins"; in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, we find magical species like "afrits", "imps", "golems" and "djinn"; the *Percy Jackson* books feature "heroes" having greater or lesser Greek gods as one of their parents, besides "monsters", "furies", "cyclops" and "satyrs". Such a taxonomical gradation of magical creatures does not merely function as a means of detailing the fantasy worlds of these texts; the varying degrees and kinds of power that such magical creatures embody must also be honed and practiced through very specific, rigorous and institutionalized means of learning, thereby turning magic into a system of knowledge that enables acquisition of social power. Since this system itself is differential, in terms of both its accessibility and its privileging of certain kinds of skills over others, magic functions in these books as an interface between the "natural" body and the "cultural" application and valuation of inherent physical qualities.

Though these creatures mostly belong to biologically different species, they can communicate freely with one another by virtue of being magical, and it is this possibility of *communication* that constitutes them as members of a *community*. In fact, in each of these series, magical characters who are not "human" in the strict biological sense are endowed with qualities which we generally recognize as being typically "humane". Thus, in the Harry Potter series, Hagrid,

---

[1]   The Harry Potter series traces the journey of the titular hero from age 11 to 17, as he and his two friends, Ron and Hermione, receive magical education at Hogwarts school and go through a series of increasingly dangerous adventures culminating in a final battle in which the evil wizard Voldemort is defeated and killed.

[2]   The Bartimaeus trilogy is an alternate rendering of European history in which Nathaniel, an adolescent apprentice wizard, finds himself beset with the moral dilemma of pursuing a political career in a world sharply divided between those who possess magical power and those who don't. The power struggle ends with two humans from these opposing groups, Nathaniel and Kitty, showing exceptional courage and trust towards the eponymous djinni in order to establish a more equitable world order.

[3]   The Percy Jackson series employs characters and stories from ancient Greek mythology, set in contemporary New York, and traces the adventurous journey of the titular hero and his friends (mostly having part-divine lineage) through the eternal battle between the Olympians and the Titans.

the half-giant, Dobby, the house-elf and Griphook, the goblin, are all represented as creatures capable of acts of kindness, sacrifice and selflessness – signs of moral consciousness that we associate usually with humans. In the *Percy Jackson* books, Grover, the satyr can magically empathize with Percy and Tyson, the cyclops goes against his supposed "nature" to remain loyal to Percy. In the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, the eponymous djinni comments on the actions of his human master Nathaniel with such witty, ironical wisdom that it is his voice we recognize as the voice of reason and morality throughout the series. Thus, ways of thinking and feeling we traditionally consider as being "human" are presented in these books more as a continuum cutting across species than a set of distinctive features that supposedly establishes our superiority over other species. Such ascription of "humane" characteristics to outwardly "non-human" creatures reveals the fundamental paradox at the centre of the social organization of these fantasy worlds – the fact that while on the one hand magic acts as a *differential* factor to distinguish one character from another in terms of natural skills and social rights, on the other hand it also functions as a potentially *equalizing* force that could pose a challenge to the existing power structures. Magic is not merely a fantastic element added on to the anthropomorphic characterization of these creatures but also a frontier across which unorthodox yet humane negotiations between them are rendered possible.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in each of these series, magical species are organized according to a social hierarchy already in place, one that is regulated and maintained by a strict implementation of measures to prevent the breach of such social boundaries. Thus, for instance, in the *Harry Potter* series, magical creatures like house-elves are "owned", as a symbol of their social status, wealth and heritage, by old wizarding families (like the Malfoys and the Blacks) or employed without equal opportunities and rights by mainstream educational and financial institutions such as Hogwarts and Gringrotts. Likewise, in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, apprentice wizards like Nathaniel are expected to be subservient to their adoptive families and resistive figures like Kitty are treated as dangerous outsiders who need to be eliminated. Similarly, in the *Percy Jackson* series, the inmates of Camp Half-Blood follow a rigid hierarchy in terms of their divine parentage. In each case, unequal distribution of power amongst these various magical groups and species causes social oppression and tension akin to racism. If obsessive concern with the "purity" of blood leads Voldemort to the ethnic cleansing mission in the Harry Potter books, magicians' oppression of fellow humans as well as non-human magical creatures causes civil unrest in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, and Percy and Tyson are looked upon with suspicion and ridicule because of their mixed parentage.

In these books, notions of tradition and purity, which form the cornerstone of social organization, are constructed around the inheritance of magic, which not only functions as a key marker of an individual's birth and status but also serves as a determinant of the legitimacy of the particular ways in which they use magic. Magic becomes the site of struggle for power, as marginalized, hybrid characters seek to destabilize and infiltrate the established social practices and institutions. Hermione's passionate defense of the rights of house elves in the *Harry Potter* books, Nathaniel and Kitty's unlikely collaboration in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, and the comradely bond between Percy, Grover and Annabeth in the *Percy Jackson* series, represent strategic alliances between disenfranchised individuals and groups targeted at the reclamation of power from the social and governmental institutions that dominate their worlds. These characters essentially pose a challenge to the traditional laws of magical inheritance by transgressing the norms that limit their use of magic, in terms of both their individual genetic identities and of their conscious social collaborations with "othered" creatures. Thus, by using magic as an interface between traditional power structures and radical forces of resistance, the writers of these books challenge biological essentialism and determinism of the kind that is so frequently used to justify racist and speciesist ideologies in the real world outside the books.

If magic becomes an instrument of social oppression as well as resistance in these books, it is also employed to test the limits of the "human" body and thereby question the very basis of distinguishing between "nature" and "technology". Being magical automatically endows characters with physical powers beyond the "normal" human body: magic in these books is shown to extend and accentuate the ordinary physical capacities of the human body just as technology enhances ours in the real world.

Characters in the *Harry Potter* books can "apparate" and "disapparate" at will, get their wounds healed instantaneously, transform into someone else's shape by drinking a magical potion or resist gravity on a broomstick for sport; magicians in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy can literally look into different "planes" simultaneously using magical glasses or allow spirits from the "Other Place" to enter their bodies; and Percy can take on just about anyone if he is in his father Poseidon's element, water or see demons whose presence is obscured to non-magical eyes by the Mist. In fact, magic turns the body itself into an immensely powerful technological device capable of "superhuman" feats. Harry's scar acts as a radar whenever Voldemort is around or is plotting some new evil, a connection as powerful as it is dangerous in its ability to transmit information both ways. Harry's mere touch is enough to incinerate Quirrel's body when it is possessed by Voldemort. Nathaniel works in tandem with Bartimaeus as a single body capable of resisting the giant Noruda, and finally as a trigger that sets off Gladstone's Staff; Percy bears the weight of Zeus' stolen lightning bolt and later of the sky itself, and Thalia offers protection to Camp Half-Blood as a magically transformed tree. Thus, magic blurs the distinction between the human subject and the technological object and acts as an interface between the individual's body and its external environment.

In fact, magic acts as a means through which the "human" body can transcend barriers of space and physicality and thereby acts an interface between the bodily "self" and the disembodied "other". If the Iris message that characters in the *Percy Jackson* books frequently use is the magical equivalent of the webcam chat, the pentacle that magicians use in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy to summon spirits from the Other Place is literally a frontier between the "human" body and the "non-human" spirit. In the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, inviting spirits into one's own ("human") body involves tremendous risk to the individual's mind, as Nathaniel's adversaries fail to realize at their own expense, and in the *Percy Jackson* books, Kronos' visits to Percy's dreams are a potential threat to the latter's better judgement. Thus, magic can act as an instrument of super-effective communication, but built into it is also has the danger of the invasion and disruption of the integrity of the individual's "self".

In fact, in Rowling's world, even memory and consciousness, which we consider as belonging to the domain of personal or individual experience, can be shared or invaded by means of magic. A Pensieve allows a person to revisit selected memories and even share them with another person, while Legilimancy and Occlumency can effectively be used to break into someone else's mind or to resist such intrusion. Especially in the case of the Penseive, magic acts as an interface between an individual's own past and present, his own body and mind, by enabling him to store and access disembodied memories at will. Additionally, it also functions as an interface between two individuals, sometimes even after one of them has died (like when Harry revisits Dumbledore and Snape's memories), allowing one to travel through the memories of another (as Harry does) and thereby blurring the lines between the living and the dead, the self and the other. Thus, magical technology functions as an interface for inter-personal communication and transforms individual experience and memory into something akin to an information archive. The translatability of the human body and mind into data is a recurrent theme in posthumanist theory and popular culture (for instance, in films like *Inception*), and is used here to suggest the potential of magical technology to interrogate the old Cartesian Mind/Body binary.

While a lot of the magic we witness in these books is merely an augmentation of basic sensory functions (sight, touch, movement) that characterize us as humans in our daily encounters with the real world, there are also striking parallels between the ways in which magic operates in these narratives and the means through which technology governs our ordinary, everyday lives. Thus, characters in the *Harry Potter* books can store memories in a Pensieve just as we store information in computers, those in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy can see creatures at different levels using magical glasses just as we use 3D glasses to see things more "clearly", and those in the *Percy Jackson* books can hear a divine message by offering a silver coin to the enchanted pool much like we can make a phone call from a public booth. What is significant here is that the difference between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" magic in these books is determined not in terms of technological complexity of the magical artefact itself but the skill and frequency of its use.

In other words, it is the characters' ability to employ magic for specific purposes rather than the nature of magical knowledge itself that makes certain elements in these narratives more fantastic than others. Thus, when Voldemort splits up his own soul to create Horcruxes in his attempt to gain immortality, or when Kitty repeats Ptolemy's singular feat by trusting Bartimaeus and going with him to the Other Place, their magical performances come across as remarkable not because they are impossible but because they are unlikely. In these cases, magic acts as an interface between the theory and practice of technology, wherein only the exceptional individual is able to go beyond what is considered "normal" in their fantastic worlds and into the realm of the "miraculous" promise of those worlds.

While the protagonists of each of these series display extraordinary and heroic magical capacity, they are also rendered identifiably "human" in one crucial way: their vulnerability to suffering and death. Percy, who is half-god, is subject to both divine and mortal wounds, the magical effects of nectar and ambrosia notwithstanding; Harry, as "The Boy Who Lived" stands exposed to less powerful spells than the one he so famously survived in his infancy; Nathaniel ultimately dies at the end of the series in spite of his formidable defensive powers. Both Percy and Harry face the temptation of immortality at the end of their respective stories, and both choose a mortal life, thereby choosing to remain recognizably human. It is this element of choice that defines these characters' moral engagement with the technology of magic. In fact, immunity to or defiance of death is what these books characterize as distinctly "non-human". Thus, the Greek gods remain powerful but distant players in the *Percy Jackson* books, and Bartimaeus a delightfully self-reflexive but ultimately invincible commentator. Interestingly, though Bartimaeus is essentially a disembodied spirit, he is subject to pain when he assumes a form in the physical world of humans and must recover by going back to the formless Other Place. Bound to her human body, Kitty, on the other hand, must suffer terrible pain and physical damage for going to the Other Place. Bodily pain, damage and destruction are thus matters that are subject to magical modification but also ultimately parameters within which magic itself defines the "human" in these books. Thus, in spite of its capacity to render the body "superhuman" in many ways, magic in these books remains embedded in the traditional equation between mortality and humanity.

Magic is both the means of overcoming ordinary limitations of the human body and the ultimate moral frontier that tests the magician's humanity. This is especially evident in the *Harry Potter* series, where Voldemort's obsession with constructing an immortal body is represented as being distinctly non-, even anti-human. Voldemort's recreation of his own body at the end of *Goblet of Fire* is a diabolical reversal of the Christian resurrection myth – it is magical cryogenesis turned evil. In fact, his Horcruxes challenge every traditional notion of the "human" body: he lives in several bodies simultaneously – part of his soul inhabits a diary as a memory, another resides in a snake and a third inside a locket, and another within Harry himself (breaking down traditional binaries of spirit/body, animate/inanimate, human/animal). His identity is dispersed across space and time, consciousness and memory. His magical achievement is at odds with his "humanness" –

the greater the extent to which he carries his magic, the more he mutilates his soul, and therefore he becomes less recognizable as "human", so that when Harry finally kills him, only the last remaining "living" part of him dies.

In direct contrast to this, the source of Harry's magic is his willing, self-sacrificing transcendence of his own body. It is, according to the rules of the books, the "old" magic of sacrificial love that really makes Harry infinitely more "human" than Voldemort. Voldemort's weapons are all instruments of bodily harm (the Unforgivable Curses, the Elder Wand), while Harry's defense is the magic of love that protects his soul from all harm. Thus, magic essentially acts here as an interface between the technology of the body and the technology of the soul, between science and morality. Harry's victory over Voldemort is effectively a reinforcement of the Cartesian paradigm super imposed on a traditional moral framework.

The power of magical technology, Rowling suggests, must be understood in terms of not merely the craft of magic but also the "natural" human values that underlie its usage. Ultimately, it is this ethical spin to the individual use and social impact of magical technology that sets apart Harry from Voldemort and frames their battle as a quintessential Good vs. Evil narrative. As Noel Chevalier observes: Rowling is not interested in critiquing technology itself; rather, she wishes to bring scientific discourse back go its Enlightenment roots, to explore the connection between science and ethics (Chevalier 408).

It is this concern with the ethics of magic that provides a social and moral context for the use of magical technology in each of these series. The protagonist of each of these series is in a sense an exception to the usual rules of magic that govern their world. Harry Potter is the only wizard to have ever survived the Killing Curse; Percy Jackson is a living embodiment of the breach of the contract between Zeus, Hades and Poseidon that forbids siring any half-blood children after the Second World War; Nathaniel, though he is the usual power-seeking magician in a dog-eat-dog world, is the only magician since Ptolemy to have inspired trust in a djinni.

These "frontier" characters have extraordinary magical powers at their disposal, but they must exercise their powers within the context of their respective communities' greater interest. They must all go through initiation into and rigorous formal training at the institutions of academic knowledge – Hogwarts, Camp Half-Blood or the household of the adult magician tutor. Such formal training in the craft of magic serves as a rite of passage for these adolescent protagonists into the community of adult magicians. More significantly, each one has to prove himself worthy of the extraordinary powers he possesses. Harry must be willing to sacrifice his own life for the rest of the magical community in a re-enactment of his mother's sacrifice for him; Percy must prove his allegiance to Camp Half-Blood, and by extension to the gods, by doing their deadly errands; and Nathaniel must first trust Bartimaeus before they can work in perfect harmony to save London from complete destruction. The pursuit of the Horcruxes instead of the Deathly Hallows, the use of Gladstone's Staff, a nuclear weapon of sorts, and the retrieval of Zeus' stolen lightning bolt, all involve not only the actual craft of magic but also questions of loyalty and ethics.

The magic of the Philosopher's Stone in the first *Harry Potter* book is inseparable from the notion of selflessness that governs its possession; similarly, Kitty's moral dilemma after her group's abortive attempt to plunder Gladstone's tomb in the *Bartimaeus* trilogy and Percy's moral stance with respect to the lightning bolt and the Golden Fleece also raise questions about the principles that govern the "proper" acquisition and use of magic. Thus, magic not only functions as the license for these young characters' entry into their respective adult worlds but also stands as an interface between power and morality, personal integrity and social responsibility. Voldemort, Kronos and Makepeace stand on the "wrong" side of this magical-moral axis, as their methods of using the technology of magic are at odds with the principles of love and sharing that underlie traditional notions of a "humane" society. On the other hand, characters like Harry, Percy and Nathaniel embody the discerning ability and the unselfish willingness to perceive the social costs of certain

kinds of powerful magic vis-à-vis their utility. Thus, when at the end of the series, Harry Potter decides to leave the Resurrection Stone behind in an undisclosed location in the Forbidden Forest and breaks the Elder Wand, he exemplifies the morally responsible use of magic that lies at the core of the social message of these books. As Nicholas Sheltrown observes:

> Harry's success as the hero of the story is contingent on his critical disposition   towards technology, making Harry Potter a morality tale of technology. It was   not   that   Harry mastered technology (such as a special spell) to defeat Lord   Voldemort;   rather,   he mastered human use of technology by recognizing its   problems and limits (Sheltrown 60).

It is this essential *human* significance of technology that these books seem to highlight through their moral politics.

Yet, these books are not without their own internal contradictions in so far as they seek to define the "human" in terms of the ways and the contexts in which the technology of magic is employed. For all its advocacy of selfless love for others, the *Harry Potter* series places a premium on individual (if altruistic) agency and offers a reading of magical technology wherein it serves only as a touchstone of personal merit rather than an instrument of social reform. The vision of the Harry Potter series remains till the end essentially *statusquo*-ist, where an oppressive leader is replaced by a more benign hero without any significant change in the prevalent ideologies of magic that cause oppression. In these books, magic derives its power by dominating forces of nature. The gods and their mortal offspring are essentially controllers of natural forces. It is obvious that technology of any sort must involve the modification of what is simply "given" to us in nature, but the complete self-assurance with which characters, both mortal and divine, use their power over nature to settle personal scores is symptomatic of a ruthless anthropocentrism of a kind not alien to us.

In the *Percy Jackson* series, the protagonist's final appeal to the gods for granting open and equal acceptance to their earth-born children in lieu of the gift of immortality also points to a more socially inclusive vision of magic. Yet, like in the *Harry Potter* series, the realization of this inclusive social vision ultimately hinges on the emergence of a heroic but humane figure rather than a complete overturning of the existing power structures. It is significant, therefore, that the *Percy Jackson* series ends with another imminent prophecy hinting at the repetition of the battle for power.

The *Bartimaeus* trilogy does, however, explore the transformative possibilities of magical technology to a greater extent than the other two series. The power of magic is more widely and precariously distributed across species here than in the other books: it is the creatures of the Other Place that are responsible for carrying out the actual business of magic for their human masters. These creatures have the power to interpret even the slightest ambiguity in their masters' commands to their own advantage and their masters' peril. Magic is therefore an interface between the theory and the practice of power here, a site of possible resistance to existing structures of power. This possibility of resistance is further explored through the figure of Kitty, who is one of an increasing number of commoners who are born with "resilience" to magic.

The books present a state of evolution in which artificially created oppressive conditions seem to induce a natural resistance to the same. This presents an interesting case where the "nature" of the magical body turns into a function of the cultural conditions of its existence. Magic is, therefore, an interface between the body as an individual biological unit or entity and its cultural currency in terms of the position it occupies in the social order. The technology of magic here has obsolescence built into it. Magic is empowering, but unlike the other series, here it is subject to revision and change in terms of its accessibility and distribution across various social groups, which makes it a potentially destabilizing and revolutionary force. Thus, though the climax of the series does not offer the kind of certitude the *Harry Potter* books do, it hints at the distinct possibility of a mass uprising against the magical technocracy in power.

      Thus, the technology of magic in these series is implicated in both conservative ideologies of individual "human" nature and social power, and radical readings of the potential of such technology in bringing about changes in our conceptions of what it is to be "human" and "humane". Magic ultimately represents an interface between technology and morality through its probing of the fundamental binary of the "self" and the "other" within structures of power. By reflecting the cultural anxieties and aspirations that technological advancements generate in the popular consciousness, these fantasy series serve as an index of and an impulse to changes in our collective perceptions of the individual's position and role in society.

Works Cited

Chevalier, Noel. "The Liberty Tree and the Whomping Willow: Political Justice, Magical Science and Harry Potter." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 29.3 (2005): 397–415. Web.

Riordan, Rick. *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2008. Print.
– – -. *The Last Olympian*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2009. Print.
– – -. *The Lightning Thief*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2005. Print.
– – -. *The Sea of Monsters*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2006. Print.
– – -. *The Titan's Curse,* New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2007. Print.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury, 1998. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury, 2000. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, London: Bloomsbury, 1997. Print.
– – -. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London: Bloomsbury, 1999. Print.

Sheltrown, Nicholas. "Harry Potter's World as a Morality Tale of Technology and Media." *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter.* Ed. Elizabeth E. Heilman. New York: Routledge, 2003. 47–64. Print.

Stroud, Jonathan. *The Amulet of Samarkand*. London: Doubleday, 2003. Print.
– – -. *The Golem's Eye*. London: Doubleday, 2004. Print.
– – -. *Ptolemy's Gate*. London: Doubleday, 2005. Print.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Lectio praecursoria:
Lastenkulttuurisen kauhun maastoa kartoittamassa

Susanne Ylönen

Susanne Ylönen (FT) puolusti väitöskirjaansa Tappeleva rapuhirviö: kauhun estetiikka lastenkulttuurissa Jyväskylän yliopistossa 5.3.2016. Tämä essee on muokattu versio väitöstä edeltäneestä lectio praecursoria -esitelmästä. Ylösen väitöskirja on luettavissa Jykdok-julkaisuarkistossa https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/48906

Tietoa kirjoittajasta: Susanne Ylönen (FT, taidekasvatus) toimii post doc -tutkijana Jyväskylän yliopistolla, taiteiden- ja kulttuurintutkimuksen laitoksella. Yhteydenotot: sucoylon@student.jyu.fi.

I

Kauhu on pelon ja inhon tunteita yhdistelevä tunne. "Kulttuurinen" kauhu puolestaan on ilmiö, kulttuurituotteiden ja kertomusten kautta välittyvä, affektiivinen asia, eli asia, joka koskettaa meitä tai pyrkii koskettamaan meitä tietyllä tavalla, esimerkiksi karvat nostattavasti, huvittavasti, jännitystä herättäen tai moraalista närkästystä lietsoen.

Voimme kauhistua kohdatessamme jotakin hirvittävää, yhtäkkistä ja moraalisesti tai aistillisesti haastavaa, kuten merihirviön, hirmumyrskyn, sarjamurhaajan tai onnettomuuspaikan. Ja kertoessamme näistä kohtaamisista muille, voimme pyrkiä tehostamaan tarinoitamme lisäämällä niihin kuulijoita liikuttavia tyylitekijöitä, kuten äänensävyn vaihteluita, ilmeitä ja narratiivisia elementtejä, jotka antavat tarinoille esimerkiksi "paljastavan" tai järkyttävän luonteen.

Kulttuurinen kauhu rakentuu siis osittain kauhistumisen tunteen kautta tai sen varaan. Se ei kuitenkaan määrity pelkästään kauhun tunteen mukaan. Kulttuurista kauhua ei ole vain se, mikä onnistuu kauhistuttamaan vaikkapa minua. Kauhistuttamaan pyrkivät kertomukset eivät myöskään yksinkertaisesti aina onnistu tavoitteessaan ja jotkut kauhuksi luetut teokset on suunniteltu alunperinkin lähinnä naurattamaan tai viihdyttämään kuulijoita.

Kulttuurinen kauhu on siis lopulta varsin monipuolinen ilmiö. Eikä se rajoitu vain kauhugenren edustajiin. Hyvän esimerkin tarjoaa lastenkulttuuri. Lapsille suunnattua kauhua ei mielletä useinkaan genremielessä "oikeaksi" kauhuksi, koska se on yleensä pehmeämpää ja "lapsellisempaa", eli esimerkiksi yksinkertaistavampaa, kuin aikuisille suunnattu kauhu. Samalla monet lasten suusta kuullut asiat voivat kauhistuttaa aikuiskuulijoita, koska ne ovat odottamattomia ja sopimattomia tai tarkoituksellisesti hyvää makua uhmaavia.

Onkin olennaista huomioida, että lastenkulttuurilla voidaan tarkoittaa kahta eri asiaa. Yhtäältä sillä voidaan viitata lapsille luotuun kulttuuriin, kuten esimerkiksi lastenkirjoihin, jotka ovat useimmiten aikuisten tekemiä ja ostamia, vaikka niiden ensisijaisena yleisönä pidetään lapsia.

Ja toisaalta sillä voidaan tarkoittaa lasten itsensä luomaa kulttuuria, kuten pelejä, leikkejä, loruja ja ylipäätään lasten vertaiskulttuurista toimintaa.

Lastenkulttuurinen kauhu voikin olla monenlaista. Se voi olla inhottavaa, kuten Laura Ruohosen ideoiman Päätäi Väätäisen kohdalla. Tai se voi olla lievästi pelottavaa ja opettavaista, kuten Philippa Leathersin *Hui, sanoi pikkukani* -tarinassa, joka kertoo varjoansa pelkäävästä kanista. Se voi myös olla älyllistä epätietoisuutta herättävää, kuten Neil Gaimanin *The Wolves in the Walls* -kuvakirja osoittaa. Ja sen kautta voidaan käsitellä toiseutta ja ulkopuolisuutta, mikä näkyy hyvin esimerkiksi Tove Janssonin luoman, Muumeista tutun, Mörön kohdalla. Monien parodialaulujenkin kohdalla on usein kyse jostakin kauhistuttavasta ja monet näistä rallatuksista liitämme nimenomaan lapsuuteen.

Varhaisemman lastenkirjallisuuden väkivallalla uhkailevasta kasvattavuudesta on siirrytty viime vuosisadan myötä lapsiystävällisempiin ja viihdyttävämpiin kauhutarinoihin, mutta käytännössä lapsille suunnattuja kauhutarinoita leimaa edelleen viihdyttämisen ja kasvattavuuden välillä tasapainoilu. Samalla lasten itsensä tuottamaa kauhukulttuuria leimaa ajasta toiseen myös esimerkiksi aikuiskulttuurin karnevalisoiminen ja eräänlainen tahallinen, räävitön kauhistuttaminen.

II

Kauhistuttava kokemus muuttuu siis kulttuuriseksi kauhuksi vasta, kun siitä kerrotaan jollekulle toiselle, eli kun siitä tehdään verbaalisesti tai visuaalisesti kommunikoitu asia, esimerkiksi kertomus tai kuva tai vaikkapa lehtijuttu. Tällaisenaan sitä leimaavat monenlaiset kerronnan konventiot. Olemme tottuneet tunnistamaan kauhuksi yliluonnolliset ilmiöt, kuten kertomukset kummituksista tai henkiin heräävistä kuolleista ja tiedämme, että kauhugenren tavanomaiseen kuvastoon kuuluvat myös hämärät, autioituneet talot ja -linnat, mielenvikaisuus ja väkivaltarikokset. Voimme myös herkistyä kertojan pahaenteiseksi kuiskaukseksi hiipuvalle äänensävylle, tummansävyiselle musiikille ja koville, leikkaaville äänille, pimeydelle ja verkkokalvoillemme hyökkääville yhtäkkisille valoille.

Kauhu on siis osittain hyvin konventionaalista. Samalla sen olemassaolossa ja kulutuksessa on kuitenkin myös jotain mystistä. Minua kiinnostaakin tutkimuksessani paitsi tragedian paradoksi, eli kysymys siitä, miksi ihmiset hakeutuvat heitä surettavien tai järkyttävien tarinoiden pariin, myös se, miten kulttuurisesta kauhusta voidaan puhua yhtä aikaa sekä "sairaana", "ei yhtään pelottavana" ja "hirvittävän hauskana". On selvää, että käytämme kauhistuttavia tarinoita kertoessamme hyväksemme erilaisia vakiintuneita kerronnan keinoja, mutta kiinnostavaa on myös se, minkälaisiin merkityksellistämisen tapoihin tukeudumme arvottaessamme näitä kauhua välittäviä tai kauhun perinteeseen tukeutuvia esityksiä.

Tutkin siis väitöskirjassani sitä, miten se, miten kauhusta puhutaan, vaikuttaa siihen, miten se koetaan.

Kauhun *estetiikasta* puhuminen korostaa sitä, että tarkastelu suunnataan niihin esteettisiin valintoihin, jotka saavat kauhistuttavat asiat tuntumaan hirvittäviltä, miellyttäviltä, kiinnostavilta tai hauskoilta. Estetiikka tarkoittaa siis tässä yhteydessä aistikokemuksiin ja tyylitekijöihin keskittymistä. Terminä se liittää tutkimukseni perinteisesti kauneutta ja sen kokemista tutkivaan filosofian haaraan, mutta tässä tutkimuksessa se tarkentuu koskemaan nimenomaan inhottaviksi ja järkyttäviksi koettuja sisältöjä ja esitystapoja, joita se tarkastelee maistelevaan, pohdiskelevaan sävyyn. Kysymykseen siitä, mitä yhteiskunnallista hyötyä tällaisesta pohdiskelevasta, tunnevaikutuksia maistelevasta tutkimuksesta on, voidaan vastata, että kulutusvalintamme eivät suinkaan ole merkityksettömiä, kun pyritään ymmärtämään sitä, mitä toivomme tai pelkäämme tai pidämme tärkeänä. Kulttuuri-ilmiöiden tutkimus tekee näkyväksi niitä arvoja, jotka ohjaavat

jokapäiväistä toimintaamme. Sellaisenaan se lisää itseymmärrystämme ja auttaa meitä rakentamaan yhteiskuntaamme esimerkiksi tasa-arvoisempaan suuntaan.

Lastenkulttuurin kauhujen kohdalla estetiikkaan keskittyvä fokus tuo esiin esimerkiksi söpöilyn lapsuutta hallinnoimaan pyrkivät motiivit. Söpöys, joka voidaan ymmärtää ihailtavaksi lapsimaisuudeksi, on noussut lastenkulttuuria hallitsevaksi tyylielementiksi 1900-luvun aikana. Se tekee pelottavista eläimistä, kuten karhuista, halittavia ja kodikkaita nalleja. Samalla se tekee lasten toiseudesta ihailtavaa ja puristeltavan tai syötävän ihanaa. Kuvakirjoissa seikkailevat söpöt pienet hirviöt edustavatkin usein lapsia. Sen sijaan, että ne uhmaisivat yhteisön normeja, kuten "kunnon" hirviöt tekevät, ne osallistuvat usein näiden normien ylläpitoon.

Pikkuhirviöt osoittavat, että lasten kuuluukin olla vähän hirveitä, eli heidän kuuluu olla joskus kiukkuisia ja aikuisten kanssa eri mieltä. Samalla ne osoittavat kuitenkin myös, että tämä hirviöys on täysin hallittavissa, kunhan tulkitsemme sen söpöilevien lasien läpi, eli kun muistutamme itseämme siitä, että tämän hirviöyden alla on ja sen pohjana toimii itse asiassa, arvostettava, ihailtava erilaisuus.

Tässä, kauhun estetiikkaa käsittelevässä tutkimuksessa, lastenkulttuurin painotus mahdollistaa siis muun muassa lasten ja aikuisten välisten, kauhisteluun liittyvien valtasuhteiden tarkastelun. Nämä valtasuhteet näkyvät esimerkiksi kysymyksissä sopivuudesta.

Se mikä on sopivaa, on useimmiten aikuisten määrittelemää. Mediasisältöjä koskevien rajojen vetäminen on vastaus aikuisten ylläpitämään, lapsuuden rajoja ja lasten hyvinvointia koskevaan, huoleen. Kuvaohjelmille annetut ikärajathan esimerkiksi perustuvat ajatukselle, jonka mukaan lapset tarvitsevat suojelua paitsi fyysisesti, myös henkisesti. Diskursiivisesti katsottuna on mielenkiintoista tarkastella vaikkapa sitä, puhutaanko huolipuheen piirissä lapsen, lasten vai lapsuuden suojelusta. Lapset kun ovat todellisia yhteiskunnan jäseniä, siinä missä lapsi ja lapsuus edustavat usein jonkinlaista essentialistista tai universalisoivaa ja ihannoivaa käsitystä siitä, minkälainen lapsen tai lapsuuden tulisi olla.

Lisäksi mielenkiintoista on mielestäni pohtia myös sitä, miksi huolen kohteeksi nousevat nykyään usein nimenomaan kuvat, eivätkä sanat. Miksi juuri kuvan pelätään järkyttävän nuorta mieltä enemmän kuin sanallisen tarinan? Ja miksi liikkuva kuva koetaan staattista kuvaa huolestuttavammaksi? Kansallisen audiovisuaalisen instituutin tai sen alla toimivan mediakasvatus- ja kuvaohjelmayksiön hallinnoimat ikärajathan eivät tunnetusti koske kirjallisuutta.

III

Tutkimukseni tärkeimpiin saavutuksiin lukeutuu esteettisen härmistämisen käsite, tai sen kääntäminen ja laajentaminen. Jos meiltä on aikaisemmin puuttunut termi, joka kuvaa yhtä aikaa sekä slasher-tyypin ruumiskauhua, että makaabereita pilkkalauluja, se on nyt tässä. Kansankielisesti kyse on alentavasta härskiydestä ja inhottamaan tai huvittamaan pyrkivästä merkityksellistämisestä. Abstraktien asioiden, kuten kuoleman kohdalla, esteettinen härmistäminen toimii konkretisoivana esitys- ja tulkintatapana. Ihannoidun sankarikuoleman tai romantisoitujen vampyyrien sijaan se keskittyy elämän ja kuoleman välisen rajankäynnin sottaisuuteen, prosessiin, joka alentaa meidät, sivilisaatioiden ja korkeakulttuurin luojat, madon ruuaksi tai, fantastisemmin ajateltuna, aivottomiksi, kömpelöiksi zombeiksi.

Härmistävää on esimerkiksi eritteisiin keskittyminen. Mätänevä liha, märkivä haava ja tahmea veri ovat muistutuksia kuoleman ja elämän materiaalisuudesta. Lisäksi härmistäviksi voidaan lukea myös erinäiset rajanylitykset. Härmistäminen menee merkityksellistämisen tapana ihon alle. Se pistää, ja inhottaa ja haastaa hyvän maun, kuten musta huumori tekee. Huomionarvoista on kuitenkin myös ennen kaikkea se, että mustassa huumorissa havainnollistuva esteettinen härmistäminen on söpöilyn tavoin kauhun hallintakeino.

Tätä hallinnan mekaniikkaa voidaan havainnollistaa myös esimerkiksi väitöskirjaprosessin avulla. En olisi selvinnyt prosessin loppuun asti, ellen olisi välillä nauranut itselleni esimerkiksi *PhD-comics* -sarjakuvan kautta. Väitöskirjaprosessihan alkaa jonkinlaisesta pelonsekaisesta kunnioituksesta, jossa tutkimustulokset ja niihin johtava polku näyttäytyvät aloittelevalle tutkijalle jollain tapaa ylevöitettynä, jonkinlaisina kaukana häämöttävinä, muodottomina asioina. Tutkijan polku on pimeä ja täynnä eksistentiaalisia pelkoja, mikä liittyy kai osittain siihen, että tohtorikoulutettava tekee sen aikana myös eräänlaista identiteettityötä: hän pyrkii irtautumaan opiskelijan statuksesta tunnustelee sitä, miltä tutkijan rooli tuntuu.

Käytännössä tutkimuksen kirjoitusprosessi johtaa siihen, että tohtorikoulutettavan ajatukset kirkastuvat vähä vähältä. Kirjoittamisen myötä tutkimuksen tekeminen alkaakin muistuttaa ehkä enemmänkin jonkinlaista puutarhanhoitoa kuin avaruusmatkaa. Sitä karsii risukkoa antaakseen tilaa muutamalle kauniiksi kokemalleen ajatuskukalle. Alun kunnioituksesta siirrytään näin tutkimuksen edetessä tutkijan arkeen, jossa kirkkaat ideat näyttäytyvät valistusfilosofi Edmund Burken sanoja seuraten lopulta helposti varsin "pieninä" ideoina tai jopa itsestään selvyyksinä.

Lopulta, pitäessään painettua väitöskirjaa käsissään, tohtorikoulutettava ei ehkä voi olla ajattelematta, kuinka helppoa kirja olisi heittää maahan ja ajaa pyörällä sen yli. Tällainen puhdistautumisrituaali voisi olla jonkun mielestä loukkaava. Mutta väitökseen valmistautuvalle, tai vasta väitelleelle tutkijalle se näyttäytyy myös melko vapauttavana fantasiana.

IV

Edellä esitetty tutkimuksen kuvaus kuvaa siis työssäni hahmottelemaani esteettisten lähestymistapojen kolminaisuutta. Se kuvaa sitä, miten jokin suuri ja muodoton voidaan ottaa askel askeleelta haltuun, kunnes siitä voidaan tehdä pilaa.

Väitöskirjatyössä tämä haltuunottoprosessi voi ottaa aikansa. Jos olisin valmistunut tavoiteajassa, olisin ehkä ehtinyt esittää vain muutaman siistityn ajatuksen. Tällaisenaan, yli vuoden yliajalle menneenä, voin kuitenkin ylpeänä kertoa, että koen ohittaneeni tämän kaunistelevan pienten löytöjen vaiheen. Sen toiselta puolen olen löytänyt, esimerkiksi esteettisen härmistämisen myötä, uudenlaisen ärsyttävän suttuisuuden. Samalla tekemistäni pienistä löydöistä on versonut uusi kasa häiritseviä kysymyksiä, uusia tutkimuksen alkuja. Mutta sitähän tutkimuksen tekeminen lopulta on: päättymätön prosessi, jossa jokainen ahaa-elämys generoi vain uusia, vielä kartoittamattomia ulottuvuuksia.

Viitteet

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Sublime and Beautiful*. London, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul & Columbia University Press, 1958. Print.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Kirja-arvio: Susanne Ylönen – *Tappeleva rapuhirviö: kauhun estetiikka lastenkulttuurissa*

Kati Kanto

Lastenkirjallisuuden kauhuja on tutkittu ennen kaikkea sosiohistoriallisesta näkökulmasta, eli esimerkiksi niiden aika- ja paikkakohtaisiin muutoksiin keskittyen, ja psykoanalyyttisen tai psykologisoivan viitekehyksen sisältä käsin. Useat tutkimukset myös yhdistelevät näitä kahta näkökulmaa.

Susanne Ylösen väitöstutkimuksen *Tappeleva rapuhirviö: kauhun estetiikka lastenkulttuurissa* keskiössä on kulttuurinen kauhu kokemuksena. Ylönen rakentaa tutkimuksensa koossa pitävän tukirangan konstruktivistisen johtoajatuksen ympärille ja tarkastelee kauhun estetiikan kenttää esteettis-diskursiivisen kehikon avulla. Metodologialtaan tutkimus tukeutuu kauhun kentän käsitteelliseen mallintamiseen, kolmen kuvakirjan semioottiseen lähilukuun ja pienehkön haastatteluaineiston diskurssianalyyttiseen tarkasteluun.

Ylönen ei pyri tarkastelemaan sitä, onko kulttuurinen kauhu lapsille hyväksi vai huonoksi, vaan ymmärtämään sitä, miksi haluamme ylipäätään pelkistää keskustelun tähän kaksinapaiseen joko-tai -kysymykseen. Samalla hän toivoo voivansa ohjata keskustelua suuntaan, jossa keskustelun eri osapuolet voisivat ymmärtää kauhun eri nyansseja ja toisiaan paremmin. Tutkimuksen tärkeimpiä saavutuksia ovat hänen mukaansa kulttuurisen kauhun kentän esteettinen mallintaminen ja erityisesti esteettisen härmistämisen käsitteen suomentaminen ja laajentaminen.

Monet Ylösen käyttämät kysymyksenasettelut ovat tuttuja elokuvan- ja kirjallisuudentutkimuksen saralta, mutta lastenkulttuuriin tai kuvakirjoihin paneutuva fokus tuo tarkasteluun myös uudelle lapsuudentutkimukselle ominaisia näkökulmia ja kysymyksiä – esimerkiksi ajatuksen siitä, että se, miten lastenkirjojen kauhuihin suhtaudumme, heijastaa sitä, mitä lapsista ajattelemme ja minkälaisina heidät näemme. Ylönen määrittelee kauhun käsitteen nimenomaan kulttuurituotteiden kautta välittyväksi, affektiiviseksi ilmiöksi. Hän puhuu

mieluummin kulttuurisesta kuin esteettisestä kauhusta ja tarkastelee sitä myös niin sanottujen "vähemmän kauhistuttavien esimerkkitapausten", kuten söpöjen pikku hirviöiden kautta. Kauhu ymmärretään tässä tutkimuksessa siis kauhugenreä laajemmaksi, monia kulttuurituotteita koskettavaksi esteettiseksi valinnaksi.

Kauhun estetiikan kenttää Ylönen havainnollistaa kolmiosaisella topografialla, joka sisältää nostattavan, "esteettiseksi ylevöittämiseksi" kutsutun lähestymistavan, kaunistelevan "estetisoivan" lähestymistavan, ja alentavan sekä humoristisen lähestymistavan, jota tutkimuksessa kutsutaan "esteettiseksi härmistämiseksi". Käsitteitä ja termejä vilisee sen verran paljon, että herää kysymys, onkohan näkökulma hieman liiankin rönsyävä ja laaja. Etenkin alaluku "Elokuvaväkivallan ja sotauutisoinnin estetisointi" tuntuu jo melko kaukaiselta aiheeseen nähden.

Tutkimus jakaantuu aineiston ja metodologian esittelyn jälkeen kuvakirjojen semioottiseen lähilukuun ja haastatteluihin sekä haastattelutulosten analyysiin. Haastattelun kohteena ovat päiväkotiopettajat eli lasten kasvattajat, 5–7-vuotiaat lapset ja joukko kuvakirjojen tekijöitä.

Ylösen itsekritiikki kohdistuu haastatteluosuuteen, jossa hän pyrkii kartoittamaan lasten suhtautumistapoja kauhuolentoihin ja niin sanottuihin pelottaviin kirjoihin. Kritiikki on mielestäni turhaa, ovathan haastattelutilanteet etenkin lasten kanssa aina aitoja ja yllättäviä. Vaikka lapset vastaavat haastattelukysymyksiin osittain melko lyhyesti, ovat kommentit osittain hyvinkin teräviä. Lapset asemoivat itsensä suhteessa kauhuun milloin järkeviksi, "ei-lapsellisiksi" kuluttajiksi, milloin tuotantopuolenkin hallitseviksi kauhujuttujen kertojiksi tai pieruvallan omaaviksi vallankumouksellisiksi. He ovat tietoisia siitä, mikä on lapsille suodun kulttuurisen kulutuksen piirissä sallittua tai toivottua ja mikä kauhistuttavaa, mutta se, miten tähän tietoon suhtaudutaan, vaihtelee tilanteen mukaan.

Haastattelujen mukaan kirjailijat tiedostavat hyvin sen vallan, joka heillä tarinoiden ja tunteiden tai yleensä elämysten tuottajina on. Valta tuo vastuuta, jota näyttäisivät korostavan kustannusmaailman sensoreiden lisäksi myös tekijöiden omat, esimerkiksi lapsuutta koskevat, käsitykset. Kirjailijat pitivät tarinoiden opettavaisuutta vanhanaikaisena, kun taas päiväkotiopettajien mielestä hyvässä tarinassa paha saa palkkansa. Kasvattajien haastatteluosuudessa korostuukin selvästi huolipuhe, huoli kauhun aiheuttamista negatiivisista vaikutteista lapseen.

Kokonaisuudessaan kauhua koskeva keskustelun kenttä näyttäytyi haastattelujen valossa ennen kaikkea huolipuheen ja sitä vastustavan vertaiskulttuurisen merkityksellistämisen välisenä vastakkainasetteluna. Uusia vivahteita tähän asetelmaan tuo tässä kuitenkin psykologisoivan puhetavan ja eri diskurssien piirissä käytettyjen esteettisten valintojen sekä niiden performatiivisten, puhujia asemoivien tavoitteiden tarkastelu. Kulttuurista kauhua ja tapoja, joilla puhumme siitä tai käytämme sitä, voidaankin käyttää esimerkiksi shokeeraamiseen, lohduttamiseen tai viihdyttämiseen. Valittu merkityksellistämisen tapa riippuu pitkälti tulkitsijan sosiaalisesta asemasta ja tavoitteista.

Ylösen tutkimus on varsin mielenkiintoinen katsaus lastenkirjojen kauhun kenttään. Tosin tutkimuksen laajuus aiheuttaa sen, että jokainen osio pureutuu aiheeseen melko lyhyesti. Laajimman kuvan aiheesta saa lähinnä tutkijan kauhua käsittelevien teosten lähiluvun kautta.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research
journal.finfar.org

Report for Fafnir: "The rise of the nerd/geek culture – the sixth national conference of fandom studies" ("Nörttikulttuurin nousu – Kuudes valtakunnallinen fandom-tutkimuksen konferenssi") 3.–4 March 2016, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Sanna Lehtonen

Finnish fandom studies reached a new milestone in March when the sixth national fandom studies conference was organized at the University of Jyväskylä – the same location where the inaugural conference took place in 2006. This year's event was convened by the Department of Art and Culture Studies under the theme of "The rise of the nerd/geek culture". The theme was very timely: as one of the organisers, Katja Kontturi noted in her opening speech, the cultural understanding of a "nerd identity" has changed. Although dictionaries still label the Finnish term *nörtti* as pejorative and associate it with computer technology, the term has been appropriated by fannish and geeky groups and individuals in a positive sense (I have thus translated *nörtti* as both "nerd" and "geek"). Nerds and fans are also appreciated by the mainstream media: as Kontturi mentioned, the largest Finnish newspaper featured an editorial last year suggesting that in contemporary information-loaded working life everyone should learn from fans' and nerds' playful and passionate practices (Pullinen 2015). In the spirit of the expanding meaning of "nerd", the conference papers discussed a wide range of fan phenomena, although the nerdy theme also meant that the focus tended to be on media fandoms at the expense of others, such as music or sport fandoms. Nevertheless, the conference demonstrated that contemporary nerdiness is an identity that intersects with other categories in complex ways; it is, for instance, gendered and generational.

From cult phenomena to transnational and transmedial practices

The keynote lecture by the Finnish SF-fandom's grand old lady Irma Hirsjärvi offered an overview of the developments in the field of fan studies both globally and nationally: in sum, from stigmatizing fans to overly positive excitement about fandoms to more nuanced and complex approaches to fannish activities that, among other things, take into account economical and political issues and varying fan trajectories. As Hirsjärvi noted, the first national conference in 2006 had mainly connected fandoms with cult phenomena. Since then the Finnisih fandom studies have taken many forms, challenging the idea of fans as mainly excited enthusiasts, as in Hirsjärvi's own work on Finnish SF-fans as a critical network. The so-called third-wave of fandom studies was present in the conference papers dealing with various media fandoms. Included were the political aspects of transmedial, transnational fan phenomena (Oskari Rantala on the "Hugo-gate" surrounding Hugo Awards in 2015), embodied, affective and gendered aspects of fan activities (Laura Antola's and Heini Rönkkö's talks on cosplay; Einari Ollikainen on bronies), the novel ways in which media houses recognize fans in their own products and commercial practices (Tanja Sihvonen & Melina

Wiik on Sherlock Holmes fandoms), and the complex power relationships and negotiations going on in between fans and anti-fans (Minna Siikilä on anti-fans of Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*).

Gaming studies were well represented at the event. The themes of transmediality and socio-political identities also characterized the papers on gaming cultures. The keynote by professor Frans Mäyrä paralled Hirsjärvi's talk by offering an overview of the developments in game studies. Although the fields of fan and game studies have their distinctive features, there are definite similarities in the debates on whether fandoms/games are "real" culture or whether being a fan/gamer is something suspicious or individually and societally beneficial. Mäyrä's talk addressed both the empowering possibilities of gaming, such as individual identity work and social networking, as well as some of the negative aspects of gaming culture, including isolation, trolling and hate speech. Both the light and dark sides were reflected in the other papers on gaming culture. While the ways in which notions of a "gamer" are gendered and behaviours of perceived girls and women in games/as gamers are often heavily policed can be highly problematic (Usva Friman's and Maria Ruotsalainen's talks on (self-identified) female gamers), games have also inspired wholly new, creative transmedial fan practices occurring in both print and online media (Tero Kerttula on Let's Play narratives). As Mäyrä concluded, while gaming is certainly now a mainstream phenomenon, the debates about gamer identities may only become fiercer as the "real" gamers defend the perceived borders of their culture from casual trespassers. No surprise here – as subcultural studies have shown, the discourses of authenticity quickly occur with any subculture becoming "too" popular, especially among the wrong folks (which often equals feminisation).

The final panel of the conference brought together five researchers to discuss the politics and practices of identity in the margins of nerd/geek cultures. Different hierarchies and borders between types of fans are typical of fan cultures and to address these, the panel members talked about their on-going case studies on different marginal fan or nerd groups: anime fans (Anna Rantasila), bronies (Mikko Hautakangas, Sanna Lehtonen), furries (Tanja Välisalo), and hikikomoris (Eliisa Vainikka). In all cases the members of these groups both emphasize the playful or communal aspects of their practices but are also debating who is going too far in their activities – whether the latter involves going against hegemonic norms of gender, age or sexuality (anime fans, bronies, furries), or mainstream life politics of whole society (hikikomoris). The panel showed that exploring marginal fan practices enables a fruitful discussion of contemporary society more broadly – paying attention to margins and abnormality brings out the often invisible cultural norms related to identity practices and life politics. As several other talks also demonstrated, the politics and discourses circulating in societies at large – whether conservative or liberal, restricting or empowering – are reflected in fan cultures that, after all, exist in relation to the surrounding world. In this sense, fandom studies have a lot to contribute to contemporary discussions in social sciences and humanities.

From margins to mainstream – where next?

While fan, nerd and gaming cultures are quickly spreading globally through various media and probably, at least to some extent, becoming part of the (Western) mainstream, the Finnish fandom studies seem to be well equipped to address the complex and often ambiguous phenomena related to transnational and transmedial fan practices. Fan, nerd and geek cultures clearly offer meaningful sites for playful identity work, yet, at the same time, issues of bullying, social rejection, and shame come up, both inside fandoms as well as in encounters between fan cultures and their outsides. Access to participatory culture is also limited by economical factors – as Mikko Hautakangas pointed out, more attention could be paid on the connections between fandoms and consumerist culture, as well as on who has access to fandoms in terms of economical wealth and race, for

instance. More research could also be done on older and/or ex-fans, nerds and gamers, to discuss life trajectories and generational differences.

In international fandom studies Anglophone and Japanese media fandoms have often been central (see e.g. Kustritz 2015) – they certainly were so at our Finnish event. As Hirsjärvi suggested in her talk, more comparative work could be done to explore how translocal fandoms are realized in local practices and what is the role of nationality in fandoms. I would add that we still know very little in general about fan practices outside Europe, North America and certain parts of Asia. Excitingly, some research has been tackling this, including The World Hobbit Project, an immense, global audience study with data from audiences in 46 countries; the Department of Art and Culture Studies in Jyväskylä is responsible for the project in Finland (https://theworldhobbitprojectfinland.com/).

While the conference offered a varied selection of portrayals of the 21st century nerd, as always with such short events, it also became obvious that many interesting topics were absent. Apart from the already listed ones, as the organisers themselves pointed out there were no talks, for instance, about (L)RPG fans, hackers or, indeed, computer nerds. There was a general agreement that we should keep up the tradition of the national conferences in fandom studies but it was still left undecided where, when and by whom the next one will be organized. The connections between technology, gaming/playing/playful culture and fandoms were raised as potential follow-up themes by this year's organisers. Tampere, we are looking at you.

Note: Anyone interested in fandom studies in Finland can sign up on the mailing list fanitutkimus@lists.jyu.fi.

Works Cited

Kustritz, Anne. "Transnationalism, Localization, and Translation in European Fandom: Fan Studies as Global Media And Audience Studies [editorial]." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* Vol. 19 (2015). n. pag. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Pullinen, Jussi. "Leiki töissä, ole utelias töissä ja innostu töissä – opi siis faneilta!" *Helsingin Sanomat* online, 29 Dec. 2015. n. pag. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Call for Papers: Fafnir 4/2016:
SPECULATIVE FICTION IN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research invites authors to submit papers for the upcoming edition 4/2016. Theme for the edition is "Speculative Fiction in Comics and Graphic Novels". We invite papers that focus on speculative fiction in, for example, genres of comics, graphic novels and graphic narratives, cartoons, animations, anime or manga.

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research is a peer-reviewed academic journal which is published in electronic format four times a year. *Fafnir* is published by FINFAR Society (The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research) from 2013 onwards.*Fafnir* publishes various texts ranging from peer-reviewed research articles to short overviews and book reviews in the field of science fiction and fantasy research.

The submissions for the edition 4/2016 must be original work, and written in English, Finnish or in Scandinavian languages. Manuscripts of research articles should be between 20,000 and 40,000 characters in length. The journal uses the most recent edition of the MLA Style Manual. The manuscripts of research articles will be peer-reviewed.

Please note that as *Fafnir* is designed to be of interest to readers with varying backgrounds, essays and other texts should beas accessibly written as possible. Also, if you are writing in English, and English is not your first language, please have your article reviewed or edited by an English language editor.

In addition to research articles, *Fafnir* constantly welcomes text proposals such as essays, interviews, overviews and book reviews on any subject suited for the journal.

The deadline for research articles is August 15, 2016and for other submissions November 15, 2016.

Please send your electronic submission (saved as RTF-file) to the following address: submissions(at)finfar.org. For further information, please contact the editors: jyrki.korpua(at)oulu.fi, hanna.roine(at)uta.fi and aino-kaisa.koistinen(at)jyu.fi.

More detailed information about *Fafnir* and the submission guidelines is available at our webpage journal.finfar.org.

This edition is scheduled for December 2016.

Best regards,
Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Jyrki Korpua and Hanna-Riikka Roine
Editors, *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*