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Editorial 1/2020

*Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Esko Suoranta, Laura E.
Goodin, & Dennis Wilson Wise*

Welcome to the new issue of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*. Cheryl Morgan opens the proceedings with her essay on the science-fictionality of Janelle Monáe. Morgan explores her career, music, and intersectional take on the android allegory, where the figure of the android is purposed, in a new chapter of a long tradition, to speak to issues of discrimination and oppression.

This issue's two research articles look at various works and forms through a geopolitical lens. Priteegandha Naik's article "The Science-Fictionalisation of Globalisation and Image Advertising in *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan" suggests that the dystopian SF play from 1998 makes both globalisation and advertising into novums. Padmanabhan's play is seen to be an example of intermediary Indian SF that directs attention to the intersections of, for example, technology and Indian society. Sarah MacKinnon charts new territory with her "Seasteads and Aquapelagos: Introducing Nissology to Speculative Fiction Studies," in which she brings the emerging field of island studies to bear on works of speculative fiction as varied as *Waterworld*, *Dissolution*, and *Snow Crash*. MacKinnon argues that fictional examples of seasteading are often reactions to catastrophes rather than devices for utopian thinking.

In addition, we present a wealth of book reviews: Tony M. Vinci's review of *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis; Sara Hays's review of Jackie C. Horne's *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*; James Hamby's review of Shawn Malley's *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction and Television*; Sarah M. Gawronski's review of Dean Conrad's *Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema*; A. J. Drenda's review of Douglas E. Cowan's *Magic, Monsters, and Make-*

Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture; Amanda Dillon's review of *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens; and Dennis Wilson Wise's review of C. Palmer-Patel's *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy*.

We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for issue 1/2021; the call for papers follows this editorial and submission guidelines can be found at <http://journal.finfar.org/for-authors/submission-guidelines/>.

As ever, we hope this issue finds you well and casts you off in pursuit of even more inspired research into all that is SF.

Live long and prosper!

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Esko Suoranta, and Laura E. Goodin, Editors-in-chief

Dennis Wise, Reviews Editor

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research



The Science-Fictional Janelle Monáe

Cheryl Morgan

*I'm an alien from outer space (outer space)
I'm a cyber-girl without a face a heart or a mind
(A product of the man, I'm a product of the man)
Ci ci ci
I'm a savior without a race (without a face)
On the run cause they? hit our ways and chase my kind
They've come to destroy me*

“Violet Stars Happy Hunting!” from *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*,
Janelle Monáe, 2007

Science fiction and popular music have a long tradition together. That’s hardly surprising because the rise of pop and humankind’s first ventures into space occurred around the same time. My first memory of the connection is from 1962 when a London-based instrumental group called The Tornados hit #1 on both sides of the Atlantic with a tune called “Telstar”. It was named after a pioneering communications satellite launched by NASA earlier that year. I’m part of the generation that had their minds expanded by Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars. But while I, and arguably the space program, have got old, pop music is as vibrant as ever, and so is its interest in science fiction. No one exemplifies that better than Janelle Monáe.

Monáe first burst onto the scene in 2007 with *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, an extended-play collection comprising five songs (seven on the Special Edition). *Metropolis* introduced Monáe’s alter-ego, Cindi Mayweather, an android revolutionary from the future. Mayweather and Monáe have been with each other in various forms ever since.

The core narrative of Cindi’s story is one of illicit love. In the first song on *Metropolis* we learn that she has fallen in love with a human man called Anthony Greendown and that, as a result, she has been “scheduled for immediate disassembly”. The precise nature of her relationships will develop over time as Monáe becomes more confident, and feels more able to be open

about her own sexuality, but in all cases whom she loves, and in some cases the mere fact that she loves, is contrary to rules imposed by an oppressive society. It is also clear in *Metropolis* that Cindi is a made thing, a construct that can be bought and sold. She is a slave, and this makes the severity of her transgressions far worse.

Metropolis was followed in 2010 by a full-blown concept album, *The ArchAndroid*. This expanded on the story of Cindi and Anthony, and their lives in the city of Metropolis. The two sides of the album are titled “Suite II” and “Suite III”, showing that they are intended to follow on directly from the earlier work that forms “Suite I”.

The cover art from *The ArchAndroid* very deliberately reflects the image of Maria, the android revolutionary from Fritz Lang’s famous film, also called *Metropolis*. There was even a plan for a graphic novel to accompany the album. That seems to have come to naught, but there is some amazing concept art online.

When Monáe released her next studio album, *The Electric Lady*, in 2013, there was some expectation that it too would continue the story of *Metropolis*. Certainly the two sides are titled “Suite IV” and “Suite V”. While it is just about possible to construct a coherent narrative involving all these albums¹, as well as 2017’s *Dirty Computer*, I think it is easier to see Monáe as rebooting Cindi’s story with each new release. There is no canon as such, just a set of themes that are continually re-explored.

The Electric Lady is also a concept album featuring Cindi Mayweather, but Anthony Greendown appears to have vanished from the story. Instead Cindi is part of a time-traveling group of revolutionaries called Wondaland (named after Monáe’s production company). Other members of the group include Badoula Oblongata, an alter-ego of Monáe’s friend and collaborator, Erykah Badu. The album also expands upon issues of sexuality, first hinted at in the track, “Mushrooms & Roses” from *The ArchAndroid*. Monáe has stated that the song title Q.U.E.E.N. is an acronym and that the Q stands for Queer².

The 2017 album, *Dirty Computer*, takes us away from Cindi altogether, reinventing Monáe as a human woman called Jane. That this is actually the same person is indicated by the fact that Jane’s personal ID in her totalitarian world is 57821, the same as the serial number of the android Cindi Mayweather.

The story of *Dirty Computer* is once again one of forbidden love. Jane is shown to be having relationships with both the male character, Ché, and the female character, Zen. It is her love for them that finally helps her break the mind control being forced upon her.

It is impossible to discuss Monáe’s music without taking into account the accompanying videos. This has been the case right from the start, where the video for “Many Moons” on *Metropolis* shows a depraved and decadent audience of rich people attending a droid auction. In it Monáe plays the roles of both Cindi and Lady Maestra, the “Master of the Show Droids”, who rides into the auction on a white horse wearing fox-hunting gear. Neither Maestra nor many of the other characters featured in the video (named in subtitles) feature in the song lyrics. The videos, therefore, provide additional worldbuilding for the stories told by the songs.

¹ I did so for a presentation at Åcon X. It required a fair amount of creativity.

² <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview> accessed 22/Dec/2019

Mon   describes the song videos that she produces, which have played significant roles in all her album releases, as “emotion pictures”. The single “Tightrope” from *The ArchAndroid* features a video set in an asylum, called The Palace of the Dogs, where artists are sent to be re-programmed. The video for “Q.U.E.E.N.” from *The Electric Lady* is set in a museum full of captured time-travelling revolutionaries. Cindi and Badoula turn up and rescue them during the song.

For *Dirty Computer* Mon   produced a 46-minute narrative film that tells the story of the album. The part of Zen is taken by actress Tessa Thompson, with whom Mon   has been rumoured to have a relationship. The place of the asylum from *The ArchAndroid* is taken by a futuristic hospital called The House of the New Dawn in which deviants such as Jane, Zen and Ch   have their brains reprogrammed.

So much for the story, but how does Mon  ’s work stack up as science fiction? Is she breaking new ground, or just mining well-trodden tropes?

The first thing to note is the sheer brilliance of her output across a range of disciplines. Her music is extremely highly rated, but she also has a hand in the video production, and is a great dancer and an accomplished actress. She’s only 34, so we can probably look forward to another decade or two of groundbreaking music and film from her.

She certainly knows her science fiction well. Rooting her story in the tradition of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* is evidence of a reverence for the history of the field. She’s also well versed in time-travel literature, as such themes are a key element of the Cindi Mayweather story. Indeed, I’m wondering whether the sudden fashion for time-war narratives that we saw in 2019 is, in part, inspired by the framing of the video for “Q.U.E.E.N.”³.

As a storyteller, Mon   is not afraid to experiment with form. One of the key features of *The Electric Lady* is a series of interludes that feature outtakes from an android-run radio station, WDRD. These are exercises in worldbuilding. Indeed, as they are presented as extracts from the media of the story world, they count as a form of John Dos Passos’s technique of including fake newspaper cuttings and the like in his novels. This technique was used to great effect by John Brunner in novels such as *Stand on Zanzibar*, and has become a standard part of the science-fiction toolbox.

Another interesting aspect of Mon  ’s story-telling is her refusal to be bound by canon. When she first began the *Metropolis* saga it appeared that she was embarking on what she hoped to be a long-running series of stories in the same world, and featuring the same characters: the Cindi Mayweather Universe, perhaps. However, she has since taken a much more flexible approach to the story.

It could be argued that this is evidence of a failure to build a coherent and continuing storyline, but rebooting is hardly new these days. Companies such as Marvel and DC have been forced into it by the simple impossibility of telling a continuing story about the same set of characters over many decades. Retellings of fairy stories have become fashionable in novels, comics, and TV. In interviews about her latest novel, *The Starless Sea*, Erin Morgenstern talks specifically about the techniques of storytelling in role-playing worlds (whether

³ I note that *Electric Lady* predates William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*, though obviously Gibson would have been working on that book for some time.

on paper or electronic) that allow every player's path through the story to be different.

The most important aspect of Monáe's work, however, is her use of androids as a metaphor for various forms of discrimination. Science fiction is replete with examples of using androids as metaphors for race, for gender, and even for sexuality. Monáe uses them for all of these, sometimes at the same time, as well as having them literally be androids.

This work is not just important from the point of view of science fiction. It also spills over into Monáe's private life, and into activism in the wider world. With *Dirty Computer* due to be released, Monáe did an interview for the leading rock-music magazine, *Rolling Stone*⁴, in which she confirmed the rumours about her sexuality. She began the process of coming out from behind the mask of Cindi Mayweather and becoming a role model for her queer fans. She told the magazine:

I want young girls, young boys, nonbinary, gay, straight, queer people who are having a hard time dealing with their sexuality, dealing with feeling ostracized or bullied for just being their unique selves, to know that I see you.... This album is for you. Be proud.

The emotion picture too begins with a call to the marginalised and misfits. The very concept of a "dirty computer" is someone who has failed to conform to society's expectations of a perfectly functioning cog in the machine. Such people are said to be infected, and in need of cleaning, which is what happens in *The House of the New Dawn*.

You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all.

Monáe's pansexuality is clearly on display in the emotion picture, as it shows her romantically involved not just with Zen, but also with the young man called Ché. As the three of them appear to be a family unit, the film can also be taken as a defence of polyamory.

A measure of the level of intersectionality involved in the *Dirty Computer* project can be gauged from the video for the song "PYNK". First, the entire concept is avowedly feminist and concerned with female empowerment. The video, with its trademark "vagina pants", deliberately references the iconic artwork "God Giving Birth" by the Swedish feminist painter Monica Sjöö⁵. Although the song is called "PYNK", the dancers in the video are not pink-skinned, they are black. And perhaps most significantly, not all of them wear the vagina pants. Monáe has explained that this is a shout out to the transgender community and is intended to support the notion that it is not necessary to have a vagina to be a woman⁶.

Since then Monáe has flirted with a trans identity herself. On January 10th, 2020 she joined in with a Twitter meme celebrating the famously queer

⁴ <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁵ Monáe acknowledges the influence of Sjöö in the sleeve notes for the album.

⁶ <https://people.com/style/janelle-monae-says-shes-working-on-mass-producing-those-vagina-pants/> accessed 15/Mar/2020

animated TV series *Steven Universe*. Her tweet was a simple hashtag: #IAmNonBinary. Asked what she had meant by this, Monáe told *The Cut*⁷:

...it resonated with me, especially as someone who has pushed boundaries of gender since the beginning of my career. I feel my feminine energy, my masculine energy, and energy I can't even explain.

The idea of “cleaning” is itself deeply political. In an article for the website, *Mic*, Natelegé Whaley draws three parallels from history⁸. First, there is racial cleansing, in which white people have sought to purge people of colour from their communities by various means from simple violence to eugenics programs of forced sterilisation. Then there is cultural cleansing, by which children from Indigenous backgrounds in colonised countries were sent to white-run boarding schools where they would have their own culture erased and white culture imposed upon them. Finally, there is the closest thing to the mind-altering treatments of *Dirty Computer*, the idea of conversion therapy. In this, LGBT+ people are given treatments such as aversion therapy and electroshock therapy in an attempt to “cure” them of their presumed deviant nature.

However, the most political track on the album must be the final one, the anthem “Americans”. It is also playing at the end of the emotion picture as Jane and Zen rescue Ché and escape the House of the New Dawn. Following the emotion picture there are a number of interviews with the cast and crew. Monáe’s co-writer on the project, Chuck Lightning, states that the idea of the film was to imagine life in a future America that had succumbed to “the worst impulses of our current President.”⁹

The song embodies resistance against that possibility. On the one hand, it channels traditional right-wing views of what it means to be American:

I like my woman in the kitchen
I teach my children superstitions
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
But she'll never ever wear my pants

But on the other it calls for the right of all citizens, including all dirty computers, to call themselves American:

Love me, baby, love me for who I am
Fallen angels, singing "Clap your hands"
Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land
I'm not crazy, baby, naw, I'm American

That this is seen as a necessary call for rebellion is clear from Monáe’s cast interview at the end of the emotion picture, in which she says, “Freedom is not free, it comes with a price¹⁰.”

⁷ <https://www.thecut.com/2020/02/janelle-monae-afrofutur.html> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁸ <https://www.mic.com/articles/189099/janelle-monaes-dirty-computer-visual-album-is-a-queer-afrofuturist-love-story-about-resistance> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁹ *Dirty Computer, The Emotion Picture: Director's Cut*, Amazon Prime, accessed 15/Mar/2020

¹⁰ *Dirty Computer, The Emotion Picture: Director's Cut* ibid

As a result of her outspoken support for the queer community, Monáe has been granted the Equality Award from the USA's Human Rights Campaign. A presentation should have taken place at the HRC's Los Angeles Dinner in March, but at the time of writing this event is in doubt due to the coronavirus crisis¹¹.

In a tradition that stretches from Mary Cavendish through HG Wells to Octavia Butler and beyond, Monáe has expressed her advocacy for human rights through the medium of science fiction. In a 2010 interview with *The Colorado Springs Independent*¹², Monáe, was asked about her use of science fiction in her work to make political points. She responded as follows:

You know, people who always try to divide you and categorize you and say, "Oh these people are not good enough to be with these people." Because being a black African-American woman and knowing my history, with how slavery happened and evolved and over time it morphed into something else, you know, whether it's discrimination against people that are gay or lesbian or straight or, you know, androids or cyborgs. So I think that it's just really about us doing away with all the labels and categories and just accepting each other for who we are as individuals.

The importance of this intersectional approach to android allegory has been commented on by Tempest Bradford in an article for the Twelfth Planet Press website¹³. Bradford also situates Monáe's output firmly in the tradition of AfroFuturism in that her work both celebrates black culture and points towards a hopeful future in which people of colour can not only exist¹⁴, but thrive.

In taking this approach Monáe's science fiction can be seen as being at the cutting edge of developments in the genre that have seen women, people of colour, and queer people gaining increasing respect over the past decade. It puts her on a par with authors such as NK Jemisin, Aliette de Bodard, and Charlie Jane Anders as flag bearers for marginalised communities. Given the much wider reach of popular music compared to written fiction, it can be argued that she is the most important of them.

Cheryl Morgan is a writer, editor, and publisher. She is the winner of four Hugo Awards and is the owner of Wizard's Tower Press. Her non-fiction has appeared in a variety of venues including *Locus*, the *SFWA Bulletin*, the *Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*, *Vector* and *Strange Horizons*. Her fiction has appeared in a number of small press magazines and anthologies. Cheryl was a Guest of Honour at the 2012 Eurocon in Zagreb and the 2019 Finncon in Jyväskylä. She was a keynote speaker at the Worliding SF academic conference at the University of Graz in 2018.

¹¹ <https://www.hrc.org/blog/hrc-to-honor-genre-bending-artist-janelle-monae-with-the-hrc-equality-award> accessed 15/Mar/2020

¹² <https://www.csindy.com/coloradosprings/art-and-soul/Content?oid=1739497> accessed 22/Dec/2019.

¹³ <http://motherofinvention.twelfthplanetpress.com/2018/07/02/androids-and-allegory/> accessed 22/Dec/2019.

¹⁴ Of course in far too much early science fiction people of colour were entirely absent from the future.



The Science-Fictionalisation of Globalisation and Image Advertising in *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan

Priteegandha Naik

Abstract: This article examines the first Indian science-fictional play: *Harvest* (1998) by Manjula Padmanabhan. It suggests that this dystopic play renders globalisation and image advertisements as novums through new and imagined technologies, and points out that Indian SF has begun to engage with these novums and the associated media technologies, using *Harvest* as an example of how the novums are used to transform and build fictional worlds.

Keywords: Indian science fiction, novum, globalisation, advertisements

Science fiction in India, particularly that written in English, has experienced a steady growth over the past few decades. A careful survey indicates that the genre in English displays a comprehensive engagement with socio-cultural issues and concerns pertinent to the Indian subcontinent. This differs significantly from regional SF; Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay suggests that these SF texts are often didactic in tone, and that the texts (especially those written in Bengali and Marathi) are heavily influenced by the Nehruvian project of modernisation, which sought to inculcate a scientific attitude and temperament amongst the citizens (447–48). I suggest that the difference in emphasis between SF written in English and that written in regional languages may reflect their different markets and areas of publication: English-language works are generally initially published internationally and regional works are exclusively published in India. These differences require closer inspection. I use *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan to illustrate the differences and present an additional approach for analysing Indian SF. I suggest a modification to Darko

Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement through the definition of the novum, associating it with corresponding developments occurring in contemporary reality. I suggest that imagined devices like the Contact Module, VideoCouch, and globalisation all function as novums, which then contribute towards world-building.

Indian SF in English is an emerging phenomenon, particularly post-millennium. Despite a robust tradition of SF in regional languages, the genre's popularity in English has historically been extremely limited, especially during the first decades after independence. Works like *The Memory of Elephants* (1988), *The Mothers of Mayadiip* (1989), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (1998) were initially published abroad and released in India a few years later¹. The international acclaim and recognition gained by the success of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had provided tremendous boost to Indian Writing in English (IWE). This recognition translated into more attention from international publishers willing to invest in the India, leading to more experimentation with form and content (Paranjpe 1052–54). For Indian SF in English, this boost was further aided by *The Calcutta Chromosome*'s receipt of the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997. The increased attention from publishers in conjunction with the international acclaim garnered by *The Calcutta Chromosome* may have significantly contributed towards reintroducing the genre in English to Indian readers. Moreover, these works actively engaged with issues informed by India's colonial legacy. I suggest that they paved the way for post-millennial Indian SF in starting to turn their gaze inward, towards the Indian subcontinent, and adopting a more somber approach in their discussions of socio-cultural issues. Additionally, the diversity in authorial backgrounds created and highlighted differences in content and style². In contrast, regional works, especially those written in Bengali and Marathi, displayed different themes. Hans Harder's analysis of Marathi SF suggests that these stories usually portrayed an intertwined exploration of both Hindu religious themes and science (114), with common tropes including Indian scientists saving the world from an approaching disaster (and thereby exhibiting India's supremacy) (115) and a fairly harmonious relationship between science, society, and culture, in which superstitions are non-existent (117–18). Chattopadhyay conceptualises these early stories (in Marathi and Bangla) as *kalpavigyan*. He breaks down the term into "vigyan", or scientific knowledge, which helps to capture the "accuracy and reality of experience", ultimately leading towards the formation of "real, perfect knowledge" (436), and "kalpa", which refers to both imagination and time. "Vigyan" is placed in a hierarchy above "gyan" – spiritual or transcendental knowledge. Such texts do not rigidly differentiate between the scientific and the fantastic; instead, they are noticeable for their tendency to "rework the history of science" by reactivating indigenous knowledge to subvert established histories of scientific knowledge or explore alternate systems from the past, against a background of the mythic called the "mythologerm" ("Mythologerm"

¹ The publication in India for *The Memory of Elephants*, *Mothers of Mayadiip*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* came in 2000, 1998, 1997, and 2002, respectively.

² This shift is noticeable even in *Lusooma* and *The Embroidered Newspaper*, which display the same qualities as regional-language science-fiction stories.

437–38). The enthusiasm for incredible inventions and adventures through fantastic innovations is notably missing in these intermediary novels. I will exemplify this difference using Padmanabhan's *Harvest*. The work serves as an "intermediary" between regional works (often didactic in tone and conservative in outlook) and post-millennial SF (actively engaged in earnestly discussing issues pertinent to the Indian subcontinent). They signify the shift in authorship and content discussed above. The work should also be understood with reference to the larger shifts that were taking place in IWE. Therefore, it is important to investigate its links with postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial criticism of SF has identified the Self and Other in the figure of the human and the alien by constructing the Other through a perspective that privileges the Self (Western outlook) (Reid 256–57). Its affinity with thought experiments has been hailed as the perfect conduit to explore the "notion of power formed within the construct of empire" (Kerslake 3). John Rieder further adds that emergent SF addresses the ideological basis of colonial practices through ideological fantasies that manifest through the coloniser "discovering" and attributing meaning to the alien population; through the introduction of a new religion and way of living into an indigenous culture through the figure of the missionary; or through the "anthropologist's fantasy", in which the indigenous population is portrayed to be at a developmental stage analogous to an early stage of human development (31–2). More importantly, Rieder's emphasis on the impossibility of tracing the origin of the genre to a single text (17–18) enables Chattopadhyay to suggest that SF can be considered to be a shared tradition between the colonising and colonised nations ("Kalpavigyan" 106–07).

Therefore, SF emerging from colonised societies needs to be culturally and historically contextualised. I suggest that Suvin's theory of the novum and the idea of cognitive estrangement will provide an additional approach to understand the play as well as postcolonial SF in general. Suvin suggests that SF can be distinguished from other genres through the presence of a novum and cognitive estrangement. The novum refers to a new/imagined/invented element that is based on a scientific or a pseudo-scientific premise. It is this element that engineers the fictional break from reality and leads to cognitive estrangement. "Cognitive" refers to the conscious act that readers undertake as they comprehend the alternate environment of the story; estrangement refers to the effect that occurs when readers recognise that the alternate environment differs from their own empirical world. The interaction between cognition and estrangement, aided by the novum, allows the reader to build and understand the fictional world. For example, in *The War of The Worlds* (1898), the description of Martians as evolved beings who have overcome the need to ingest solid food and rely only on blood for sustenance classifies them as the "novum" that leads to cognitive estrangement. Similarly, in *The Memory of Elephants*, the memo-scan is an invented device that enables Homi to access the memories of his immediate family, dead ancestors, and other members of his community, which enables him to chart the history of the Parsi community. The memo-scan is therefore a novum. Suvin's conceptualisation suggests that the novum "totalizes" all aspects of the work in such a way that it is "able to effect a change in the whole universe of the tale, or at least crucially important aspects of it" (Metamorphosis 64). In this case, the novum's presence is a hegemonic, cohesive current that is the driving force behind the narrative. However, Istvan

Csicsery-Ronay Jr. suggests that an increasing number of texts have started employing more novums due to “inter-layered narrative arcs” (*Seven Beauties* 62). Suvin’s theory has also been adopted by Suparno Banerjee to examine Anglophone Indian SF. He focuses on the dialectical processes involved in the definition of cognitive estrangement, suggesting that this estranging function reveals its affinity for the “concepts of authority and subversion” (“Other Tomorrows” 10). He proposes that this function allows it to explore alternate systems that might have the potential to subvert dominant systems, thereby effecting a dialectic approach (12). Banerjee’s postcolonial engagement with Suvin’s theory also validates its utility. My attempt to understand SF through the element of the novum is meant to approach SF with respect to changes in contemporary reality. This will provide another method to understand the genre in India.

The link between contemporary reality and the genre must be understood against a cultural and social background. I use Damien Broderick’s conception of the “mega-text” – a repository of themes, icons, and tropes – to suggest that these are essentially novums that function as intertext to help readers negotiate the various elements present in the novel (143–46). In addition to drawing its strength from the mega-text, the novum also has a cultural aspect, drawn from the emerging techno-scientific culture. David Bell suggests that “culture”

can refer to *products* (sometimes called texts, even when they’re paintings, cakes or personal stereos), *practices* (singing, gardening, texting, sometimes called lived cultures), *institutions* (museums, broadcasters, governments – bodies that produce and regulate what counts as culture) and *theories* (ways of understanding the other three; we might also include methods here, in terms of ways of finding things out about culture). (3)

This definition includes all practices that emerged with the inclusion of technology in daily life. Science and technology are not insular forces that determine reality; they have become part of reality (8–10).

Therefore, George Slusser’s proposition that “all SFs are not equal” is significant, as each culture has reacted to scientific thought and advances in different ways (28). Since scientific thought has an indelible influence on SF, it follows that its degree of integration in a culture would have also exerted a considerable influence upon the genre. Similarly, Csicsery-Ronay suggests that there can be as many SFs as there are “theories of culture” (“SF” 388). This implies that scientific advancements, understanding, and temperament have an indelible influence on culture and society and, by extension, SF. I propose that *Harvest* meets at the intersection of these aspects, exploring how a culture interacts with invasive technological changes. I use *Harvest* as an example of the intermediary novels that turn their gaze inward to redirect attention and engage with Indian society and culture. This point of intersection and inwardness provides the cultural aspect to the novum. Csicsery-Ronay suggests that there is a need to broaden the scope of the genre, as different cultures also precipitate different ways of perceiving, conceptualising, and representing. This ensures that the determining properties of the genre will also need regeneration (“What Do We” 481). Thus, researchers and critics need to revise their

understanding of the novum to competently assess how Indian science fiction perceives and portrays the changes taking place in society.

The above discussion provides a background of postcolonialism in SF, the importance of Suvin's theory, the need to include corresponding scientific and technological changes, and the need to reassess approaches to the genre. I suggest a revision of the definition of the novum against this background. I propose that the novum can refer to the inclusion of those new elements, either invented, innovated, modified, or adapted, different from the reader's empirical reality, that may or may not be supplied with a logical explanation. The implication is that the processes and phenomena occurring in the "zero world" may be altered in the fictional universe, but this alteration would be rationally treated. I propose that the novums exist along a spectrum, based on the presence or absence of a supplementary explanation. This new interpretation of the novum also includes the ways that social, cultural, and political forces have been substantially altered in the text. These elements are naturalised – that is, portrayed as organic entities of the textual landscape – but are defamiliarising for readers because those elements differ from their reality. Thus, these are the "new" elements operating, and functioning as units of world-building, in Indian SF. These novums exist along a spectrum in terms of integration with other elements of the narrative, helping to transform the atmosphere of the fictional universe.

I exemplify these claims using *Harvest*, a dystopic play set in a futuristic Mumbai, in the year 2010. Globalisation instituted by the first world has enabled systematic, sanctioned, and legal exploitation of people and resources from third-world countries. Padmanabhan projects universal patterns of exploitation that have gradually ossified due to globalisation. The play opens with Om finally securing a job with InterPlanta, as a live Donor who will "sell" his organs to a Receiver in the first world. This organisation controls not just Om's lifestyle but also his family's. They install a Contact Module, which enables communication with the Receiver, Ginni. Ginni's concerns about the health of the Donor propels her to issue dictates about Om's nutrition and sanitation. The relationship between the Donor and the Receiver represents the skewed economic relationship of every third-world country with the first world, especially the United States. When the Guards from InterPlanta arrive to take Om for the operation to donate his organs, he loses his nerve and instead allows the Guards to mistake his brother, Jeetu, as the Donor. Jaya, his wife, is agonised by this horrendous error but is unable to convince Om and Ma of the consequences. Om's arguments with Jaya after this are not because of his guilt but because of his jealousy over Jeetu's ability to mentally experience Ginni's images exclusively. Ma, on the other hand, seems to have dissociated herself from reality by choosing to physically immerse herself in the SuperDeluxe VideoCouch. In the final act, Jaya's listless existence is interrupted by Virgil, the real Receiver, who adopts Jeetu's body to convince Jaya to be impregnated by his sperm. The play ends with Jaya's refusal to comply with Virgil's demands.

The play brings together a wide variety of "challenges facing mankind in the 21st century", the theme of the Onassis Award it received in 1996. It presents a frightening scenario wherein people are forced either to sell their organs or to sell their bodies for sexual services. Shital Pravinchandra also notes how the play explores the relationship between first-world and third-world countries wrought by the process of globalisation, in which the "digital and biomedical

technologies of late capitalism” (88) can lure the poor and deprived into “making money” from organ harvesting (as opposed to earning it through labour). Pravinchandra suggests that globalisation has engaged the third world in multiple areas of production, including reproduction, to satisfy the consumption needs of the first world. Moreover, the contractual agreement between the two parties is enforced through the Contact Module, which functions as both a communication device and a surveillance system. The presence of the global multinational corporation and the merging of the human and the machine through Jeetu, Ma, Ginni, and Jaya has led critics to suggest that *Harvest* shares overlapping concerns with cyberpunk theory and culture. In a similar vein, Suchitra Mathur examines how *Harvest* reworks and rewrites the differential experience of the “cyborg” between the first and the third world by exposing how power differences produce a “disjointed experience” that, rather than highlight the latter’s concerns, aggravates their subordination (128). She suggests that there is a difference between the cyborg Virgil and the cyborg Jeetu, as the former has chosen to be this way while the latter is forced and then seduced to fulfil Virgil’s needs.

Banerjee raises similar concerns by proposing that Indian SF has a contradictory stance with respect to the subversive potential embodied by the cyborg (“Ruptured” 58–59). He proposes that the transformation of Ma and Jeetu into cyborgs indicates the bioviolence stemming from the use of technologies that “condemns them within an ideology of submission and commoditization, not much different from earlier modern forms” 63). Banerjee echoes this proposition in an in-depth study of cyberpunk in India wherein he suggests that the cyberpunk ethos espoused by the West undergoes several transformations in Indian SF in the form of “subaltern discourses, sometimes as humanistic condemnation of the post-human, and sometimes as postmodern mimicry of western cyberpunk” (“India” 408). He suggests that *Harvest* opposes the cyborg, and therefore the “cyber” aspect, through Jaya, who uses her own body to resist being artificially impregnated (410–11). These studies suggest that *Harvest* replicates the coloniser-colonised relationship between the first and the third world, albeit using a different set of tools. These studies reveal the futility of simply adopting Western outlooks and theories into an Indian setting. They also expose the multilayered thematic concerns in the play and vividly detail the implications of Padmanabhan’s vision. This paper suggests that the play does not just discuss globalisation as it would any other theme; instead, Padmanabhan renders globalisation as a novum through the lens of organ trade and medical tourism. Globalisation is purported to be an economic force brought into the third world by the first world, especially the United States. The all-encompassing phenomenon affects all spheres of life – i.e., social, cultural, environmental, political, and economic – and especially hurts the poor.

Harvest tracks globalisation through new and advanced medical technologies developed and used to profit from marginalised sections. In the empirical world, the onset of globalisation introduced numerous advanced medical technologies. However, these medical technologies, unevenly distributed between the public and private sectors, harmed the poor and marginalised the most. India used these opportunities to promote medical tourism, with the active support and encouragement of both the government and the private sector. Thus, better health care, affordable mainly to the

corporate, private sector, led to an increase in the overall cost of health care; *Harvest* illustrates this phenomenon. As a result, only a specific section of the elite population could take advantage of these services; public health care systems lagged, but medical tourism prospered (Godwin 3981). “Medical tourism” is a controversial term and has invited much skepticism from professionals in the medical field, because the “romantic” packaging conceals the anxieties and worries of the patients and their families (Godwin 3981). Nevertheless, effective marketing and advertising, as well as effective enforcing agents of globalisation, ensured the promotion of medical tourism. Several third-world countries had started using their medical facilities to attract foreign patients who found the health care in their own countries to be unacceptably expensive (Reddy and Qadeer 70; Godwin 3981). Although India began these marketing efforts later than several other Asian countries, it did not lag in its efforts to promote itself as the newest and best medical-tourism destination. The Indian government began promoting itself in 2004, formulating laws, rules, and regulations that enabled the expansion of medical tourism as a trade practice (Reddy and Qadeer 70–71).

In Padmanabhan’s introduction to *Harvest*, she remarks that the idea for *Harvest* came from reports she had read about organ trade in India. She envisions a scenario in which globalisation has led to extreme inequalities in the distribution of wealth and the uneven development of the country. She demonstrates how pre-existing inequalities have interacted with the capital infused from the first world to generate more inequalities. She chooses medical tourism, demonstrated through legally sanctioned organ trade, to illustrate one of the impacts of globalisation. In this portrayal, globalisation is not very different from India’s experience of British imperialism. The organ trade in the play has become a well-regulated and thriving industry. InterPlanta is an organisation that specialises in organ trade by mediating between the Donors from the third world and the Receivers from the first world. The organisation’s infrastructure can assess “six thousand” candidates simultaneously: Om says, “We were standing all together in that line. And the line went on and on – not just on one floor, but slanting up, forever. All in iron bars and grills. It was like being in a cage shaped like a tunnel. All around, up, down, sideways, there were men” (Padmanabhan 1). The mechanised recruitment process has been refined to eliminate “unhealthy” candidates. Om reveals that at the end of this process, the organisation selected only a few people. This indicates both the stringency of the process and the miniscule population of healthy individuals. The organisation regulates not just Om’s lifestyle but also his family’s. Ginni’s insistence on the installation of a private washroom, the control over nutrition, and most importantly, the access to decent clothes and health care indicate how globalisation forces its way into people’s lives. It is portrayed as indirectly controlling an individual’s choices, including choices related to the individual’s family.

Padmanabhan envisions a highly exploitative and intrusive form of medical tourism. The scenario envisioned here corresponds to the authentic situation of organ transplantation in India since the 1970s. This unregulated industry flouted norms and resorted to practices so unhealthy that they generated a huge international outcry (Shroff 348–49). As a result, in 1994 the Government of India passed the Transplantation of Human Organ Act, which limited organ donation amongst family members and made deceased donation a legal option only with the

registration of brain death³. Padmanabhan's conception of organ trade through medical tourism suggests that globalisation has started exploiting not just natural but also human resources. Medical tourism as envisioned in the play is tailored to meet the expectations and demands of the foreign consumer. First-world Receivers do not need to travel to avail themselves of the necessary resources. There is an implicit assumption that scientific advancement has enabled organ storage and transportation over extremely long distances.

The extrapolation of this kind of globalisation of the health-care sector serves as a novum. It has been normalised in the fictional universe as a naturally ensuing phenomenon. This kind of characterisation of the phenomenon leads to defamiliarisation for readers because it differs from their corresponding empirical reality. Here, the "new" is not an invented device, but the naturalising of this intensified phenomenon in the text. The kind of scenario envisioned by Padmanabhan is an exacerbation of an extant occurrence/event/incident in the "zero world"⁴. Padmanabhan's treatment of globalisation suggests that organ trade through medical tourism can transform all aspects of life. The rational treatment of this phenomenon makes it more plausible for the reader. Om's frustration over a lack of jobs implies rapidly changing economic conditions. His enrolment as a Donor is a reason that manifests these changing conditions. Thus, organ trade through medical tourism (a result of globalisation) can be considered one of the building blocks in the alternate reality of the fictional universe.

Another novum in the play is the Contact Module, a device suspended from the ceiling that enables communication and surveillance. This Contact Module fulfills all the criteria of a novum described above. It is a new element that is rationally treated but is not supplied with an explanation, and it is used to build the fictional universe in the play. This device displays the face of the Receiver, Ginni, who is described as having a "young woman's face, beautiful in a youthful, glamorous, First World manner" (Padmanabhan 1.2). Padmanabhan states that she had made a conscious attempt to withhold "cultural signifiers" in the play to make it more representational of the skewed relationship between third-world and first-world countries that enforces globalisation. She also observes in her introduction to *Harvest* that whereas Om and his family are often appropriated to suit the location and culture where the play is being performed, Ginni's image always remains the same.

I suggest that the Contact Module signifies more than communication between different parts of the world and a mode of surveillance (as noted by several researchers discussed above). I suggest that the manner of this communication replicates a television screening an advertisement. The Contact Module functions like a television screen, switched on with a remote: "GUARD 2 moves over to the CONTACT MODULE and points a remote at it. There are musical notes and clicks. The polygon stirs and lights up" (Padmanabhan 1.1). This novum symbolises the seductive power of images, which help to enforce globalisation in third-world countries. The image has emerged as a powerful force in contemporary, post-modern culture. In India, the advertising industry

³ As quoted in Shroff's essay.

⁴ Suvin uses the term "zero world" to refer to the author's empirical reality, which serves as a reference point for the author to construct new worlds and for the reader to comprehend these worlds.

boomed after the recession of 1991, leading to increased competition amongst multinational corporations (Ciochetto 159). Clients and advertising agencies preferred to advertise on television rather than in print due to the low literacy rate in the country (160); this indicates the importance of advertising in the form of images. It also reflects a gradual turn towards the formation of a more obvious visual culture. Judith Williamson suggests that visual imagery in advertisements was used to communicate specific values, attitudes, and ideas, and that the messages attached to the commodities played a significant role for consumers (Preface). This indicates that products are sold based on not only on use value but also on brand value (beyond the product's utilitarian function). Several case studies demonstrate that brands like McDonalds, SunSilk, and Lux had also started using cultural messages to make economic gains (see especially O'Barr, 8–25).

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally suggest that advertising is an “integral part of modern culture” as advertisements are attached with social meanings that help the consumer to navigate through society and social relationships (7). The embedding of social meanings within commodities helps individuals to mediate relationships in society and construct their own identity. Thus, advertisements manufacture their own “systems of meaning” that percolate in society and manifest in different aspects of interpersonal relationships. David Harvey echoes this proposition by suggesting that the acceleration in consumption patterns due to acceleration in turnover time has led to the commodification of the image in the post-modern world. The image, like any other commodity, develops its systems of meanings and represents certain notions, which are used to manipulate tastes and desires (287–90).

In the play, Ginni's appearance as a “first-world woman” is associated with certain representations not just of glamour, but of riches, security, and stability in a world overrun by instabilities. Jeetu is ready to give up parts of his body to be a part of Ginni because the images projected in his mind are bright and seductive: “JEETU: (*behaving as if he is standing very close to someone, following her around as she moves out of his reach*) You need some more parts of me?” (Padmanabhan 3.1). The brief glimpse of her image as “so young! And beautiful” and “wearing almost nothing!” (3.1) convinces Jeetu to “see” her again, as the image signifies treasures. Om, Ma, and Jeetu are seduced because the image provides a break from their dreary existence; moreover, Ginni's promises of a better standard of living are inherent in her image. Douglas Crimp suggests that “mass advertising wants to disguise the directorial mode as a form of the documentary” in order to resemble reality (179). The image projects this reality as both enticing and accessible. Graham Murphy and Lars Schmeink suggest that the emergence of a new visual culture in the postmodern age that is drawn from new media technologies lent itself to a “literary cyberpunk imaginary” that took on a variety of forms such as the computer (24). Even Scott Bukatman suggests that cyberpunk uses the visual medium to understand cyberspace, performs “an act of abstraction and intensification” that captures the fluidity and fragmentation of the new “corporate, physical, cyberspatial space”, and incorporates and signifies the unequal “world orders” (18–19). Therefore, the imagery invoked in cyberpunk seems to circulate between visibility and virtuality, observed in Ginni's interaction with Jeetu.

Jean Baudrillard suggests that meanings disappear in images due to the heavy weight accorded to representation. Ideally, images represent a referential

object, but as simulacra, they “invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction” to such an extent that they precede reality (“Evil” 13). Thus, images blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. In the play, Ginni is revealed to be a simulation, a “computer-generated wet-dream” that is meant to disguise the real Receiver, Virgil. This deceit allows the computer to cross-check details and build a relationship with the Donor and the family so that the Receiver does not have to tax himself emotionally. The hidden vantage point also accords a privileged position to the Receiver, enabling him to observe silently and manipulate the situation to his advantage later. Virgil’s appearance as Jeetu towards the end of the play is a case in point. Additionally, this appearance leads not just to the images bleeding into each other but to the identities merging as well; even reality is suspect here. Om, Ma, and Jeetu mistake the imaginary for the real because it leads to tangible results in the form of benefits like a personal washroom, better clothes, and a steady supply of food. Ginni’s image masks the absence of basic reality and projects the imaginary as real. This is a simulation of reality, which Baudrillard describes as the realm of the hyper-real. Thus, in addition, Ginni’s image also regulates their experience of reality. Veronica Hollinger suggests that cyberpunk’s attention to the “outside”, rather than the “inside”, indicates its awareness about the “era of hyperreality” (37–38). The careful construction of Ginni’s image is a simulacrum that conceals the grim reality of globalisation.

Padmanabhan seems to subscribe to Baudrillard’s vision of this realm of hyper-reality, wherein the reality principle has disappeared and things merely simulate reality (“Evil Demon” 196–97). In this hyper-real world, seduction and easy compliance reach their apotheosis when Ma physically immerses herself in the SuperDeluxe VideoCouch, another novum. This device enables viewers to completely immerse themselves into the container that flashes video images while taking care of all bodily functions. Baudrillard proposes that consumers give themselves up to the seductive power of the mass media – television, advertisements, films, magazines, and newspapers – and allow the messages of the medium to invade all aspects of their lives, dismissing the boundaries between the public and private spheres (“Ecstasy of” 126–29). Ma’s immersion and Om’s jealousy over Jeetu’s ability to participate in Ginni’s private life, through the images beamed inside his mind illustrate the attractive power of this realm of hyper-reality.

In such a situation, Jaya’s demand for Virgil to leave the simulation is her weapon to wrestle back power. She demands his presence to reinject realness and referentiality in the social world and return to the reality principle, saying that she wants “real hands touching me. I want to feel a real weight upon me!” (Padmanabhan 3.2). Her subsequent commands are nothing less than directives, commanding Virgil to say her name correctly and meet her only through the real world.

The use of a cyberpunk ethos and the notion of hyper-reality, created by the proliferation of simulacra, sheds light on how the image (through advertising) has begun to broker cultural and social meanings. The analysis of Ginni’s image indicates this development in contemporary reality. *Harvest* is a prime example of how these “intermediary” science-fiction works had begun to establish an independent tradition by negotiating between old and new hierarchies, a result first of imperialism and then of globalisation (sometimes referred to as “neo-imperialism”). Each novum in the play adds an extra layer

that helps to build the fictional world. Additionally, this fictional world intensifies the echoes of problematic scenarios in the empirical world. The integration and cohesiveness of various elements in the play signify one of the ways that world-building takes place in Indian SF; each of these novums presents open-ended implications while successfully altering the socio-cultural atmosphere in the play by creating a comprehensive, alternative reality.

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Seasteads and Aquapelagos: Introducing Nissology to Speculative-Fiction Studies

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Abstract: Examining fictional seasteading through the lens of the “aquapelago” acts as a bridge between the fields of island studies and speculative-fiction studies. Island studies as an interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry has drawn attention to the complex interactions between the maritime, terrestrial, and human aspects of island societies, moving away from “land-biased” research. The “aquapelago” has been devised to better understand islands as assemblages that may wax, wane, and change over time. Examples of seasteading within speculative fiction reveal that such floating settlements are not necessarily aquapelagic societies; some are more representative of ocean-skimming cruise liners. Such fictive examples frequently represent seasteading as floating refuges borne of necessity in a dystopian world affected by environmental or societal catastrophe rather than as planned utopias.

Keywords: aquapelago, seasteading, utopia, climate change, island studies, speculative fiction

1. Islands of the Mind

Islands have been an enduring motif in Western literature from Classical-era adventures like Homer’s *Odyssey*, Plato’s tale of Atlantis in *Timaeus*, and early Christian works like the *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot* (900 AD) and his legendary search for the Isle of the Blessed to Renaissance works like Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), colonial-era works like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), as well as more modern fiction such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s tales set in the Earthsea universe (1964–2018), Michael

Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), and *The Islanders* by Christopher Priest (2014). Islands have also featured as a useful backdrop or plot device to isolate and contain potential suspects in the mystery and crime genres, such as those of Agatha Christie. They are also a persisting feature within other forms of Western media, such as the films *Mysterious Island* (1961), *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998), and *Castaway* (2000), plus television shows such as *Thunderbirds* (1965–1968), *Lost* (2004–2010), the Irish comedy *Father Ted* (1995–1998), and the currently airing BBC detective show filmed in Guadeloupe, *Death in Paradise* (2011–present).

Islands are such a pervasive motif that the cultural history of the Occident has been described as an island story (Gillis, *Islands of the Mind*; Baldacchino, “Introducing” 16). Islands feature in such profusion that some island scholars claim the West suffers from a phenomenon termed “islomania”: an obsession with islands (Gillis, “Island Sojourns” 247). Islomania is said to result from “islandness”, or the “metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experiences that accompany the physical isolation of island life” (Conkling 200). Island scholar Godfrey Baldacchino has explicated islandness as encompassing the geographical particularities of islands such as geographical precision, comprehensible scale, and separation from elsewhere (“Islands” 35). These characteristics result in islandness constituting a special sense of place not replicable in continental regions, and this sense of place can produce particularly strong emotional geographies (“Editorial” 374).

Usually the smaller and more remote the island, the stronger is “outsiders” attraction to it: to write about it, to visit it, to dream about it. As Baldacchino explains, “They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination” (“Editorial” 373–74). Mediatization of islands has transmitted, transformed, amplified, and mythologised islandness to the point where islomania is often based on a mythscape rather than an appreciation of the day-to-day realities and mundanties of island life (see MacKinnon and Hannan for the mythscape of the Scottish island of St. Kilda). For Baldacchino, there are five principal ways that media as well as the populations and governments of islands themselves have reified islomania: portraying islands as “special” and different from continental cultural and political norms; as sites of exocitism, particularly in relation to indigenous peoples; as a background for male exploration and domination, as in a Robinsonade; as a locus for the rise of tourism for relaxation and adventure; and, through the use of branding and marketing, as a route to development (“Getting wet” 55–56). This holds true not only for warm-water islands that promise paradise, exocitism, and relaxation. People are also attracted to cold-water islands that offer a different form of islomania based on exploration, emptiness, and perceived remoteness (Baldacchino, *Extreme tourism*; see also Petridou, Olausson, and Ioannides for a discussion of Greenland’s tourism industry).

2. Island Studies (Nissology)

Island studies as a distinct field of scholarly research is a relatively recent interdisciplinary development, dating from around the year 2000 (see Grydehøj for a comprehensive history of the field). The *raison d’être* of island

studies is to “understand islands on their own terms” (McCall 3) through “sharing, advancing and challenging existing theorization on islands ... while avoiding, delimiting or debunking false or partial interpretations of the island condition” (Baldacchino, “Introducing” 16). Despite its being a relatively young field, scholars have made significant progress in researching and sharing knowledge about island governance (Baldacchino, “Editorial”), music (Johnson and Kuwahara), culture (Pungetti), and games and sports (Ronström), as well as the aforementioned implications of “islandness”; for example, on economic practices (Royle, *Geography*), and in power dynamics between islands and between mainlands and islands (Pöllath). Island scholars have also begun to consider the representations of islandness within media; these include, for example, Graziadei et al.’s discussion of Michael Bay’s film *The Island* (2017), Lucchitti’s (2013) discussion of the Blasket Islands in Irish literature, and Kinane’s (2018) *Theorising Literary Islands – The Island Trope in Contemporary Robinsonade Narratives*. Similarly, Crane and Fletcher’s *Island Genres*, *Genre Islands* discusses islands in popular fiction.

Island scholars have also examined islands within climate-change narratives (Kelman, 2018). Many islands have risen to international attention for their somewhat unfortunate position as “miners’ canaries”, revealing the effects of climate change long before larger landmasses do (Royle, “Lessons” 250; Nunn 144). Nations in the Pacific Ocean are already facing the impacts of rising sea levels; these include Tuvalu (Farbotko 48) and the Marshall Islands, the government of which is making plans for relocation under a schema called “Migration with Dignity” (McClain et al. 3). Some Pacific islands are going as far as planning to construct islands using land-reclamation techniques (Lister and Muk-Pavic 79). However, several island scholars have warned against glossing over all Pacific islands as “sinking” or “titanic” societies (Barnett 207; Barnett and Campbell 2). Some have also highlighted the under-researched maritime aspects of islands in reaction to accusations of a “land bias” in nissological research (Baldacchino, “Getting Wet” 22), despite the immutability of land and water boundaries that often results in islands being defined by their coastlines, which determine their natural edges (Farran 55). This is largely a result of land being “perceived as solid, boundable, controllable – the space of civilization Water, by contrast ... either threatens or is used ... but that is fundamentally external to society” (Steinberg 2113). At a basic level, seas are frequently represented in atlases as “huge, monochromatic and isotropic space(s) ... where nothing seems to happen except for the activity of fishermen” (Fleury 1–2). This is despite a wider recognition that historically the sea “binds particular modes of civilisation together” (Maxwell 22), particularly within archipelagos where island relations are built on connection, assemblage, mobility, and multiplicity (Stratford 3), as with some Pacific nations (see Matsuda 31). The recent growing concern about the implications of climate change has drawn attention to aquatic surroundings as well as producing a global discourse that is “interconnected through the rising of a world ocean” (DeLoughery, “Submarine” 34).

In recent years conventional notions of archipelagos have been critiqued for their lack of consideration of the extent to which human communities create integrated terrestrial and marine spaces through their livelihood activities in particular locations at particular times. Such integrated spaces were characterised as “aquapelagos” by Hayward (“Aquapelagos” 3), using a

neologism that has persisted, and it extends to a variety of contexts that include speculative-fiction locales such as the techno-city represented in the TV series *Stargate Atlantis* (MacKinnon 42). One key aspect of the aquapelago emphasised in Hayward's first essay on the topic and his subsequent theorisation of the aquapelagism and de-aquapelagism of Manhattan during the 18th to early 21st centuries is its temporality. In this context, aquapelagos are perceived to "wax and wane" in response to changes in such factors as population patterns, climate and weather events, over-aggressive extractivism, and pollution. In an historical context, the thawing that followed the late Glacial Period around 12,000 years ago was instrumental in changing land and sea boundaries in manners that stimulated aquapelagic activity, just as the more recent impacts of the Anthropocene have both disrupted existing aquapelagic systems (such as Manhattan) and opened up new reactive and opportunistic systems.

In contrast to aquapelagos, island scholars have shown that cruise liners merely skim the surface of the ocean, rather than coexist with it (Cashman, "Skimming"). Cruise ships are "spaces of containment" that are a destination in and of themselves where tourists spend their time and their money (Weaver 165). Tourists are focused inwards towards the ship and its aquatic entertainment, such as hot tubs and artificial wave machines; it becomes impossible for them to interact with the sea around them (Cashman, "Skimming" 1). The sea is an "unnatural place for humans ... fraught with danger" (Cashman, "King Neptune" 91). In fact, on many cruise ships a large number of cabins face inward for the pleasure and distractions of the central concourse rather than out to sea (Fleury 2). This containment is often extended ashore as cruise-ship companies have been known to rent or purchase entire islands and beaches in the Caribbean to act as destinations for tourists (Weaver 166). This creates a "tourist bubble" where time as well as space is contained through tight onshore schedules that shield tourists from local environments and cultures (Gutberlet 520). When cruise ships interact with the depths of the ocean, it is often with deleterious effect in the form of disposing of solid waste, grey water, and bilge water that can harm human health and the environment (see Panko and Henthorn 15). What follows is a discussion of seasteading within speculative fiction to determine to what degree seasteads resemble ocean-skimming cruise ships or integrated aquatic-terrestrial-human spaces.

3. Seasteading

Seasteading, a portmanteau of "sea" and "homesteading", is the idea of constructing permanent floating dwellings called "seasteads". Seasteads can take various forms: platforms fixed to the ocean floor, floating cities, or large ships with a resident population. In the 1960s planners and architects such as Japanese Metabolist architect Kiyonori Kikutake and American architect and designer R. Buckminster Fuller began to consider the possibilities of people living permanently on seasteads. Kikutake designed a free-floating, politically independent city for a Japanese architecture magazine in April 1960: "Ocean City" would have the capacity for 500,000 people and would sink upon reaching the end of its lifespan. In 1967 Fuller designed a plan for a "tetrahedral" floating city called "Triton City" for the US Department of Housing and Urban

Development. Although neither of these cities was built, they serve as examples of architectural retro-futurism.

It was also in the 1960s that the first attempts of people to construct and inhabit offshore platforms were made. In 1967 Italian engineer Giorgio Rosa funded the construction of Respubliko de la Insulo de la Rozoj in the Adriatic Sea, 11 km off the Rimini coast in Italy. In 1968 Rosa declared himself president of the newly independent state, with Esperanto as its official language (Hayward, “Aquapelagos” 2). The Italian government destroyed Rose Island in 1969, believing it was being used for tax-avoidance purposes. Also in 1967, the first floating settlement was created using a retrofitted ship. According to the website for the Church of Scientology purchased British naval ship *HMS Royal Scotsman*, renaming her *Apollo*, in order to “assist L. Ron Hubbard with advanced research operations and supervise Church organizations around the world”. The Church of Scientology describes its Sea Organization, or Sea Org, as a “fraternal religious order ... [that] is composed of the singularly most dedicated Scientologists – individuals who have committed their lives to the volunteer service of their religion”. The ship was retired from service in 1975 when the Sea Org’s administrative organisation moved to Florida, although there continue to be other Sea Org vessels.

Since 2008, the Seasteading Institute, a California-based independent think tank funded by wealthy patrons, many of whom share a libertarian political bent, has promoted seasteading as a means of creating communities outside of established nation-states, their tax regimes, and alleged “deep-state” bureaucratic cultures (for a discussion of the politics of seasteading, see Steinberg, Nyman, and Caraccioli 1536). This libertarian philosophy and sense of “otherness” differentiates seasteads from constructed islands like The Palms in Dubai, Flevopolder in the Netherlands, and Chinese artificial islands in the South China Sea that do not exist to challenge the state but to support and reify it. However, the Seasteading Institute has promoted a “floating city” concept since 2016, and in early 2017 announced an agreement with the government of French Polynesia to moor a floating city in sheltered waters off the archipelago, to get the project off paper and into reality. Despite considerable publicity and media coverage, the Seasteading Institute’s venture collapsed when the government withdrew support in early 2018. To date neither the Seasteading Institute nor any other entity, such as *Freedomship*, has succeeded in establishing a free-floating autonomous micro-state in international waters, but libertarians’ considerable and ongoing interest in the project suggests that they will pursue further ventures in future.

4. Seasteading in Speculative Fiction

While the term “seasteading” did not enter usage until the 1980s with Ken Neumeyer’s book *Sailing the Farm* (1981), the concept of floating dwellings has existed within speculative fiction for much longer. Jules Verne’s *Une ville flottante* depicts a steam-powered ship so massive and complex that it is described as “more than a vessel, a floating city, part of English soil” (5). In 1895 Verne also published *L’île à hélice*, translated as both *Propeller Island* and *The Floating Island*. Philip E. High’s *These Savage Futurians* (1967) features a charismatic and authoritarian leader, Arnold Magellan, who establishes a

refuge for the world's greatest scientists and thinkers on an artificial island in the mid-Atlantic. As the island grows, the rest of the world suffers from famine, disease, and chaos. Magellan's islanders began conducting genetic experiments on the children of survivors to produce a more advanced and stable society.

What follows is a more in-depth discussion of seasteading in speculative fiction between 1990 and 2019, not as an exhaustive list, but as an introduction to examining the interaction between people and their terrestrial and aquatic environments and as a nexus between the fields of island studies and speculative-fiction studies.

4.1 *Waterworld*

Many speculative fiction works of the 1990s suggested that seasteading would become an inevitable response to global catastrophes such as climate change or social breakdown. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 1995 post-apocalyptic SF film directed by Kevin Reynolds, *Waterworld*. The film is set in the distant future after the polar ice caps have melted and sea-level rise has submerged virtually all the land on Earth. The film follows a character, "The Mariner," who trades in the rarest of all goods in this watery dystopia: dirt. The Mariner lives on his trimaran and uses his mutations of gills and webbed toes to dive to now-submerged towns to salvage items for trade. *Waterworld* features several forms of seasteading: man-made atolls, trading platforms, and settlements onboard oil tankers.

The humans in *Waterworld* live together in groups on artificial atolls: rings of ramshackle, shanty-style buildings around an interior lagoon that harbours small boats and rafts. Only one atoll is seen on-screen, and it is shown to be limited in facilities and comfort: the single store sells only fresh-water rations and a single tomato plant. The exterior of the atoll is thinly fortified with sheets of corrugated metal that prove instantly ineffective against Smoker (pirate) attack, and the island is overrun. The emotional geography of the *Waterworld* atoll therefore reflects that of a cruise ship: it is an inward-looking place that protects residents from the dangers of the surrounding ocean. The limited interaction between the people of the atoll and the ocean is emphasised when the Mariner throws a child off a boat and she panics while her carer shouts, "She can't swim!"

After the atoll is attacked, the Mariner and his rescued companions spend several days at sea when they see a small barter outpost that appears to be anchored to the ocean floor. The multi-level platform appears too small for permanent habitation, with little in the way of shelter or home comforts. The platform is used as a trap by Smokers, some of whom hide by being anchored to the ocean floor on submersible jet skis. The Smokers live aboard the rusty hulk of the infamous *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker. The antagonist of the movie and leader of the Smokers, the Deacon, stands on the bridge and preaches his messianic message of finding dry land to the Smoker hordes below. Mobility is a key feature of both cruise liners and aquapelagos, but this mobility takes different forms. While cruise liners themselves navigate the ocean the people onboard are generally restricted in their movements to 'guest areas' and designated routes ashore. Within aquapelagos, however, it is the people who are mobile, moving through, within and beyond the terrestrial and aquatic

spaces. It could be argued that the Smokers and the Mariner of *Waterworld* represent an aquapelagic existence. While the Smokers stalk the ocean in their oil tanker, they also utilize its depths for camouflage and for surprise submersible attacks. The Mariner himself scavenges from the depths of a long-gone civilization and uses his physical mutations of gills to swim for much longer than other humans.

Phillip Hayward writes that one of strongest examples of aquapelagity is the immersion of humans in aquatic spaces for livelihood activities such as freediving for food or resources, giving the example of freedivers in Japan and Korea, whose diving technique is similar to that of the Mariner (“Sounding”). Other examples of humans existing within ocean spaces include Alexander Beliaev’s *Amphibian Man* (1928) and Peter Benchley’s *White Shark* (1994), both of which feature humans anatomically altered to breathe through gills as does the Mariner, and works such as James Cameron’s film *The Abyss* (1989) or Greg van Eekhout’s novel *California Bones* (2014); the latter novel features humans “breathing” oxygenated fluids in their lungs that enables them to operate underwater without air tanks. Therefore, there is scope outside seasteading to investigate the presence of aquapelagos within speculative fiction that features humans spending prolonged periods of time submerged through adaptation or technology.

4.2 Distress

The plot of *Distress* (1995), a SF novel by Greg Egan, centres around an investigative science journalist, Andrew Worth, who is attending a physics conference to report on a purported Theory of Everything. The conference is being held on Stateless, a constructed living island that is anchored to a guyot on an underwater mountain 4,000 km from Australia’s east coast. The island was formed after six employees of a Californian biotech company stole the seed material and information needed to grow an artificial bio-island in 2025. The protagonist describes the landscape of Stateless as being

like a pale stranded Starfish. Six arms sloped gently down from a central plateau; along their sides, grey rock gave way to banks of coral, which thinned from a mass of solid outcrops to a lacelike presence barely breaking the surface of the water Inland a sprinkling of lights hinted at the city’s orderly grid Stateless was as beautiful as any atoll, as spectacular as any ocean liner ... with none of the reassuring qualities of either. (106)

Each arm is over 40km long, and if constructed from a traditional material like limestone would snap at the edge of the guyot (157); however, the fine “mineralised foam” that is forever dissolving, releasing gases, and self-repairing means that Stateless continues to float (162). One million people live on Stateless, and almost two-thirds of the population are Pasifika, essentially climate-change refugees, waiting for their home nations, including Fiji and Samoa, to grow their own new (and legal) artificial islands. As the protagonist laments, the “Greenhouse Storms have claimed so many people” (325). The political situation on Stateless is described as anarchy: there is no ruler, but not an absence of laws (143). Stateless struggles to have any industry of note and cannot exploit any natural resources; it thus relies on tourism and income

related to cultural activities. However, because Stateless is boycotted by UN countries due to its rogue status, travel from anywhere is long and complicated. The island is further ostracised because of its communal approach to ownership and distribution of resources. While in the rest of the world private land ownership is the norm and every food crop is licensed, on Stateless nobody owns land and no one goes hungry. For this reason Stateless represents the “Otherness” of a seastead: life outside the global capitalist agenda. This form of anarcho-communism is quite an interesting alternative to many contemporary conceptions of seasteading that view such endeavours as a source of “individualist escape” (Steinberg, Nyman, and Caraccioli 1534).

New residents, and even visitors, to Stateless are encouraged to take a trip to the underside of the island to see its inner workings as a rite of passage. This involves using scuba gear while being lowered through a narrow duct and emerging beneath one of the piers. After their initial submergence, Stateless residents appear to have little interaction with the Pacific; there is no mention of fishing, and travel, despite the boycott, is by air. This suggests that Stateless is not a truly aquapelagic society; rather, it is firmly territorially focused, or “land-biased”, where humans’ interaction with their oceanic surroundings is minimised to a fleeting encounter.

The snowflake shape of Stateless is similar to the landscape of Atlantis within the Stargate franchise. Additionally, both cities also use the ocean for protection. The finale of *Distress* involves Stateless residents submerging their core downtown to drown an invading force; in contrast, Atlantis is submerged for many years to hide it from scanners and to attenuate any laser weapons. Atlantis is a mobile city-ship that has been “submerged, afloat, and travelled through space several times” (MacKinnon 45), and its islandness is more representative of the “performed entity” of an aquapelago than the static boundness of Stateless.

Greg Egan revisits seasteading in his 2019 novella *Perihelion Summer*, in which a binary black hole system enters the solar system and alters the Earth’s orbit. Subsequently, large swathes of the Earth become uninhabitable for most of the year as the climate becomes more extreme. The protagonist, Matt, has designed and built a torus-shaped floating habitat, called *Mandjet*. The plan is to sail south from the west coast of Australia to spend the summer in Antarctica, then sail back to Australia in wintertime. *Mandjet* is arguably more aquapelagic than Stateless for several reasons. First, Matt spends significant amounts of time underwater welding new boats to its side and hiding from pirates. Second, he uses various vessels to move back and forth between *Mandjet*, other ships they encounter, and Australia. Thirdly, he suspends and submerges a net in the central oculus of *Mandjet* to provide a mobile aquaculture rig. Therefore, *Mandjet* is not simply skimming the surface of the Indian Ocean; instead, its population is navigating beyond the seastead’s boundaries and using and engaging with its depths on a continual basis. Furthermore, due to its seasonal habitation, *Mandjet*’s aquapelago can be said to wax and wane annually.

4.3 Snow Crash

Snow Crash (1992) by Neal Stephenson is a SF novel set in 21st-century North America after an economic collapse. The plot of the book centres around a virus being transferred, via drugs or injections or from the Metaverse (similar to an online virtual-reality computer simulation), into the body and attacking the neuro-linguistic part of the brain. The virus is designed to undo the “partitioned logic of natural language that resulted from the fall ... of the tower of Babel” (Swanstrom 70). The key to stopping the spread of the virus is aboard the *Raft*, a floating conglomeration of makeshift boats lashed to the sides of a former US aircraft carrier, *Enterprise*.

After purchasing *Enterprise*, charismatic preacher L. Bob Rife used the ship to rescue Bangladeshis when their country was submerged due to deforestation in the Ganges basin (this was probably not an entirely charitable act, as Rife was the architect of the virus and the Bangladeshis were probably the first carriers). The nuclear-powered engine is no longer operational, and the *Raft* floats clockwise around the Pacific Ocean at the whim of ocean and wind currents (254). Over time the *Raft* has grown in area and population, becoming a hub for Eurasian refugees (called Refus) fleeing economic strife in their home countries. The Refus that make it aboard are made of hardy stuff, as the *Raft* stays a minimum of 100 miles offshore (340), and the journey usually occurs in makeshift boats in tumultuous waters; moreover, arriving Refus must avoid being killed by the ones already there.

Some Refus detach from the *Raft* to paddle to shore in search of a better life. Such is the reputation of the *Raft*’s population that Californian beachfront property owners hire personal security defenses and subscribe to a rolling *Raft* news report for fear a group of Refus will come ashore. The reputation of the *Raft* is made even more dramatic by the fact that it is only accessible to visiting outsiders with the aid of a local guide (359), both for safety and because the ad-hoc nature of the construction means that getting from one point to another can form a labyrinth that forces one to walk through the *Raft*’s residential areas (323). Therefore, the *Raft* is regarded as a threat to the mainlanders’ way of life, acting both as a metaphor for fear of the “Other” that is frequently present in discussions of immigration, and as a real threat in the novel due to its central role in disseminating the linguistic virus. The fear of climate refugees is a continuing theme within cli-fi literature such as John Lanchester’s *The Wall* and Omar El Akkad’s *American War*.

Like the *Raft*, Armada, the piratical city-state flotilla in China Miéville’s *The Scar* (2011), is a seastead to be feared. It grows in wealth and population by looting and kidnapping. What further distinguishes Armada as “Other” within the Bas-Lag world is that all races aboard are equal. In particular, the Remade, victims of the criminal justice system that mutilates their bodies with machinery or strange appendages, who are normally destined for slave-like conditions, are free citizens on Armada. The Cray, an aquatic race who live on the underside of Armada in coral-like structures are humanoid from the waist up and lobster-like from the waist down. Therefore, Armada is unique among these examples of seasteading in that spaces both above and below the waterline are inhabited; it therefore provides the strongest example of a truly aquapelagic society. In Hayward’s conception of the aquapelago, he admits that while humans are “essential to the aquapelago, humans are only one of a series

of actants without which the aquapelago cannot be performatively constituted” (“Constitution” 3).

5. Discussion

This paper has found that seasteads within SF generally fall into two categories. The first is the somewhat ramshackle flotilla-type seastead that has grown and altered as boats (read: landmass) are either added or jettisoned, such as the *Raft*, *Armada*, and the atolls of *Waterworld*. The other type relies on advanced technology, like *Stateless* or *Atlantis*, to create a more planned terrestrial space that resembles high-density urban centres like San Francisco or Tokyo. The impetus for constructing both types of seastead has often been climatic disaster or societal breakdown, rather than the desire to construct fanciful projects with utopian aims.

Seasteading offers an opportunity for survival and sanctuary. The *Raft*’s origins began as a refuge for drowning Bangladeshis, *Stateless* for Pasifika, the *Mandjet* for Australian and Timorese refugees, and the atoll of *Waterworld* for humanity’s remaining climate-change survivors. Therefore, rather than serving as “locales of desire” and “platforms of paradise” – utopian playgrounds for inhabitants or the onlooker gaze – the majority of the seasteads featured in this paper are utilitarian life rafts, born of necessity. The role of seasteading in housing climate refugees and anarchists makes them politically transgressive places that can pose a threat to the continental way of life. Also, the very act of inhabiting the ocean marks seasteads as “outside” places. As Elizabeth DeLoughery claims, oceanic spaces represent either the “utopian space of biocapital or the dystopian futurity of climate change, marine spaces [are] profoundly exceptional to human experience” (“Ordinary” 356–57). This is illustrated by the people of *Waterworld*, who have known only life at sea, and the people onboard *Mandjet*; both feel relief at reaching landmasses. This is perhaps why there has been such slow development of the Seasteading Institute.

As Hayward asserts, aquapelagoes are not fixed geographic descriptions but performed entities that “wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop” (“Aquapelagos” 27). There are several examples of such performed entities, such as the *Mariner* and *Smokers* in *Waterworld*, the *Armada*, and the *Mandjet*, which not only navigate the ocean surface but also use its depths for food, trade, and even habitation in the case of the *Cray*; the *Mandjet* is the most obvious example of a seastead altering its aquapelgism along with climate patterns.

In contrast, various examples within this paper, such as the atolls of *Waterworld*, *Stateless*, the *Raft*, and *Atlantis* are terrestrially based societies where oceanic interaction is minimised and any submersive experiences are the exception rather than the norm. These examples retain a strongly terrestrial imagination of future humanity, rather than exploring the potential for humans to more easily inhabit aquatic spaces and/or exist simultaneously in both. Seasteading, in these regards, can be seen as something of a fantasy displacement of terrestrial structures and behaviours onto offshore platforms without the next level of immersion and transformation. They are still

principally laminar, thin platforms rather than points of transition between oceanic depths and the above-water world and its atmosphere. Therefore, these examples are more akin to ocean-skimming cruise liners than aquapelagic societies.

6. Conclusion

Island Studies is still a relatively new field of research that has just begun to engage with media and literature on – or about – islands. There is much work to be done on planets as islands, cities that “float” in the sky, underwater settlements, and extra-terrestrial islands. It is hoped that this paper will instigate more discussion between scholars of islands and speculative fiction about the interaction of sentient beings with their aquatic and terrestrial surroundings.

As a tentative step in this direction, this paper has shown that fictive examples of seasteading often originate as reactive adaptations to catastrophic events rather than an attempt to purposefully design and attain a form of utopia. Seasteading does not inherently equate to the construction of an aquapelagic society. Life onboard a seastead can be terrestrially focused and contained by the seastead’s edges, much like the emotional geography of a cruise liner. There are examples of aquapelagic seasteads, such as those found in *Perihelion Summer*, *The Scar* and the Stargate franchise, where inhabitants interact with their aquatic environment to a greater or lesser extent, making aquapelagity not a fixed characteristic but an assemblage that is performed in space and time.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and
Posthuman in Literature and Culture*

Tony M. Vinci

Karkulehto, Sanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, eds. *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-0367197476.

Weird ecologist Timothy Morton employs the term “mesh” to denote the sticky, fluid, overlapping entanglements between *things* – subjects, objects, forces, codes, bodies, etc.¹ In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, editors Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis have done more than assemble a collection of essays on posthumanisms (broadly conceived); they have amassed a scholarly mesh of sorts, a strange ecosystem of questions, concepts, methodologies, and subject positions that play productively with the evolving formations of critical posthumanisms.² In this sense, *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* is less a book to be read than an environment to become entangled with. Latching onto Donna J. Haraway’s Chthulucentric thinking,³ the chapters that comprise the collection strive to

¹ See Morton, Timothy, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

² In an effort to avoid getting bogged down in fine-haired taxonomical distinctions, throughout this review I will refer to “posthumanisms” and “critical posthumanisms” as umbrella terms that include discussions of the anti-humanisms, non- and anti-anthropocentrism, neganthropocentrism, the posthuman, the nonhuman, and other concepts that generally invite us to think beyond the liberal humanist subject and its life-world.

³ See Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

“create new gripping surfaces between art, theory, and the world by conducting concrete case studies of various contemporary art works and cultural phenomena” (10). Such approaches compel readers to become acutely aware, when tussling with literary studies specifically, of the ways in which “research materials often defy the traditional definitions of representation and textuality” (10). Thus, *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* announces itself as something other than a traditional study of what might be thought of as a canon of posthumanist texts: it presents itself as a self-reflexive collection of posthumanist experimentations both within and beyond text and narrative.

Chapter by chapter, this volume establishes new lines of kinship between visual arts, literature, comics, video games, medical humanities, and theory. While the discrete essays in the collection might benefit from growing longer tentacles and groping with a slightly larger networks of scholarly bodies, the book is dazzling in its playful intelligence and indefatigable curiosity. Because of this spirit of interrogative play, I consider it to be part of the now-vital network of collected essays on critical posthumanisms that includes Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova’s *Posthuman Glossary* (2018), Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini’s *The Cambridge Guide to Literature and the Human* (2016), Neal Badmington’s *Posthumanism* (2000), and Judith M. Halberstam and Ira Livingston’s *Posthuman Bodies* (1995). I justify this privileged placement by charting the eccentric, multinational texts, lives, and phenomena introduced throughout the book, accenting moments that might be of particular provocation or significance for scholars both familiar and unfamiliar with critical posthumanisms.

Unlike some collections of essays on literary and cultural studies, in which subsections and intellectual groupings seem to be constructed haphazardly as a last-ditch effort to offer some semblance of theoretical or thematic cohesion, the book’s thirteen chapters (and introduction) are structured in five thematic clusters that readers familiar with the field of critical posthumanisms will recognise immediately: posthumanist literature and theory; posthumanist figurations in literature and life (in this case, aliens and monsters); the non-human animal; posthumanist technologies; and materiality. These chapters and clusters are entangled by what the editors call the “meta-disciplinary streak running through the entire book” (10) – a call to recognise and attempt to think beyond the limitations of our current discipline-specific assumptions and methodologies. In this way, the book almost begs to be read as a cohesive, if wide-ranging and diverse, monograph that begins with literary analyses, moves to discussions of cultural productions in varied mediums, and ventures fully into the terrain of nonhuman and posthumanist phenomena and materiality.

The three chapters in Part I propose a set of posthumanist reading practices that interrogate the very possibility of what might be termed a posthumanist literature. Carole Guesse and Karoliina Lummaa open the collection with essays that feature literary texts that might, through their topics and techniques, be thought of as posthumanist. Guesse positions Michel Houellebecq’s 2005 novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, as an attempt to thematise (and possibly enact) posthumanist perspectives via a clone’s first-person account of a postapocalyptic future. In remarkably lyrical prose, Lummaa describes how two digital poems (Marko Niemi and Dan Waber’s

2008 flash poem, “a as in dog”, and Jouni Tossavainen’s 2008 sound poem, “a short interview with a lost voice”) might be read with sensitivity to the thematics of posthumanisms as well as the materialities involved in the production and reading of literature. Through deft and engaging readings of these texts, Guesse and Lummaa invite readers to move beyond *themes* of more-than-human-assemblages and anti-anthropocentric points of view. They ask instead: how might a text do more than narrate the possibilities of a posthumanist ethics? How might it activate posthumanist agencies?

The inaugural section of the collection concludes with Kaisa Kortekallio’s remarkable “Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*”. Questioning the worth of putative readerly empathy, Kortekallio instead outlines a practice of enacting fictional experience that opens readers to “nonhuman influences through self-aware engagement with estranging first-person narratives” (57). Aligning VanderMeer, Morton, and her own essay through their use of first-person narration, the chapter highlights the value of texts that compel an awareness of the artificiality of characters while attempting to induce an absence of subjectivity in the reader. Rather than remaining a sovereign subject, Kortekallio suggests, the reader should strive to *become-instrument*: “something that is manufactured, calibrated, and played for a specific creative purpose” (57). Kortekallio carefully establishes how, via Vandermeer and Morton, becoming-instrument estranges and stimulates an asubjective stance that compels the openness for which she calls in reading. For me, the bold assertion of such reading practices that breach the boundaries between text and world and deny the validity of a humanist subject are precisely the type of thinking critical posthumanisms needs in order for us to further enact its ethical promises. Perhaps more importantly, Kortekallio’s chapter primes the reader for how they might themselves become-instrument while venturing through the rest of the collection.

Part II extends the theories conceived and tested in Part I by emphasising the figures of the alien and the monster in literature and culture. Not only do they establish a provocative collection of primary texts in multiple genres and mediums (which is useful in and of itself), but the authors remain attentive to the diacritical specificities of each text and medium. Instead of providing readings that are thematic or cultural, here, particular aesthetic, generic, cultural, and embodied forms are studied in relation to the potential posthumanist work of the texts. One of the most productive features of these chapters is their visual facsimiles of primary texts. In her chapter on *Sandman: Overture*, Essi Varis reproduces and analyses a selection of beautifully rendered panels that foreground the ways in which the comic simultaneously defamiliarises the reader by evoking nonhuman experiences and characterisations while reminding the reader that a trace of anthropocentrism scaffolds every image, every narrative, every bit of dialogue. As Varis clarifies, within the comic, “animals always speak in human language, the machines are always androids, and every non-carbon-based creature has a human face” (96). For her, *Sandman: Overture* is productively posthumanist in that it inspires an acute responsiveness to textual styles, representations, and modes of cognition in the reader. Similarly, in a chapter on nonhuman experiences in video games, Jonne Arjoranta analyses a variety of screenshots from *Alien vs. Predator* to

express how the game's synesthetic design, visual indicators, colour filters, and highlighting expresses nonhuman embodied cognition.

Dedicated primarily to studying the nonhuman animal, Part III continues to play with a carnivalesque zone of texts and theories, but it also marks a shift away from the collection's focus on literature and narrative. Such a redirection of intellectual energies from the narrative to the lived not only reenergises the collection (and makes it stand apart in the field), but invites the reader to reconsider the six essays that came before. While many of the chapters in Parts I and II reference first-person perspectives and the subjective position of the authors, the essays in Part III (and to some extent Part IV) reach beyond traditional argument-driven rhetoric to experiment productively with the affective. Both Mikko Keskinen and Hana Porkertová consider human-animal becomings, specifically through human-canine relationships. Keskinen analyses Charles Siebert's 2000 novel *Angus*. Rather than studying the narrative and its deceased, nonhuman narrator, Keskinen analyses how the human reader engages with the novel's stylistic techniques, particularly the eponymous character's play with standard English, the narrative's structure (which mimics canine memory capacity), and the title's metafictional valence, which positions the novel itself not as a narrative but as an inter-species "translation machine" (153). Porkertová maps the Deleuzian notion of assemblage onto the relationship between Eva and Nessie, a blind woman and her guide dog. For me, this is one of the most impactful essays in the collection: its use of Deleuze to perform an ethnography that imbricates the author with her human and nonhuman subjects, technologies, and lived disabilities results in a remarkably thoughtful and affective experience. As I read emails between Porkertová and Evie, her human subject, about the perceived co-experiences between human and canine via disability, I could not help but *become-instrument* and contaminate the anthropocentric discourses regarding law, technology, disability, and species designations that inform my own sense of personhood. Continuing to *tune the instrument that therefore I was becoming*, the final essay in Part III, Brad Bolman's "Carnivorous Anatomies: Art and Being Beasts", charts an anti-anthropocentric intellectual history of the concept of anatomy via the bodies of pigs as they have been depicted in "anatomical and physiological reference works" (163). The result is an exercise in the very types of estrangement and defamiliarisation for which posthumanist texts are known. In other words, the book's theoretical engagements with more-than-human assemblages often produce the affective and intellectual experiences typically reserved for the area of the aesthetic.

Part IV migrates away from narrative studies altogether and experiments instead with "Technological Co-Agencies". These chapters vary in approach and content, but they align through a similar ambition to locate anthropocentric structures and biases and postulate alternative conceptions and practices. Cléo Collomb and Samuel Goyet construct a careful argument to reposition the computer in the public imagination as more than a tool (or platform for tools). In a revealing section analysing a Google search page, they demonstrate the bewildering maneuvers and machinations that such a seemingly simple "tool" performs. Their work becomes more provocative when they assert that, when human thinkers calibrate themselves to the specific methods of action that computers perform, the complicated calculus of computation can be rethought as a type of computational (versus textual)

writing. Analysing what is perhaps one of the most recognisable human-computer assemblages, gaming, Marleena Huuhka develops Nakamura and Wirman's notion of counterplay as a strategy of gameplay that makes visible the "logic of capitalism, conquest, and possession" inherent in popular games such as *Minecraft* (233). By amplifying the ways in which games might fortify the anthropocentric, capitalist, and postcolonial values of conquest and possession, Huuhka stresses the importance of what might otherwise seem a facile strategy of resistance. Because it introduces the powerful alternative of refusal, counterplay promises to help individuals dis-imbricate themselves from the logic of particular games as well as the cultural processes that may shape their own desires.

One of the most galvanising chapters in the collection, the final essay in Part IV, Patricia Flanagan and Raune Frankjær's "Cyborganic Wearables: Sociotechnical Misbehavior and the Evolution of Nonhuman Agency", analyses a cyborganic wearable created by the authors. Named "Bamboo Whisper", the goal of the "human-nature-machine hybrid" is to perform what much posthumanist literature and theory thematises: the deconstruction of anthropocentric authority via haptic sensitivities and human-nature-technological assemblages (253). Assisted by a collection of stunning photographs of people wearing Bamboo Whisper, the essay argues convincingly how such "fictional posthuman entities" might help wearers (and readers) to overcome anthropocentric sensory biases and encounter the unseen signals sent by the material movements of nonhuman biological agencies (253).

If readers do as I have suggested and read the collection as a monograph of sorts, then by the time they reach Part V – comprised of a single chapter, "Unnarratable Matter" by Juha Raipola – then they will most likely be ready to concede the potential impotence of narrative when engaging perceptions and materialities beyond putative human frameworks. Returning to the collection's evident interest in the limitations of literary studies, Raipola argues that stories themselves might be part of the problem of anthropocentrism. He argues that, despite the fact that nonhuman agencies are always already part of human stories, such stories fail to compel us to actualise an ethic of interspecies equality because the very logic of storytelling – its meanings and structures, its pleasures and affectations – are always already anthropocentric. Thus, the work of critical posthumanisms might do well to continually reach outside of literary studies to keep questing in environment-worlds that, while they incorporate narrative, also refuse to engage completely in the logic of stories.

Despite my celebration of the collection, I did encounter a single strange and unexpected sticking point: *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman, and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* might not reconfigure enough. Most chapters seem haunted by the anthropocentrism that they claim to counteract. Many of them actually incorporate the phrase "what it means to be human" as if the human itself were still a valid ontological construct that must be reckoned with instead of an ideological category of power, control, and convenience that, in no real way, has ever existed as such. Again and again, the human returns in some chapters as the baseline from which all theorisation, experimentations, and creations must be considered, compared, evaluated, etc. To be fair, some of the authors may do this to carefully think around concepts of agency and power, ontology and epistemology; yet, it seems odd that the premise of the liberal human subject is not ejected completely from the collection or at least

quarantined for a time to allow us to imagine and encounter new possibilities. Especially considering the intense focus these authors place on materialities, assemblages, and co-constitutions, it is surprising that there is not more engagement with contemporary thinkers who do the same, such as Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) or Arthur Kroker in *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway* (2012). This single critique should certainly not dissuade anyone from reading the collection. I share it mainly to emphasise that the book is at its best when it successfully exorcises the specter of the human and clarifies the ethical value of thinking and living anti-anthropocentrically, posthumanistically, and neganthropocentrically.

Surprisingly, one of the features of the book that performs the cultural work defined above is the index. Scuttling about the index's pages are those species of terms now recognisable as the lexical imaginary of critical posthumanisms: *alien, Anthropocene, assemblage, becoming, cognition, cyborg, defamiliarization, ecology, embodied cognition, emergence, empathy, gender, ghost, human, hyperobject, matter, nonhuman, spectrality, subjectivity, weird ecology*, etc. However, these terms are not alone. Migrating among them, hums another species of terminology that intermingles the territories of critical posthumanisms with the territories of narratology, narrative genre, and interdisciplinary media: *character, children's literature, comics, contemporary art, digital literature, fictionality, narrative, narrative theory, narratology, speculative fiction, storied matter, videogames, visual storytelling, writing*. Such a lexical mesh evinces a dedication to grounding abstract theorising with the specificities of discrete aesthetic forms. My hope is that this move might invite thinkers interested primarily in formalist, structuralist, and aesthetics approaches to consider more fully the value of critical posthumanisms while also encouraging practitioners of critical posthumanisms to become more attentive to the limitations and challenges aesthetic forms may place on their thought. Hence, the prime value of the collection, at least for this reviewer, is its effort to bring into conversation a wide array of theories, disciplines, primary texts (comics, novels, video games, etc.), materialities, and aesthetic sensitivities that both enhance and question the emerging fields of critical posthumanisms.

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BOOK REVIEW:

Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle

Sara Hays

Jackie C. Horne, ed. *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*. UP of Mississippi, 2019. ISBN 978-1496819840.

Most people, if they recognise the name at all, know Madeleine L'Engle as the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*. That is a legacy that practically any author would be grateful to leave behind, but L'Engle has bequeathed a much larger world. In *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*, editor Jackie C. Horne has conveniently compiled into one volume for the first time a sampling of interviews L'Engle gave over the course of her career. The collection is part of the Literary Conversations Series published by the University Press of Mississippi, a series that boasts 180 titles featuring the compiled interviews of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Toni Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and Maurice Sendak. Although all of the interviews compiled in the many volumes of the series have been previously released in various other publications over the years, so an enterprising scholar could certainly track them all down individually, the impetus of the series is convenience; the series' editors have done the tedious work of compiling the choicest sampling of each author's conversations. This particular collection of interviews with L'Engle represents the consistent quality and reliability of the series and gives readers a much-coveted glimpse into the mind of a legendary figure of science fiction and fantasy.

Horne arranges these interviews with L'Engle chronologically from 1967, a few years after the initial publication of *A Wrinkle in Time*, to 2006, a year before her death. Taken from a variety of sources – scholarly journals, radio programs, popular Christian magazines – the thirteen interviews in this collection can consequently appeal to audiences from scholars to fans. More specifically, while children's literature scholars will likely get the most use out

of such a collection of broad-ranging interviews, more casual fans of L'Engle's novels will also enjoy reading her answers and tracing the trajectory of her point of view over the course of four decades.

In addition to being arranged chronologically, the interviews also follow a loose thematic pattern, with certain interviews focusing on topics such as feminism, religion, writing, or science, depending on the intended audience of the interviewing publication. The first selection in the book is from Roy Newquist's 1967 collection *Conversations* and reads more like an autobiography in that Newquist has removed his questions from the transcript and has edited L'Engle's responses together into one continuous narrative. She reminisces about several significant moments and realisations throughout her life up to that point, including experiences at school, her first novel written at just twelve years old, her guilt about not being a good housewife – "I don't sweep in the corners. I can't bake pies. I should stop writing and be a proper housewife and mother" (7) – and her general feelings of self-doubt. She also muses on the problematic categorisation of "children's books" and herself as a children's author. She claims that she does not write books for children but rather for herself, saying "I think anybody who writes for children is being intolerable to children The real children's books are those they go on reading all their lives, books that come to terms with man's place in the universe" (9). She mentions Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and C. S. Lewis as positive examples of "real" children's authors. Ultimately, L'Engle's candid vulnerability in this first interview makes it an excellent opening piece to the collection.

Another interview that stands out is her long discussion with Linda Chisolm, which is particularly pertinent to those seeking to analyse the spirituality of L'Engle's fiction because L'Engle discusses the development of her theological views at length, beginning with her reluctant entrance into a Congregational church community in Connecticut where she, her husband, and their children lived in the 1950s. She claims to have been "very much an agnostic" and had explained to the young minister that "yes, I would like to come to church, but he would have to accept the fact that I simply had to live *as though* I believed in God, but I could not say that I did" (33). His unexpected response was to have her teach the high school Sunday school class. She did relish being a part of a supportive community of other young families, something she had never experienced before. Her Congregationalist friends encouraged her to read German theologians in an attempt to convert her fully, but she recalls that her "true theological reading turned out to be my discovery of higher mathematics" (34). After devouring Einstein, Jeans, Eddington, Planck, and Sullivan, she had finally found a God she could believe in. As she explains, "These people talked about a universe in which I felt I could believe in God, whereas the theologians had turned me off" (35). She continues discussing with Chisolm her views about Jesus and Satan, theologians she does like, and how her study of science and mathematics eventually led her to write *A Wrinkle in Time*.

The next three interviews in the collection are from the period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when L'Engle's frequent speaking engagements at Wheaton College garnered attention from Christian publications. The ones included in this book are from a popular Christian magazine called *Christianity Today*, a program on Episcopal Radio hosted by Ted Baehr called *Searching*, and a biblical historical journal called *Arkenstone*. As a change of pace from

theology, the next interview in the collection is a transcript of one of the several times the author appeared on *The Studs Terkel Program* and is clearly aimed at a more general audience. It focuses on L'Engle's most recent book at the time, *A Ring of Endless Light*, the problem with the assumption associating the term "adult novels" with "porno" (105), and her research on dolphins for the novel. In the course of the conversation, she provocatively suggests that children can understand science better than adults; as evidence, she references the publication process for the admittedly complicated *A Wrinkle in Time*. Multiple "tired old editors" (105) had trouble understanding the book and, therefore, rejected it with the assumption that children would have trouble understanding it as well. L'Engle dismisses this idea as "patronizing" (106) and insists that children are capable of understanding any concept, and want to do so, as long as there is a good story to go with it. This point of view has become foundational to the success of children's science fiction and fantasy genres going forward.

The last few interviews in the collection differ in tone from the earlier conversations for two specific reasons: first, children's literature had come into its own as an academic field; second, L'Engle's health and cognitive abilities had been in steady decline. As an example, Gary Schmidt's 1991 interview for the *ALAN Review* (the journal for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English) is more focused on the literary aspects of her writing, such as authorial intent, the narrator, and questions of genre; indeed, Schmidt seems awkwardly preoccupied with the role of the narrator in each of L'Engle's novels, broaching the topic in almost every question and discussing the narrators as if they are sentient beings who attempt to control the reader's experience in various ways. He is likely attempting to bring an air of professionalism to what, at the time, was the relatively new and underappreciated field of children's lit scholarship, but he instead comes across as a zealous grad student who has just listened to a life-changing lecture about narrative personas in an Intro to Narratology course. The resultant tone of the interview is decidedly more antagonistic than previous, less scholarly ones; L'Engle actually takes issue with a particular line of questioning that suggests that she, as the author, intentionally manipulates her stories rather than passively channeling the story through herself as a conduit. She insists, "I do not control, own, or dominate my stories. I serve them, and for me they are truth. When I am writing, so often I am given what I need. All I have to do is recognize it" (163). Her answers to Schmidt's questions give the impression that she has not been challenged in quite such a straightforward manner by previous interviewers and feels compelled to defend her writing process, perhaps for one of the first times. However, a positive side-effect of his heavy-handed style is that Schmidt makes L'Engle feel defensive, so she, therefore, ends up walking much farther down the path of deep discussion than she likely was intending to travel in that interview.

The last interview in the collection, and one of L'Engle's last official ones, was conducted by Leonard S. Marcus in 2002, not long after L'Engle had suffered a stroke, and was published in Marcus's 2006 collection *The Wand and the Word: Conversations with Writers of Fantasy*. Because L'Engle was not feeling well, Marcus's softball questions are simple and nostalgic – "What kind of child were you?" (182), "When did you first keep a journal?" (184), "Were you a good student?" (184) – and he gets responses that are the epitome of short and sweet, most amounting to no more than a few lines but still dripping with

concentrated wisdom. Marcus eventually expanded his project through over fifty additional interviews with L'Engle's family, friends, and fans, and he published *Listening for Madeleine: A Portrait of Madeleine L'Engle in Many Voices* in 2012. Although this interview admittedly does not offer much for scholars in the way of new or revelatory information, it is (tonally) a lovely conversation which brings the collection in for a pleasantly soft landing.

Besides the collected interviews, *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle* offers a few other helpful features, such as a complete list of L'Engle's published works and a timeline of significant biographical events. A distinct highlight of the collection, however, is the insightful introduction by editor Jackie C. Horne. She provides background details about L'Engle's publishing woes, the author's struggles with her conception of God, and how the changing landscape of children's and fantasy literature has affected how readers and scholars interact with L'Engle's novels. For some volumes in the Literary Conversations Series, particularly those featuring well-known names such as Steve Martin and David Foster Wallace, the editor's introduction seems superfluous since at least one full-length scholarly biography for those writers already exists. However, in *Conversations with Madeleine L'Engle*, the introduction and extra features of the collection are particularly necessary because there is currently no official, scholarly biography of L'Engle; there is only a collection of stories about her written by her granddaughters called *Becoming Madeleine* (2018); later that same year, Christian publisher Zondervan also released an account titled *A Light So Lovely: The Spiritual Legacy of Madeleine L'Engle* on how L'Engle's faith influenced her creativity. Ultimately, Horne's thoughtfully curated sampling of reprinted interviews paired with her insights in the introduction make this collection a useful resource for L'Engle scholars and fans alike.

Biography: Sara Hays has a PhD in English from Middle Tennessee State University where she specialised in children's and young adult literature as well as Victorian literature. Her dissertation focused on the novels of young-adult author John Green. Professionally, she has taught on the college level for twelve years and is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Cumberland University in Lebanon, TN, where she teaches courses in children's literature, British literature, and advanced composition.



BOOK REVIEW:

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

James Hamby

Malley, Shawn. *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Liverpool UP, 2018. ISBN 978-1786941190.

Shawn Malley's *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television* comes at a critical time in international relations, Western identity, and humanity's development of technologies with uncertain futures. The book's ambitious goal of connecting North American popular culture, Western neocolonialism, artificial intelligence, humanity's first steps into space, and the socio-political nature of archaeology produces an insightful take on how contemporary SF reproduces ideals of power and hegemony also found in places such as America's aggressive military policy towards the Middle East and the insidious ways it has often found tacit support through archaeology. Though archaeology is a field that, like many other disciplines in the academy, asserts its independence and objectivity, it has throughout its history been used as an instrument of power by warring (and especially colonial) powers. This, Malley asserts, has been particularly true of American adventurism in the Middle East in the 21st century. The goal of Malley's study is to examine "how archaeology bequeaths to SFFTV [science fiction film and television] a critical vocabulary with which to speak about the past" (13). Malley is largely successful in accomplishing his stated aims, and his able demonstration of how colonial ideology filters into North American popular culture is truly disturbing in its

suggestion of ubiquitous propaganda. However, at times Malley needs to more strongly connect the disparate elements of his argument to demonstrate the underlying forces that shape these narratives and prove that these connections do in fact exist. Nevertheless, Malley's study provides valuable commentary on the ways in which geopolitics shape popular narratives.

Excavating the Future fits neatly into post-colonial literary interpretation. While its examinations of power between coloniser and colonised may be nothing new, its discussion of neo-colonialism in the 21st century pointedly demonstrates that the wrongs of colonial conquest that took place in the past are not over. Furthermore, its focus on archaeology underscores the idea that historical narratives are always being constructed and reconstructed from the remains of the past, from artefacts of unknown or dubious origins whose meanings are imposed upon them by those with the most power.

The work begins with an introduction to the depiction of human evolution in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The film's iconic opening shows apes transforming into a more humanlike state – with weapons and aggression – upon encountering alien technology. Malley argues that the opening scene “conflates the birth of human culture with the birth of archaeology, the invention of material culture with the advent of ideology” (11). Because so much SF, like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, tries to express the complexity of human evolution and to speculate on what may come next, Malley claims that archaeology is a frequent motif in SF as well as a “scientific touchstone and visual field for imagining humanity's progression” (2). With this articulation of the role of archaeology in SFFTV, the act of “digging up the past buried in the future” (1), as Malley puts it, later becomes a means of placing American military intervention in the Middle East on a progressive continuum in which America brings order and civilisation to barbarians in the desert. Malley then divides the book into three sections of two to three chapters each. Every chapter features an analysis of either a television series or a film and describes how the “archaeological mise-en-scenes” they contain constitute the “dreams of progress sustaining globalist politics” (18). In looking at contemporary events in the frames of mythologised timelines, audiences must question the consequences of the decisions that society chooses to make.

The first section of the book, “Battling Babylon: Military SFFTV and the War on Terror”, contains chapters on *Manticore*, *Stargate SG-1*, and *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen*. The chapter on *Transformers 2* offers the best articulation of Malley's argument for how geopolitics drive popular narratives. In discussing the collaboration between Hollywood and the Pentagon's liaison office in Los Angeles for the entertainment industry, Malley notes that this department's ostensible purpose is to assist in creating accurate depictions of the US armed forces, but that its true mission, according to Phil Strub, chief of the liaison office, is to ensure that the military is never depicted negatively (63). Each of these three opening chapters also shows how SFFTV dramas set in the Middle East typically avoid “politics by fostering sympathy with the travails and triumphs of the individual protagonists” (32). These works thus view the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East as backgrounds for heroes' journeys rather than as reckless colonial aggression. Indeed, as Malley states, these films evade “direct geopolitical debate by privileging action-adventure, special effects, espionage narratives”, and other titillating Hollywood blockbuster elements (32). Rife with orientalist tropes, imperialistic self-

congratulations, and fetishised heroism, these narratives set America's invasions within the long history of the Middle East in a position of paramount importance. The connection Malley draws between Hollywood and the Pentagon is an intriguing, tangible bit of evidence that underscores his argument. However, Malley regrettably does not extend this connection, or any other like it, to the other sections of the book, nor does he really explore it thoroughly in this section. For instance, how much influence does this office have? What happens when films portray the American military negatively? These tantalising questions remain unanswered.

The second and third parts of the book branch out in their thematic concerns. "Part 2: of Artefacts and Ancient Aliens" features chapters on the History Channel series *Ancient Aliens* (2009-present), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), and *Smallville* (2001-11), all of which consider humanity's evolutionary trajectory and question if we are on a path towards self-destruction (74). Malley points out that the first season of *Ancient Aliens* promotes an apocalyptic vision of current events (88). In this narrative framework he sees an attempt to address the faults of "an age whose information technologies are themselves symptomatic of heightened global crisis" (94). As with the globalist narratives examined in the first part of Malley's study, the SF works discussed in Part 2 create mythologised timelines in which we may view ourselves. Likewise, "Part 3: Cyborg Sites: The Case of A. I. Artificial Intelligence" examines SFFTV set in the distant future that looks backwards at human development, causing audiences to reflect on our place in time on the cusp of posthumanism. Malley grounds his discussion of cyborgs by first analysing a cyborg's existential crisis in Steven Spielberg's *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and then examining the human-cyborg continuum in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-09) and *Prometheus* (2012). Malley argues that in all of these stories cyborgs "embark on existential journeys through archaeological investigations of their origins in human technology, excavations that expose the material conditions of the cyborg birth to politics of simulation in which we are constantly remaking and unmaking ourselves" (144). In contrast to the first section of Malley's work in which the SFFTV examined promotes a positive and uncritical interpretation of the current geopolitical situation, the works of this final section are largely pessimistic, questioning global capitalism and cultural hegemony, and their audiences are left with great doubt as to the direction in which we are moving. As Malley declares in his introduction, archaeology not only lends SF "materials for recognizable futures, but it also injects challenging questions about the ideological motivations" these constructions have for audiences (18). Just as the tracing of the human story through archaeology in SF narratives can serve the purposes of power, so too, Malley suggests, can these stories critique it.

While this work is well-researched and thought-provoking, there are some arguments in further need of fleshing out. As mentioned above, Malley's discussion of the US military's Hollywood liaison office is intriguing and could be developed further. Also, the thread of geopolitics that was so prominent in the first section recedes noticeably in the remaining two sections, only coming up here and there, and even then the works discussed seem to lack the same social commentary contained in that first section. Nevertheless, Malley does succeed in identifying the politicised ways in which archaeology is used in SFFTV, creating mise-en-scènes that either support or question hegemonic

power. As mentioned above, this book's ambition lies more in tying together so many different threads rather than saying anything new about the nature of power. Yet the focus on archaeology – a field frequently supposed to be based on artefacts (and thus hard facts) but really built upon interpretation (as in other social sciences) – underscores the tenuous nature of humanity's relationship with its own past. The present imagining the future looking back on its past creates a powerful prism through which to view ourselves – including our geopolitics and our relationship with technology – with just enough displacement to allow for objectivity and criticism.

This volume should prove to be of interest not only to SF scholars but to film, television, and general popular-culture scholars as well. Moreover, this is a timely study as endemic war in the Middle East and our relationship with technologies that may transform or destroy us are ever-present in our political and social debates. Not only does this study convey SF's enormous potential for social influence and criticism, but it also captures the zeitgeist of the early 21st century, when we are poised at a unique time in history for unthinkable change, and possibly for self-destruction. *Excavating the Future* challenges its readers to think about the shape of humanity's trajectory through time, especially about how the future will look back on our world today.

Biography: James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University where he also teaches courses in composition and literature, including *Victorian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale*. His dissertation, *David Copperfield: Victorian Hero* examines archetypal tropes in Dickens's most autobiographical novel. He is also the Book Reviews Associate Editor for *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses:
The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction
Cinema*

Sarah M. Gawronski

Conrad, Dean. *Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema*. McFarland, 2018, www.mcfarlandbooks.com. ISBN 978-1476669274.

Space aliens, terminators, avengers, oh my. Mother, sex object, bystander, oh no. Dean Conrad covers all these tropes and many more in his survey *Space Sirens, Scientists, and Princesses: The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema*, looking at nearly 120 years of female representation in SF cinematic history. In his introduction, Conrad makes it clear that this book is a cinema history, not a “work of cultural, critical, film or feminist theory – although its does drift into all of those fields in places” (6). Throughout this cinematic history, Conrad makes apparent that the predominant roles of women in 120 years were and remain women who watch “men doing things” and women who “revolve around men” (17, 223); in addition, “men run around; women run after them” (225). In examining this subject, Conrad contributes to conversations on cinematic history, SF history, and feminist theory. This text can sit on the shelf next to macro surveys, such as Brian Aldiss’s *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* and Robert Adam’s *The History of Science Fiction*. It can also sit snugly with more micro surveys, such as *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896-Present* by Ally Acker and *A History of Science Fiction Film* by John Brosnan. In order to accomplish his goal of writing a cinematic history of women in SF, Conrad engages with scholars of many fields including such notable feminist theorists as Simone De Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone. He

also digs through the extensive vault that is film and TV. He looks at some of the earliest films ever made featuring women and includes an epilogue that examines films up to the point of publication, including *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Since his focus is female representation, Conrad spends very little time on females who make the films but instead focuses on the representation of women in the movie industry, which is inherently patriarchal, and how that representation interacts with male representation and domination of SF film.

Conrad separates his book into seven chapters, each following cinematic or historical changes. Chapter 1, “Science Fiction – Silents and the Establishment of Female Roles” examines the advent of cinema with the silent film period. Conrad makes a somewhat dubious argument early on when he suggests that all early films are science fiction. They are indeed a scientific marvel, but hardly science fiction (15). However, he quickly moves into silent films that are unquestioningly SF, such as *Dog Factory* and *Chapellerie et charcuterie mécanique*. Through these films, he notes that the women appear as little more than “onlookers, watching men doing things” (17). This is a theme that runs throughout this history.

As he moves through the history of science fiction cinema, he notes that women’s representation changes – for better or for worse – with the changes in cinematic technology. Perhaps the most enduring point that Conrad makes through each technological change is that the history of female representation is a “give-with-one-hand-take-with-the-other mentality” (146). For example, during the age of sound, women begin to take on more prominent roles, yet they are of traditional representation: the evil queen, the princess in distress, or the female aid; and such representation reflects increasing sexualisation (46).

As Conrad moves into chapter 2, “Science Fantasy – Sound, Technology and the Service of Male Desires”, he explores how the role of women became increasingly sexualised as silent films became talkies: sexualised aliens, sexualised monsters, and sexualised robots. If women were not overtly sexualised, they were often depicted as a mother-figure. As the survey continues, we learn that the sexualisation of the female and the presence of the mother-figure are continual themes that run throughout the history of SF cinema, which is not surprising as two of the four major female archetypes are the whore and the mother.

It is in chapter 3, “Peace and the Emergence of Female Professionals”, where Conrad shows his first grudging respect for the cinematic industry and their attempts of granting female agency. Though women are still sidekick characters to men’s narratives, they begin to have more overt agency. His prime example, and one to which he keeps returning throughout the survey, is the 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as female secretary Helen Benson stands beside the male alien and helps prevent an alien invasion and the annihilation of the human race. Despite women’s having more agency, Conrad notes that though they are being presented as professionals, including scientists, the sciences they specialise in are “soft sciences” or “life sciences” while the “hard sciences” remain firmly in the hands of men (82-83). This trend continues well into the present. An example he often alludes to is Amy Adams’s linguist in *Arrival*.

Unfortunately, the progress seen in chapter 3 seems to be short-lived. As women made progress during the second-wave feminist revolution, their screen representations did not progress accordingly. During this time, cinema made

another technological advancement: colour. As Conrad often shows, as cinema takes a step forward, female representation takes two steps backward. Chapter 4, “Intermission – Watershed Years, or, Destination Unknown and an *Annus Mirabilis*” presents some notable female figures such as Dr. Zira from the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* and Barbarella from *Barbarella*. However, these roles are quickly diminished by their patriarchal setup. Dr. Zira, though showing great promise for female representation as a scientist, loses stature in the sequel and gets axed in the third movie. And Barbarella shows fierce female agency as well as being a “proficient female astronaut”; however, “This is a movie in which feminist attitudes are approached from a patriarchal perspective, turning a promising treatise into ... ‘elucubrated, anemic pornography’” (110). Not only is Barbarella highly sexualised, she is then shamed for her sexual appetite.

The first half of Conrad’s book follows the first six decades of SF cinema, showing a constant shift forward followed by a corresponding setback. Unfortunately, this rings true for the following six decades as well. As Conrad gets into chapter 5, “Golden Era – Blockbusters and the Development of Female Heroes”, there is finally some hope that women will break out of their stereotyped representations or their position as a bystander in the man’s narrative. This seems to hold true for a little while with women like Princess Leia, Ellen Ripley, and Sarah Connor (*Star Wars*, *Aliens*, and *Terminator* respectively): women who are “strong, opinionated and resourceful” (138). Yet, even with this stunning trio, stereotypes resound, such as Ripley and Connor being represented as mother figures. Another turn is the masculinised female, as represented by Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. As Conrad remarks, “To appropriate Laura Mulvey here, it might seem that creators of female characters in the 1980s and ‘90s were ‘torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity’” (145). As Conrad moves into chapter 6, “Dangerous Times – Identity Crises and a Millennial Mélange”, we are reminded that in the end tradition rules the cinematic industry. Despite certain achievements, SF cinema returns to monstrous, sexualised females in films about men.

Finally, as Conrad reaches the twenty-first century and the computer/CGI age, women are once again presented as sex symbols despite being competent warriors. Twenty-first-century SF has become “Look-at-my-ass SF” (203), which he illustrates with no less than a half-dozen images of movie posters in which the women’s backside is facing the audience while the men are in more natural frontal poses (204). Though Conrad gives a succinct and complete concluding chapter, I believe the whole text is best summarised by the following quote: “On the one hand, it [cinematic female representation] promised – and delivered – so much; on the other, it showed that, however complete the revolution may appear, convention and stereotype always seem to retain a degree of influence” (180). With every gain women attained in SF cinematic history, they were also held to stereotypes and industry tradition which had them acting as bystanders in stories about men.

In *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses*, Conrad offers a concise and remarkably complete history of female representation in SF cinema. Unfortunately, at points the text seems rather redundant; however, I believe that the fault lies more with the consistent one-step-forward-two-steps-backward mentality in cinematic history than with Conrad himself. Conrad can hardly be blamed for an industry whose attitude remains “give-with-one-hand-

take-with-the-other” (146). Conrad, though, can also sometimes be too tentative in his assertions. At times, it feels as though he is hesitant to offer firm critique of an industry that has consistently been reluctant to show women taking control of the narrative. Yet, overall, this is a solid book on the history of female representation in SF cinema. Conrad gives a concise, chronological view of this history, making solid connections between ideas and film examples. He engages with scholars from many fields of study. Furthermore, he has a wonderful appendix that contains an extensive list (including summaries) of the films discussed in his text. Additionally, he provides a thorough bibliography and filmography. Finally, if one feels so inclined, they can visit his website to get a more complete contents of the text and updates on more recent examples. I highly recommend this text for SF and film scholars, and, as it is an easily understandable read, I would recommend it to any layperson interested in these topics.

Biography: Sarah M. Gawronski is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her primary area of study is SF/dystopian/post-apocalyptic fiction. Her dissertation is on women in post-apocalyptic literature by women from 1954-2018. She is the mother of three feline boys, and in her rare free time she reads, plays table-top games, and is an avid knitter.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe
Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape
Fantasy Culture*

A. J. Drenda

Cowan, Douglas E. *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture*. U of California P, 2019. ISBN 978-0520293991.

Douglas E. Cowan's *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is an overview of popular culture with the fantastic at its heart and an intention to use myth and religion as its investigative lens. However, this analytical promise, made clear from the more specific subtitle – *How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture* – remains somewhat unfulfilled because Cowan does not discuss myths or the idea of the “mythic” in fantasy, but largely focuses on Campbell’s hero’s journey as it appears across chosen texts. The “religion” aspect of the book is no more prominent. Cowan makes clear from the outset that *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is less explicitly about religion than his three previous books dealing with religion and popular culture: *Sacred Terror* (2008), *Sacred Space* (2010), and *America’s Dark Theologian* (2018). Instead, he explains that this book concentrates on how the broad spectrum of fantasy film, television, and participative culture are evidence of an ongoing need for *mythic vision*. By “*mythic vision*” Cowan understands larger frames of meaning into which people continually write themselves and how these frames of meaning, over time, elevate some of the storyworlds to the status of “religion”

(xiii). Investigative lenses aside, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is Cowan's invitation to explore the fantastic culture methodically by analysing its dominant themes.

The thematic structure of the book and its scope indicate that Cowan attempts to reach multiple audiences. These audiences seem to include scholars from various fields, students, and fantasy fans. Across nine chapters, he covers texts ranging from novels, films, and TV series to role-playing games and other participatory practices. The first four chapters tackle themes of fairy stories, magic, immortality, and everlasting youth. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the mythic hero, chapter 7 focuses on the warrior-heroine, and chapter 8 is devoted to RPGs and LARPs. The final chapter is focused on Cowan's musings on the nature of "happily ever after" (186). At 194 pages, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is a medium-sized book, with a helpful index, bibliography, and impressive mediography (with references to 187 films and TV-shows). All these help the readers navigate their way through the broad body of texts that Cowan tackles.

The broad scope of Cowan's analysis can be a delight to readers who enjoy a panoramic view of culture. Readers who seek a more focused view, however, might be disappointed because the breadth of scope leaves little space for a detailed analysis and engagement with research across the fields. This leads to a quality dissonance across the book. Some texts, such as John Boorman's science-fantasy *Zardoz* (1974) and Yuen Woo-ping's *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1978), have not been analysed at length previously and, most probably, have been forgotten by the popular audience. Cowan's original and engaging exploration of these texts reminds academics and popular readers alike about the existence and value of these films. The discussion of other texts in *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes*, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1937), including their respective numerous film and stage adaptations, might prove interesting to a popular reader but may leave an academic audience wanting more critical material and analytical depth. Depending on the reading audience, the scope of this book can be its delight but possibly also its downfall.

Cowan's definition of fantasy is as broad as his choice of texts. He follows David Pringle's suggestion that fantasy is the "fiction of the heart's desire" but also heeds Ursula Le Guin's warning that fantasy is true, if not factual (17). The keys to Cowan's views on fantasy are the three main tropes: the supernatural exemplified by magic, the monstrous represented by villainous creatures, and the heroism embodied by fantastic protagonists. In chapter 1 he devotes two sections to sketching the limits of fantasy and to "explaining fantasy" (17). In these sections, Cowan mentions a plethora of things such as magic carpets, heroic deeds, cyclopes, and access to magical powers, and he identifies them as elementary to fantasy texts and easily recognisable to popular audiences. Based on these tropes, he distils his own three main tropes from the similarities between the late 1950s and early 1960s "*peplum*" (sword-and-sandal) films, which explore the deeds of Hercules, Samson, and Goliath, the popular heroes of the European cinema of the time (14). The three tropes that Cowan favours lead him to a broad scope of genres and literary forms because he includes everything from traditional fairy tales, animal fables, "lost races", "lost worlds", and "lost time" stories; epic battles involving wizards and witches; Arthurian legends and post-apocalyptic landscapes; and superheroes and supervillains as

a part of fantasy culture (14). In this Cowan hardly limits his idea of fantasy; rather, he uses it as an umbrella term that includes everything “non-purely realistic”. Fantasy, in other words, according to Cowan, is in many respects limitless. A limitless approach can be aggravating for a critic of the genre but is likely a joyful one for a popular reader.

It is possible, too, that Cowan’s “limitless” approach to fantasy reigns due to his limited engagement with current fantasy criticism. Although he uses Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) to discuss the *Grimm* TV series as an intrusion fantasy, other critical works applicable to Cowan’s vast number of texts are absent. For example, as Cowan introduces myth as one of the driving terms of his book and discusses fantasy in terms of storyworlds, the absence of Brian Attebery’s *Stories about Stories* (2014) is notable.

Cowan’s panoramic view of fantasy does not stop him from a diligent approach towards fantasy gaming, though, which makes chapter 8, “The Stuff of Legends”, the best chapter. Here Cowan argues that gaming is the “theatre of the mind, the principal domain of fantasy”, and offers a few examples to support this argument (170). First, Cowan introduces Wil Wheaton’s *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana* (Geek & Sundry, 2015) and brings the uninitiated closer to the world of RPG in general. Second, Cowan investigates *Dungeons & Dragons* (A War in Scarlet: “Night of the Owlbear”) and studies the rise in the involvement of players throughout the campaign and their gradual immersion into the characters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *LARPS: The Series* and offers insight into the mechanisms of live-action playing games, contrasting them with Joe Lynch’s film *Knights of Badassdom* (2013). As he explores his way through these three examples from the fantasy gaming world, Cowan directs his readers to sources that can be easily accessed online. This turns the chapter into an interactive manual, which explains the processes that take place during the games and strengthens Cowan’s arguments on the nature of gaming and fantasy in general. Cowan argues that fantasy (gaming) is more than a spectator sport (167). He further argues that gaming operates on a different level of engagement: it is a step further from a reader of a book or an observer in the cinema. Gaming is about becoming a part of the adventure, if only for a weekend, whether as a hobbit, a dwarf, a wizard, or even an orc (167). Cowan reminds his readers that the numerous rules that govern RPGs and LARPs should always be secondary to the story and that the framework of the game serves the adventure the players create among themselves, not the other way around (171). This engaging introduction to the RPG and LARP culture will likely be especially satisfying to fantasy enthusiasts.

In many respects, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* encapsulates all the love of stories that Cowan developed in childhood (xii). In this sense, the book is a friendly love-letter to his childhood self and, written in a conversational tone, it is accessible to a wide audience. Cowan is aware of potential criticism on his choice of texts and thus invites his readers to treat his book, not as an end of the discussion, but as a beginning (xv). His last sentence seems to reinforce this idea of an open-discussion table, as he writes: “So, let me tell you a story....” (194). Unfortunately, my contention with this approach is simple: the fantasy field has moved past the beginnings because fantasy critics have been working steadily on them for the past forty years. Academics would have welcomed a more detailed analysis of fewer texts along with a more-

focused contextualisation of current fantasy research. My greatest delight in this book would have been if it had started with: “So, let’s discuss *this* story....”

Biography: Trained primarily as a 20th-century literary critic, A. J. Drenda holds a PhD in Fantasy Literature from Anglia Ruskin University, UK. She has taught media analysis, politics, and culture at Middlesex University, London, and her main research interest is magic in fantasy.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Once and Future Antiquities in Science
Fiction and Fantasy*

Amanda Dillon

Rogers, Brett M. and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, editors. *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. ISBN 978-1350074880.

Interdisciplinarity, as anyone who has attempted to work across multiple fields at once knows, is a really tall order. There is always one more thing to check up on, a slew of theorists or primary material that it seems everyone in the discipline *just knows* that you inevitably miss out on, and you are inevitably attacked for these failings. To do it right requires a level of curiosity and intuitive rigour that so often only holds up for the individual scholar's more familiar discipline. I would love to say that Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens's collection *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy* bucks this trend. Alas, no. But I would argue that it falls right into this trap in a rather interesting way, some contributions more than others, and in doing so provides some interesting areas for further development.

There appear to be two core concerns that this collection pivots upon: Suvin-style "displacement" (cognitive estrangement, more or less), and the reception and reuse/reworking of classical material. I suspect classical receptionists would see this last as a tautology, but in terms of the phenomenology of writing and reading science fiction and fantasy, and the ontologies of the worlds they create, reuse and reworking are two rather different endeavours. This inconsistency of approach leads to a problem that may just be the inevitable weakness of nearly all edited collections – that individual authors interpret the rubric differently to the point of actually dealing with different issues – and this means that the collection as a whole is unusually variable. This

is really unfortunate, because the good contributions here are *very* good and provide some fascinating insights in terms of the use and reuse of classical material, and they reflect in interesting ways on the change in the use of this material for creative ends over time. The weaker contributions, however, seem to set up easy questions to answer and do not quite get to the point of answering that all-important “so what” question. There is an underlying weakness of the literary criticism, in terms of both the actual doing of the exegesis and a clear lack of familiarity with the field of SF studies in particular, which means that these chapters struggle to become more than just lists of equivalences for the experienced SF and fantasy reader and critic.

Individual examples will help clarify this matter. The strong contributions from Claire Kenward (on time travel and the *Iliad*), Steven B. Moses and Brett M. Rogers (on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the figure of Atlas), and C. W. Marshall’s utterly joyful chapter on Dungeons and Dragons and the impact of classical creatures on its bestiary all get one thing very, very right: they look at a tension between the classical/historical and the science fictional/fantastical. Kenward, for example, takes a fascinating approach where “SF engagements with ancient classics ... can offer speculative wish-fulfilment for those seeking to commune directly with the classical past” (45) – thus placing front and centre the dialogue between the SF tactic of cognitive estrangement in terms of time travel to a familiar-but-just-alien-enough past and the historical. This links beautifully to relatively recent work on language’s limitations in expressing the truly alien, such as in Susan Mandala’s *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2010): the classical material therefore allows readers to remain anchored to the familiar whilst just enough displacement happens for the reader to feel the disruption from the present. Moses and Rogers’s chapter takes a somewhat different but similarly satisfying tack, where they highlight the ways in which the hyper-masculine figure of Atlas is reinterpreted in terms of queer sexualities in *Rocky Horror*, an argument that feels particularly timely in terms of current arguments in identity politics. Marshall, meanwhile, asks the interesting question of why certain classical beasts continue to fascinate – and while I’m not sure if he entirely answers this, he certainly has fun attempting to do so.

The other contributions, though, lack this nuanced approach to the classics and the fantastic. Suzanne Lye provides some discussion of the Odyssean journey that Chihiro undergoes in *Spirited Away*, but seems to muddle audience studies with auteur studies: it is clear that Miyazaki knows *The Odyssey*, but a more pertinent question is whether or not Japanese audiences would, given that Homer is specifically Western. There is a double displacement here going on that Lye misses (even though she mentions “cross-cultural displacement” at work in the film [79]). Many of the other contributions do not make it much beyond identification and rough equation between classical narrative and the narrative in the chosen primary text: Foster, Tomasso, McAuley, and Weiner all do this, and I found myself wondering throughout why these equations mattered. Perhaps they do – but this needed to be made absolutely crystal clear, given that many readers may be approaching the collection from outside classical reception studies. Tony Keen’s contribution, a reflection on his “The ‘T’ Stands for Tiberius” blog post from 2006, seems particularly insular and at times unnecessarily taxonomical. If there is anything there is a *lot* of in SF and fantasy studies, it is taxonomies –

and I'm not wholly sure we need yet another one. Jennifer Ranck's analysis of the Cassandra figure in *Continuum* sets up and hits a very easy target: Cassandra's "empowered, suffering figure exposes similarities between dramatic depictions in Greek tragedy and modern SF, as well as fantasy" (144). Well, yes. The question that wants answering here is why this figure (and these other characters, and narrative shapes, and names) keep getting used again and again. Catherynne M. Valente's epilogue goes some distance towards providing an answer to this – that for many "there is no difference" between SF, fantasy, and the classics (203) – but it feels like an argument that ought to be absolutely welded to the displacement question throughout the collection.

But this weakness is illuminating. The tension between Suvinian estrangement and the kind of distantly familiar displacement seen in the texts under examination here is not played out on a broader scale. What does it mean to be displaced into the past rather than into space? What does it mean when the past is displaced *into* space, à la *Stargate*? Some consideration of Karen Hellekson's work on alternate history might have proven enlightening here, particularly given that what is at work in the collection is actually more closely aligned to temporal displacement of character and theme rather than physical displacement – and indeed, that of the past into the future (whether that of the author's present, or the characters' present, they bring the classical forward, rather than the futuristic into the past. These questions provide that next step, that fertile ground for further work in the area: where do the historical and the fantastic touch – and what happens when they do? Rogers and Stevens's collection provides some groundwork towards this question, but doesn't entirely manage to address it in any sustained or indeed novel way, even if individual contributions do. This book is thus likely only of interest to those already versed in classical reception but not SF and fantasy, rather than the other way around.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the
Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy*

Dennis Wilson Wise

Palmer-Patel, C. *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy*. Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-367189143.

As fantasy scholars, we live in good times. With major networks and outlets all vying to adapt the next big fantasy series (most recently Netflix and Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher*), the genre itself is flourishing, but the last decade has also seen a remarkable wealth of high-quality new fantasy scholarship. Even beyond single-author studies and the continuously fertile field of Tolkien studies, recent standout monographs, among others, include Michael Saler's *As If* (2012), Stefan Ekman's *Here Be Dragons* (2013), Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy* (2015), and James Gifford's *A Modernist Fantasy* (2018). Yet what contemporary fantasy studies has lacked is a systematic and sympathetic analysis of those texts most closely associated with fantasy in the popular imagination: namely, *epic* fantasy. Meeting this need is C. Palmer-Patel's timely *The Shape of Fantasy*, an unabashedly structuralist account of "Heroic Epic Fantasy" (hereafter "HEF") as it appears in the two decades between 1990 and 2010. Unlike many previous scholars of fantasy, Palmer-Patel has little interest in genre definitions – despite providing a taxonomy that does exactly that. She separates fantasy along two separate axes, Epic v. Localised and Heroic v. Fragmented,¹ and she focuses solely on fantasy that is "heroic" and "epic" both. Yet, for Palmer-Patel, this heroic epic structure cuts across typical genre boundaries like SF, horror, gothic, and fantasy – for example, *Dune*, *Star Wars*,

¹ Since Palmer-Patel always (distractingly) capitalises terms like "Heroic Epic Fantasy" and "Localised", I will follow that usage here.

and Anne McCaffrey's quasi-SF *Pern* books all employ a heroic epic structure. All told, *The Shape of Fantasy* is an excellent study on a body of fiction badly in need of scholars willing to consider the genre's positive features. Even if several of Palmer-Patel's specific defenses of HEF fall short (often significantly), it remains refreshing to find scholarship that recognises how the popularity of genre fantasy might arise from something more than placid readers who love comforting formulas and clichés.

Throughout *The Shape of Fantasy*, Palmer-Patel's methodology pays homage to John Clute's four-fold "grammar" of the fantasy story from *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Yet, beyond modifying and reorganising Clute's main categories of Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition, and Return/Healing, HEF – as its name implies – places a comparatively greater emphasis on the hero function. Within this new grammar, the hero "realises a messianic duty via a journey, one which results in a spiritual transcendence for the hero along with the salvation of the world by the act of healing or re-creating it, thereby fulfilling their destiny" (1). Rather than prescribing any one permanent HEF formula, however, Palmer-Patel seeks only to describe HEF as it appears between 1990 and 2009 (14), and she admits that certain epic fantasies since 2010 have already begun to "evolve past the Heroic Epic patterns identified in this book" (13). Still, much like Clute's grammar, Palmer-Patel's model applies to a surprisingly wide range of fantasy texts. According to her, the messianic aspect of the hero is vital. Heroes are tasked with saving the "world through a sacrifice, usually associated with some literal or metaphorical connection to death as part of their journey" (7). At the same time, within Fantasyland "structures of fate and prophecy are essential to the narrative plot" (8). After all, only by positing a higher power can the hero find transcendence (7). Indeed, an implied greatness of scale is what makes HEF specifically *epic*. In contrast to Sword-and-Sorcery Fantasy, which is Local and non-Epic, HEF works toward world-salvation and the fulfillment of a world destiny, oftentimes through healing or re-creation. What soon becomes apparent from Palmer-Patel's model, though, are its quirks. For example, it excludes from HEF a series like George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* because no one primary protagonist or group arises to fill the hero function. As such, despite other generic similarities to texts like *The Lord of the Rings*, Palmer-Patel calls it a "Fragmented Hero" fantasy rather than "Heroic Epic" (9).

After laying the groundwork of her study in the introduction, Palmer-Patel then spends each following chapter detailing one aspect of the hero-function or HEF narrative, using one illustrative HEF text per chapter. The first three chapters focus on the heroes themselves – and these chapters particularly challenge the notion, often raised by detractors, that prophecy or fate acts to limit the hero's free will. A different solution to this problem appears in each of the three chapters. For example, chapter 1 shows how, while destiny itself may be fixed, heroes use their free will to "determine whether to fulfill the functions of their design" (20). In other words, freedom is much like Madeleine L'Engle's claim in *A Wrinkle in Time* that life is like a sonnet – people are "given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you" (qtd. in 29). In chapter 2, whereas heroes must voluntarily let fate work through them as in chapter 1, heroes also must "actively manipulate events and prophecy itself as they negotiate the demands of fate" (33). Success is not predetermined. Heroes, who must choose between one or more possible

branching futures, act “much like the stone thrown into a pond which creates ripples on the surface” (39). A third variation appears in the next chapter. Although fate affects heroes, heroes affect fate too, and Palmer-Patel selects the *ta’veren* from Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* as her example, characters who push and pull the people and events around them. She further asserts that this lack of fixity despite the presence of destiny challenges the view expressed in Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* that portal-quests curtail the interpretative choices available to readers – a rebuttal with potential, in my view, although Palmer-Patel sorely overreaches when she calls Rand al’Thor, the Dragon Reborn, an “unreliable narrator” due to his madness (55).

In chapters 4 and 5, two more hero functions come under Palmer-Patel’s microscope: heroic messianism and the “ou-hero”, the most original new coinage in *The Shape of Fantasy*. In this latter category, the proposed hero *fails* to save the world, meaning that they fail to restore balance to a world that has grown increasingly chaotic. Correspondingly, the proposed hero becomes a *not-hero*. In worst-case scenarios, poor decision-making might even transform the ou-hero into an outright villain, and these villains, who have misused their free will by making unwise choices, are led down paths committed to skewing the cosmic balance. Oftentimes, ou-heroes also operate as a reflection or mirror upon the hero – for example, Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter. One intriguing question left unexplored by Palmer-Patel, though, is just how far her ou-hero concept should replace the “Dark Lord” concept traditional to genre fantasy. Although treated as roughly equivalent concepts in chapter 4, Palmer-Patel does later distinguish between them, calling the admirable Vin and Elend from Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn* trilogy both “ou-heroes” (141).

Turning to chapters 6 through 8, Palmer-Patel sets her sights on the narrative of Fantasyland itself, devoting one chapter apiece to a major variation on the HEF plotline. *Entropy* becomes Palmer-Patel’s major concept in these chapters. Chapter 6, for example, argues that entropy – a combination of Thinning and Wrongness – always triggers the plot in Fantasyland and operates to “unbalance good and evil in the world” (101). In chapter 7, the hero is a liminal figure between worlds who reverses entropic decay, restores the cosmic balance, and finally re-establishes a “closed system” that insulates Fantasyland from otherworldly entropic intrusions (118). Some form of Healing usually concludes these narratives, whether of the hero or the land or both, but healing Fantasyland can lead to new world orders as often as to Edenic returns. As such, chapter 8 takes up the subject of Fantasylands that undergo far-from-equilibrium conditions, but here Palmer-Patel’s argument becomes somewhat puzzling. On one hand, she states that the perpetual entropy of HEF makes it an anti-utopian genre. Given the prevalence of sequel series, no stability achieved by the HEF narrative is ever truly permanent. At the same time, the *populace* of Fantasyland, when faced with radical chaos during far-from-equilibrium conditions, seems to prefer a hegemonic or totalitarian political order. This means, in turn, that the hero must anti-democratically subvert the popular will and rebel “against this order and ... break out of the flat line of stability and progress into the future” (145). Here Palmer-Patel’s adherence to description over evaluation becomes frustrating because, despite partly gearing her argument towards a defense of HEF, the tension this chapter observes between *progress* – always implied by heroic messianic time, which is linear and future-orientated – and *return* is troubling. Both sides of this tension seem

to have disturbing hegemonic implications, but Palmer-Patel leaves these implications unexplored.

The Shape of Fantasy ends with a brief coda chapter on sequel series and a short conclusion. As my short summary has probably made clear, though, Palmer-Patel – in addition to outlining the “shape” of Heroic Epic Fantasy – also seeks to defend the genre against its various detractors. Unfortunately, while her grammar of HEF is highly useful, the defense aspect of her project falls short in several key areas. For example, she seeks to counter charges of fantasy’s irrationalism (a criticism familiar from Marxist critics like Darko Suvin) by drawing from multiple fields of discourse – literary criticism, of course, but also philosophy and science, particularly chaos theory as outlined by N. Katherine Hayles, which spurs Palmer-Patel’s discussions on entropy. The main intuition is that HEF operates according to a cultural feedback loop between the invented secondary world and certain discourses from the primary world, and these discourses authorise critical intellectual topics like fate and personal freedom, individual choice, or the relationship between self and community. Or, to put the same insight another way, “Heroic Epic Fantasy ... contains real-world scientific and philosophical ideas which are embedded directly into its narrative structure”, and it matters less whether specific fantastical elements are scientific, magical, or supernatural than how those “elements are connected to the embedded narrative structures of the Heroic Epic” (176). As far as this cultural feedback loop goes, the insight seems plausible, and it certainly helps Palmer-Patel resist critical methodologies that attempt to locate the “value” of fantasy in “psychoanalytic, archetypal, allegorical, or pedagogical readings of Fantasy” (4).

Still, in a book barely 180 pages long, it is almost impossible to do full justice to complex ideas drawn from fields as diverse as philosophy and science, and Palmer-Patel’s use of chaos theory seems particularly like an attempt to legitimise with a veneer of scientific jargon arguments that might have survived on their own. Do we really need to invoke “strange attractors” (47) to claim that “Heroic Epic Fantasy is a rational literature” (15, emphasis original)? This tactic brings up another potential shortcoming of *The Shape of Fantasy* – its lack of engagement with ideology critique, which has generally encouraged a wide array of critics to disparage genre fantasy as conservative and regressive. Despite glancing references to Darko Suvin and utopian studies, Palmer-Patel never engages the arguments that have traditionally relegated her chosen genre to the sidelines – unhistoricised ontologies of Good and Evil, the presence of magic, the evasion of historical and social contradictions, the lack of mass political activism, etc. Defending messianic hero-figures, for example, by showing how their choices fit into philosophical discourses on freedom and fate will, after all, will hardly sway those critics who view an emphasis on liberal individualism as the key problem to mostly everything. Likewise, chapter 8’s tensions over HEF’s anti-democratic potential seem more damning than helpful.

This is only to say, of course, that I doubt that *The Shape of Fantasy* will do much to overturn any entrenched animosity against genre fantasy, whether from mainstream literary studies or from scholars of speculative fiction in general. And, historically, structuralist accounts have typically had difficulties with engaging ideological critique. Still, *The Shape of Fantasy* remains a fine book, a desperately needed excursion into a woefully neglected part of modern

fantasy – the most popular and arguably most influential part of modern fantasy, in fact. Its key terms pay tribute to the continuing usefulness and resilience of John Clute’s own grammar, now over two decades old, and Palmer-Patel modifies and augments Clute when needed, especially in her useful “ou-hero” concept. Just as importantly, the book highlights several fantasy writers who deserve greater critical attention than they have previously received, and Palmer-Patel’s own admiration for HEF shines through in her analysis. While *The Shape of Fantasy* might not advance the most important theoretical debates over genre fantasy, Palmer-Patel has nevertheless given us a necessary and incredibly detailed gateway into a vast body of fantasy that has unfortunately seen too little academic respect.

Biography: Dennis Wilson Wise is a lecturer for the University of Arizona interested in the relationship between political theory and fantasy literature. Previous academic work has appeared in *Tolkien Studies*, *Law & Literature*, *Extrapolation*, and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, plus others, and he has recently earned an R. D. Mullen Postdoctoral Research Fellowship from *Science Fiction Studies*. Wise also serves as the reviews editor for *Fafnir*.



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