# Fantastika Journal

"Fantastika" – a term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute – embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternative Histories, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopian Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space.

The goal of *Fantastika Journal* and its annual conference is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies and collaborations. We invite articles examining all mediums and disciplines which concern the Fantastika genres.

This first edition explores and evaluates current research into Fantastika. As well as cataloguing and challenging established critical stances and recent developments, we investigate approaches which embrace the self-reflexivity latent in the study of speculative and fantastical texts. It is our position that to ask questions about and within Fantastika studies is also to ask, 'what is Fantastika?' – that to read or identify Fantastika as Fantastika is to probe and strengthen our own hermeneutics. The articles and editorials in this first issue consider critical taxonomies and developmental trends of the genres of Fantastika.

# Acknowledgements

This issue is published by *Fantastika Journal*. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada.

# Contents

The Weird receives an extensive amount of critical attention, scholarship which seeks to describe and categorise its fundamental aspects. Popularised in the twentieth century following the publication of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, this term generally refers to narratives which conjure a particular sense of the unknown. However, previous research on this mode has tended to overlook its linguistic background, particularly the semantic shift that the word 'weird' underwent. Originally referring to the fated inevitable, the term developed to adopt supernatural connotations and began to reflect the more contemporarily recognisable notion of the uncannily inexplicable. This paper charts the linguistic development of the term 'weird' as an alternate investigation into this literary mode's roots, to understand its complexities and its enduring relevance to a (post)modern context as a multi-faceted aesthetic form.

Originating with the Proto-Germanic 'wurthiz,' meaning 'fate' or 'destiny,' 'weird' initially referred to a sense of inevitability. Focusing on the Old Norse connection to the mythological Norn, three omniscient sisters of fate, I demonstrate how the term begins to incorporate a

dualism of the known and unknown. Subsequently examining the Old English cognate 'wyrd' ('that which comes'), this paper charts the broadening of the word through the transition from the three weird sisters to the iconic weird witches of *Macbeth*. Concluding with an analysis of a Google Ngram of 'weird' from Seventeenth Century to contemporary usage, this paper analyses how this rich ancestry and multiplicity influences the later literary mode. This paper will therefore chart the word 'weird' transitioning from primarily referring to the inevitable to the inexplicable. Through this development I suggest that the Weird represents a fluidity which is progressively inspired by new sources in a continual evolution. Consequently, the Weird literary form offers an alternate paradigm of reading, celebrating an opening of imaginative vistas and unknowns rather than rigid narratives of epistemological and ontological compartmentalisation.

## The Weird in Fantastika: Grotesque Aesthetics and Disrupting Anthropocentricism

In this article I outline how understanding the Weird and Weird Fiction is useful for the study of Fantastika. First, I give an overview of what constitutes Weird Fiction and discuss how Weird Fiction fits into Fantastika. I also consider the importance of Weird Fiction and the Weird to contemporary literary study. The loose parameters of Weird Fiction and the ambiguity of the Weird mode give the authors of such works licence to explore unique literary spaces and experiment with unconventional narratives. I account for the Weird as a literary mode, and argue that the Weird is evident in a text when the reader senses that there is something deeper, more dark and sinister lurking beneath the surface narrative.

The purpose of the Weird is to unsettle and disturb, which leads to destabilising the world as previously understood by human subjects. I argue that this destabilisation within Weird Fiction results in the disruption of the taken-for-granted anthropocentric worldview. One of the key ways in which anthropomorphism is dismantled is through aesthetics of the grotesque. In order to illustrate this point, I analyse Aliya Whiteley's novella *The Beauty* (2014). The power of visceral disgust is considered in Whiteley's text, which features humanoid-fungoid creatures that instil a fear of contamination within the human

protagonists. Thus, I maintain that disgust is an important tool in blurring binary categories, such as human/nonhuman and culture/nature.

I draw on contemporary theorists such as Eugene Thacker, Timothy Morgan, and Jane Bennett to argue that the Weird is an important addition to a new materialist conceptualisation of the world. Therefore, the importance of Weird Fiction is stressed in relation to contemporary scholarship, considering both contemporary literary theory and genre fictions.

## On Placing the Grotesque

Throughout its long history, the grotesque has been mostly been discussed for the various, even opposing, types of representation it has been depicted and traced through. As an aesthetic category of art and literature, it has constantly given rise to critical studies of both diverse and complementary nature about a mode which is very often taken to be incomprehensible, misunderstood, absurd, or appalling. While a considerable amount of misunderstanding is related to the definition of the mode, the inherent confusion has to do with different categories of the grotesque as well as overlaps with similar modes and genres. As such, the grotesque has been debated not only in relation to other modes and genres but also with regard its own varying types of representation. Reviewing some of the relevant works and key notions, I initially focus on the definition of the grotesque by reviewing major elements of the mode and then aims to make a proposition regarding the categories of the grotesque. Sketching out earlier studies, I discuss the grotesque with regard to certain distinguishing features which help to categorise its varying types and situate it among neighbouring modes.

## Alternate History: Defining Counterparts and Individuals with Transworld Identity

Alternate History is a fictional genre that includes stories that are set in worlds whose histories are counterfactual to the history of our actual world. Owing to the nature of Alternate History Fiction, the textual actual world of such texts includes a mix of actual world historical figures and fictional characters. For example: an alternate World War II narrative would include purely fictional characters as well as actual world individuals such as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Goebbels. In this paper, the specific focus will be on historical figures that appear as characters to theorise the manner in which they are presented in the text.

In Possible Worlds Theory, two sets of concepts - counterpart theory (Lewis, 1986) and transworld identity (Kripke, 1972) - can be used to label and describe the process through which actual world individuals appear in a textual actual world. While some literary theorists choose one term over the other (Eco, 1984; Ronen, 1994), others see the merit in using both terms (Ryan, 1991; Bell, 2010). Theorists who use both terms state that the term 'counterpart' is used to refer to the actual world individual who exists a textual actual world, while the term 'transworld identity' is used to describe the process through which these individuals appear in a textual actual world. However, I argue that in regards to defining actual world individuals who appear in Alternate History textual actual worlds, the terms counterpart and transworld identity are not alternatives for one another. Using examples from Stephen Fry's *Making History* (1996) and Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), I demonstrate that counterpart and transworld identity can each be used to define a different type of actual world individual within a textual actual world.

## Walking the Horizon: Transmissions between Worlds in Alan Garner's Late Fiction

Alan Garner's 1960s children's Fantasy fiction re-writes myth and legend to investigate the specific landscapes of Cheshire, but his later fictions re-articulate the relation between human consciousness and place. The later texts bring into contact different worlds and different times, through a planar structuring of space. *Strandloper* (1997) concerns the collision between a transported English convict and Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime; *Thursbitch* (2003) the relation between the eighteenth-century rituals and observances of a

Cheshire village and two contemporary characters; and *Boneland* (2012) interiorises temporal dislocation and repetition in the psyche of Colin from Garner's first novel *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), now an adult and astrophysicist, who struggles with the consequences of his experiences in the earlier books. The formal structures of the novels reflect this shift, incorporating dislocated protagonists, movement between interiority and exteriority, disarticulated time, and transmissions between different worlds.

## Non-Fiction Reviews

## Gothic Perils of the Academic Life

# Fantastika; or, The Sacred Grove

## John Clute

### Part 1: A Problem

This excursion begins as a personal narrative about a time long ago when I started to direct traffic, which is to say began to write encyclopedias, a self-appointed job I have held ever since. Others of my generation will have other stories to tell, perhaps about actually being behind the wheel.

In 1975, Peter Nicholls contracted with the book-packager Roxby Press to produce an *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a project whose overweening specificity and proclaimed scope were new to the literature of the fantastic as a whole. Nicholls's plan was to create a work of reference which left nothing out that belonged under that title. He asked me to become his Associate Editor, with a primary responsibility for author entries. As the world of the literatures of the fantastic was (we knew even then) much more extensive than the world of anything that we might end up defining as English-language science fiction (hence sf), our initial overall challenge was to work out how to sort the traffic: anything we licensed as sf please park here; everything else go somewhere else (but we knew not where).

Any initial arrogance about defining our terms was quickly chastened. The task, we decided pretty soon, was not exactly to create a universal definition of sf, for we knew (by then) that this could not be done; the task was to create an encompassing but porous boundary marker that would convince us that it plausibly enclosed something or other that fitted better inside than out (and which should be written about). Clearly we needed to operate within a narrower remit than E. F. Bleiler had applied to the construction of his brilliant *Checklist of Fantastic Literature* (1948), which included without distinguishing amongst them "science fiction, fantasy and weird books in the English language," and making no claim to completeness. Bleiler's superb book was a sampler; for our part, in order to

create a work of reference that left nothing out, we would attempt to adhere to a description of sf "defined" as a marriage of the various definitions of the genre that were then current. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* would be, in other words, a tenement. The published result was an interwoven edifice of entries within a boundary line marked sf, exceedingly fuzzy, leaking every which way; an *eruv* that did not safely distinguish the sacred from the profane. The moat protecting our tenement was a water margin.

But it worked for a while, and in a way it still works, partly because our "definition" of sf as being essentially whatever everyone else thought it was seemed sufficiently broad-church to allow users and scholars to make use of us without surrendering their own takes on the matter. Our deliberate refusal to know exactly what we were talking about – our refusal to know what sf truly was – was, I continue to think, a good model for writing encyclopedias.

At the same time we knew we were dodging bullets. Both diachronically and synchronically the world of the fantastic, even in 1979, clearly interpenetrated and transcended the alphabetarium of gems and orts we had assembled. As the 1970s turned into the 1980s and we began to prepare a much larger second edition of the *SFE* (1993), we became increasingly aware of the need to call it all something else; or, more accurately, we needed to call all of it *something*. Labels, almost always tendentious, proliferated. I myself became involved in an *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), which at points mated with the *SFE*, but with differences in language and tone that caused some terminological discords; later, in *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* (2006), I did more to deepen a confusion that I not alone was beginning to feel. I think this concussive proliferation of claim and counter-claim was increasingly distressing as well to others of my generation of scholars and critics of the widening field of the fantastic in literature who had come to maturity in the 1960s and 1970s, and who had long been mining the *SFE* and other mutually inconsistent alphabetical resources for distinguishing markers that less and less adequately sorted an increasingly sophisticated and varifocal array of fields. This dis-ease only grew as new examples and formats of non-mimetic literatures, in English and other European language groups, continued to enrich the mix of the given.

Quarrels duly ensued. Monothetic definitions of individual flora in the vast forest of the fantastic in literature turned out, again and again, to reify short-lived phases or *congeries*, as though the fantastic was a clade, with congery A breeding with congery B, and B breeding with C, but C already morphed beyond any capacity to back-breed with A. Too many theoretical presentations of some tactic of fixative apprehension – like Darko Suvin's definition of all sf in terms of cognitive estrangement, or Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic as being restricted to texts which treated their fantastic or nonfantastic nature as a problematic to be *resolved (or not) within the text* – gave off a taxonomical whiff, that smell of essences bleeding out, whenever fictions are seen interchangeable: as fungibles whose nature is exactly coterminous with what they are citably about. But a storyable fiction is never ultimately defined in terms of mere being. A storyable fiction is how it is told. The fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

As a member of this 1960s-1970s generation, I found myself of course luxuriating in though bedazzled by the raucous fecundity of the new world. But I was a freelance encyclopedist, an organiser who stopped carefully short of defining what I'd organised; I did not feel any need to generate apodictic definitions whose clarity of application (and whose restrictive gatekeeper function regarding suitable texts) might be institutionally convenient; it was not my task to establish industry-compliant *findings* measurable by peers. An encyclopedia does not work that way. Certainly the *SFE*, as described above, is far from a compliant tool or concatenation of tools. I (for one) continue to attempt to direct traffic through the use of metaphors and terms harlequined from other disciplines as spotlight strobes to gain sight, almost always flickeringly, of the contour and thrust of the kind of literatures I thought expressive of a larger enterprise than realism. But if I were to continue working on encyclopedias, I began to feel somehow that the old parsings were beginning to try not only my but everyone else's patience, even though old terminologies might continue to provide titular continuity to enterprises like the *SFE* or the EoF. Then, in 2005, Nicholls, David Langford and I were contracted to produce a Third Edition of the *SFE* online, an enterprise which would inevitably, as the twenty-first century lengthened, be required to attempt to fulfil a far wider remit than the term sf itself had traditionally encompassed (as a

marker of the tsunami-like expansion of material to deal with, the original *SFE*, at 730,000 words, had grown to well over 5,000,000 by the end of 2016).

I had happened upon the term "fantastika" a few months before a visit to the Czech Republic in 2007, and incorporated it into an address given in Prague which I titled "Fantastika in the World Storm"; a version of that address can be found in my *Pardon This Intrusion* (2011). The word fantastika as I began to use it then came from Continental criticism and general usage, and had been applied there very variously indeed to describe the literatures of the fantastic in the Western World. I took the term initially to allow, at the least hortatory level possible, its use as a generalised non-imperialist polythetic umbrella designation for those literatures. (I think I was following consensus to treat the term as almost certainly being of greatest use in the context of the literatures of the West with which I was familiar, and which share history and are similarly haunted by the usurper guilt that marks them all.) Over and above that initial broad usage, I proposed to use the term primarily to describe works written (very roughly) from the last decades of the eighteenth century onward: works that might be deemed therefore to have been written in a consciousness of their generic nature. I now use the term fantastika, in these two primary senses (plus a few others), in everything I write. I try to keep several loose conditions in mind. The following list (which partially rephrases what I have just suggested) moves from the (hopefully uncontroversial) traffic-control generalisations that begin "Part Two" into more specialised and/or speculative applications I have found personally useful. The practical and the poetry may, it must be admitted, feed each other.

**Part Two: Practical/Poetical**

**1**): Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are *understood* to be fantastic.

**2**): Fantastika is a child of Romanticism in Europe. It soon monstrously outgrew these swaddling clothes.

**3**): What seems today a basic assumption – that mimetic literatures and fantastika differ – depends on the visibility of what we deem to be significant distinctions. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is not significantly or generically distinguished from his other tragedies by the presence of witches. An infantilisation of the non-mimetic for two centuries after *The Tempest* is assumed for the purposes of my argument; as is the not entirely cartoonish further assumption, that hegemonic representations of the "real" legitimated primarily through mimesis had an increasingly procrustean effect on the creative imagination of the West as the eighteenth century reached its turbulent climax. But is not until (roughly) the beginning of the nineteenth century that the subversive quasi-industrial creation by authors and publishers of oppositional genres began to create centripetal domains for various forms of the fantastic, forms inherently transgressive of standard understandings of how the West was won. For reasons beyond my scope here to anatomise concisely, these incipient genres seemed from the first pragmatically prone to the breeding of interpellatory conversations, which is to say toolkits. A toolkit is a sharing of knowledge. In 2007 it seemed to me foolish not to make this form of conscious interaction – this tropic inclination toward infodump – a central element of my loose but not casual restriction of the term fantastika to works conscious of their generic nature. The term fantastika designates a fictional work *understood* to be non-mimetic and which its creator *understands* is a toolkit (or megatext) to be shared.

**4**): Fantastika did not create but was in at the birth of the planet. Works that I have been comfortable describing as fantastika were almost all composed after the publication of M. Volney's *The Ruins* (1791), which features a spirit astronaut gazing upon the world that spins beneath him, as though – for the first time – the planet itself could seen at a glance, an arena suddenly exposed to the gaze of *Homo sapiens*. But Volney's planet, as it whirls through the decades under the astronaut's gaze, is also a planet in the grip of time. *The Ruins* is a surprisingly benign embryonic prevision of the nature of the sf gaze, which is a gaze driven by time. Indeed, only a few years later, the landscape painter Robert Hubert had already created a diptych, *Project for the Grande Galerie of the Louvre* (1796) and *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796), which, for the first time in his huge oeuvre (and perhaps for the first time ever), can be taken to visualise a doubled world joined one to the other through a yet-unspoken temporal gap that cried out to be narrated. An entry in *The*

*Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* on "Ruins and Futurity" fits both Volney and Robert into a general argument about the creation of this gap that only sf could fill: an opening of the eyes that could no longer shut. Suddenly the planet, turning in time, had become visible. Very soon, awareness of that marching planet dramatically expands the narrative frame of stories I would characterise as early examples of fantastika, as at the end of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Similarly, John Martin's *The Assuaging of the Waters* (1840) or *Solitude* (1843) or *The Plains of Heaven* (1851-1853) may be the first works of art to hint at the curvature of the Earth. It might be added that early works of fantastika can in general be usefully understood as legacy-softwar proleptic of our planet's seismic entry into the Anthropocene, the geological epoch we now fully inhabit. The term fantastika designates a fictional work through which the planet may be seen.

**5**): This argument has been presented variously, by authors as distinct as Samuel R Delany and Ursula K Le Guin: that the default understanding of a tale of fantastika is literal not metaphorical; for metaphors in fantastika can mean what they say. Fantastika is a grammar of the literal; it is not a lesson imparted to the world from without. A story told literally is a story which believes what it sees, no matter how "marvelous" the vision may seem. Lord Byron's denuded planet, in "Darkness" (1816), which I have suggested may be the first Scientific Romance, is the planet itself, not a message to the planet.

**6**) That if we take the Western World between 1800 and 2017 as its focus, then fantastika is transgressive against owners. If we take the world in its entirety as focus – a task whose magnitude I am not competent to assess – then the planetary gaze of fantastika can be seen as colonising, and its transgressiveness as provincial. But this is perhaps to blame the tool for its user.

**7**): If we incorporate the implications of #3 above into our attempts to define (even pro tem) the various generic iterations of the non-mimetic, then it is easy to suggest a kind of aphorism: that *the world is the fourth wall of fantastika*. So when we say that a sf text can be defined as story set in an arguable world, we are saying that an sf text can be defined as a story that addresses the fourth wall. Any reading of any text of fantastika that dissevers text

from its worldly context throws out the bathwater and the baby. That to best understand any such text, we must recognise *where it is*. The author's engendering intentions, the context she wrote in and for whom, when he wrote and with what knowledge or premonition, the anthropocenic world that circumambiates each word: all should be taken into account. It might be possible to say that Anglo-American New Criticism never generated a competent reading of any text we might designate here as fantastika.

**8**): Fantastika is ludic, which may be another way of saying it is literal. If fantastika can be seen as encompassing sacred games of insight and analysis within an *eruv*, a shift of emphasis is likely to occur, with less attention paid to taxonomic descriptions of particular genres, and more paid to the multiple interactions of text with text, a dance of synchrony and diachrony within the permission of the *eruv* that makes something of a mock of definitions of particular texts that privilege the Apollonian purity of the done thing. The inherent grammar – the engendering fire – of fantastika is not to be found in the thing done, or in strategic groupings of texts under various partial rubrics, but in the grammars of connection between texts; it lies in the *beat* that marks a tensing of the limbs of story, in the gap between the repose of the already told and the alarums of something new; it might be described as a manifestation of *Pathosformeln*, a term Aby Warburg used to describe what he conceived of as the essence of any typology of an artistic form through time: which was the edge where it all changes. Which is to say that live story is bark not bole. The heart of a matter is when it changes. Fantastika, which is time-bound, is the lord of the dance, which moves in time. The heart of fantastika is a changing of the guard between fixations. Each time we sight this round planet anew, the heart beats.

## Works Cited

Clute, John. *Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. Beccon Publications, 2011.

Clute, John, and David Langford. "Ruins and Futurity." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Eds. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight. Gollancz, 18 Jan. 2017. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.
<http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/ruins_and_futurity>.

Michaud, Philippe-Alain. *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*. Zone Books, 2004.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*. Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, and Jones, 1818.

Volney, M. *Les Ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires*. Chez Desenne/Chez Volland/Chez Plassan, 1791.

Volney, M. *The Ruins; Or, a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*. Trans. Anonymous. J Johnson, 1792.

**Bionote**

John Clute is a Canadian critic, editor, and author, and has been publishing since 1960. His criticism has been published across a wide array of publications, and also assembled in several collections of essays and reviews. Clute has published several SF stories and two novels. He is co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* [http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/], which has won the Hugo Award in 1980, 1994, and 2012; as well as the co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Huge Award winner of 1998). Clute has received numerous other rewards as recognition of his work, including the Pilgrim Award, the IAFA Award as Distinguished Guest Scholar, and a Solstice Award. Clute currently resides in UK.

# Excavations of Genre Barriers:
# Breaking New Ground with *Fantastika Journal*

## C. Palmer-Patel

What is 'Fantastika'? And why is there a need for it?

Fantastika embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction (SF), and Horror, but can also include Alternate Histories, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopian Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space[1]. The term itself is appropriated from John Clute (from a range of Slavonic languages) in "Fantastika in the World Storm" (2007): "I will start by defining fantastika in a way that may seem obvious, but is not: Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are *understood* to be fantastic" (20, original emphasis). Clute further revises his definition and approach to 'Fantastika' in his editorial in this first edition.

The term deliberately encompasses a wide boundary. As a Fantasy scholar, I have found it difficult to situate myself within the abundant genre conferences that I have attended in UK in the last few years. While both SF and Gothic conferences are inviting of Fantasy scholars, too often I would find myself speaking on a lone Fantasy panel, distinct and demarcated by the very nature of being 'Fantasy Fiction,' regardless of my fellow panellists' chosen topics or texts. There is a vast difference, for example, between a paper on gender and bodies in George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series and eco-linguistic elements in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, one that cannot be united simply by both being defined as Fantasy texts.

My goal then in creating the annual Fantastika conferences – and the resulting *Fantastika Journal* – is to bridge this divide between genres and genre scholarship; to focus on subject matter and themes that are common to Fantastika as a whole. There are topics that are shared by many of the Fantastika genres: the first three conferences discussed

visuals, locations, and global aspects respectively. This last conference especially considered productions of Fantastika that are produced in non-English mediums or non-Western countries. The next conference, which will take place at the end of this week, concerns performativity. The aim of *Fantastika Journal* and its annual conference is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies, and collaborations. Often, the boundaries between genres are not as clear cut as we would like them to be. There are places of overlap, of tangling and disorder.

That is not to say that we should not differentiate and define genres within this Fantastika umbrella term. For instance, I will often identify as a Fantasy scholar. There is a scholastic necessity in defining genres: we must do so in order to demarcate the boundaries of our research, in order to say that 'these texts are within my purview because of x reasons.' But *Fantastika Journal* has two major objectives: first, as I described above, to focus on the commonalities that can occur between genres and to create a space for dialogue in order to express these harmonies. We hope to discover or create critical vocabularies that will enable us to convey, explore, and understanding these cross-webbings. This does not mean that an individual article or researcher needs to express these ideas within their own work, but we hope that our publications will express a narrative with each issue, one in which parallel themes and ideas are explored.

Second, *Fantastika* is also a home for those who might struggle to define themselves. Where do we place 'Weird Fiction' for example? Is it a subgenre of Science Fiction? Fantasy? Horror? Can it be in its own category, and if so, how do we start to discuss it in relation to the existing critical field? Is it, in fact, not a genre at all, but rather an aesthetic category, 'The Weird'? Oddly enough, as my experiences above indicated, Fantasy itself seems to struggle to find a home. It is a binary of SF? A sister genre of the Gothic? Does it have ties to Folklore and Fairy Tales, or is it distinct? My own approach to studying Fantasy Fiction has focused on the central narrative pattern, specifically on the 'Heroic Epic' which I will describe below, rather than concentrating on defining the 'Fantasy' elements of a particular novel. This

approach has allowed me to examine works that have similar narrative structures, regardless of its genre demarcation.

The articles in this edition all discuss genres and modes that can be seen to struggle to find a place within the existing critical field. In particular for this edition, we invited submissions that offered a discussion of the current literary field, and especially those that explores definitions and boundaries of Fantastika. The first two articles deal with that elusive category of Weird Fiction. In "From the Inevitable to the Inexplicable: Investigating the Literary and Linguistic Roots of the Weird," Kerry Dodd looks at problems in defining and identifying the Weird. Tracing the linguistic and literary usage of the word, Dodd identifies that "the term weird has shifted from its original application, gaining new semantic meaning and indeed becoming the identifying cornerstone for a certain stream of fiction." His argument leads to Claire Quigley's exploration of Weird Fiction in the "The Weird in Fantastika: Grotesque Aesthetics and Disrupting Anthropocentricism." Quigley asserts that Weird Fiction serves to disturb, disrupt, and destabilise. "The Weird," Quigley concludes, "enriches our understanding of Fantastika by demonstrating the fundamental role that disgust plays in defamiliarising the world of the text." Her article segways into Nahid Shahbazi Moghadam's "On Placing the Grotesque," where Moghadam reviews approaches to defining "grotesque" in order to move towards a comprehensive definition of the concept. Moghadam concludes that the controversies surrounding the mode should be more clearly explicated considering that the grotesque is "fluid in terms of its capacity to merge and overlap" with many forms of art and literature.

Riyukta Raghunath then explores important terminology in regard to Alternate History in "Alternate History: Defining Counterparts and Individuals with Transworld Identity." Raghunath sets up a difference in labelling characters in Alternate History, between those that are presented as identical to real historical figures (for this Raghunath adopts the term "transworld identity"), and those characters that differ from their real-world counterparts in significant ways ("counterparts"). Brian Baker concludes the articles in this edition with "Walking the Horizon: Transmissions between Worlds in Alan Garner's Late Fiction." Baker presents how Garner's later fiction: "does not fit so easily into commonly-

understood definitions of Fantasy. What it recurrently does, however, is to engage stories of modern life with mythic patterns." Baker's investigation into Garner's works explores a type of Fantastika that plays with time, space, human consciousness, which is "re-articulated through a myth of transmission."

Thus the articles in this edition, and the extensive reviews of fiction and nonfiction that follows them, offer not only a survey of a range of genres included as Fantastika, but also a glimpse at the problems with definitions and demarcations when it comes to genre boundaries. They offer a small taste into the wide world of Fantastika texts. But, distinguishing and concentrating on individual genres is not the only way that one can approach the study of Fantastika. As I will explore below, genre boundaries can also be broken down so as to enable us to investigate similar patterns between fictions. The methodology I describe below is one that I employ in my own research practices. I hope it will be fruitful for others as well.

### The Heroic Epic: An Example of the Commonalities between Genres

As stated above, my own approach to studying Fantasy has focused on identifying the narrative form. I suggest that plot structure can be the central premise by which we define genres or subgenres, whereas setting and effect/affect can be secondary considerations. Thus I identify a 'Heroic Epic' pattern, and argue that this form is more important in understanding and investigating genre, rather than identifying and isolating whether it is a Heroic Epic Fantasy or Heroic Epic SF or Heroic Epic Horror. The 'Heroic Epic' combines plot (Epic) with character (Heroic). This is not a wholly new idea: in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) Brian Attebery argues that: "the ability of fantasy to generate wonder [...] is closely tied to both setting and story line" (128), but here I am prioritising story over setting; the 'Heroic Epic' part of the definition of greater importance than that of 'Fantasy.' The reason for this, as I will conclude below, is that, by using this approach to defining subgenres of Fantastika, and by identifying similarities between genres by storyline, we can focus on the story rather than on setting. The narrative structure of the Heroic Epic is one where the hero achieves spiritual transcendence (the ascendance of the hero from human or superhuman to

something closer to the divine) via a journey (literal or metaphorical) through which the hero(es) 'saves' the world by healing or re-creating it, and thereby fulfils their destiny and the world's destiny.

This is the basic structure of the 'Epic' or 'Heroic Epic' found in mythology and romance (legends), as many formalists have identified. James Frazer (1890), Otto Rank (1909), Lord Raglan (1936), and Joseph Campbell (1949), have all offered a comparative study of religion and mythology in order to identify the basic structure of the hero's journey. Vladimir Propp's (1928; 1958 English translation) formalist approach to folktales is also an important study, in which Propp identifies 31 formal functions of the folktale. There is an obvious problem with reducing the Heroic Epic to a simple pattern. One hopes not to be reductive and ignore the depth and complexity of each work. While the texts that I study share common structural similarities, I acknowledge and make reference to the differences between these texts. Additionally, I do not mean to dismiss those works that do not follow my model of the Heroic Epic; it is simply my area of focus.

There are numerous and varied definitions of 'hero,' but as a starting point I turn to the definition provided by Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (lectures 1835; published 1904): the hero is one (whether in fiction, mythology, or the real world) who "know[s] for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe and his duty and destiny there" (2-3). This is a key element of the hero's identity. The hero is defined by the manner in which they come to identify their place in the universe and fulfil their destiny – taking on this duty of their own free will. Thus, the Epic is a journey which results in fulfilling a world destiny; the Heroic journey is one where the hero achieves spiritual transcendence, and the Heroic Epic is where the two meet.

If there is no journey – literal or metaphorical – through which the hero(es) achieve spiritual transcendence, thereby fulfilling their destiny, then the book or series is not part of the Heroic Epic subgenre of Fantasy. The 'journey' of the hero does not indicate the hero's life from birth to death, but the path through which they come to save the world. The hero is a messianic hero, one who saves the world through a sacrifice, usually associated with some

literal or metaphorical connection to death as part of the journey. In *The Epic Hero* (2000), an analysis of mythological heroes, Dean A. Miller identifies that: "the heroic individual comes from his voluntary submission to death: the hero wills himself to accept and even to welcome the danger of death" (121). Like the mythological hero, the Epic Fantasy hero's power comes from their "voluntary submission to death." Through this sacrifice, the hero achieves transcendence – that is, they ascend spiritually and achieve a connection with the divine. This idea, along with the prospect of transcendence, would also indicate that some conception of a higher power (divinity or fate or a metaphysical entity) *must* be necessary in the work in order for it to be defined as the Epic Fantasy genre. However, this destiny or divinity can be expressed either implicitly or explicitly.

While nomenclature for the 'Heroic Epic' already exists in the form of 'Epic Fantasy,' this term seems to refer to the length of the texts, rather than indicating an awareness of the history of the Epic deriving from mythology. I also refrain from using the label 'High Fantasy' as both 'High Fantasy' and 'Epic Fantasy' are often used to encompass both 'Heroic Fantasy' (for example, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) as well as 'Sword and Sorcery' (for instance, Robert Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*). Too often the word 'Fantasy' serves to encompass any text that is remotely fantastical regardless of the cultural and time of production. Thus, these labels (High Fantasy, Heroic Fantasy, Epic Fantasy, and Sword and Sorcery) seem to make some attempt to distinguish Fantasy as a 'formulaic genre,' as opposed to other Fantastika works such as 'Magic Realism' or 'Fairy Tale.' The problem lies in that these labels themselves are often used interchangeably with little or no distinction made between them. Accordingly, in "The Demarcation of Sword and Sorcery" (2011) Joseph A. McCullough suggests that the major distinction between 'Heroic Fantasy' and 'Sword and Sorcery' is one of scale:

> Instead the definitive aspect of the idea of scope or scale lies in the idea that something exists that is bigger and stronger than the heroes. This can be God, gods, fate, destiny, good and evil, law and chaos. But these must be more than mere concepts. *They must be tangible driving forces at work in the world*. (n.p., my emphasis)

Both genres – Heroic Fantasy and Sword and Sorcery – match John G. Cawelti's description of the Adventure formula in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), with Fantasy being a type of Adventure: "that of the hero – individual or group – overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission. Often, though not always, the hero's trials are the result of the machinations of a villain" (39-40). However, the extent or depth of Cawelti's supposition is markedly different in the two subgenres. To expand on McCullough's argument, in the Heroic, the narrative results in a world-salvation, usually as a result of the interactions of divinity and fate. Sword and Sorcery, in contrast, while still incorporating the idea of overcoming an obstacle or villain, is less grand in scale, lacking the motifs that suggests a hero's connection to divinity.

That is the distinction, I believe, between different labels of genre Fantasies; between the Epic and Urban Fantasy, or between the Epic and Sword and Sorcery, or between the Epic and what I call the 'Localised Fantasy.' The distinction is not so much the location, of land or of city, but of the sense of scale, a scale that includes the entire cosmos, dimensions, depths and heights of heaven and hell – a scale that indicates a divine order to the world which *impacts* on the plot or narrative arc. While the Fantasy heroes of these 'Localised' Fantasies may grapple with powerful creatures and villains, Epic Fantasy must culminate in the hero facing an 'ultimate evil' that transforms and remakes the world as a whole, and not just a city or region.

For instance, while in Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (2006) the protagonist Locke Lamora has the markers of an Epic hero, the novel's events do not appear to lead to a transcendental event that impacts on the world. This first entry in a series is a city Fantasy, regionalised to a specific location. More importantly, Lamora's actions are not motivated by the sense of divine fate. There is little sense of fate or of the gods in the first book of the series (although this changes by the third novel). While there is religion – Lamora and his gang of thieves are in fact all priests, individuals who seem to believe in their god – the gods do not seem to impact on the events of the first book. To emphasise once more, all Epic Fantasies must contain some idea of divine or metaphysical entity or fate, either implicitly or explicitly,

who intervenes in the world. Thus Lynch's *Lies of Locke Lamora* is excluded from this distinction.
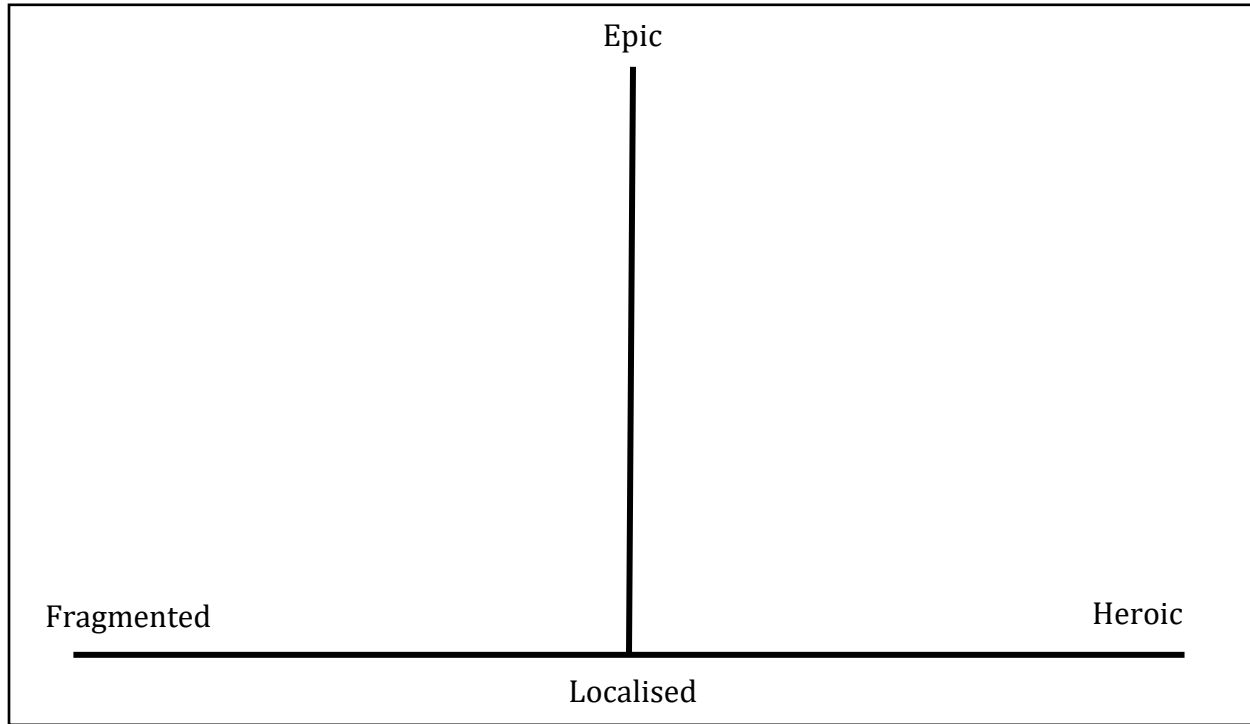


**Figure 1: The Heroic/Epic Graph of Fantasy.**

Accordingly, I identify Heroic Epic at one corner of a two-dimensional scale (Figure 1). One end of the horizontal axis – the character axis – is the Heroic. The Heroic is a unified group who, along with the prophesised hero(es), bring about the resolution of the plot. Even if the group is divided or broken – as happens in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) or Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* (1990-2013) – the divided group has a common goal; this resolution is brought about through the actions of all the protagonists as a unified whole. On the other end is what I call the 'Fragmented Hero.' In this end of the axis, the protagonists are so numerous and disintegrated, each with their own individual contradictory goals, that it is difficult to determine who is the primary hero of the novel. George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996-present) and Steven Erikson's *Malazan* series (1999-present) are such examples, where it may be difficult at first to predict which characters are the 'good' characters that will save the world. Note however that, like Lynch's protagonists, there still exists the potential for the characters to develop heroic qualities as these series progress, as

the authors may suggest some hint of destiny earlier in the narrative. The 'prophesised hero' is the intersection where the Hero and the Epic axis meet, combining the chosen hero with the Epic axis through the idea of destiny.

The vertical axis – setting – I have outlined above, with Epic on one end and the Local or regional on the other. The Localised Fantasy differs from Epic in two major ways. Firstly, the plot (and resolution) of Localised Fantasy takes place in a central area, rather than on the world scale. However, it is possible that characters may move from region to region on a series of adventures, as is the case with Robert Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* series (1932-1936) or Michael Moorcock's *Elric* series (1961-1977). For this reason, there is perhaps a further distinction between 'Localised Fantasy' and 'Adventure Fantasy.' As well, these distinctions of Epic and Local do not operate as binaries, but rather as a spectrum. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) may be seen as halfway between the Epic and Localised Fantasy scale – although the Hero has a destiny to fulfil, the story is largely contained to a hidden society in Britain and rarely moves beyond those regional borders. However, as Potter does cross a metaphysical boundary through death, perhaps the question of where to place the final book is open to debate. Thus, secondly, as I identified above, the true Epic often contains and conveys the entire cosmic destiny – that is, the universe of the Epic includes some hint of metaphysical worlds and an idea of a divinity (whether a benign or malignant anthropomorphic god or a numinous fate) influencing the events of the narrative. In explicit fantasies, this hint of divinity is often an overt motivator of the plot, but in implicit fantasies, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, the divine intervention, while not as visibly noticeable, may still be present in the background.[2] Thus, while Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion* (2000) can be seen as a Localised Fantasy because it is contained within the country of Chalion, I view it as more Epic than it is Local, because of the divine impact on plot, character, and setting. A novel such as *Gardens of the Moon* (1999), the first book of Erikson's *Malazan* series, may be Epic but not Heroic, as gods are overtly motivating events within the novels, appearing as characters themselves, yet it is difficult to determine which protagonist (whether human or divine) the reader should identify with, that is, which character performs the Heroic function.
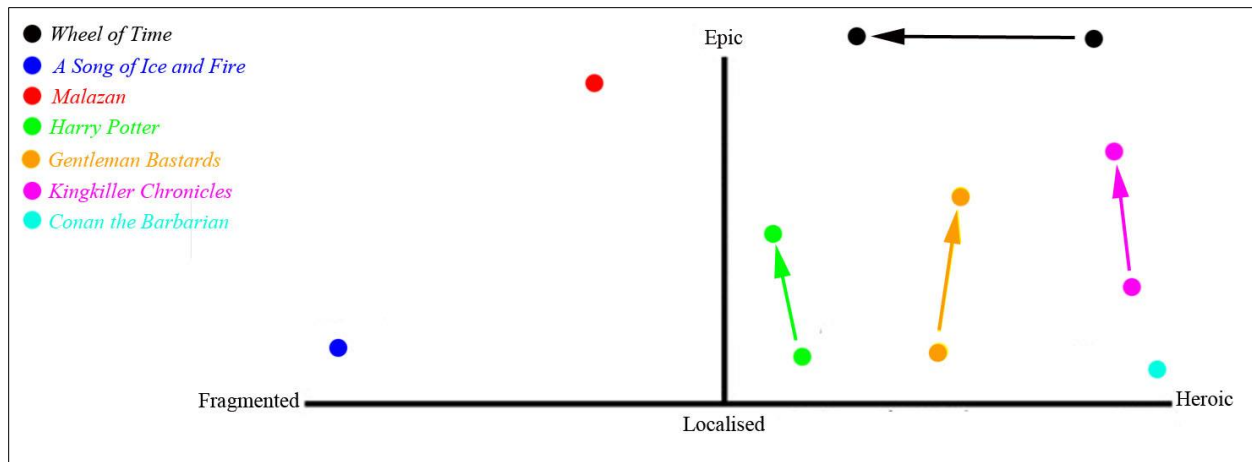
**Figure 2: Textual Examples on the Heroic/Epic Graph of Fantasy.**

The identification of these Fantastika texts along the horizontal and vertical scales are not always static (Figure 2). Scott Lynch's *Gentleman Bastard* series (2006-present) moves gradually from Localised to Epic, as by the third book of the unfinished series a hint of destiny starts to emerge. Here the underlying markers of 'hero' found in the protagonist (initially present in the first two books) begin to manifest more overtly as the protagonist Locke Lamora gradually moves from antihero to hero. Patrick Rothfuss's yet unfinished trilogy *The Kingkiller Chronicles* (2007-present) begins in the Localised end of the Epic scale, especially in its outer frame narrative, where the entire trilogy is narrated by a story-teller in an isolated inn. Though the main character of the story has motifs of the hero, these have not yet manifested with marks of divine favour. Although there is some movement into a metaphysical territory, this does not, at this time, seem to have impacted on narrative structure.

The Heroic Epic graph also works for media other than book or book series. For example, open-world video games such as *Skyrim* (2011) or *Pokémon Red/Blue* (1996)[3], despite taking place in a vast setting, can be considered as Localised rather than Epic as the hero (the player) moves from location to location completing quests. These open-world quest Fantasy games are thus 'Adventure Fantasies' – although a more thorough survey of the ludic aspect of these worlds may be necessary to substantiate these claims, especially as

both games are part of a larger series of games. As M. M. Bakhtin describes in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), the chronotope of Adventure time is one that is episodic: "composed of a series of short segments that correspond to separate adventures" (91). Similarly, if individual novels in a Fantasy series have no movement or growth from novel to novel, they may be seen as Adventure Fantasy within its episodic structure. But if there is an overarching plot that governs the series, motivating the story with some idea of divine fate, then the series as a whole may be viewed as Epic.

This structure of the Heroic Epic graph can be found in many Fantastika genres. Superhero alternate-universe stories (storylines that are alternate timelines or alternate versions to the central story) show elements of Heroic Epic Fantasy (*Superman Red Son*, 2004, is a good example), although the original Superhero story may be Localised to a specific city (such as Batman in Gotham City, for instance). Fairy tale revisions may fall into either end of the graph, depending on plot and character. For example, Mercedes Lackey's *Five Hundred Kingdom* series (2004-2012) is more Epic, while her *Elemental Masters* series (1995-2015) is more Localised. I would suggest that most productions from the Gothic/Horror Fantastika branch are Localised rather than Epics, the story focusing on a haunting of a locale or person, rather than a world (although Gothic/Horror *motifs* may be included in an Epic). There may be exceptions of course. The films *Evil Dead 2* (1987), *Blade* (1998), and *Cabin in the Woods* (2012) are good examples of the Horror genres which contain Epic motifs of a 'prophecy' and fate. The television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) is another such example where individual episodes may be more Localised while the overarching series arc may be Epic. Thus, there may be Heroic Epic Gothics or Horrors, just as there may be Heroic Epic SF. While critics may disagree over whether Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) or George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977-present) are best classified as SF or Fantasy, I would emphasise the need to approach definition first and foremost in terms of narrative. Herbert's *Dune* and Lucas's *Star Wars* are both 'Heroic Epics' in this sense, as may be Norrington's *Blade* (1998). Whether these texts are then 'Heroic Epic SF' or 'Heroic Epic Horror' may still be important distinctions to make, but the essential thing is that they are all defined by story first.

**Venturing 'New' Territory**

The pattern of the Heroic Epic demonstrates a good example of an approach that one can take in discussing genres together as a whole. As I've identified, focusing on narrative patterns of the Heroic Epic has allowed me to discuss ideas that are common to many Fantastika genres, without feeling the need to compartmentalise or distinguish between them on the basis of being 'Gothic' or 'Fantasy' or 'SF.' This approach also allows me to explore narrative trends between different types of 'Fantasy' and 'Fantastika,' again, without needing to label the distinction between the two. As such, I have found the umbrella term of 'Fantastika' to be useful for many purposes. Chiefly, because I can discuss ideas and themes that are common to multiple genres. This is not to say that our readers need to approach Fantastika genres in the same way – there are, of course, plenty of Fantastika works that have very little narrative to speak of, or, indeed, works where reader's affect or reception of the text may be of greater significance than elements of narrative structure. Nonetheless I hope the Heroic/Epic Graph has served to demonstrate ways in which the various genres – and mediums – of Fantastika can be approached as a unified field. Viewing Fantastika as umbrella term that spans multiple forms enables one to approach such a proliferation of genres, modes, and mediums, and gives us an anchor in which to discuss them as a unit. It allows us to draw useful, precise definitions of genre – of the type I identified above – whilst still maintaining a wider sense of interrelation, a controlled super-discourse.

We invite those of you who have an interest in any of the Fantastika genres to take part in our evolving research community. Just as the Heroic/Epic Graph exhibits a space of merger, of crossing or dissolving boundaries, and unifying common themes and elements between genres, so too is *Fantastika Journal* a space to explore ideas and controversies that are shared between literatures. As my examples above also illustrate, Fantastika literatures are not restricted to the textual field. Indeed, the fiction reviews that conclude this edition exemplifies the wide field of Fantastika that is currently being produced. We've attempted to include reviews from books, short story collections, films, television shows, video games, conferences, and even soundtracks. As such, *Fantastika* itself is not restricted purely to the field of literary criticism. We invite researchers of all mediums: film studies, art scholars,

theatre and performance practitioners, and so forth. We are also an interdisciplinary journal. Those that have taken part in the Fantastika community so far represent a diverse range of humanities and even science disciplines, from religious studies and linguistics, to computer studies and theoretical physics.

One final note that should hardly need to be said: *Fantastika Journal* will not offer a defence of the study of these popular genres and forms. At times, Fantastika is literary and/or artistic. At others, there may be little artistic value to the production, but nonetheless the Fantastika production under study may still offer an insight into the cultures and peoples of the time. As the wide range of fiction and non-fiction reviews at the end of this edition demonstrates, Fantastika is constantly being produced, constantly evolving, constantly influencing and being influenced by current cultural moments and movements; it offers a creative and engaging perception of humanity today. As such, *Fantastika Journal* moves beyond the question of why people engage with these genres – that way leads to stagnation in research. Instead, we take it as evident that these literatures and mediums are of academic value, and instead provide a space for the developing discourses of this emerging critical field. The articles in this first edition represent some of the most recent developments in the study of Fantastika. We invite further contributions from those with an academic interest in the Fantastika fields to join us in excavating and examining Fantastika genres, as we continue the development towards new research frontiers.

**Notes**

**1.** Editorial aside: except for the rare instances in editorials, throughout all the articles and reviews in this journal we have decided to capitalize genres as proper nouns. This is in order to differentiate the word as a genre as opposed to the common usage of the word. For instance, 'Fantasy' as a genre, which is distinct from 'fantasy' as 'imaginary' or 'make-belive'; or 'Horror' as a genre to distinguish from 'horror' as emotion or affect.

**2.** I'd like to note that there is a difference between practiced religion and spirituality or divine entities that actually influence the world. For example, Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy (2006-2008) has many multiple religions which are localised. Yet the world itself was created by two spirits.

While neither of these spirits have a religious following – and, indeed, the majority of the population do not even have an awareness of them – both entities directly impact on the narrative. I classify it as an Epic accordingly. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* is similar. Though the idea of religion exists in the novels, these religions are also multiple and contradictory. Prophecy, when it appears, is interpreted by each protagonist in their favour. There is no underlying sense of destiny motivating events – at least not for the moment, as the *Game of Thrones* television adaptation (2011-present), which extends further than the published books, has been seen to move into the Heroic axis, and it is likely to shift into the Epic axis as well.

**3.** *Pokémon* is the only example that I have used that was created originally by non-English developers. However, all the examples I have used in this editorial are examples of Fantastika that are, in some way, produced for an English-speaking audience. As I suggested above, Fantastika is not a Western phenomenon. There are many productions of Fantastika that are currently taking place in a wide range of languages and countries. But, for the purposes of this editorial, I wish to avoid conflating differences in cultural productions as well as avoid any inconsistencies that may occur due to translation. When one compares a novel like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967, translated 1970) for example, to George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, one may want to consider the language and culture that each author is publishing in.

**Works Cited**

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. 1975. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*. 1835. Chapman and Hall Limited, 1904.

Cawelti, John G. "The Study of Literary Formulas." *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 5-36.

Clute, John. "Fantastika in the World Storm." 2007. *Pardon this Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. Beccon Publications, 2011, pp. 19-31.

Miller, Dean A. *The Epic Hero*. 2000. John Hopkins University Press, 2002.

McCullough, Joseph A. "The Demarcation of Sword and Sorcery." 2011. <http://www.blackgate.com/the-demarcation-of-sword-and-sorcery/#3> Accessed 25 June 2014.

**Bionote**

Charul (Chuckie) Palmer-Patel is Head Editor of *Fantastika Journal*. She started organising the Fantastika conferences four years ago at Lancaster University, UK, and has expanded the conference to journal form in the hopes of maintaining and expanding the Fantastika community once she moves back to Canada this summer. The categorisation of the Heroic Epic came about through Palmer-Patel's doctoral thesis, which used interdisciplinary approaches to examining narrative patterns within Heroic Epic Fantasy.

# From the Inevitable to the Inexplicable: Investigating the Literary and Linguistic Roots of the Weird

## Kerry Dodd

The Weird's identity is generally ambiguous; whether it is a genre or mode, often its tales are distinguished by a specific visceral reaction rather than core structural components.[1] Gravitating towards the unknown, its interest in the inexplicable interrogates the boundaries of human knowledge and, pertinently, what lies outside them. Certainly the Weird operates in a similar, or parallel, manner to Fantastika as both represent a spectrum of the fantastic rather than being governed by rigid fundamental aspects. China Miéville, a prominent Weird or New Weird writer and critic, suggests in the *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* that "if considered at all, Weird Fiction is usually, roughly, conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic ('horror' plus 'fantasy') often featuring non-traditional alien monsters (thus plus 'science fiction')" (510). A nebulous amalgamation that circulates genre peripheries, the Weird operates similar to Fantastika's salient interconnectivity through its intrinsically interpretative style: as such there is arguably no quintessential or definitive weird tale.

The Weird's multi-faceted nature resists definition, even if a substantial amount of critical material has been produced in an attempt to demarcate its fundamental traits. Miéville's hesitation on whether the Weird should be "considered at all" addresses concerns towards attempts to impose a standardisation upon this literary investigation, particularly following the debates surrounding the prospective New Weird.[2] However, the weird tale still retains enduring popularity. The publication of Jeff and Ann VanderMeers' anthologies *The New Weird* (2007) and *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Fiction* (2012), as well as Jeff's own novel *Annihilation* (2014) winning the Nebula Award, illustrates the continued interest and cultural recognition of the Weird beyond Miéville's statement in 2007. The weird tale thus sustains a degree of enduring popularity in the twenty-first century built

upon the foundation of a developing literary and semantic preoccupation with the strange and inexplicable.

Increasing interest in the Weird was, and has always been, inevitably followed by questions of definition. The literary tradition of the weird tale has been immensely self-reflexive since its inception, as critics are often practicing writers in the field. S. T. Joshi has published extensively on the Weird, indeed his editing and championing of H. P. Lovecraft's work was instrumental in raising awareness of both the author and the weird tale itself. Determining from the beginning of his eponymous book *The Weird Tale* that "I am not, as a result, prepared to define the weird tale, and venture to assert that any definition of it may be impossible" (2), Joshi evidently feels the expectation to both introduce and dismiss questions of identification. Critical discourse on the Weird is thus haunted by the anticipated necessity to either resist or acquiesce to such an inevitably fraught process.

The weird tale has a long tradition of fluidity. Although consolidated by the pulp magazine *Weird Tales,* which ran initially from 1923 to 1940, it exists more as a perceived mode than concretised genre. The VanderMeers' *The Weird* is an extensively researched and collected source of the major twentieth century writers, yet their anthology does not provide any examples of weird tales before 1908, omitting authors like Edgar Allan Poe. The Weird as a literary form receives a copious amount of material debating its definition. However, I would argue that the weird tale's extensive heritage is largely forgotten and crucially under-researched. Narratives such as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), with the house's creeping uneasiness and the suggestion that something eldritch lingers just under the surface, evidently bears hallmarks of the more contemporary Weird as featured in the VanderMeers' anthology. Yet the description of tales as 'weird' seems to lie outside of the VanderMeers' remit, potentially as the term's semantic shift refers to an even wider and more expansive narrative tradition. To better understand its contextual and literary background, and avoid the overly prescriptive tendencies of the previously outlined approach, I intend to examine the semantic development of the word 'weird,' from its etymological origins to contemporary utilisation. Moving from the Proto-Germanic linguistic root to the equivocation of the weird sisters in *Macbeth* (1606) and finally concluding with a

reflection on contemporary implications, I demonstrate how the adoption of 'weird' as a descriptive term incorporates two significant meanings due to a semantic shift in the word itself. Succinctly, what constitutes a weird tale develops from primarily referring to fate or inevitability to encompass the supernatural, strange and uncanny. As the identity of the Weird expands it bears a striking resemblance to Fantastika's own multiplicity. The New Weird particularly emphasises this similarity by not differentiating or favouring any particular stylistic influence over another, creating a vibrant field that aptly seems to resist empirical interrogation and categorisation. Focusing on an overlooked etymological and literary heritage, this article will provide fresh insight into the Weird, celebrating its self-consciously open, interpretative and crucially all-encompassing nature akin to the aforementioned Fantastika inclusivity.

The self-reflexivity of the Weird, in which writers are often also critics within the field, is a long-standing penchant. Lovecraft is one of the most famous authors of the weird tale, a term he discussed at length in his seminal essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1925). Lovecraft outlines an extensive history of supernatural fiction, particularly commenting upon Gothic authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth century which he deemed crucial to the Horror tale's development. Concluding with an analysis of the "modern masters" (Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, M. R. James), the essay is a landmark that testifies the pervasive examples of tales deemed to have a certain weirdness about them. For Lovecraft however there is a particular distinction between the aforementioned Gothic or supernatural fiction and the weird tale. His opening statement, that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (105), establishes the concept of the inexplicable spectacle: a sight too overwhelming to be articulated or processed, a meeting that evokes an intentionally visceral reaction. Essentially there is considered to be a particular separation between weird tales and other examples of supernatural fiction; indeed, this distinction is outlined by Lovecraft himself:

> The true weird tale *has something more* than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of *outer, unknown forces* must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness

becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or *defeat of those fixed laws of Nature* which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of *unplumbed space.* (107, my emphasis)

The weird tale is thus seen as being "something more," it is intrinsically set apart from other forms of supernatural fiction by its innate drive to go further or beyond the conventional. Concrete details are absent in Weird narratives, producing a fundamental atmosphere of indeterminacy, emphasising a feeling of unease or particularly visceral reaction. Vitally, Lovecraft consolidates this interrogation as an inquisitive confrontation with the unknown, a topic which is illustrated by his Cosmic Horror tales that at their core explore the limitation of human epistemology. The nomenclature of the designated weird tale is however still at this moment being developed; Lovecraft's title refers primarily to the supernatural rather than Weird fiction, which would feature more prominently in his later essay "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" in 1934. The Weird as a style is therefore a contemporary and retrospective designation whereas the descriptive aspects of 'the weird tale' has a more extensive historical progression: for example, Lovecraft is a self-conscious writer of weird tales but not Weird Fiction. The semantic shift that the eponymous term has experienced is equally wrapped up in this evolutionary process, moving from referring to the inevitable to the inexplicable. These developments persist in the modern utilisation and, as such, an investigation into the linguistic roots permits a greater understanding of both the weird tale and the Weird itself.

In contemporary usage the word 'weird' generally refers to experiences which are supernatural, strange or uncanny, yet originally it denoted "the principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined" ("weird, n.," *OED Online*). Although this initially seems antithetical to its current meaning, both return to the prospect of the external: actions beyond control, or more explicitly to the sense of the unknown 'outer' that Lovecraft identifies. To understand these alternate connotations, it is useful to examine the linguistic root and development. The word 'weird' originally stems from the Proto-Indo-European 'wert' ("weird, adj.," *Online English Etymology*) which means 'to turn' or 'to bend.' This later developed into the Proto-Germanic 'wurthiz' which refers to 'fate' or 'destiny,' a term relating

to the Old Norse, 'urðr,' and entered Old English as 'wyrd.' Although the Proto-Indo-European root's meaning does not directly mirror the aforementioned standard hallmarks, the subsequent development in Old Norse is particularly crucial for its reference to inevitability.

The word 'urðr,' the Old Norse cognate of wyrd, refers to both fate and destiny, taken from the Norse mythological belief in the Norn, three goddesses of fate: Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld. The Norn were considered to perceive the destiny of the cosmos; their gaze beheld not only the essence of humanity but also that of the gods. The three reside within, or near to, a well called Urðarbrunnr which feeds the ash world tree Yggdrasill, whose branches reach from the underworld to the heavens. The breadth of these connections allow the goddesses sight over the whole cosmos, a form of inhuman omniscience similar to the unknowability of Lovecraft's horrors due to their fundamental departure from human perception. Each goddess represents an aspect of time: past (Urðr), present (Verðandi) and future (Skuld). Urðr thus refers both to the prospect of preordained cosmic decisions as well as events which have already come to pass, historical truths. These concepts are key identifiable components of the later Weird, in which the presence of ancient horrors, archaeological terrors or hidden threats bridges the two meanings to emphasise the weird tale's challenge towards documented historical progress, questioning both the origin and destination of human ontology. The original meaning, whilst less overt, endures within the Weird and its cosmic determinism, articulating an enduring anxiety of empirical research by interrogating the foundations of human existence: our history.

Similar to other mythological traditions which contain three goddesses of fate – the Greek Moirai or Roman Parcae for instance – the Norn stand outside of the conventional metaphysical existence. Yet unlike these examples, which centre around the spinning, measuring and cutting of the thread of life, the Norn instead emphasise the perception of inevitability. For even if gods learn of the future through the Norn, it is believed that they cannot change the course of events and instead participate in fate coming to pass since "under the auspices of the norns they are obliged to carry out actions that happen of necessity" (Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* 40). The Norn, therefore, are beings that are

able to discern universal truths, unknown to humans or gods, in order to understand the preordained nature of the cosmos and the redundancy of personal agency.

The influence of this mythological tradition is identifiable in a range of Weird fiction. Lord Dunsany's characters Fate and Chance in *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905) and *Time and the Gods* (1906) "play" with gods and humans as chess pieces in a universal cyclical game in which "those things that have been shall all be again" ("The Dreams of the Prophet" 77), as each iteration is an endless repetition of the same moves akin to the inevitability of the Norn's prophecies. Likewise, Lovecraft's infamous line within "The Call of Cthulhu" that "in his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming" (*H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3* 74), depicts the eponymous eldritch terror as existing outside human concepts of time and space, with the promise of its destined return. From a human perspective, Cthulhu is evidently terrifying as it defies our conception of material laws, yet crucially its enduring existence before and after humanity is also a form of inevitability, suggesting it is situated in a wider, cosmic understanding outside human comprehension. Equally, the marriage of inexplicable entities and 'past' horrors being unearthed is another component which features heavily in the Weird genre. Notable examples range between Algernon Blackwood's "A Descent into Egypt" (1914), in which the narrator feels threatened by an oppressive personification of ancient Egypt that waits beneath the sands to eventually subsume modern civilisation; Lovecraft's non-Euclidean city atop Antarctica's mountains in *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) which predates human species existence; or China Miéville's *The City & the City* (2009) in which the novel's pivotal murder is orientated around an archaeological dig aimed at discovering material traces of a mythical city. Each of these contains the presence of unknowability entwined with inevitability, an encounter with something incomprehensible that has existed both before and will remain after humankind: the ancient past that will subsist into the distant future. The initial meaning of 'urðr' is thus reflected in a multitude of later Weird texts. The adoption of mythological traditions expands its meaning to refer to omniscient knowledge or entities, which are then appropriated by a discourse interested in that which lies outside of the human: the ontological, metaphysical and epistemological Other.

'Wyrd,' the Old English cognate of 'urðr,' shares its mythological tradition and thus reflects a similar concept; however, its alternate linguistic development arrived at the more recognisable meaning found in contemporary contexts. The 'wyrd' refers to "that which comes," or more specifically "fate, chance, fortune; destiny; the Fates" ("weird, adj." *Online English Etymology)*, paralleling the preordained prophecies of the Norn. From this grew the symbolism of the weird sisters, a development upon the Norn in Middle English that began to incorporate the "uncanny, supernatural" qualities that the term 'weird' is typically associated with in contemporary English. Although the 'weird sisters' are arguably most famously associated with William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, their literary heritage pre-dates the Elizabethan playwright. In *The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters,* Laura Shamas points out that these beings can be found as early as "The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wynton," written in 1420 (9).[3] Similar to Shakespeare's adaptation, in this initial tale Macbeth instead encounters three weird sisters, rather than witches, who prophesise the end of King Duncan's rule. Shamas pertinently notes that "the Sisters here appear to function as special Seers, or the Fates – not as real women" (Shamas 10); although they seem to have a supernatural quality, they are more aligned with the three goddesses of fate than Shakespeare's witches are. Developing from the 'wyrd,' the weird sisters are analogous to figures such as the Norn due to the emphasis placed on inevitability and inhuman knowledge. As Shamas comments the sisters do not appear to be 'real women,' they are celestial beings and thus circulate in a different sphere of existence. This difference is a crucial starting point to understand the development of the wyrd, as it shifts from referring primarily to inevitable prophecies to focus on a degree of unknowability, a fundamental ontological separation which arises when confronting the Other, essentially the inhuman.

The contrast between the traditional weird sisters and the witches within Shakespeare's interpretation of *Macbeth* straddles the invocation of Lovecraft's aforementioned "certain atmosphere": the presence of "outer, unknown forces" mixed with the "defeat of those fixed laws of Nature" (107). The Norn and weird sisters represent unknowable entities, yet they also are beheld as being all-knowing and as such equally represent the known and unknown. Crucially both are considered as a 'natural' force, an element particularly emphasised in the mythology of the Norn as an intrinsic part of their

role as interpreters of fate. Yet they are distanced from humanity by their incomprehensibility, existing on a separate plane of reality, and thus their unique understanding sets them apart from metaphysical laws as perceived by humans. The later weird monsters of Lovecraft and his contemporaries are akin to this distanced nature of the Norn or weird sisters due to the emphasis placed upon this fundamental separation. The perceived "defeat of those fixed laws of Nature" suggests that this conceived rigidity is in fact entirely contestable, yet Lovecraft's passage does not confirm whether the weird tale involves the unwinding of cosmic laws or in fact humanity's realisation that they previously misunderstood the universe. As such this capitalises upon the prospective horror that the eldritch monster is actually more cosmically innate or 'natural' than humanity. The interest in the unknown or outer qualities of the Weird is one which continues from the Norn into the weird sisters. Shamas comments that the weird sisters' movement within the original text is centrifugal, "one of purposeful retreat away from the centre, as if these three women have other things to do, and other places to be; their real calling is elsewhere, 'Other'" (16). The emphasis Shamas places on multiple iterations of the "Other" denotes this outward trajectory as prioritising the external or "elsewhere" over the present: their prophecy is a small part of their grander function obscured to both the human characters and audience. This action suggests the inevitability of the situation, in which the sisters act as a conduit to convey the preordained future which, to them, is evident due to their elevated insight, which meanwhile appears almost fantastical to the bewildered ears of mortal humans. The invocation of a prophetic tradition interrogates the sisters' interaction within the text, whether their prophecy does indeed influence Macbeth's decision to betray Duncan or if this was an inevitable event irrespective of their intervention.

Shakespeare's weird witches are nevertheless closer to the contemporary usage of the word than the Norn or sisters; their utilisation of language reflects the inherent flaws of this system and its capacity for imperfect articulation, a feature found commonly in Weird expressions of the inarticulable. The foretelling in *Macbeth* acts as a form of equivocation, in which the ambiguity of language permits the potential for interpretation through obscurity. Constructing a form of magical hierarchy, Shakespeare positions the witches as subordinates to Hecate, an action which Shamas notes "extends the archetypal resonance into the

underworld of classic mythology and fairy tales" (35). These women are accordingly no longer the celestial sisters of Fate but are corporeal beings who instead draw upon supernatural power. Shakespeare's witches lack the 'natural' omniscient insight of the archetypal Fates; it is thus unclear whether they accurately predict inevitable events or instead speak to Macbeth's desires. His exclamation that the witches are "imperfect speakers" (I.iii.69) and inquiring the witches "from whence/You owe this strange intelligence" (I.iii.74-75), foregrounds the ambiguity caused by their equivocation. Unlike the intrinsic omniscience of the Norn, Macbeth perceives that the witches draw their knowledge from elsewhere, from an external supernatural source. The lack of conclusive answers differs from a sense of the unknown derived from a separation of ontology, the subversion of a human system rather than the acknowledgement of knowledge beyond understanding. The failure of language to reliably denote meaning requires interpretation and is utilised to obfuscate the prophecy, an alternate version of the unknown in which linguistic representation cannot fully realise conceptualisation. Building from the absence in understanding an ontological unknown, this obscurity is rather an *epistemological* unknown, in which a gap in human knowledge is utilised to convey the sense of something greater, beyond our understanding, by revealing the incapacity of our human linguistic structure to succinctly denote meaning.

The inability to express the situation, in essence the failure of language, is intrinsic to the appearance of the Weird's iconic eldritch monsters which refute attempts to be defined. Entities such as Lovecraft's Shoggoths are depicted as beyond words, another equivocation that disrupts conventional methods of description. In *At the Mountains of Madness*, an expedition to Antarctica results in the discovery of a hidden city at its mountainous peaks. Its derelict halls, composed of non-Euclidean architecture, are explored by the two main characters until they unwittingly encounter a Shoggoth, a sight too horrific to process or explain. Lovecraft self-referentially raises the complexity of describing the visual as "the words reaching the reader can never even suggest the awfulness of the sight itself" (96), theatrically calling attention to the perceived indescribability of the monster. However, Lovecraft contradicts this statement by consequently trying to describe the Shoggoth, arguably an irresistible reaction of the human brain grappling with the sight in an attempt

to produce any coherent or suitable response. The amorphous conglomerate of the Shoggoth's "shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and the myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming" (97) presents a being seemingly in flux between solid and liquid, the description providing an excessively detailed part of the incalculable whole. Language is central to the Weird, the gaps in representation and depiction offering the perfect location for the indescribable. The equivocation of Shakespeare's witches resides in a similar hesitation, the self-conscious utilisation of prophetic gaps rather than the more concrete omniscience of the weird sisters. Graham Harman contends in *Weird Realism* that Lovecraft dwells in this aperture as "no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess" (7), a pertinent comment on the failure to translate the visual into expressible terms. Appropriately this interest in the indescribable mirrors the movement of 'weird' from denoting the known to the unknown, the attempt to depict the obscure through the familiar. This gap runs also back to the witches' language and actions: whilst the objects they utilise may be grotesque yet recognisable, the source and legitimacy of their prophecy is enigmatic.

Language forms a central component of the weird tale. Its self-equivocation gestures to the unfamiliar, to a gap in understanding or absence in knowledge. Shakespeare's incorporation of weird witches instead of the sisters of fate embodies a transition from the inevitable to the inexplicable. The witches are the perfect vehicle for this shift, as their intrinsic semantic association with the supernatural and uncanny, evident in their language, reflects the definition that the *Online Etymology Dictionary* outlines. The appropriation of strange occurrences, into the weird's semantics, intended to be "odd" and "frightening" ("weird, adj."*)* is particularly central to the presentation and spectacle the witches enact upon the stage. As the witches vanish before Macbeth, "into the air; and what seemed corporeal/Melted, as breath into the wind" (I.iii.80-81), their mysteriousness adds a sense of magical performance and the occult to their actions. Yet whilst this reinforces their supernatural nature, the witches also retain an earthly sense, with their connection to the element of the wind, in contrast with the divinity of the Norn or sisters. The disappearance of the witches creates a silent void, avoiding Macbeth's interrogation and eluding any clear

interpretation. Their divination is however imperfect; based off the supernatural spectacle, the witches are merely conduits for a magical performance and as such they cannot match the innate knowledge of the weird sisters. The iconic "double, double, toil and trouble" scene from act four evidently invokes a macabre atmosphere of gore and violent delights with its concoction of poisoned entrails, sweltered venom, eye of newt, scale of dragon and finger of birth-strangled babe. Offering a potent visualisation of the cauldron's contents, the visceral conglomerate twists the celestial prophecies of the Norn into something much darker and more sinister. Although graphic, the witches' power is seemingly derived from earthly ingredients. In fact, whilst each singular item is well documented, its purpose and the resulting outcome are mysterious: akin to the Shoggoth, parts are detailed but the whole is avoided in a fusion of the material and immaterial. The emphasis placed within the play on spectacle, the elaborate invocations and the later macabre spectres, capitalises on the terror of the supernatural, rather than the awe of the celestial, emphasising a developing theatrical or visual centrality to the weird tale.

The spectacle of Shakespeare's weird witches thus reflects the uncanny aesthetic that becomes part of the cluster of meanings surrounding the word weird. Instead of the divinity of the Fates, the witches' prophetic ritual is conveyed through ambiguity: the lack of conclusive answers, the bizarre, sometimes fantastical, mixture of animal parts and their uncertain intent. At the heart of these components is their degree of familiarity: the objects and language of the witches can be grappled with, whilst the Norn lie beyond human understanding. The complexity of the Weird draws on these two strands of the known and unknown, particularly as it begins to subsequently refer to the "partaking of or suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character, unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; uncanny" ("weird," adj., *OED Online*). Of particular interest within this definition is the attention towards the unearthly, inhuman propensity of the term 'weird.' Its alien nature is intended to unsettle, to make the subject uncomfortable at the visual and hinted presence of external influences. These elements combine the celestial separation of the original wyrd figures with the more contemporary utilisation identifiable in the supernatural actions of Shakespeare's witches. The word 'weird' thus expands beyond its traditional denotation of inevitability to the inexplicable; the term becomes suggestive of the mysterious and peculiar,

visuals or experiences outside of discernible and rationalised explanation. Subsequent to this semantic shift, the presence of the term rises in linguistic use as it is used more widely to refer to the strange as identified in the following Google Ngram:
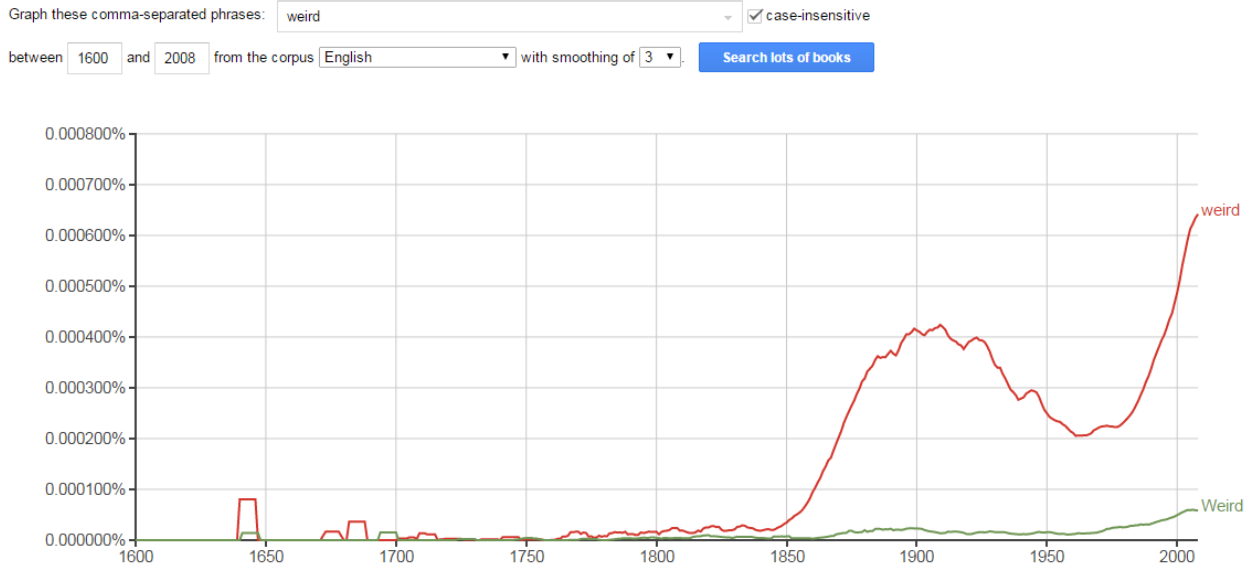


**Figure 1: Google Ngram of the Word 'weird.' ("Google Books Ngram Viewer,"**
***Google*. 19 August. 2016)**

The Ngram graph indicates an increase in usage of the word 'weird' around the mid-to-late 1700s, before a sharp increase beginning in the 1850s. The increasing presence of the term 'weird' in the English language within this period is, sadly, beyond the immediate scope of this article. However, during this time-frame the weird tale becomes more recognisable by its contemporary definition. For example, the narrator within Louisa May Alcott's short story "Lost in a Pyramid" (1869) describes the upcoming recount as a "weird story" to which another character responds that "I like weird tales, and they never trouble me." The following story of ancient Egyptian supernatural horrors is evidently more akin to the contemporary Weird, as the term shifts in meaning and indeed even has a reputation for 'troubling' the reader. This intended affect reinforces the suggestive and allusive side of the Weird, a quality that Lovecraft outlined as a fundamental aspect of the tale as "atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction" ("Notes on Writing Weird Fiction"). By the start of the twentieth century 'weird' itself has shifted in meaning alongside the

consolidation of the contemporary weird tale. Although such founding authors as James, Machen or Hodgson towards the end of the nineteenth century would not self-consciously identify as Weird writers, the associated terminology does creep into their fiction. Algernon Blackwood's "A Descent into Egypt" (1914) in particular suggests that "there was a weirdness in [Egypt]" (*Incredible Adventures* 262), conclusively summarising the uneasy and apprehensive atmosphere of the tale. The application of 'weird' in fantastical texts has apparently moved from the inevitable to the inexplicable, shifting from the concrete known to the interpretive.

These developments begin to mark the emergence of the contemporary weird tale, inspired heavily by specific hermetic investigations of the late Victorian period. Although there is insufficient space in this article for a deeper investigation, interest in cultural performances such as phantasmagoria/magic lantern shows, or esoteric fascination with the occult and astral plane are parallel to the formation of the weird tale. The establishment of such organisations as The Theosophical Society in 1875 and The Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn in 1887 reflects an increasing literary and cultural enthusiasm for the occult unknown. Indeed, Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, argued for "an etheric, astral, or akashic level of reality, which exists just beyond the ordinary gross sphere of material nature" (*Ghosts, Spirits and Psychics: The Paranormal from Alchemy to Zombies* 4). This belief recalls the division between the known and unknown that has been discussed throughout this article, from the divinity of the Fates to the supernatural invocations of the witches. This late nineteenth and early twentieth century fascination would feature prominently in many early examples of weird tales – such as Machen's "The Great God Pan" (1894), Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908) or Lovecraft's "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (1919) – all of which, to some degree, engage with the concept of perceiving a realm of existence beyond the material. The influx of weird tales draws on this movement from the inevitable to the inexplicable, capitalising on a particular cultural moment where the term's increased post-1850 usage coincides with developing interest in the "outer unknown" Lovecraft identified.

This period consequently has been widely termed as the 'golden age' of the weird tale. Joshi in *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* seeks to grapple with its development outside of Lovecraft's legacy and in fact pays attention to many writers he feels were overlooked in "Supernatural Horror in Literature." His assessment that "in contemplating post-Lovecraftian weird fiction, it is difficult to resist concluding that we have entered a definite "Silver Age" that reveals a marked falling-off of quality and richness from the "Golden Age"" (8) draws attention to both the centrality of Lovecraft to this field and a suggested subsequent decline of Weird Fiction. As the Ngram displays a sharp decrease in the linguistic use of the term 'weird' around both of the world wars and particularly the end of *Weird Tales'* original publication run in 1940, this parallel, whilst not offering conclusive proof of decline, presents a pertinent topic of investigation. In particular, its occurrence just before the New Wave of Science Fiction and such evidently Weird texts as Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1972), with its alluring and empirically incalculable zone, provokes an interesting avenue of inquiry. Yet the weird tale has developed throughout its history. In particular, as this article has aimed to established, an overly descriptive definition of the weird tale would overlook the form's inherent nuance for change or adaptation and as such limit its own versatility. The Ngram's pre-millennial increase indeed mirrors a contemporary expansion of popular and literary interest, as exemplified by Cthulhu merchandise, Weird anthologies and the New Weird, that principally reflect an enduring cultural relevance that reaches across a range of media formats such as video games, roleplay, film and podcasts to name just a few. Therefore, whilst Joshi does provide an extensive and detailed history, I would instead suggest that the weird tale is an enduring and developing format, one whose application will always be pertinent to the method in which uncanny, strange or unusual events in daily life are conceptualised.

So why is etymology important or valuable, is it able to provide us with an alternate perspective of the weird tale? As demonstrated throughout the article, Weird writers are often very self-aware of their intent and the visceral affect of their work. Appropriately, the VanderMeers' *The Weird* anthology concludes with an afterword, or more precisely "Afterweird," by Miéville who acknowledges the linguistic roots of the term as "we need to access the innards of whatever we would understand" (1112). He asks "if the shift that

occurred some time in the 19th Century is not an evolution of meaning but a cleft, a repudiation, a revolution, a violence, a break?" (1114). Evidently, the linguistic and literary history of the genre's name with its associated terms and denotations is a prospective burden that contemporary Weird writers/critics are both aware of and anxious about. Although appropriate caution should be taken, given the evident self-implication of both writer and critic, Miéville does point out that the semantic shift could be a separation rather than a continuation. As such his provocative questioning of "what if etymology is fucking useless?" (1114), offers an undeniable challenge to the methods through which the Weird's history and identity are engaged with by scholars. Similar to the reticence of producing a definitive definition of the Weird, evidently Miéville himself as writer and critic is aware of the restrictive trappings of retroactive classification. Although a valid concern, I would argue that etymology provides a valuable perspective as, rather than attempting to systematise or identify core Weird aspects, it instead demonstrates how the base term has changed.

What Miéville does point out is the voraciousness of the term. Weird creeps into parts of daily life so that mundane events are called 'weird,' certain actions or tales have an element of 'weirdness' about them and as such the word has become so invested in the way we think about the division between the known and unknown, the familiar and strange, that it is virtually commonplace. Indeed, the New Weird's continual unearthly spin on reality is situated alongside other forms and genres, particularly Postmodernism and Science Fiction (authors such as Philip K. Dick or Haruki Murakami) which whilst not chiefly Weird, do have a distinctly eerie quality to them. Mariana Warner comments that "even when we profess agnosticism if not unbelief in a supernatural order, we are the inheritors of much classical cosmology and medieval philosophy about spirit and soul – in unconscious ways and in common parlance" (*Phantasmagoria* 9). In many ways then the inexplicable is inherently ingrained into our cultural matrix, whether this be a perception of dislocation, unease or transcendental awe, the sense of the unknown continues to drive human progression.

As this article has set out, the term weird has shifted from its original application, gaining new semantic meaning and indeed becoming the identifying cornerstone for a certain stream of fiction. I contend that understanding this inherent fluidity helps develop

an appreciation of the Weird's evolution and adaptability. Like Fantastika, the weird tale continuously draws upon diverse sources, their fundamental progressive momentum reaching towards new methods of replicating the fantastical and strange. Although the length of this article has not allowed for a comprehensive discussion of why the word 'weird' experienced such a dramatic increase post-1850, the alignment of similar investigations such as those of the occult, theosophy and pseudo-science undeniably reach out to the incalculability of the unknown. Following on from and responding against the advocation of individual reason as cardinal in the Age of Enlightenment, these investigations interrogate the validity of empirical interpretation, and are instead drawn to the allure of the ineffable. Examining the linguistic roots of 'weird' offers another dimension to Weird studies, exposing its complex interweave; etymology therefore offers an illumination of the term's origins and by no means limits the Weird's future, indeed enhancing our awareness of its quintessential flexibility. Liminal literary categories such as Fantastika and the Weird thus offer an alternative mode of reading, as by challenging rigid compartmentalisation they celebrate an opening up of imaginative vistas rather than the restriction of imposing boundaries. The mode's umbrella-like nature is to be celebrated, as it permits an otherwise unavailable malleability; a vibrant fusion in which the known and unknown meet, continually pushing against notions of the inexplicable other.

**Notes**

**1.** Throughout the article, for distinction, I will refer to the contemporarily recognised literary form as a capitalised Weird and retain lower-case for the more descriptive pre-cursor, i.e. a weird tale vs. the Weird.

**2.** The New Weird generally refers to a wave of Weird fiction operating since the start of the twenty-first century. However, its validity has been questioned by critics and authors, such as Miéville, who have cautioned against its use as a marketing strategy. The term was coined during an online forum discussion that included participation from many influential writers within the field. An archived version may be found in the VanderMeers' *The New Weird* anthology.

**3.** For this article, I will refer to the 'weird sisters' as the original interpretation – which are more similar to the three Fates – and use 'weird witches' to denote the more supernatural Shakespearian interpretation within *Macbeth*.

**Works Cited**

Alcott, Louisa May. "Lost in a Pyramid, or the Mummy's Curse." 1869. Project Gutenburg Australia. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0603041h.html> Ebook. Accessed on 20 November 2016.

Blackwood, Algernon. "A Descent into Egypt." 1914. *Incredible Adventures*. Project Gutenburg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/43816> Ebook. Accessed on 19 August 2016.

Cardin, Matt. *Ghosts, Spirits and Psychics: The Paranormal from Alchemy to Zombies.* ABC-CLIO, 2015.

Dunsany, Lord. *In the Land of Time and Other Fantasy Tales*. Penguin Books, 2004.

"Google Books Ngram Viewer," *Google*, 2016. <https://books.google.com/ngrams> Accessed 19 August 2016.

Harman, Graham. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. John Hunt Publishing, 2012.

Jochens, Jenny. *Old Norse Images of Women.* University of Philadelphia Press, 1996.

Joshi, S. T. *The Evolution of the Weird Tale.* Hippocampus Press, 2004.

---. *The Weird Tale.* Wildside Press, 1990.

Lovecraft, H. P. *At the Mountains of Madness*. The Modern Library, 2005.

---. *H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3 The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2000.

---. "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction." *The H. P. Lovecraft Archive*. < www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx> Accessed 18 August 2016.

---. "Supernatural Horror in Literature." *At the Mountains of Madness*. The Modern Library, 2005.

Miéville, China. "Afterweird: 'The Efficacy of a Worm-eaten Dictionary.'" *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*. Eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer. Atlantic Books, 2011.

---. *The City & the City*. Macmillan. 2009.

---. "Weird Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. Eds. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint. Routledge. London. 2009. pp. 510-15.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth.* 1606. Penguin Books, 2015.

Shamas, Laura. *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters*. Peter Lang, 2007.

VanderMeer, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. *The New Weird.* Tachyon Publications, 2008.

---. *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*. Atlantic Books, 2011. Kindle.

Warner, Mariana. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty -first Century*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

"weird, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2016. Web. 13 August 2016.

"weird, adj." *Online Etymology Dictionary.*
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=weird&allowed_in_frame=0>
Accessed 5 September 2016.

"weird, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2016. Web. 22 August 2016.

**Bionote**

Kerry Dodd is a PhD researcher at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, entitled 'The Archaeological Weird: Exhuming the Inhuman,' examines the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Kerry also works more widely in the fields of: Science Fiction (particularly Cosmic Horror and Cyberpunk), the Gothic, and digital narratives.

# The Weird in Fantastika: Grotesque Aesthetics and Disrupting Anthropocentricism

## Claire Quigley

"The appeal of the weird story is precisely that it is designed to disturb," claims esteemed Science Fiction author Michael Moorcock ("Forweird" xiii). But what is Weird Fiction, how exactly does it disturb, and why is this disturbance important? My aim here is to highlight the way in which Weird Fiction disrupts anthropocentric perceptions of the world. The Weird achieves this through its inclusion of unsettling narrative content and themes. I would argue that the uneasy nature of the Weird is a dynamic force that acts upon the reader, piercing their comfortable understanding of the world. Thus, the Weird exposes the darkness of reality by revealing that the universe is not, in fact, under human mastery. I will first consider Weird Fiction within the space of Fantastika, looking at how Weird Fiction fits into Fantastika and the role it plays within that framework. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the aesthetics of the Weird open a path for contemporary literary scholarship to renew and transform its focus on materiality. This is achieved in the Weird through an emphasis on disgust, the grotesque and fear of contamination. I argue that an amalgamation of these components, as they coalesce within the Weird, results in a destabilisation of anthropocentric ways of seeing and thinking about the world. This challenge to anthropocentricism is crucial because the human subject naturally perceives the world through a human-centric lens. However, the narratives of the Weird allude to a world much larger than previously assumed: a much darker reality, from the vastness of the unknown expanse of space to the unseen systems that form the human/nonhuman worlds.

Regarding the textual and philosophical roots of Weird Fiction, the work of Horror scholars Roger Luckhurst, S. T. Joshi and Eugene Thacker will be examined. I will also look at a shift towards materiality and a focus on nonhuman entities in critical theory. N. Katherine Hayles's *How we Became Posthuman* (1999) will be used as a starting point of an exploration into contemporary theories of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. The

theories of contemporary thinkers Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett will be addressed to consider the limitations of anthropocentric outlooks, as such viewpoints privilege human-centric ways of thinking. These anthropocentric perspectives are not inherently malicious but rather they are the default views that stem from human consciousness: as Thacker puts it, "after all, being human, how else would we make sense of the world?" (*In the Dust of This Planet* 4). Rather than favouring human experience above all else, Speculative Realist approaches instead offer a worldview that accounts for the significance of nonhuman beings, and the connections between human and nonhuman entities. Finally, I will offer a close reading of the novella *The Beauty* (2014) by contemporary British author Aliya Whiteley. I will use Whiteley's text to support my arguments regarding the Weird, as *The Beauty* exemplifies the results of the thematic and aesthetic workings of the Weird within a text.

Weird Fiction fits under the umbrella of Fantastika because it is a genre that moves freely between the "three main forms of fantastika," as set out by John Clute in his talk "Fantastika in the World Storm," given in 2007 (n.p.). According to Clute, these three forms consist of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror as models. The issue with Weird Fiction is that it is a slightly tricky subject to discuss because it is not a 'genre' in the traditional sense. At its most basic, Weird Fiction is a mode of literature that borrows elements from other genre fictions. It adopts aspects from genres such as Science Fiction, Urban Fantasy, and Horror, often with Fabulist elements and some Magical Realism sprinkled in. Notable examples of Weird Fiction include Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014), and China Miéville's *Bas-Lag* series, including *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and *The Scar* (2002). These novels could be classified as Fantastika, though they do not sit comfortably as strictly Science Fiction or Fantasy.

I do not intend to artlessly affix Weird Fiction to this list as a 'fourth' mode of Fantastika. Such a move would not be necessary, or even helpful, because Weird Fiction is not a stable category. Weird Fiction does not consist of identifiable themes and tropes, but rather it is an open, fluid system with no fixed parameters. This characteristic of Weird Fiction undeniably makes it difficult to define, but from this fluidity Weird Fiction also

garners its strength, as it is this precise fluidity that marks the uniqueness of weird literature. Indeed, Roger Luckhurst stresses that Weird Fiction "concerns liminal things, in-between states, transgressions always on the verge of turning into something else," thus Weird Fiction is difficult to define "because it focuses on the horrors of what is hard to define" (xvi). Weird Fiction lives between genres, but its fluid nature also blurs the boundaries that split these genres – boundaries that were never quite stable to begin with. The aesthetics of the Weird exposes the fluidity between genre fictions, but also goes a step further in that it subverts the separation of "genre" fiction and "literary" fiction, so that the parameters of these categories are constantly shifting and rearranging. This blurring of genre and literary fictions can be seen in the work of authors like Karen Russell and Kelly Link. This is why it is useful to think of Weird Fiction as a 'liquid genre,' perpetually moving between more established genres and modes, such as Horror or Magical Realism, picking up different aspects from a wide range of literary forms, but never staying fixed in one permanent state.

Throughout this article, the terms "Weird Fiction" and "the Weird" will be both used, and though these terms are closely related, they are not interchangeable. A work of Weird Fiction does not have to be exclusively categorised as a "Weird text," so it could be Weird and Fabulist fiction, or Weird Fiction and Horror. This is why the texts comprising Weird Fiction constitute a fluid body that blurs traditional genre categories. It reifies the already fuzzy lines between more traditional genres, whereas the Weird is better understood as a literary mode. The Weird is a destabilising entity, as well as blurring genre boundaries it also causes disruption by psychologically unsettling the reader or audience of a given text. This disruptive quality of the Weird is identified through a nagging sense of dread, an uneasiness that creeps into a text and weaves through it. The reader, then, senses something more dark and sinister lurking beneath the surface narrative. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, co-editors of *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (2012), argue with some finesse that "the Weird is as much a *sensation* as it is a mode of writing" (xvi). The Weird does not operate on the level of a cheap jump-scare or a suspenseful thriller, rather, its unsettling aspect does not necessarily derive from plot, but also from the tone and themes of a Weird text.

Furthermore, the disturbing and sinister force of the Weird draws attention to the unknown quality of the world, and the universe at large. Consequently, the reader feels unsettled by the Weird but cannot fully comprehend or articulate why. This, in turn, emphasises the inherently limited nature of human consciousness and human understanding, which results in the realisation that any human viewpoint is not necessarily privileged or unique. Being human does not imply mastery of all knowledge, as there are so many intricate processes at play in the impossibly immense cosmos, that the primate human brain simply cannot comprehend it all. Importantly, in "Fantastika in the World Storm" Clute argues that, "the greatest danger we face" is a "peace that feels good, because in any human being an internal peace that takes it easy – that does not constantly wrest clarity from the magma and nightmare of the souls within us … is exactly amnesia" (n.p.). The merit of the Weird becomes clear when, regarding Clute's words, the Weird mode enables Weird Fiction to remain unsettling, thus ensuring that the reader never feels at ease. Rather, the reader is constantly on edge within the fluctuating push-and-pull nature of the Weird, seeking to find a glimpse of clarity within its murky space. Considering the stories collected in *The Weird: A Compendium,* Michael Moorcock notes, "what is good about the majority of these stories is precisely that they leave you with many more questions than answers, the mark, in my view, of a superior kind of fiction" (xii). In works of Weird Fiction the security of anthropocentric narrative is troubled by the disruptive forces at play within the text, which thrive on rendering previously discrete categories unstable so that the reader's desire for internal peace is impossible to fulfil.

Weird Fiction is a diverse body of literature, and is currently thriving amongst and alongside contemporary Science Fiction and Fantasy writing. One of the best places to start with in an assessment of the Weird is the imposing figure of H.P. Lovecraft. Although Weird Fiction has its roots in the works of Lovecraft's influences, such as the "richly poetic cast" of Edgar Allan Poe's dark mysteries or the "malignly supernatural" tales of Ambrose Bierce that formed "a leading element in America's fund of weird literature," it is undoubtedly Lovecraft who popularised the genre ("Supernatural Horror in Literature" 136-44). Lovecraft's "weird tales" were published in the American pulp magazines of the early twentieth century, and though his work was initially dismissed during his lifetime, it is now almost universally

acknowledged that "Lovecraft fundamentally defined the shape of his chosen literary field," as China Miéville insists (*At the Mountains of Madness* xi). The reason why Lovecraft's influence remains so prominent is not only due to his written material in and of itself, but also from the philosophies many scholars have extracted from his texts.

S. T. Joshi argues that Lovecraft's particular outlook is one of materialism, and stresses that this philosophy is essential to Lovecraft's work and underpins his tales of cosmic horror. Although Lovecraft himself did not ascribe to a definite school of philosophical thought, a materialist thread throughout his fiction has been observed by contemporary readers. Joshi enthusiastically promotes Lovecraft's materialism, whilst Graham Harman, in his text *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), maintains that Lovecraft's fiction does not espouse a "scientistic materialism whose goal is the dissolution of mystery," but rather "it is a materialism that joins modern science to a long history of baffled alchemists and mystics" (58). Taken this way, Lovecraft's materialism has the additional feature of dealing a blow to anthropocentric understandings of the world, as Joshi emphasises the fact that the material laws of the universe do require humans to understand them in order to operate. As Roger Luckhurst maintains, "the clearest position Lovecraft came to articulate, though, was cosmic indifferentism" (xxii).

Furthermore, Joshi goes on to point out that Lovecraft's materialism "virtually necessitated the central conception in his aesthetic of the weird" (xv). This aesthetic is known as "cosmicism" and, according to Joshi, cosmicism operates through "the suggestion of the vast gulfs of space and time and the resultant inconsequence of the human species" (xv). The genius of Lovecraft stems from his particular strain of Weird cosmic horror and the darkness of his work manifests in the fact that the human characters of his stories act and exist in a fundamentally uncaring universe. Lovecraft's monstrous imaginings, such as the Old Ones and the infamous entity Cthulhu illustrate the inexplicable complexities of a disturbing universe, one which is, at best, apathetic to the live of individuals, and indifferent towards the human race as a whole.

Interpretations of both Lovecraft's materialism and his aesthetic of cosmicism have proven highly influential in contemporary accounts of the Weird. Of particular significance is the contribution of Lovecraft's stories to the Weird's custom of destabilising the false comfort offered by anthropocentric worldviews. Luckhurst suggests that Lovecraft's "fiction has been read as an attempt to think outside the subject," which results in giving "priority to the weirdness of the object world" (xxiii). Therefore, a turn away from anthropocentricism is inherent within the Weird, since Weird Fiction dethrones human consciousness as the most important force on offer in the universe by exposing the complex vastness of the cosmos, and exploring the dark entities within. However, cosmic horror is not the only aesthetic avenue through which Weird Fiction unseats human consciousness from its apparently universal centrality. Additionally, the very base materiality of the nonhuman world presented in Weird texts unsettles the human-centric view. In fact, the Weird suggests a path forward for theory, as it emphasises the value of the materiality of the world and credits both human and nonhuman entities with subjective agency.

N. Katherine Hayles famously declared in her influential text *How We Became Posthuman* that her aim is to "put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased by contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects," and that her ambition for contemporary scholarship is a theory "that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity" (5). Weird Fiction foregrounds the materiality of the world in two primary ways. First, it destabilises anthropocentricism through blurring boundaries between human and nonhuman beings. The nonhuman subject in the Weird can be understood through the lens of theories of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology (or OOO), a philosophy which posits that there is nothing inherently "special" about being human by means of focusing on the significance of nonhuman experience. Timothy Morton, a prominent figure in the OOO movement, states that Object-Oriented Ontology is "an emerging philosophical movement committed to a unique form of realism and non-anthropocentric thinking" (*Hyperobjects* 2). In his recent publication, *Dark Ecology* (2016), Morton states the basis for understanding OOO is that, "there is no intrinsic superiority of human ways of accessing the thing" (*Dark Ecology* 18). This echoes Eugene Thacker's assertion in *In the Dust of this Planet* (2011), that "when the non-human world manifests

itself to us ... more often than not our response is to recuperate that non-human world into whatever the dominant, human-centric worldview is at the time" (4). The Weird breaks free of this urge to pin down uncertain, nonhuman entities by undermining anthropocentricism as a viable worldview. Take Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" for example, in which a Norwegian sailor details an encounter with a monstrous being so unrecognisable and overwhelming, that the horror of such an apparition shatters his understanding of the world. However, as Miéville argues, Lovecraft's "materialism means it is not just in his creatures that horror lies, but in the material reality of which they are a part" (*At the Mountains of Madness* xvi). This statement can be extended to contemporary Weird Fiction, where the material, nonhuman world is portrayed with its own inherent agency, such that the nonhuman world functions of its own accord without human intervention.

Another way that the Weird emphasises the importance of materiality is that it draws attention to the physicality of the embodied subject. Weird Fiction is extremely concerned with the materiality of the body, and how that body (both human and nonhuman) exists and interacts within the wider, physical world. In fact, Jeff VanderMeer points out that the body-horror films of the 1980s, such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), have been significant influences on contemporary Weird Fiction. China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* draws on the visceral nature of bodily transformation in those films. In Miéville's novel, for instance, the character David Serachin pays a visit to a seedy brothel in the depths of the city. This place is populated by those labelled "Remade," individuals whose bodies have been torn apart and rebuilt to form monstrous hybrid creatures. This scene is not intended to achieve a cheap shock at its vulgarity, but its purpose is to slowly unsettle and disturb, as the reader follows David through the halls of the brothel, where "time was stretched out and sticky in this corridor, like rancid treacle ... It was like a nightmare garden. Each room contained some unique flesh-flower, blossom of torture" (416). Here, Miéville's imagery and language subverts the reader's expectations. Typically, allusions to flowers and the natural world are romanticised in grandiose terms, but this scene operates in a Weird mode, which twists nature to lay bare its sinister quality. What's more, the disgust David feels at the sight of the Remade alters his perception of the world. The protagonist's confrontation with these disconcerting images warp his experience of

time, turning it into a tangible, "sticky," and harrowing dimension. Thus Miéville employs the Weird's quality of dislocation to great effect, whereby disturbing language and imagery leads to an awareness of the strange forces in the world.

Moreover, the concern with the physicality of the material body leads on to a key feature of the Weird, namely, the significance of the grotesque. The grotesque in Weird Fiction is often expressed as primal disgust. Luckhurst insists that, "at the heart of the Weird, then, is a dynamic of the sublime and the disgusting or grotesque," and the reason why the grotesque is so offensive is because grotesque entities "violate boundaries, commit category errors, mix up illegitimate elements" (xviii). Importantly, disgust in Weird Fiction stems from a fear of contamination, and particularly disgust felt by human subjects who come in contact with contaminants outside the body, resulting in a fear that their body will become polluted by disturbing substances. These contaminants take many forms in various weird texts, but the substance is always a nonhuman object or material, often taking the form of a liquid, a vapour or a spore. Common transmitters of disgust include slime and fungus.

Fungal forms and substances are particularly notable focuses of disgust in weird fiction. The starting-point for the study of fungoid fiction is typically William Hope Hodgson's short story "The Voice in the Night" from 1907. The bizarre topic of fungus, though, has afforded enough material for Orrin Grey and Silvia Moreno-Garcia to compile an anthology of fungoid fiction in 2012, titled simply *Fungi*, stating in their introduction that "there's a small but persistent fungal thread that runs, mycelium-like, through the history of weird fiction" (7). Certainly, a fascination with the grotesque and disgustingly inexplicable nature of the fungoid still proves fruitful today, with fungus providing the basis for texts from the best-selling novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* by M.R. Carey, to Aliya Whiteley's niche novella *The Beauty*, both published in 2014. I will now turn to examine the idea of the grotesque more broadly, before considering the impact its disturbing nature has in Whiteley's tale of fungoid horror.

In *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (1989)*,* Bernard McElroy maps out the two principal meanings of the term 'grotesque' when he states, "in its most literal sense, it refers

to a type of decorative art combining human features with lithe beasts and fantastic birds," however the grotesque "in colloquial usage, can mean almost anything unseemly, disproportionate, or in bad taste" (1). In Weird Fiction, the grotesque often manifests in line with both these definitions. The Weird is often concerned with the "unseemly" nature of fungus and slime, whilst the grotesque is usually revealed within a Weird text through the metamorphosis of a human body into a bestial form. For example, this turn from human to animal is a central concern in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. When the characters entre a strange landscape known as Area X, they each undergo a bodily transformation due to the influence of the "pristine, empty wilderness" (*Annihilation* 55). In *Authority,* the second book of the series, the protagonist, Control, is confronted with a grotesque artwork painted by an unhinged colleague who has returned from Area X. This artwork is "grotesque" in both classical and colloquial senses, as the figures depicted in the work are human-animal hybrids. The art also serves to disgust and unsettle Control as he gazes upon the atrocious images, "along the wall and part of the ceiling, someone had painted a vast phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces … deep and blues and greens and yellows, to form approximation of bodies" (*Authority* 273).

The grotesque is a prominent feature of the Weird, since it is from the grotesque that visceral disgust and revulsion stem. McElroy asserts that "the grotesque arises from a peculiar attitude or stance of mind toward the fearsome," such that disgust is accompanied by fear of contamination, as the infiltration of human subject by a nonhuman substance destabilises any tenable notion of a stable human identity (ix). Through contamination by fungus or slime, the human body can no longer provide a clear barrier between the human and nonhuman, nor between the self and other. This dynamic of uncertainly and unstable identity is an essential feature of the Weird.  In *Slime Dynamics* (2012) Ben Woodard argues that "there has always been an attempt to externalise ooze and slime and sludge but this effort cannot grasp nor undo the sliminess of slime as internal to life itself" (13). This identity crisis on the part of the human subject is brought about by a slime-like contaminant, since as Woodard notes, "humans gradually ascended from these clustered ponds of ooze" yet attempt to "escape our sliminess through culture, aesthetics, judicial systems, piety, abstinence, or the next life if need be" (1-2). Human beings attempt to remove themselves

from the primordial ooze from which all life on earth emerged, to distance themselves from this past. The threat of contamination by any slimy nonhuman substance is met, therefore, with disgust because its very presence disrupts any understanding of a world in which the human is privileged. This primordial ooze is a reminder of the pertinence of the nonhuman world, as it communicates to the human subject that there is nothing unique about being human. All life comes from the same slime.

Yet, as Woodard observes, "the slime and ooze from which we came is not so unsettling" because, though the knowledge of this slime destabilises anthropocentricism, the human subject can still feel relatively stable due to the fact that this primordial ooze is thought of as "dead matter" (14). However, Woodard also points out that "the slime mould, the fungus, appears as the same kind of matter but that which is active of its own accord," and therefore is forcefully unsettling for the human subject to comprehend. Fungus operates with "a mind of its own," so to speak, and thus is understood to have an agency of its own, outside the human (14). Fungus is a destabilising type of lifeform because it does not fit neatly into the animal-plant binary as understood by humans. In fact, fungus aptly embodies the essence of the Weird due to its inability to slot neatly into discrete categorisation. It has no skeletal structure nor internal organs, but is more closely related to animal (and, therefore, to human) life than it is to plant-life.

Mushrooms can be nourishing and perfectly safe to ingest, but can also be fatally poisonous, and at times it can be nearly impossible to tell the difference between the two. Woodward insists that "the intertwining of life and death has long been a mark of fungoid existence," as fungus thrives in darkness and "dissolves inorganic structures" (27-29). Therefore, Woodard concludes that "fungus is representative of death and not another form of life," so unsettling is fungus that it subverts the apparent unquestionable binary of life and death (29). In fact, the deterioration of the distinction between life and death is the starting point for Aliya Whiteley's fungoid tale *The Beauty*. Whiteley's novella tells the story of a small village of men who reside in the Valley of the Rocks. The women of the village have all recently perished after developing a fatal fungal infection, such that the only remaining inhabitants of the Valley of the Rocks are all men. The narrator of the story, Nate, is old

enough to remember the women, including his mother, but young enough not to have well-formed memories of them. Nate's role in the village is as storyteller, and so he attempts to make sense of this new womanless world, and give some sort of meaning to the lives of the men. The theme of storytelling is recurrent throughout *The Beauty,* as Nate struggles to create meaning for this new phase of life by presenting the idea of women as myth: "only six years have passed and yet I mythologize them as if it is six hundred" (1). Throughout the novel, Nate struggles to find new stories that appropriately frame the now-womanless world, failing to find any language that reflects this new world. Nate observes that "language is changing, like the earth, like the sea. We live in a lonely, fateful flux, outnumbered and outgrown" (1-2). Language helps shape the world from a human perspective, but language comes under stress in the Weird and breaks down, unable to describe the strangeness of the world in any meaningful way. The old narratives that helped shape human culture no longer apply, yet neither can new stories be formed, as Nate solemnly affirms, "and now we are part of nothing. There are no more stories. I can make no words" (21). When faced with an inexplicable incident or sensation, in this case the trauma of losing the women, the Weird manifests as that which is impossible to articulate.

The lack of any female presence in the village is profoundly registered as a "gap felt when the world has women ripped from it" (16). The yellow fungus that killed the women is, from the outset, presented as a distinctly feminine disease. Nate recalls the fungus that consumed the women six years ago, and remembers, "Miriam died early on, one of the first, with the yellow fungus thick on her nose and tongue. It crawled out from her womb and down her legs" (2). The fungus is clearly depicted as an aggressive bodily invasion, it is a gross contaminant that breaks through the body and, in turn, breaks down the body. It is telling that the yellow fungus creeps out from Miriam's nose, her mouth and her womb. The fungal infection has invaded the body through open orifices, thus exposing the human body as a porous and unstable membrane, rather than a fixed entity. The opening of the mouth and nose shatters any illusion that the body is a self-contained and stable unit, since the presence of bodily orifices continually remind the human subject that there are gaps in the body, holes that can bestow external substances and entities passage inside the body. Furthermore, the fungus is explicitly tied to the female anatomy, confusing the bodily barrier

between the internal and external. When Nate states that the fungus "crawled out from her womb," the origin of the fungus is ambiguous: did the fungal infection start *inside* the uterus, as a biological function of the body itself? Or did the fungus contaminate the body through open orifices, occupying the human body as a host to a foreign pollutant, nesting within the uterine interior before breaking out to take over the rest of the woman's physical form? These questions are never resolved, so this uncertainty of the fungal origin hangs tentatively throughout the course of the novella.

Regardless of the true origin of the deadly yellow fungus, Nate has witnessed the damage its contamination can wreak. Although the damage has so far only happened to women, he remains wary of nature's readiness to adapt. Nate observes the flippant attitude of a younger boy, Thomas, noting that the fungus has "become safe" to the younger generation and Thomas has "never considered the idea that it might grow, change, come for us men one day" (7). This concern of Nate's, that the fungus may adapt and change, is a way into his broader understanding on the fluctuating nature of the wide world. The fungus will not stand still, nature does not stand still and thus life does not stand still. Writing on the philosophy of Horror fiction, Eugene Thacker offers F.W.J. Schelling's idea of the state of nature, stating "nature for Schelling was that 'something' that was not in itself anything, a unity without boundary constituted entirely of process, becoming flux and flow – a "ground" of the world that was continually ungrounding itself" (*Tentacles Longer Than Night* 143). This view of nature embodies Nate's own idea of the natural world, for it is not something that can be categorised and pinned down, nor can nature be understood through human rationale. In true Weird fashion, the women's deaths are inexplicable, as the experience of such a trauma defies human reason and uncovers the uncaring condition of the cosmos.

*The Beauty* also explores the fluctuating nature of human society and culture. Rather than sticking to a strict nature/culture binary, where culture is a manmade sphere entirely separate from nature, Nate explicitly links the two by drawing on his role as the storyteller. "Stories are slippery as seasons," he observes, "it's beyond my power to make either stand still" (10). Therefore, nature cannot be "tamed" by culture or by language, since both nature and culture are fluid categories. In *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* (2014), Dylan Trigg

suggests that culture is a key component to the construction of human identity, noting that "the human subject finds itself in a world. There, it recognises itself as having a history that predates its own birth … In time, the subject incorporates fragments of a history into a formulation of a self. The history is transmitted in time through the practice of cultural traditions" (27). But in *The Beauty*, the formation of identity through history and culture has failed as the deaths of the women have altered the men's understanding of themselves and their history. Nature adapts and grows, and so must human culture, even if this growth means the deconstruction of the security previously granted by an anthropocentric understanding of the world.

Human history and culture are changed in *The Beauty*, in which humanity is bestowed with a brand new creation myth. Unlike the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, where human beings are dragged away from their ideal union with nature, the creation myth of *The Beauty* is one in which nature plays an essential role. The death of the women was both natural and unnatural. It is natural in the sense that a fungus (rather than, say, a man-made chemical) took the lives of these women, but also unnatural in that the absence of the women is dislocating and traumatic for the men left behind. In this way, the deaths of the women can be read as a rupture in cultural and historical human narratives, a break in the apparently linear progress of human history. The inhabitants of the Valley of the Rocks have suffered an indescribable trauma, and thus cannot return to culture and creation as previously understood, since those grand narratives have failed them. Instead, a new understanding of the human condition must be drawn up, one in which the men are inescapably linked to an un-romanticised nature, rather than detached from it. Therefore, the new world order that emerges in *The Beauty* is a human culture that conceptually aligns with Speculative Realism, as it displaces the previous closed-off and limiting anthropocentricism and replaces it with a human assimilation into nature.

The new creation myth put forth in *The Beauty* is an assimilation of humanity, and specifically biological males, into nature. The historical and cultural narratives are no longer controlled by men, as indicated by Nate's crisis as storyteller. Nate's first encounter with the Beauty (an entity that presents as a female fungoid figure) has obvious parallels with the

"Book of Genesis," as he finds himself lost in the forest, in awe of the spectacle and wonder of the natural world. Yet this particular myth is rife with oedipal underpinnings, exemplified by the comfort Nate feels listening to a soothing humming noise that infiltrates his mind. For instance, he describes this noise as a "mother-hum." In a dream-like state, Nate begins his incorporation into the natural world by consuming food produced by unhindered nature, "the smell of food cuts through me. Three apples and a honeycomb ... As I eat, the humming returns, pleasant and disjointed ... I eat and listen to the humming, and when the last mouthful of apple is gone, the core and pips inside me, I think of how to tell this story when I get free" (18). Nate's consumption of the apples echoes Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden, but his feasting is not presented in terms of morality or sin. Rather it is representative of how human and nonhuman entities can be intrinsically linked. In her book on speculative realism, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett states, "human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other" – thus, eating is presented as a human-nonhuman dialogue (29). Furthermore, Bennett stresses that "eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry ... you both are and are not what you eat" (49). Therefore, this act of eating represents the starting point for breakdown of traditional binaries, the boundaries between men and women, between nature and culture, and between human and nonhuman are destabilised in Nate's consumption. As the storyteller, Nate realises the language of the old world is insufficient to encapsulate this new experience, conceding that "every word I use, every turn of phrase I fit together in my head is wrong" (18). Once again, the tradition of rendering experience into a coherent narrative has failed, signalling the failure of language as a tool of constructing culture.

Everything shifts when the Beauty enters the world. Whereas Nate's ingestion of the apples sets the course for a blurring of human-nonhuman boundaries, the introduction of the disturbing figure of the Beauty is where the subversive power of the Weird is most evident. The Beauty has sprung from the yellow fungus that had spread on top of women's graves, and so Nate cannot help but see it as female. Thus, the Beauty appears as a disquieting hybrid of fungus and woman, and though the fungoid creature is collectively known as "the Beauty," there are in fact separate female figures. Each of these fungoid women is paired with

a man in the village, but though they appear distinct, they are in fact all connected, communicating through a form of image-based telepathy. This method of sharing information implies the liveliness and interconnected nature of all entities, and also signifies the inevitable shift away from words as a primary method of communication. The Beauty is the embodiment of the grotesque, "it is yellow and spongey and limbed, with a smooth round ball for a head. It is without eyes, without ears" (18). The appearance of this hybrid creature is so disturbing that it literally shakes the earth, "the ground shudders and from the hole climbs a thing. A woman. A thing" (18). Nate's confrontation with this woman-thing shakes his worldview and de-centres the world as he previously understood it. The Beauty slips between categories – human-nonhuman, subject-object – it is unstuck in language.

The Beauty as a human-fungus hybrid is so unsettling because, as Woodard states, "the fungal threatens to undo the necessity of the body, of the form for life … the softening of the fungal and the de- and un-earthing of the vegetative becomes troubling when it encounters the living body of humans" (37). This dehumanising quality of the Beauty is met with disgust from the men in the text, this disgust is a result of a fear of contamination from the fungoid figures. This is further complicated by the personal horror that the men experience when they feel overwhelming disgust mixed with lust and desire. Nate first categorises the Beauty as a woman, it "stands like a human. Like a woman," but this categorisation is unstable and tainted with disgust, as Nate states the Beauty has "rounded hips that speak to me of a woman, of want, and that disgusts me beyond words" (18). McElroy explains this uncomfortable blend of disgust and desire through imagining the grotesque, noting "the grotesque lures even as it repels, fascinates us with our own irrational dreads … the world intuited by the grotesque is one in which identity may be wholly or partially lost through transformation of the individual into something subhuman" (16). Nate's fear of becoming an abhuman being is visible through his loss of words when met with the desire of the Beauty and finds, to his horror, that he too desires it.

Initially, the uncontrollable lust Nate and the other men feel toward the Beauty is driven by a maddening disgust, felt by the men who desire the Beauty but are repulsed by the contamination the fungus could to wreak upon their bodies, and to their humanity.

Though this disgust never truly dissipates, most of the men are reconciled to their desire for the Beauty. It appears as though the fungus that killed the women has somehow adapted, reformed, to creature these fungoid women. A.L. Tsing notes that, "as contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option" (27). Nature has never been "pure" – it has always been grotesque because it is always transformative. It is not governed by a fixed hierarchy with humans at the top, but rather fluctuates and changes through an expansive network of chemicals and organisms.

The contamination from the Beauty manifests in the form of pregnancy, and once again gender binaries are subverted when it is revealed that the human men carry and give birth to the Beauty's offspring. Thomas is the first to become pregnant, a large lump growing on his hip, eventually twisting and distorting his chest, and the birthing process involves tearing apart the body to bring new life, this new fungoid-humanoid hybrid into the word, "Thomas puts his own hands to his wound and pulls it apart I see his fingers reach in, peel back the skin and dig through the thick yellow mess that sills out of hum, coming free from his body, hanging in strands and globs" (67). Although Nate is horrified at the thought that this fate awaits him, but he soon comes to realise that it would be futile to fight against it, "I will have a baby of my own ... I will feed my baby from a hole in my hip ... If I have to live with it, then how can it be unbearable?" (89). Nate has allowed himself to succumb to the tide of nature, as the previous understandings of the "rational" and "normal" ways of being have collapsed. In the end, Nate and the men that remain in the village have given up fighting to maintain any worldview that privileges the human. The Beauty is not an attack on humanity, and neither is nature punishing the human subject: there is no moral element to this alteration, it is simply a feature of the transformative natural world.

McElroy suggests that "to render an object as grotesque is to situate it in a world which is grotesque ...a context in which such distortion is possible, an implied world where men can and do find themselves metamorphosed into vermin" (5). *The Beauty* implies that the world is and always has been grotesque, and this world is revealed through the structural qualities of Weird, which destabilises boundaries and disrupts previously held human-

centric worldviews. This destabilising character is the consequence of the Weird acting as a disruptive mode within Weird Fiction. The Weird helps the reader reimagine the world via disturbing imagery such as fungoid-human hybrids and monstrous births. As Whiteley's text reflects, the Weird leans away from language's narrative-forming limitations in favour of an image-based means of conveying meaning. This rethinking of the world is aided by examining theories of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology alongside the Weird's grotesque themes and aesthetics. Both Speculative Realism and the Weird de-centre the human subject, in that both the theory and the mode suggest visions of the world that value nonhuman entities, and stress the importance of the connective feed between all objects. The Weird as an aesthetic category is one that destabilises default narratives of the world and humanity's place at its centre. Each text approaches this issue from a different angle, whether as the uncaring cosmos of Lovecraft's fiction, in which humans are shown to be truly inconsequential, or the fungoid figures in *The Beauty*, which speak to the limits of anthropocentric perceptions of nature.

The everyday world is full of darkness and mystery to which the human mind is not attuned. Narratives of the Weird are beneficial to constructing new understandings of the world outside the narrow scope of anthropocentric worldviews, as China Miéville points out, the Weird "punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday" (*The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* 511). Thinking through the Weird opens up many avenues to explore in contemporary scholarship, such as new ideas of materialism and hybrid identities. These destabilising ideas exist in the everyday world, but it is through works of Weird Fiction and genres of Fantastika that these issues come into focus. This is due to the fact that ideas of genre fluidity within Fantastika are augmented in studying the Weird, with its inherent lack of rigidity. Therefore, the Weird enriches our understanding of Fantastika by demonstrating the fundamental role that disgust plays in defamiliarising the world of the text. Examining disgust borne from the Weird, which is embedded in themes of bodily contamination and images of the grotesque, enables the study of the crucially fluid and transformative nature of Fantastika. Studying these "liquid" categories promotes engagement with texts, authors and subjects that fall outside traditional classifications, and

further helps us recognise the limitations of pre-existing categories. Finally, the consideration of liminal genres within Fantastika encourages a scholarship open to the qualities and aesthetics of the Weird.

**Works Cited**

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.

Clute, John. "Fantastika in the World Storm." September 2007. <www.johnclute.co.uk/word/?p=15> Accessed 26 Aug 2016.

Grey, Orrin and Silvia Moreno-Garcia, eds. "Introduction." *Fungi*. Innsmouth Free Press, 2012, pp. 7-8.

Harman, Graham. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Zero Books, 2011.

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

Joshi, S. T. "Introduction." *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Tales*. Author. H.P. Lovecraft. Penguin Modern Classics, 2002, pp. vii-xxiv.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Introduction." *Classic Horror Stories*. Author. H.P. Lovecraft. Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. vii-xxxvi.

McElroy, Bernard. *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque.* Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.

Miéville, China. "Introduction." *At the Mountains of Madness*. Author. H.P. Lovecraft. The Modern Library, 2005, pp. xi-xxv.

---. *Perdido Street Station.* Pan Macmillan, 2000.

---. "Weird Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. Eds. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint. Routledge, 2011, pp. 510-15.

Moorcock, Michael. "Forweird." *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*. Eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer. Corvus, 2011, pp. xv-xx.

Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For A Logic of Future Coexistence.* Columbia University Press, 2016.

---. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet*. Zero Books, 2011.

---. *Tentacles Longer Than Night.* Zero Books, 2015.

Trigg, Dylan. *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror.* Zero Books, 2014.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton University Press, 2015.

VanderMeer, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. "Introduction." *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*. Eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer. Corvus, 2011, pp. xv-xx.

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Fourth Estate, 2014.

---. *Authority*. Fourth Estate, 2014.

Whiteley, Aliya. *The Beauty.* Unsung Stories, 2014.

Woodard, Ben. *Slime Dynamics.* Zero Books. 2012.

**Bionote**

Claire Quigley is a PhD student at the University of Sussex, UK. She has an MA in Contemporary Literature and Culture from Birkbeck, University of London. Her MA thesis focused on the *Southern Reach* trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer. She has a BA in English with History from University College Dublin. Her research interests include weird fiction, posthumanism, human-animal studies, ecocriticism, and speculative fiction in general. Her doctoral thesis examines the disruptive forces of the Weird in contemporary weird fiction.

# On Placing the Grotesque

## Nahid Shahbazi Moghadam

With a long history dating back to cave art, the grotesque has been variously presented and widely disputed in its degree of seriousness and the level of importance attributed to its manifestation in a vast range of artistic and literary works. As an aesthetic category of art and literature, it has constantly given rise to critical studies of both diverse and complementary nature about a mode which is very often misunderstood and taken to be incomprehensible, absurd, or appalling. While a considerable amount of misunderstanding is related to the definition of the mode, a good deal of that goes to its categorisation and the overlaps with similar modes. Accordingly, the present work initially reviews the definition of the grotesque through a survey of its most commonly discussed elements to elaborate on classifications and interrelatedness of those elements for the feasibility of moving towards a more comprehensive definition. Then, by drawing from certain relevant studies, my major concern is to discuss possible subcategories of the grotesque in relation to its neighbouring modes.

### Towards a Definition

With the wide range contemporary application of the word 'grotesque' to various artistic and literary works, the subject has gradually pushed back its boundary. Becoming excessively free from the limitation once surrounding it, the word is too rashly employed at some present implications. In 1982, Geoffrey Galt Harpham warns against the contemporary use of the term "grotesque," which "is so loose that the word is in danger of losing all meaning and passing out of critical discourse altogether" (xx). In 2010, Shun-Liang Chao somehow touches on the same concern by asserting that the mode has suffered "loose uses of the term grotesque," mainly stemming from too much focus on the contradictory nature of the grotesque in fusing opposite elements (8).

As defined in many dictionaries as well as glossaries of literary terms, the grotesque has mostly been restricted to a mere description which considers it as a manifestation of distorted human features with an ultimate goal of creating excessive horror or laughter. Such definitions describe the grotesque only partially as they mainly deal with *some* of the characteristics which function in the forming of the grotesque. One of the few satisfactory dictionary definitions is provided by *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (2006), which is noteworthy for its short but helpful reference to the grotesque as the mix of laughter and horror and the "abnormal or macabre characters or incidents" (Quinn 187). Among sources on literary theories, one of the most detailed discussions is arguably presented by *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (1993), which basically surveys theoretical studies on the mode.[1]

In this article, I deal with the definition of the grotesque by taking various elements discussed in earlier studies into a broader scope with a focus on the major hallmarks. There are a number of recurrent elements of the mode such as fusion of discordant parts, copresentation of opposites, deformity, distortion, exaggeration, degradation, alienation and the like; with which the grotesque has been aptly identified. These elements are discussed in various studies, some of which classifying them in certain groups. For instance, while Philip Thomson discusses some of the elements in a subdivision of the *function* and *purposes* of grotesque (58-70), Noël Carroll proposes that providing a right definition of the grotesque requires discussing the mode structurally rather than functionally since the grotesque has a definite structure but functions by evoking a variety of emotions and by communicating a wide range purposes (295).

The present study does not exclude those aspects related to the effect of the mode in its focus on the structure; rather, it aims to classify the recurrent elements into two main divisions in discussing literary grotesque in general and grotesque fiction in particular. In a structural sense, the grotesque manifests itself through a number of elements, the most distinctive of which is the fusion of human with nonhuman parts namely plants and animals, though not certainly limited to them. This feature can also be related to the fusion of organic and inorganic as well as ontological/conceptual and biological fusions.

The grotesque is mainly associated with distorted images of various kinds. Distortion, as such, generally portrays disproportionate combinations of discordant parts mostly in an exaggerated manner. These combinations are crucial to the essence of the grotesque since they give way to a series of defamiliarised and incongruous mixtures in a set world. As Wilson Yates puts it, the world created accordingly is strange since "grotesque images distort, exaggerate, and present to us a world that is twisted and broken" (55). Wolfgang Kayser refers to characteristics such as "the distortion of 'natural' size and shape" as well as "the suspension of the categories of objects" among other prevalent motifs of the grotesque (185). Along with the fusion of human, animals, and plants, any fusion of organic and inorganic including bodies reduced to human-like objects like automata and waxed dolls can be similarly can be considered as distorted and discordant images (Kayser 184-85). Dieter Meindl elaborates on "categorical transgression" as a feature which "comingles the animate and inanimate and conflates such classification as plant, animal, human" (15). Likewise, Harpham refers to such fusions as "transcategorical hybrid," which "offers endless and compelling temptations to interpretation" (21). As such, these images contribute to a phenomenological resistance of the grotesque to definite classification.

That the grotesque fuses discordant parts is not necessarily restricted to a body in its material form. This implies that the grotesque may also transcend categories of being in an abstract and characteristic sense as well as/instead of physical manifestations. Carroll discusses grotesque imagery as "an animate being that violates our standing biological or ontological concepts and expectations" (287-98). In a rather similar vein, Chao refers to the grotesque body as one which metaphorically "mixes up (biological and conceptual) categories" (56).

An essential factor in such images is that they biologically/ontologically and conceptually blend human and beast/monster or organic and inorganic. Hence, in most cases, there would be nothing elementally grotesque if the fusion collapsed. In separation, even a monster is not necessarily a grotesque phenomenon. As Mikhail Bakhtin asserts, great works of the grotesque go beyond mere "exaggeration, excessiveness, obscurity and

monstrosity" (127). Likewise, in a study discussing the grotesque in Gogol's *Overcoat,* James Roney reminds [the reader] that "grotesqueries lies in a single being with inseparable monstrous and human parts" rather than the simple fact of each one being what it is naturally taken to be (169). To sum up, the fusion of discordant parts in distorted, incongruent, bizarre, and exaggerated combinations is crucial to the mode since it sets the dividing lines and distinguishes the grotesque from similar and easily confused terms and modes. In bringing such attributions of elemental fusion into a structural hallmark, I borrow from Meindl to refer to this feature as "categorical transgression" (15), which primarily makes sense in terms of objects, images and characters at a literal and possibly metaphoric level.

Another element to consider as a structural feature is the co-presentation of opposites or clash of incompatibles discussed in many scholarly works with respect to the mode as being a mixture of horror and laughter or comedy and tragedy. Accordingly, to avoid too much focus on this controversial element, we may agree that it does not seem to be the most important factor which one of the two elements of comic and tragic is more prevalent as long as a mingling of both is recognisable and the associated effect is evoked. It is in fact the effect of their coexistence that matters since "a great artist may achieve significant effects by a criss-cross of tears and laughter," manipulating these opposite elements to produce "a new sublime incongruity" (Knight 160).

The inseparable mixture of comic and tragic in the grotesque and the resulting contradictory feelings it evokes can be included in a broader term signifying the simultaneous blend of opposites. This implies that this characteristic is not just restricted to the comic and horrific nature of the mode. The ambivalent nature of the grotesque is also discernible through the arousal of simultaneously negative and positive emotions such as repulsion and attraction in the characters and/or the possible response the work evokes in its readers. The co-presentation of opposites or the "clash of incompatibles," as termed by Thomson (27), is the broad scope that takes the coexistence of ludicrous and fearful as well as other possible pairs of simultaneously opposite entities such as attraction/repulsion, life/death, reality/fantasy, and real/surreal under dominion. The blend of reality with

fantastic or surrealistic elements is particularly vital in distinguishing the grotesque from fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature, later discussed in this article.

The coexistence of opposite elements is not necessarily demonstrated only through two contradictory entities brought together via the grotesque. It is very often the case that a single entity or a character is by nature self-contradictory or evokes contradictions, and is hence inclined towards the grotesque. To put it more accurately, a clash of incompatibility in grotesque fiction can well rely on contradictory nature of a focal image, an object or a character. Considering Chao's definition of the grotesque as a "flesh made metaphor" (14), grotesque images or characters can display both categorical transgression and clash of incompatibles in a single focal representation.

Apart from the portrayal of discordant parts of human and nonhuman in transcategorical fusions, bodily portrayal involving scatological images and excessive sexuality share the exaggeration and distortion reinforced through the grotesque. A third subgroup of structural elements can thus be stipulated as "images of material body" in exaggerated, disgusting, or eccentric representation of material life. Such representations are basically manifested in either or both domains of excessive sexuality and scatological images. As later highlighted, some categories of grotesque fiction are more abundant in the portrayal of bodily excesses.

That scatological representations and strange or excessive sexuality can be part of the grotesque is least disputed, but the range of attitudes towards its effect gives rise to contradictory views. The depiction of the animal side of mankind, prevalent in works of the grotesque, has most to do with the animalism within man and is mostly pictured in an appalling manner, exposing human to the reality of his limited and imperfect nature. As Bernard McElroy assumes, animalism makes us notice "the undignified, perilous, even gross physicality of existence" through "exaggeration, distortion, or unexpected combination" (11). To John Clark, what makes scatological representations satirically grotesque is that "proud, self-delusional man ever aspires to elevate himself and his dignity," but is ironically downgraded to a "defecating animal before our eyes" (116).

The most positive outlook on material life is that of Bakhtin for whom man's superiority is achieved paradoxically through bodily materialism rather than abstract spirit. For Bakhtin, the real anatomy of the grotesque body is built upon lower stratum, which is the source of all debasement; the grotesque body is "unfinished and open" and "exceeds its own limits in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (26). He does pronounce this debasement in a regenerative and positive manner since the downward movement to bodily lower stratum is the backbone of all grotesque imagery, through which the high is uncrowned and unburdened. As can be observed, this also indicates his positivity towards the degrading effect of the grotesque. His attitude, noteworthy as it is, appears to be temporally restricted and best applicable to early modern era. Such a positive standpoint is often challenged by scholars who share a more cynical view of man's debasing corporeality. As a matter of fact, as long as excessive body imagery maintain its vitality in the shaping of the mode, grotesque potentially entertains both viewpoints depending on the context to which the literary creation belongs and the more humoristic or horrifying nature of the work it is presented in.

Another element of the mode, complexities and fluctuations of identity, is intensively portrayed by authors writing in the vein of the grotesque if not widely addressed in critical studies. As a prime example, Edgar Allan Poe's tales often leave identity fluid and unresolved among or within characters. An early consideration of this feature appears in Kayser's study, briefly discussing E. T. A Hoffmann as an author in whose works "doubts concerning ... identity are never fully resolved" (73). In effect, "loss of identity" and "destruction of personality" are also noted in his final list of grotesque motifs (185). Inclined towards the demonic aspects of the grotesque, he mostly views the identity motif in the grotesque as one under the threat of abysmal forces crucial to the mode.

Harpham's discussion of identity complications is more implicitly dealt with in his analysis of "the art of the grotto." In a well-argued discussion about feminine and masculine signs on the wall-reliefs of ancient caves, he draws our attention to the fact that the faces on the wall-reliefs do not appear complete, and there is "a tendency to avoid defining the human

form, leaving it in an undeterminate [sic] state, and, above all, trying to hide or to transform face" (61). Accordingly, his description of the faces on the wall-reliefs notes the indeterminacy and/or possible transformation of faces, which are deliberately left unfinished.

McElroy deals with the loss of identity by placing the grotesque in a world "in which identity may be wholly or partially lost through transformation of the individual into something subhuman" (16). The notion of transformation is noteworthy in that it also signifies the transgression of categories of being by lowering individuals into a subhuman state, either biologically or ontologically. In fact, McElroy's association of identity crisis with transformation can be explicated in terms of categorical transgression leading to alteration and possible fluctuation of identity.

Based on the aforementioned studies, I would synthesise the notion of loss and/or transformation of identity with the indeterminacy of the blurring faces of the cave art to highlight how the loss of individuality can be most possibly extended and redefined as indeterminacy or fluctuation of identity within one character or confusions between characters. Adopting the term "blur of identity" from Harpham's discussion of blurring faces of cave art, I consider the confusion, fluctuation or loss of identity as one of the hallmarks of the grotesque; the play of individual personality and the way it may fluctuate or be lethally transformed is a thematically structural concept which contributes to either or both alienation and degradation.

Accordingly, the structural elements discussed above contribute to the conception of the grotesque, rendering the effectual elements through the representation or reception of the grotesque within its literary domain. I employ the terms structural and effectual so as to distinguish respectively between those elements forming the mode and those conveyed through such representations. As the name may suggest, the group of effectual elements, subdivided into alienation and degradation, has to do with the effects that the grotesque has the potentiality to evoke.

The concept of alienation is basically elaborated by Kayser and Thomson. Among the more recent critics, Meindl also discusses alienation in relation to madness. Both Kayser and Thomson pronounce this element in an approximate cause-effect relationship with the clash of incompatibles. Kayser defines the structure of the grotesque as related to "the merger of incompatible elements [which] may be either effected in the tangible objects themselves or it may result from a character's – or narrator's – reaction to a given situation," ultimately leading to an experience of true alienation (116). He describes it as a feeling that makes us "lose the ground from under our feet" in a world suddenly turned alien (118). In a much similar vein, Thomson assumes that an experience of alienation has "much to do with the conflict-character of the grotesque, with the mixture of incompatible characteristic of it" (59). He stipulates that such an effect is mainly due to the "sudden placing of familiar elements of reality in a peculiar and disturbing light," whereas such objects "would arouse no curiosity" or strangeness as separate entities (59). As it can be deduced from his standpoint, alienation is particularly interrelated with categorical transgression and the clash of incompatibles. Dieter Meindl contributes a postmodern touch to this concept by relating it to madness. He follows Kayser's lead in that he considers abysmal forces render the familiar world alienated. Accordingly, he suggests "mental alienation" as an equal for madness and a "central motif of the grotesque" (15).

As such, alienation may be observed from the two perspective of external and internal estrangement. And, in this manner, contemporary fiction can well portray characters not only isolated from the outer world but also alienated within. Taking the aforementioned discussions into account, it can be asserted that the already alienated human being from his surrounding may reach the height of grotesqueries once he is mentally and internally alienated by a stroke of madness or mental disorder, which also involves humiliation. With regard to experiencing humiliation in the literature of the grotesque, McElroy particularly views humiliation as a main trait in discussing the characteristics of modern grotesque and observes that "the central figure of the modern grotesque is not alienated man but *humiliated* man" (22). He argues that the focus of the grotesque has moved from the external world to the world within since "the modern grotesque is internal, not infernal, and its originator is recognized as neither god nor devil but man himself" (21). His emphasis on humiliation at

the expense of alienation is mostly rooted in his belief that the modern grotesque has lost touch with supernaturalism. However, along with degradation, alienation is still prevalent and discernible as a major effectual feature of the grotesque even taking that the notion of supernaturalism may have lost some of its glamour.

Although many of the contemporary critics such as McElroy and Clark assert that grotesque literature involves degradation, views as positive as that of Bakhtin do not prevail among scholarly ideas, particularly those dealing with contemporary literature. All in all, the concept of degradation can be pictured both at physical and mental levels. Physically speaking, it mainly involves deformities, physical defects, and distorted ugly appearance. In a mental sense, it mostly entails psychic disorders, nervous breakdowns, insanity, and aggression. Moreover, death, which is attributed to the grotesque for rendering fanciful and excited imagination, can portray an ultimate form of degradation (Ruskin 156). Hence, this concept can be taken as an effectual element of grotesque representations which is depicted through deformity, madness, aggression, or death and may appear under one or some of these guises.

To reiterate on its definition, the grotesque involves biological and/or ontological transgression of categories of existence through clash of incompatible and contradictory co-presentations. Excessive body imagery and obliteration or blur of identity also accompany the central image or motif to effect alienation and degradation in form of nervous breakdown, madness, rejection, death, and the like. Beyond the conception of a basic pattern, the grotesque can also be recognised in the centrality of a character, human or non-human; the focal image which represents the grotesque at a pictorial or metaphoric level. Hence, the grotesque image involves a thing or animate being which is basically related to the fusion of discordant parts and can refer to a character of any type in works of fiction by extension.

## Attempts at Categorisation

The grotesque has long been disputed for the various, even opposing, types of representation through which it has been depicted and traced. In addition, it is mostly

considered as susceptible to an entanglement with a variety of literary terms such as satire, parody, irony, macabre, and so on. It also bears resemblance to and is connected with the fantastic, caricature, and the like. Although such a flexibility and interconnectedness has been a thread to its integrity as a self-standing aesthetic category, it can as well demonstrate the wide range of meaning the grotesque has the capacity to render while retaining its unique basic structure. As such, the grotesque can be discussed and classified not only in relation to other modes and genres, but also with regard to its own varying types of representation. In this section, I would draw from certain relevant discussions on the categories of the grotesque and its interrelatedness with other modes and genres in order to elaborate on its categorisation and overlaps with the neighbouring modes in the succeeding part.

Among the first attempts at categorising the grotesque, John Ruskin's study of the Renaissance art in "Grotesque Renaissance" of his voluminous *The Stones of Venice* (1853), emphasises that the grotesque involves simultaneous representation of both the ludicrous and the fearful. His observation is in line with two earlier studies by Christoph Martin Wieland and Victor Hugo. Emphasising the psychological effect of the grotesque on the perceiver, Wieland focuses on the three elements of laughter, horror, and astonishment (Barasch 148; Clayborough 66; Kayser 30-31). In the preface to *Cromwell* (1827), Hugo notes the juxtaposition of ludicrous and fearful and emphasises deformity in grotesque manifestations (Kayser 56-59; Barasch 55; Bakhtin 43). Depending on the dominance of either the ludicrous or the fearful, Ruskin respectively terms the mode as "sportive" and "terrible" grotesque (126).

Based on the artistic mind creating the form, Lily Campbell divides the mode into fanciful, artificial, and great grotesque, the last of which comprises both the fancifulness and the play of the artificial grotesque (Barasch 158-59). Her 1906 dissertation discusses the grotesque in terms of external and internal elements. Accordingly, while the former refers to incongruity and the fusion of real and ideal, the latter has to do with the three proposed status of mind producing "the great grotesque, the fanciful, or the artificial," which

successively signify the best to worst forms of the manifestations of the mode (Barasch 158-59).

The mid-twentieth century seminal study, Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), is an attempt to undertake "the task of describing the variations on an ageless theme" (11). Besides discussing the grotesque as generally presented through recurrent "subject matters," which he conclusively reviews in a number of motifs in a final chapter, Kayser proposes "two basic types of grotesque" modelled on graphic arts (181-86). These two categories, "fantastic" grotesque and "satiric" grotesque, respectively rely on "oneiric worlds" and "play of masks" (186), and will be further investigated in this article.

In a broad sense of categorisation, Peter Fingesten speaks of the grotesque as genuine and quasi-grotesque, implying that the grotesque dominates in some works and is partially employed in some others (420). His 1984 article "Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque," a brief but concise study focusing mainly on visual arts, insists on the distinction between genuine and quasi-grotesque. The dividing line is that genuine grotesque requires a harmony between form and subject matter in that both the visual form and the subject are discerned as grotesque, otherwise the work can be classified as quasi-grotesque (419-20). Taking the grotesque symbolically, Fingesten follows the same trend as Kayser and Harpham in describing the mode as a "juxtaposition of two or more different or contradictory elements," and therefore capable of visually or psychologically evoking "surprise or shock" (420).

Due to its overlap with the fantastic, caricature, and other relevant modes, the grotesque has been variously discussed in its interrelationship and distinctiveness as well. Comparing the grotesque and caricature, Philip Thomson stipulates that caricature becomes grotesque if it exceeds limits of exaggeration to the extent that ridiculousness blends with the "disgusting or fearsome" (39). Even though the two terms can now be taken as explicably distinct from each other, they did not appear as much different more than a century ago. As a matter of fact, the grotesque was rather too closely associated with caricature in its early critical history.

Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (1865), the first thorough attempt at the history of the mode, bears witness to this fact simply through its title. As a post romantic work on the grotesque, it relates the grotesque to caricature and comedy, and reviews the history of the grotesque until the mid-nineteenth century; Wright's main attempt is to make the grotesque synonymous to caricature (Clayborough 49-51). Wright's most prominent contemporary work is Heinrich Schneegans's *History of the Grotesque Satire* (1894). Schneegans reviews the so far presented definitions of the grotesque and opposes Wright in that he associates the mode with satire rather than caricature. He mainly concentrates on Rabelais for his elaboration of the grotesque satire.

A later study, "Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque" in *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive* (1894) by John Addington Symonds, which locates the grotesque at an intermediate stage between caricature and the fantastic, is of more significance to the present discussion as it deals with the grotesque both in relation to caricature and the fantastic. Accordingly, Symonds considers the grotesque as "a branch of fantastic" which also shares a sense of obscenity with caricature (173-75). As Clayborough indicates, Symonds's study differs from Wright's in that he does not subordinate the grotesque to caricature (52-55). Although he does not elaborate on placing the grotesque between the fantastic and caricature, it is worthwhile to consider his standpoint in classifying the grotesque, its variations and neighbouring modes.

As observed above in Symonds's differentiation of the modes, the interrelationship between the fantastic and the grotesque is even more problematic than that of the grotesque and caricature. Both are controversial terms and are sometimes interchangeably used to refer to the same phenomenon. Uncanny, supernatural and other similar attributions are ascribed to both modes. Some critics differentiate the two by referring to the fantastic as a quality of losing touch with reality and the grotesque as portrayed within the real world. For instance, Hugo situates the grotesque "in the real world around us" (Thomson 17). A simple but careful distinction between the two modes is much later made by Thomson's *The Grotesque* (1972) in that the grotesque deliberately confuses fantasy and reality, whereas

the fantastic lacks such a fusion between realistic and imaginary or supernatural features (23-24). More recently, Chao subcategorises the grotesque under the fantastic and distinguishes it from caricature through its "(con)fusion of heterogeneous form" (8).

However, discussions basically focusing on the fantastic have very often considered it, similar to the grotesque, as a blend of the real and supernatural. Situating the fantastic between the uncanny and the marvellous, Todorov considers the mode comprising indeterminacy "between a natural and supernatural explanation" (33). To attribute to the fantastic an in-between status, dangling between natural and supernatural or uncanny and marvellous, complicates its distinction from the grotesque since the grotesque can also rely on the simultaneous presentation of the imaginary and real. It is noteworthy, though, that certain characteristics of the grotesque such as images of material body and excessive physical life leading to humiliation, clarifies distinctions between the two modes.

**The Borderlines and Overlaps: An Interface**

The notion developed in this study for the overlaps of these neighbouring modes derives from an eclecticism of the aforementioned discussions. The classification illustrated in Todorov's *The Fantastic* places the fantastic at a mediating state between the uncanny and marvellous with the overlapping categories of fantastic-uncanny and fantastic-marvellous (44).[2] I follow his model in placing the grotesque between the fantastic and caricature in categories of fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature. In essence, along with Todorov's classification of the fantastic between fantastic-marvellous and fantastic-uncanny, Symonds's discussion on interrelatedness of the grotesque with the fantastic and caricature is of certain significance in considering the grotesque at an intermediate or in-between stage with the fantastic and caricature. In this regard, the grotesque may be depicted either as situated at a rather distinct in-between stage or bordering on the fantastic and caricature.

Acknowledging Fingesten's categories of the mode as genuine and quasi-grotesque in that some grotesque works are partial and some others are pure or genuine, I also consider two main divisions for literary grotesque; the grotesque fiction as being basically the

grotesque and, bordering on either the fantastic or caricature, as the fantastic-grotesque or grotesque-caricature respectively. Not subcategorising the grotesque into the realm of the fantastic as Symonds and Chao do, I take grotesque fiction as possibly either inclined towards the fantastic or caricature. The distinction between fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature can be made through the presence or absence of the supernatural respectively. Fantastic-grotesque drags the clash of fantasy and reality towards an implausible or unrealistic edge since uncanny and inexplicable events take place and ultimately remain in a state of irresolution. While the fantastic-grotesque relies on the emergence of the supernatural and the horrifying, no such uncanny or supernatural dimensions are detectable in grotesque-caricature. Devoid of uncanny incidents, grotesque-caricature best relies on shock effect and parody mainly through the clash evoked by simultaneous sentiments of repulsion and attraction. In short, the grotesque best borders on caricature once the mode abounds in parodic representations and caricature-like images. A similar classification by Kayser basically focuses on graphic arts and distinguishes works of Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Bruegel and William Blake from those of William Hogarth, Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya:

> Focusing on the grotesque, one may distinguish between two principal currents, although these two are frequently merged. The "fantastic" grotesque originates with Bosch and Bruegel … their macabre dream worlds abounds with rattling skeletons, creeping, root-like creatures. Frightful monsters, and fantastic animals. … The other trend, which is illustrated by the work of Hogarth … reaches the grotesque by way of satiric, caricatural, and cynical distortions, that is, by way of the comically grotesque. (Kayser 173)

It is, however, noteworthy that Kayser proposes the two categories as the major "currents" of the grotesque itself rather than considering them as overlaps with other neighbouring modes. I suggest that such terming can possibly make better sense with regard to the interrelationship of the grotesque with the fantastic and caricature. Meanwhile, the grotesque fiction can also be classified in two similar groups, each of which partly oriented towards each of the two currents of horror and abstraction or mockery and physical grossness. In what follows, I would make a rough distinction between the two in two categories which I term as 'conceptual' and 'representational' grotesque fiction.

Carroll defines a "thing" as grotesque "if it is an image, whether verbal or visual, of an animate being that violates our standing biological or ontological concepts and expectations" (297-98). To Carroll, a plot is also "metaphorically" associated with the grotesque when it builds on "anomalous events" (297). Therefore, the grotesque fiction can both depend on animate beings as the central motif at an ontological level and metaphoric anomalies of plot or "conceptual anomalies" (303). As Carroll's concise and well-argued discussion addresses the issue in both artistic and literary realms, in terms of literature and fiction in particular, plot comes to play a more significant role in the shaping of the mode. The term conceptual grotesque, which I borrow from Carroll, can be used to signify the grotesque as mainly depicted through incidents and plot. In conceptual grotesque, categorical transgression is conveyed ontologically in that the violation of existential levels does not literally and physically occur but is conceptually and metaphorically perceived. In fiction works of this nature, the rendition of the grotesque mainly relies on anomalies of the plot and incidents which outweigh representations of excessive bodily life.

In some other works of grotesque fiction, the rendition of the mode basically relies on characterisation and excessive body images. Aversive imagery, desolation, gloom and inertia prevail in such narratives reinforced through grotesque representations. I distinguish this type of grotesque fiction, which is more depicted through characterisation, excessive body imagery and aggressive manners as representational. It is noteworthy, however, that characters in such types of fiction do not necessarily turn to be grotesque due to physical distortion and deformed bodies, that is, deformity is not grotesque by itself; complexities in character and manner, clashing contradictions and identity obliterations are required to render deformed characters as grotesque. Accordingly, I use the term representational grotesque to refer to works of fiction in which the grotesque basically prevails through characterisation and excessive body imagery.

Representational and conceptual grotesque can thus be differentiated from each other on the basis of their respective reliance on characterisation and plot anomalies. In works of fiction, the grotesque can be viably depicted both in the complexities of characterisation and the development of the storyline. However, conceptual grotesque

basically relies on indeterminacy and irresovibility more effectively than representational grotesque does; explicable in terms of their respective focus on plot and characterisation. Since conceptual grotesque mostly concentrates on plot anomalies, it is more apt to create the sense of confusion inherent to the grotesque. While it more dominantly triggers intellectual uncertainty and the clashing contrast between reality and fantasy or the real and the surreal, representational grotesque elicit more of emotional disharmony and the clashing contrast between repulsion and attraction.

The two categories of the grotesque fiction can be distinguished from fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature by an acute observation of the defamiliarising effect prevalent in them. While fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature are respectively inclined to remain unresolvable and render shock effect, the grotesque itself manipulates both features through its paradoxical nature in which familiar topics shift toward the grotesque by the way they are defamiliarised. First propagated by Victor Shklovsky as *ostraneie*, the technique can be well traced and discussed in a vast range of artistic and literary works. In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky represents examples of how Tolstoy defamiliarises objects by not naming them, by naming parts of things by words other than the immediate referents, or by describing them as if they are viewed for the first time (18). Whatever techniques are employed for defamiliarisation, the essential point is that an artistic approach "removes objects from automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 18).

The grotesque aptly shares the refreshing of perception through its unique approach of simultaneous depiction of opposing and contradictory elements in an eccentric portrayal. Accordingly, the notion of defamiliarisation can be regarded as a characterising feature in the conception of the grotesque, differentiating it from fantastic-grotesque and grotesque-caricature. That the grotesque invites, entertains, and at the same time, dispels interpretation is an indispensable part of the phenomenon. It is fluid in terms of its capacity to merge and overlap with other forms of artistic and literary creation, a justification for the difficulty of situating the mode within fixed borderlines and discussing its variations as well as its being located at an intermediate stage, an interface.

**Notes**

**1.** The volume entry on the grotesque is written by Frances Barasch, the author of *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*.

**2.** Todorov's schematic representation for the classification of the fantastic, the line in the middle signifying the fantastic (44):

| uncanny | fantastic-uncanny | fantastic-marvellous | marvellous |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------|------------|
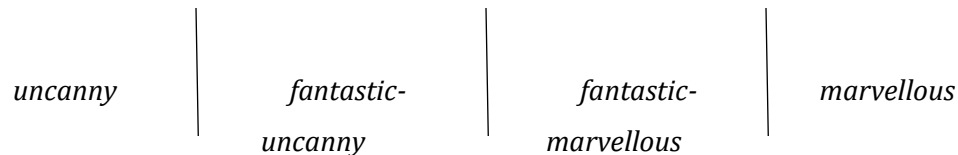
**Works Cited**

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helen Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1965.

Barasch, Frances K. "Theories of the Grotesque." *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Ed. Irena Rima Makaryk. University of Toronto Press, 1993, pp. 85-89.

---. *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*. Mouton, 1971

Carroll, Noël. "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy." *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Ed. Frances S. Connelly. Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 291-311.

Chao, Shun-Liang. *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque: Crashaw, Baudelaire, Magritte*. Modern Humanities Researching Association and Maney Publishing, 2010.

Clark, John R. *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1991.

Clayborough, Arthur. *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Clarendon Press, 1965.

Fingesten, Peter. "Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1984, pp. 419-26.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Indiana University Press, 1963.

Knight, G. Wilson. "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque." *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*. Methuen, 1949, pp. 160-79.

McElroy, Bernard. *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. Macmillan Press, 1989.

Meindl, Dieter. *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*. University of Missouri Press, 1996.

Quinn, Edward. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. Facts On File, Inc., 2006.

Roney, James N. "Reading Gogol's Grotesque 'Overcoat.'" *The Grotesque*. Eds. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. Facts On File, 2009, pp. 167-76.

Ruskin, John. "Grotesque Renaissance." *The Stones of Venice*. Vol. 3. Thomas and Cromell & Co, 1875, pp. 112-65.

Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as a Technique." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 17-23.

Symonds, John Addington. "Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque." *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*. 1890. Kessinger Publishing, 2005, pp. 169-80.

Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. Routledge, 1972.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic.* Trans. Richard Howard. Cornell University Press, 1973.

Yates, Wilson. "An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Consideration." *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections.* Eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates. Eerdman Publishing, 1997, pp. 1-68.

**Bionote**

Nahid Shahbazi Moghadam is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Semnan University, Iran. Her area of interest involves the fantastic and the grotesque, twentieth-century British fiction, comparative literary studies, and literary translation. She has published articles in these areas focusing on authors like Mervyn Peake and Ian McEwan, and her translations of Mervyn Peake's *Boy in Darkness and Other Stories* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* into Persian have been published in recent years.

# Alternate History: Defining Counterparts and Individuals with Transworld Identity

## Riyukta Raghunath

The fictional genre of Alternate History consists of stories that are set in a world where the history of that world unfolds differently than it did in our actual world. Such texts single out a pivotal moment in our actual world history and build textual actual worlds that contradict or are counterfactual to this moment. For example, alternate World War II texts present a textual actual world that is counterfactual by contradicting Adolf Hitler's defeat in World War II to present a world where Hitler is instead victorious. These texts evidently use our world as its epistemological template but alter a few crucial events from our history to make it counterfactual. By doing so, the text essentially creates a possible world where certain events might have turned out differently. Therefore we can say that Alternate Historical Fiction is almost exclusively occupied with the world that we inhabit. It is for this reason that I argue that Alternate Historical Fiction can be best understood using an ontologically centred theory, that is, Possible Worlds Theory. Alternate Historical Fiction is epistemologically linked to the actual world thereby creating a binary relation between the actual world and the textual actual world. Possible Worlds Theory is effective as a methodology because it can be used to divide the ontological universe of the text into constituent worlds; characterise the worlds of the text into different possible worlds; and determine their position in relation to the actual world.

Possible Worlds Theory is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that has its roots in philosophy. The term 'possible worlds' entered the philosophical lexicon through the writings of German philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). Leibniz alleged that God conceives many possible worlds and chooses the best one among them and makes it the actual world (that is, the world we inhabit). Therefore, it may be said that the actual world we live in is a part of a universe that contains along with the actual world, also a multitude

of possible worlds. Leibniz's philosophical tracts and theological reasoning were developed to form the Possible-Worlds logic. According to Possible-Worlds logic, the truth value of non-actualised possibilities or necessities can be determined by considering modal propositions as facts about possible worlds. In philosophy, the theoretical application of the concept of possible-worlds is used within the field of modal logic and semantics. Philosophers such as Saul Kripke, David Lewis, and Nicholas Rescher have each used the Possible Worlds logic to comprehend reference and modality.

Having now found its way into literary studies, Possible-Worlds logic is used to study the worlds created by fictional texts. Literary theorists such as Lubomír Doležel and Thomas Pavel have used Possible Worlds Theory to describe the internal structure of texts. Umberto Eco, another literary theorist, has used Possible Worlds Theory to analyse the possible worlds created by the characters of a text through the mental process of dreams, wishes and so on. Theorists such as Marie Laure-Ryan and Alice Bell use the theory to develop a modal universe each, that is, they divide the universe of the text into categories of actual and possible based on the type of worlds that are created by the text.

The primary focus of this paper is on the nomenclature regarding actual world historical individuals that appear in Alternate Historical Fiction texts. I will critically examine two concepts within Possible Worlds Theory, counterpart theory and transworld identity, as both concepts deal with individuals that appear in more than one possible world. As a result of having two schools of thought (modal realism and moderate realism), there also exist two sets of terminology to label actual world individuals that appear in textual actual worlds. It is important to establish appropriate terminology to label such individuals before beginning any kind of analysis of the literature itself. Although a discursive and conceptual disparity exists between logicians, within literary studies, critics have dealt with such terminological inconsistencies by either choosing one term over the other or employing both sets of terminology. Literary critics who employ both terms use 'counterpart' to label all *actual world* individuals who appear in *textual actual worlds* and appropriate the term 'transworld identity' to describe the process through which they cross ontological boundaries and appear in *more than one world*. However, as I will argue, within Alternate Historical Fiction

it would be misleading to label all actual world individuals that appear in textual actual worlds as 'counterparts.' I have chosen two specific examples - Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) and Stephen Fry's *Making History* (1996) in order to illustrate the inconsistencies of this nomenclature as both texts are indicative of the two types of actual world individuals that may typically exist in Alternate History textual actual worlds but in divergent ways. This paper will examine the critical terminology in order to determine appropriate nomenclature for identifying actual world historical figures within Alternate Historical Fiction.

**Counterpart Theory and Transworld Identity**

In Alternate Historical Fiction, it is very common for actual world individuals, objects, and events to appear in the textual actual world. Within Possible Worlds Theory, there are two conflicting sets of concepts – counterpart theory and transworld Identity – to describe the process through which such actual world individuals exist in more than one world. This is because within Possible Worlds philosophical logic, although there is consensus on the assertion that the modal universe consists of the actual world and other possible worlds, the ontological status of these worlds is a highly debated topic among philosophers. As Ruth Ronen indicates in *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994), there are two views that are in direct opposition to each other: 'modal realism' proposed by David Lewis and 'moderate realism' proposed by Saul Kripke (Ronen 21-22). According to these theories, while the *actual* world is perceived as physically existing, there is a distinction between those who regard *possible* worlds as physically existing (modal realism) and those who do not (moderate realism). As Alice Bell indicates in *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction* (2010), Daniel Nolan distinguishes the two views based on how they are treated conceptually – those who consider possible worlds to be 'concrete' and those who think of them as being 'abstract' (19). From this Nolan proposes two schools of thought – Concretists (David Lewis) and Abstractionists[1] (Saul Kripke; Nicholas Rescher).

According to David Lewis in *Counterfactuals* (1973), the actual world and all possible worlds have the same ontological status, that is, they exist in the same way that the actual

world does "differing not in kind but only in what goes on at them" (85). The basis for Lewis's assertion is his indexical theory of actuality in which states that:

> Our actual world is only one world among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by "actual" what we do; for the meaning we give to "actual" is such that it refers at any world *i* to that world *i* itself. "Actual" is indexical, like "I" or "here", or "now": it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located. (85-86)

Lewis objects to the view that the world that we live in is alone actual. According to him, the ontological status of all domains, actual or possible, is relative. This means that what accounts for being the actual world depends on the point of view of its inhabitants. So for instance, from the point of view of a possible world, that world is considered actual and our world is a possible world. Furthermore, in a later work, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), Lewis also maintains that: "absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is" (86) and "absolutely every way that a part of a world could possibly be is a way that some part of some world is" (86). This idea implies that there is no space in the universe for a what-might-have-been world that exists only conceptually. This is because modal realism asserts that such worlds are in fact true accounts of some world that exists physically. Consequently, Lewis argues that although individuals can exist in more than one world, they are not the same individuals because it is logically impossible for any individual to exist in multiple worlds simultaneously.

Therefore, in line with his commitment to modal realism, Lewis proposes a formal theory known as counterpart theory to describe individuals who populate possible worlds. According to this theory, inhabitants of the actual world who exist in other possible worlds are not the same individuals but only counterparts of the original. As Lewis explains in "Postscripts to 'Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic'" (1983): "worlds do not overlap: unlike Siamese twins, they have no shared parts [...] No possible individual is part of two worlds" (36). Instead, Lewis suggests that each of these individuals is a different counterpart.

In contrast to Lewis's view, moderate realists such as Rescher and Kripke maintain that our actual world is the only domain that physically exists. As Rescher states in "The Ontology of the Possible" (1979): "only actual things or states of affairs can unqualifiedly be said to exist" (168). All other worlds are possible worlds that come into being through mental processes such as imagining, storytelling, dreaming, and so on. Therefore, according to this view possible worlds are not like the actual world because they do not physically exist somewhere. Instead, they are mental constructions of ways the world might have been, if certain events had gone otherwise.

In direct opposition to Lewis who subscribes to the notion that possible worlds are "something like remote planets" (*Plurality of Worlds* 2), in "Naming and Necessity" (1972) Saul Kripke states that:

> a possible world isn't a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope [...] *A possible world is given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it* [...] Possible worlds are *stipulated*, not *discovered*. (44, original emphasis)

Kripke here stresses that possible worlds are only conceptual; they are not worlds that exist out there for us to physically access. Instead, for moderate realists, as Nicholas Rescher explains, a possible world "exists in a relativised manner, as the objects of certain intellectual processes" ("Ontology of the Possible" 168). Therefore, possible worlds along with their inhabitants are abstract entities and any discussion about possible worlds is concerned with how things might have been, rather than how things really are, in another ontological domain. Accordingly, moderate realists propose the notion of transworld identity which suggests that actual world individuals who inhabit possible worlds are self-same individuals who possess identity across possible worlds. Kripke asserts that when we talk about individuals in a possible world, we imagine the same individual in a different context. He uses the example of President Richard Nixon to argue that while "talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to *him*" ("Naming and Necessity" 44, original emphasis) as opposed to what would have happened to a counterpart of him.

To summarise, counterpart theory posits that a statement such as "I could have been a Mathematician" assumes that there is a possible world in which a counterpart of me is a mathematician. In contrast, according to transworld identity, the same statement presupposes that there is a possible world in which *I* exist and I *am* a mathematician. Therefore, to say that an individual has transworld identity means that the same individual exists in more than one world even if they have somewhat different properties in each possible world and to say that you have a counterpart means that you exist in the actual world but someone who resembles you closely exists in a possible world.

**Counterpart Theory and Transworld Identity within the Context of Fiction**

As the hitherto discussion has shown, logicians remain divided in their view and the debate surrounding transworld identity and counterpart theory remains unresolved. In *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction (2010)*, Alice Bell notes that "the field of literary studies has inherited [from Possible-Worlds logic in philosophy] – if only implicitly – a number of unresolved conflicts along with disparate conceptualisations, varied terminology and potentially incompatible approaches" (75). Before I explain the approach that I wish to adopt to analyse Alternate Historical Fiction, it is necessary to explore how Possible Worlds literary theorists have dealt with the conceptual and terminological disparities that exist between both these concepts in their analyses.

In *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (1994), Ruth Ronen appropriates the term "transworld identity" to link an actual world individual to their corresponding character in a textual actual world. However, Ronen recognises the problem that the term transworld identity poses in literary studies. She links the issue to the "difference between the way possibility functions in philosophical logic and in literary theory of fictionality" (60). According to Ronen, possible worlds in philosophy are conceptual worlds and the only restrictions imposed on them are the two laws of logic – The Law of the Excluded Middle and the Law of Non-Contradiction.[2] As an example, she points out how possible worlds may consist of only one or two entities and sometimes even no entity at all. That is, it is logically

possible for a possible world to be empty. Fictional worlds on the other hand, in the words of Ronen, are "pregnant worlds, concrete constellations of objects, and not abstract constructs" (60) and therefore possibility within this discipline "depends on the presence of concrete fictional entities" (60). This highlights how possible worlds are perceived differently between the two disciplines – possible worlds are perceived by philosophers as *conceptual constructs* but she claims that fictional worlds are perceived by literary theorists and readers as *concrete constructs*.

As a result, Ronen explains that "transworld identity does not raise a problem when we treat all worlds relevant for cross-identification as if they were of the same logical order" (59). To show that the notion of transworld identity in literary theory is not problematic, Ronen gives the example of when individuals travel between worlds that belong to the same ontological universe (that is, the actual world and possible worlds, or the textual actual world and textual possible worlds). However, she maintains that it raises issues when individuals move from one ontological universe to another. Ronen explains:

> Trans-world identity does raise a problem in the context of worlds of different orders, worlds which do not belong to the same logical domain. Such is the case when we have a fictional construct on the one hand and the given world of our experience, on the other hand. (59)

Ronen here highlights why transworld identity is an issue when inhabitants of the actual world appear in the textual actual world because these worlds belong to different ontological domains – while one originates in the actual universe, the other exists in the textual universe. Bell concurs with Ronen when she states that:

> the movement of an individual between the Actual World and possible world or a Textual Actual World and a Textual Possible World can be easily theoretically accommodated because they belong to the same system of reality [...]. [However] issues of counterparthood and transworld identity represent a potential ontological challenge when an Actual World individual appears in a Textual Actual World because they belong to different systems of reality. (76)

Like Ronen and Bell, in *Heterocosmica* (1998) Lubomír Doležel also acknowledges the illogicality of actual world individuals that appear in the textual actual world. However, unlike Ronen, Doležel offers a solution when he appropriates the use of both terms (counterpart and transworld identity) within his analyses. Doležel justifies his choice of using both terms to talk about actual world individuals that exist within the realm of fiction in the following words:

> Tolstoy's fictional Napoleon or Dickens's fictional London are not identical with the historical Napoleon or the geographical London [...] [yet] an ineradicable relationship exists between the historical Napoleon and all fictional Napoleons, between the actual London and all the fictional settings called London. [...] This relationship extends across world boundaries; fictional entities and their actual prototypes are linked by transworld identity. [...] Lewis, emphasizing that 'things in different worlds are never identical,' links the various incarnations of one thing in different worlds by the 'counterpart relation.' It is 'a relation of similarity' and thus seems to presuppose that the counterparts share some essential properties. But it is also flexible enough to link the Hitler of history and a Hitler who led 'a blameless life.' (*Heterocosmica* 788-89)

Doležel's reasons for using the term 'counterpart' to label all actual world historical individuals that appear in texts are as follows: first, he recognises that actual world individuals and their fictional counterparts are not identical, and, second, although a counterpart and its original are not identical, they still share certain properties that are sufficient to link the textual actual counterpart to its actual world referent. At the same time, Doležel also uses the term transworld identity in order to show that although actual world 'prototypes' and their counterparts are not the same individuals, they are still epistemologically related. Therefore, in order to be able to use Possible Worlds Theory to theorise the process through which actual world individuals appear in textual actual worlds, Doležel also proposes using the term transworld identity to label the epistemological link.

Marie-Laure Ryan also recognises the importance of using both terms for the analysis of fictional texts that include historical characters. In *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence,*

*and Narrative* Theory (1991), using the example of Napoleon Bonaparte appearing in fictional texts, Ryan asserts that: "the Napoleon of TAW [textual actual world] is regarded as a counterpart of the Napoleon of AW [actual world] linked to him through […] a line of transworld identity" (52). Like Doležel and Ryan, Bell too sees merit in using both terms and states that:

> The use of the Concretist term, 'counterpart,' to describe an actual world figure in fiction acknowledges that a fictional incarnation is not the *same* individual as the actual world inhabitant. However, by describing the process through which they move through and across the different modal systems of reality as 'transworld identity' – a term allied with Abstractionism – their essential epistemic relation is maintained. (77)

Bell here explains that using the term counterpart maintains that the actual world figure and their counterpart in the textual actual world are not the same individual. However, using the term transworld identity to describe their movement from one modal system to another, readers can still make the epistemological connection between the actual world individual and their counterpart.

     To conclude this section, Possible Worlds literary theorists either use both terms (Doležel; Ryan; Bell) 'transworld identity' and 'counterparts,' or they choose one term over the other (Ronen). Critics who use both the terms state that the term counterpart is used to refer to *all* actual world individual who exist in a possible world or a textual actual world while the term transworld identity is used to describe the process through which readers make the link between the actual world individual and their counterpart in a fictional context. However, as I will show below, within the context of Alternate Historical Fiction, there is a need to use both these concepts to *label* actual world individuals who exist in textual actual worlds. This is because there is more to the conceptual distinction between both the terms, and consequently, also to its application to Alternate Historical Fiction than has been previously noted. In the following section, I will use two indicative textual examples from Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992) and Stephen Fry's *Making History* (1996) respectively to show how the conceptual distinction between the two concepts is typically reflected in Alternate Historical Fiction texts.

**Alternate Historical Fiction: The New Approach**

Unlike logicians who are concerned only with individuals who exist between the actual world and the many possible worlds, literary theorists are concerned with individuals who exist between the actual world and the textual actual world, a special type of possible world. I suggest that instead of focusing on the ontological status of worlds that may be actual, possible or fictional, we must look at how actual world individuals are being presented within textual actual worlds. As I will show below using examples from Alternate History texts, actual world historical figures are introduced differently in different textual actual worlds. The texts that I have picked are Alternate History that present a different World War II outcome in particular. These are only two popular examples in the Alternate History Genre, but I have picked them for their clear use of depicting actual historical figures in different textual ways.

The textual actual world of an Alternate Historical Fiction text includes actual world historical figures that are presented as inhabitants of that world. *Fatherland* is an alternate World War II narrative that explores the premise: 'What if Hitler had won the war?' It is written in the form of a detective story. The point of divergence is Reinhard Heydrich's assassination attempt in 1942 – which he survives in the text and ultimately becomes the head of SS. The story begins in Nazi Germany 1964, in the week leading up to Hitler's 75th birthday. The story follows protagonist and chief investigating officer, Xavier March, as he investigates suspicious deaths of high-ranking Nazi officials. As he proceeds with his investigation, he uncovers signs of conspiracy that goes to the very top of the German Reich. March and an American journalist named Charlie work together to reveal the truth about the murders, the Wannsee conference, and the Holocaust.

In the textual actual world of *Fatherland*, when March discovers two names – Wilhlem Stuckart and Martin Luther – written in murder victim Joseph Buhler's diary, he sets off to uncover more information around these names. At the registrar's office, March pulls up the Nazi party's guide and flips through the pages to find the name 'Stuckart.' It reads:

> Born 16 November 1902, Wiesbaden. Studied law and economics at Munich and Frankfurt-am-Main universities. Graduated Magna Cum Laude, June 1928. Joined the Party in Munich in 1922. Various SA and SS positions. Mayor of Stettin, 1933. State Secretary, Ministry of the Interior, 1935-53. Publication: A Commentary on the German Racial Laws (1936). Promoted honorary SS-Obergruppenführer, 1944. Returned to private legal practice, 1953. (*Fatherland* 92)

Through the above extract, the reader is made aware of the textual actual world character, Wilhelm Stuckart. Some readers, depending on their knowledge of World War II may also recognise that the name Wilhelm Stuckart originates in the actual world. In any case, in the author's note to the reader at the end of the text, Robert Harris acknowledges that "many of the characters whose names are used in the novel actually existed [in the actual world]" (385). In the author's note, Harris also provides readers with a short biographical account of all the actual world historical figures used in the text. He states that the biographical details of actual world historical figures that are used in the book are correct until 1942 but "their subsequent fates, of course, were different" (385). Harris states that Wilhelm Stuckart in the actual world:

> was arrested at the end of the war and spent four years in detention. He was released in 1949 and lived in West Berlin. In December 1953 he was killed in a "car" accident near Hanover: the 'accident' was probably arranged by a vengeance squad hunting down those Nazi war criminals still at large. (*Fatherland* 385)

As the above extracts on Wilhelm Stuckart show, the textual actual world Wilhelm Stuckart and the actual world Wilhelm Stuckart differ in crucial ways. For example, the actual world Wilhelm Stuckart died in 1953, but in the textual actual world Wilhelm Stuckart returns to legal practice in 1953. At the same time, it is also evident from the extracts that both Wilhelm Stuckarts also resemble each other closely – their lives until 1942 remained identical in that they were born on the same day, they graduated from the same college at the same time, and they joined the Nazi party in the same year.

Similar to Wilhelm Stuckart as seen above, all the other actual world historical individuals such as Reinhard Heydrich, Adolf Hitler, or Odilo Globocknik that are used in the textual actual world are identical to their originals until 1942. Therefore, none of the actual world historical figures that are used in the textual actual world of *Fatherland* are the self-same individuals as their actual world referent. Instead, they resemble their actual world referents closely, at least until 1942 but then their lives differ after that point. In this text the year 1942 is the point of divergence for all characters and events. Here, Ryan's principle of minimal departure can be used to explain how readers understand the textual actual world:

> We reconstrue the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW [actual world]. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text. (51)

According to this principle readers use their knowledge of the actual world and construct textual actual worlds as closely as possible to the actual world by making only those changes to the textual actual world that need to be made. For example, while reading the above extract from *Fatherland* where Xavier March looks up Stuckart's name in the registry, the reader will construe the textual Wilhelm Stuckart as he is in the actual world. The only change that the reader is asked to make is: In the actual world, Wilhelm Stuckart dies in 1953 but in the textual actual world, he is not killed in a car crash, and instead returns to his legal practice.

Alternate Historical Fiction texts can present historical figures in different ways. *Making History* is a novel that explores the premise: 'What if Hitler had never been born?' Protagonist Michael Young, a doctoral history graduate student studying at Cambridge, England and his physicist friend, Leo Zuckerman, invent a machine that helps them alter the past. Using this machine, Michael prevents the birth of Adolf Hitler, and wakes up in a world in which a more charismatic leader led Nazi Germany to European domination by 1939. Even so, a different form of the Final Solution of the Jews or Holocaust is still implemented.

In this textual actual world, Michael and Leo meet to discuss how they could possibly use the time machine. Michael suggests that they could use it to erase the infamous Adolf Hitler from their world:

> MICHAEL: So we erase him! If we wanted to, we could liquidate Hitler. [...]
>
> LEO: You think the thought hasn't crossed my mind? You think the idea of being able to rid humanity of the curse of Adolf Hitler isn't something I think of every minute of my waking life? But listen to me, Michael, listen to me. The day I was first told what happened to my father, what happened there in Auschwitz, that day I made myself a promise. I swore before God and the Universe that never, ever, would I involve myself in war, in murder, in the harming of another human being. You understand me? [...]
>
> MICHAEL: Who said anything about killing? [...]
>
> MICHAEL: (continuing: smiling wickedly) We just make sure the motherfucker is never born. Know what I'm saying? (*Making History* 151-53)

The above conversation between Leo and Michael takes place in the textual actual world, but depending on their knowledge of the World War II, readers will recognise that the extract refers to the actual world historical figure Adolf Hitler and an actual world place Auschwitz. If, as the principle of minimal departure dictates we assume that the textual actual world of *Making History* is an epistemological extension of our actual world unless specified otherwise, then along with the historical Adolf Hitler we can also invoke all the contextual information from the actual world. For example, readers will assume that the extract speaks of Adolf Hitler in the actual world who was responsible for the concentration camp he set up in Auschwitz to implement the Final Solution of the Jews which here Leo refers to using the words "war," "murder" and "harming of another human being." Using both their knowledge of the actual world history and the information that is provided in the extract, Adolf Hitler in the text will be interpreted by the reader as being the same person as the actual world individual who was the leader of the Nazi party and Chancellor of Germany during the World War II. As evidenced by the above extract, both Michael and Leo share their hatred for Hitler due to their knowledge of the history of the actual figure. Therefore, when the duo decides to alter history so that Hitler is never born, readers assume that they are doing so because the textual actual world Hitler is the same person as the actual world Hitler. The text at this

point does not give the reader any reason to assume that the Hitler in the textual actual world is different from the Hitler who existed in the actual world.

In both examples of *Fatherland* and *Making History*, two types of actual world historical individuals appear in textual actual worlds. As shown through the example of Wilhelm Stuckart in *Fatherland,* the textual Stuckart is presented as resembling the actual Stuckart closely, but then he also differs from his actual world referent in other ways. In contrast, Hitler in *Making History* is presented as being indistinguishable from the actual world Hitler. As discussed previously, Possible Worlds Theory currently has the necessary vocabulary to describe such individuals that exist in more than one world. However, as it stands in literary theory, all actual world historical figures who appear in textual actual worlds are defined as 'counterparts.' Thus, there is a lack of terminology to distinguish between historical figures who are presented in fiction as being the same individual as their actual world referent and those who are not. As shown through the two textual examples above, the distinction is crucial within the context of Alternate Historical Fiction because when actual world historical figures are introduced in Alternate History textual actual worlds they may be of two types. While Wilhelm Stuckart in the textual actual world can be labelled as a counterpart of his actual world referent, I argue that using the term counterpart to describe Adolf Hitler in the textual actual world of *Making History* would be misleading. This is because the Adolf Hitler in the textual actual world, unlike the definition of a counterpart, is the same person as his actual world referent.

Recall that within philosophical logic there is a specific difference between the concept of counterparts and transworld identity. Counterparts posit an individual who resembles their actual world referent in crucial ways but also differs in other ways and exists in a possible world. Adopting Lewis's definition of the term: "Your counterparts resemble you in content and context in important ways […] but they are not really you […] your counterparts are men you would have been, had the world been otherwise" ("Counterpart Theory" 27-28). An individual with transworld identity on the other hand is the same person as the actual world individual, but they exist in a possible world.

Returning to the examples from *Fatherland* and *Making History,* we can see how Adolf Hitler in the textual actual world of *Making History* corresponds to the notion of having transworld identity. In this case, the textual Hitler is not a counterpart of the actual world Hitler, unlike a 'counterpart,' the textual actual Adolf Hitler is the same person as the actual world Hitler, just that he exists in another possible world. Therefore, I propose that historical figures presented in a textual actual world as being the same person as their actual world referents should be defined as individuals who possess 'transworld identity.' Conversely, Wilhelm Stuckart in the textual actual world of *Fatherland* is a 'counterpart' of the actual world Wilhelm Stuckart. This concurs with Lewis's definition of counterparts and therefore I suggest that the term 'counterpart' should only be used to label individuals who resemble their actual world referents in crucial ways and yet are not the same person. As also seen with both the examples above, Ryan's principle of minimal departure can be used to explain how readers make the epistemological link between a counterpart or individual with transworld identity and the actual world historical figure. When a character in the text is a counterpart, the text dictates some changes to the individual (as seen with the Wilhlem Stuckart example), but when the character possesses transworld identity the text does not dictate any changes in terms of the character (as seen with the example from *Making History*).

## Conclusion

Transworld identity and counterpart theory are two concepts that are important for analysing Alternate Historical Fiction because they each offer the vocabulary that is needed to describe actual world individuals that appear in textual actual worlds. As a direct consequence of the conceptual disagreement between the modal realists and moderate realists on the ontological status of possible worlds, both schools of thought also disagree on whether or not individuals who appear in more than one possible world are the self-same individuals. While modal realists who believe that all possible worlds, like the actual world, physically exist out there, moderate realists propose that individuals who appear in more than one possible world cannot be the same individual. They argue that it is logically impossible for one individual to exist in two or more worlds simultaneously. Instead, they

propose that counterparts exist in other possible worlds. Moderate realists do not subscribe to the notion that possible worlds are concrete entities and so according to them the self-same actual world individual can appear across possible worlds.

While this debate remains unresolved, literary theorists in their application of Possible Worlds Theory to fiction have appropriated the associated terminology to befit their analyses. While the approach that literary theorists adopt is valid for the types of fiction that they analyse, I have shown how these approaches are lacking when applied to Alternate Historical Fiction. More specifically, using examples from two Alternate Historical Fiction texts, I have shown how textual actual worlds of such fiction can have two types of actual world historical figures presented as characters. Consequently, two sets of terminology are needed to appropriately label the two types of actual world individuals in texts. Within my discussion of the two concepts, I have shown that the terms counterpart and transworld identity are *not substitutes for one another*, but rather that they are two conceptually different concepts that refer to two different phenomena especially within the context of Alternate Historical Fiction. I have concluded that within the context of Alternate Historical Fiction, counterparts are those individuals that appear across possible worlds, resemble their actual world referents closely, but also differ from them in some respects. On the other hand, the term transworld identity is used when the same actual world individual is presented in the textual actual world. Within the parameters of this article, I have adopted the concepts of counterpart and transworld identity to label only actual world historical figures who appear in fictional texts. However, these concepts may be extended to analyse fictional characters that appear in more than one textual actual world or even across multiple textual universes. In differentiating between two crucial types of actual world individuals that may appear within the Alternate History Genre, this paper offers appropriate vocabulary that may be used to define and describe actual world historical figures in Alternate Historical Fiction texts.

**Notes**

1. While Ronen (1994) chooses to use the terms 'modal' and 'moderate' realism, and theorists such as Nolan (2002) and Bell (2010) use the term 'Abstractionism' and 'Concretism' to refer to the two

schools of thought, for consistency in this paper, following Ronen, I will be referring to the two views as modal realism and moderate realism.

2. Bell (2010) states that according to the law of non-contradiction a proposition "p AND ~p is false" (47) this means that for a world to be possible a proposition and its negation cannot be true simultaneously. The law of the excluded middle states that "p OR ~p is true" (46) suggesting that a statement is either true or false, an in-between state is not possible. Therefore, there cannot be a possible world in which elephants both exist and do not exist at the same time. Similarly, in a possible world, elephants must also either exist or not; an in-between state of existing and not existing is impossible.

**Works Cited**

Bell, Alice. *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Doležel, Lubomír. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press, 1984.

Fry, Stephen. *Making History*. Random House, 1996.

Harris, Robert. *Fatherland*. Hutchinson, 1992.

Kripke, Saul A. "Naming and Necessity." *Semantics of Natural Language.* Springer, 1972, pp. 253-355.

---. "Semantical Analysis of Modal Logic I Normal Modal Propositional Calculi." *Mathematical Logic Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 5-6, 1963, pp. 67-96.

Lewis, David K. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

---. "Anselm and Actuality." *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, 1983, pp. 175-88.

---. *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell, 1973.

---. "Postscripts to 'Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic.'" *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, 1983, pp. 39-46.

Leibniz, Gottfried W. *The Monadology*. 1714. Trans. R. Latta. 1898. <http://www.plato-philosophy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Monadology-1714-by-Gottfried-Wilhelm-LEIBNIZ-1646-1716.pdf> Accessed 20 October 2015.

Nolan, Daniel. *Topics in the Philosophy of Possible Worlds*. Routledge, 2002.

Pavel, Thomas G. "Fiction and the Causal Theory of Names." *Poetics*, vol. 8, no. 1-2, 1979, pp. 179-91.

Rescher, Nicholas. "The Ontology of the Possible." *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality.* Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 166-81.

Ronen, Ruth. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

**Bionote**

Riyukta Raghunath is an English Language and Linguistics PhD student at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Before coming to Sheffield Hallam University, she completed her Master's in English Language Studies from the University of Sheffield and she holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Madras Christian College in India. The emphasis of her doctoral thesis is on the analytical potential of a narratological framework such as Possible Worlds Theory on counterfactual historical fiction. Her research interests include Narratology, Stylistics, and Cognitive Poetics. She is currently an Associate Lecturer in the department of Humanities at Sheffield Hallam University.

# Walking the Horizon: Transmissions between Worlds in Alan Garner's Late Fiction

## Brian Baker

In this article I will be considering three novels by Alan Garner, the Cheshire-based writer whose most famous works are those he wrote for children in the 1960s, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) and *The Owl Service* (1967). Garner, for all his longevity, has not been subject to a great deal of critical analysis. There is one monograph extant on his work, published in 1981 by Neil Philip (which therefore does not cover the later fictions I will be analysing here); a scattering of articles, mainly considering his children's Fantasy Fiction; and one recent book of short critical and personal appreciations, *First Light* (2016). In part, this is because his works are difficult to place generically and contextually. The early fictions are clearly works of Fantasy. *The Weirdstone* (and its sequel, *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963)) has at the centre of its narrative two children, Colin and Susan, who are drawn into a battle between the forces of good and evil through discovering Fundindelve, a world beneath Alderley Edge in Cheshire. There, they help release the forces of light, who do battle in the world and defeat the forces of evil. In *The Owl Service*, three young people (two teenage boys and a young woman) unconsciously re-enact the narrative of Blodeuwedd from the Welsh story-cycle the *Mabinogion*, under the fantastical influence of a set of patterned crockery (the 'Owl Service') they find hidden in the rafters. Garner's later fiction, however, does not fit so easily into commonly-understood definitions of Fantasy. What it recurrently does, however, is to engage stories of modern life with mythic patterns and narratives transmitted across time, through oral storytelling, through shamanic ritual, and through art.

As Neil Philip writes in his early study of Garner's work, *A Fine Anger* (1981):

> Garner is one of the most able of the writers who have sought in the last twenty years to explore the disjointed and troubled psychological and emotional landscape of the twentieth century through the symbolism of myth and

folklore: myth is used as a diagnostic tool in the examination of contemporary ills. Central to Garner's writing is a concern with patterning, with repetitive cycles of experience, which he has explored by structuring his stories around myths and legends. (21)

Garner's later fictions are, most properly, Fantastika: fictions of time and place which self-consciously deploy narrative material drawn from myth, according to John Clute's definition:

[Fantastika texts] generally exhibit an awareness - on the author's part, or embedded in the text, or both – that they are in fact generic; that stories within the overall remit are most usually effective (and resonant) when read literally; and that the pre-emptive transgressiveness of fantastika is most salutary within the context of the Western World, but when addressed 'outwards' can seem invasive ("Fantastika," *SF Encyclopaedia*).

All of Garner's later fictions are deeply self-conscious about their use of myth within the narratives; as I will suggest, Garner recurrently uses a motif of transmission (across time, via objects, through stories, or even from consciousness to consciousness) to signify this generic awareness. They are stories which embed other stories within them or, like *The Owl Service*, gain particular resonance intertextually. Of the three later novels I will consider in this article, *Strandloper* (1997) concerns the collision between a transported English convict and Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime; *Thursbitch* (2003) the relation between the 18th-century rituals and observances of a Cheshire village and two contemporary characters; and *Boneland* (2012) interiorises temporal dislocation and repetition in the psyche of *The Weirdstone*'s Colin, now an adult and astrophysicist, who struggles with the consequences of his experiences in the earlier books. In these novels, there is a direct connection between time and place, a connection which is understood through a process of transmission through ritual and myth, often located in a specific and significant landscape.

In this article, then, I will approach three of Garner's later novels through an analysis of the relations of time and space as they are experienced by the books' protagonists. I propose that Garner's novels are *planar fictions*. The texts are structured with two (or multiple) planes that move independently in time/space but can be brought into alignment through the workings of an object (the Weirdstone, for instance) or through consciousness

(between two or more characters living in different times and/ or places). This alignment, often worked through a particular shamanic figure or 'conduit,' enables a transcendent understanding of the relation between human subject and cosmos, or what I will identify as between 'myth and place.' This visionary understanding is itself transmitted through the poet or artist, and through the poetic artwork: Garner's fiction itself.

Garner's later novels are not fictions of mapping space, even the actual geography of Cheshire, but rather fictions of *the alignment of co-ordinates*: it is no coincidence that Garner's autobiographical non-fiction essay about his writing, "The Edge of the Ceiling," begins:

> My name is Alan Garner, and I was born, with the cord twice wrapped round my throat, in the front room of 47 Crescent Road, Congleton, Cheshire, at Latitude 53°09'40" N, Longitude 02°13'7" W, at 21.30 on Wednesday, 17 October 1934. (Garner 1997: 3)

The co-ordinates and the time are precise; from this, Garner suggests, all else follows. Most overtly, in *Thursbitch* and *Boneland*, these two planes are the Earth and the constellations of stars that wheel overhead. There is not, in Garner's fiction, a direct connection between stars and markers on the land in terms of an astro-cartography, the kind of connection that is proposed in the mode of writing known as "Earth Mysteries" (which begins with the publication of John Michell's *The View Over Atlantis* in 1973), which suggest that Neolithic monuments were constructed to mirror the constellations above; but instead, one finds a ritual relation that has to do with movement and conjunction. When the co-ordinates align, the true nature of world and subject are revealed.

In a very self-conscious manner, Garner's fictions articulate the place of writing itself (or of poetic inspiration, perhaps) in this moment of revelation. Garner's fictions then embody a moment of artistic conjuring of a connection between worlds. We can see this in "The Edge of the Ceiling," where Garner talks about his childhood in Cheshire when, sequentially confined to his room by diphtheria, meningitis, and pneumonia, he discovered "a forest in the ceiling, with hills and clouds, and a road to the horizon" (10). Between sleeping, catnapping and coma, Garner suggests that he was able, by 'switching himself off,'

to enter a different world in the ceiling, to 'live' in the ceiling when his ability to 'live' in the 'real' world of Cheshire was reduced by chronic pain and debility. Unlike Susan in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, however, Garner does not embrace the attraction of the unreal world. While "the world of the ceiling was three-dimensional, objects were solid, visual perspectives true" (11), Garner writes that the world of the bed became "the permanent choice" of where to truly live because of the *constraints* (not the fantastical wonders) of the world of the ceiling:

> Although the way to the ceiling was along the same road in the ceiling, the land beyond the road, from visit to visit, was inconsistent; and this inconsistency made the ceiling not more interesting but less. Each venture was separate rather than a learning, and such variety leads nowhere; it builds nothing; it has nothing to teach. And I wanted to learn. That was the difference. I would enter the ceiling by an act of will, but left it through tedium. Sooner or later, I would stop whatever I was doing in the ceiling, turn around, and always be facing the same road-forest-cloud-hill picture that I saw from my bed. Then I would pull back as a camera does to the bed and lie looking at the lime-wash plaster. (11-12)

This relation between the bed and the ceiling seems to me to symbolically present the spatial and temporal relationships in many of Garner's books. Recurrently, we find two spatial planes, and an observer whose consciousness forms a kind of bridge or conduit between these planes. There is an interaction between 'real' and the 'unreal,' between modernity and myth, articulated through narrative. As readers of these fiction, we too enact the connection. In two of the books I will be considering in this article, *Thursbitch* and *Boneland*, the relation between the bed and the ceiling can be taken to directly signify the relation between land and sky, but it also represents a spatio-temporal relation between two different historical periods which come into contact through some kind of emotional, psychological or ritual resonance. In the third, *Strandloper*, this vertical relation is extended (more problematically) into the horizontal plane, in a narrative of geographical displacement and cultural encounter.

At the centre of *Boneland* is Colin Whisterfield. In *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and its sequel *The Moon of Gomrath*, Colin and his sister Susan were living temporarily on

Alderley Edge in Cheshire and had come into possession of the magical Weirdstone, the key to the magic which had sealed horse-borne warriors beneath Alderley Edge to await the time when they would be needed to save the world from the evil Nastrond and the forces of darkness. *Boneland*, published nearly 50 years later, takes up Colin's story as a Professor of Astrophysics, working at Jodrell Bank observatory (which is itself close to Alderley Edge, where Colin now lives in a permanent wooden house in the woods). *Boneland* is a narrative of trauma and loss; Colin has lost his sister Susan, who had been translated to some kind of spiritual realm elsewhere at the end of *The Moon of Gomrath*, and through the narrative Colin seeks the help of the psychologist Meg, the taxi driver Bert and others to 'heal' his traumatised consciousness. Colin, who is described by Meg as "an immature, uncooperative hysterical depressive Asperger's, with an IQ off the clock" (35), suffers memory problems; or rather, suffers from a psychological threshold instilled at the age of 13. Before that time, Colin can remember nothing; after that time he has total recall. "'I can't delete,' he tells Meg. 'Not even dreams'" (36). *Boneland* is therefore a narrative of trauma and healing that is predicated upon the psychological effects of the events of the *Weirdstone* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, novels published some 50 years before. As the narrative nears its conclusion, it becomes apparent that both Meg and Bert are Colin's own psychological projections, mechanisms by which he attempts to return to himself, to a sense of well-being or peace. The fictional time of *Boneland* contains the historical 50 years between the publication of *The Weirdstone* and the conclusion of the trilogy. Time, in a sense, is articulated intertextually.

Colin's vocation as an Astrophysicist, watching the stars through the radio telescope, is a means by which to search for his sister, translated to the other realm of mythic beings and cosmic forces. This iteration of the relation between bed and ceiling is paralleled throughout the narrative in scenes narrated from the point of view of a Neolithic man, whose understanding the connection between sky, land and art is outlined on the very first page:

> He cut the veil of the rock; the hooves clattered the bellowing waters below him in the dark. The lamp brought the moon from the blade, and the blade the bull from the rock. The ice rang.
>
> He took life in his mouth, spat red over hand on the cave wall. Around, above him, the trample of the beasts answered; the stags, the hinds, the horses, the

> bulls, the trace of old dreams. The ice rang. He held the lamp and climbed among antlers necks ears eyes horns haunches, the limbs, the nostrils, the rutting, the dancers; from the cave to the crack. He pushed the lamp at the dark and followed his shoulder, his head twisted, through the hill along the seam of grit, by the nooks of the dead. He slipped out; pinched the lamp, and crawled between slabs into the gash of Ludcruck on snow. (1)

We can see here a similar depth-metaphor as is found in *The Weirdstone*. The Neolithic man descends *beneath the hill* in order to reach the site of a more primal relation between forces of light and darkness, life and death; however, where Colin and Susan uncovered the existence of an Old Magic that inhabits Alderley Edge but is largely unacknowledged by modernity, the Neolithic man himself forges the connection between forces of light and darkness through cave-painting, through the creation of images. The oblique, poetic language of *Boneland* here presents a symbol for the work of the novel itself, a kind of ritual of healing or forging of connection between old and new, sky and land, myth and place. This formal self-consciousness indicates *Boneland*'s alignment with Clute's definition of Fantastika noted above.

The connection between sky and land, or myth and place, is the artist (as shaman). This a figure that can be found, much earlier, in the contemporary London-based writer Iain Sinclair's "Intimate Associations: Myth and Place" from his 1979 text *Suicide Bridge*:

> Man is the messenger substance between [myth and place]. He is a raised tube, opened at crown of head & base of feet – so that it flows through him, conscious or unconscious, the power, the surge, the tachyonic voltage. He is erect. That is his vanity, to lift skull to the shafting sun. (149)

Sinclair, as I have analysed extensively in a book-length study, is deeply engaged with the imagination of place, and in one of his most recent books, *Black Apples of Gower* (2015), he returned to the South Wales locations and stories of his childhood. Although I have no evidence of a direct transmission of this (male) figure of the shaman from Garner to Sinclair (or vice versa), both Sinclair's work and Garner's can be seen to connect with the mode of the 'Eerie' or folk horror, the bringing together of a textual consciousness of a specific place with supernatural, mythic or uncanny events, often connected to deep historical time. Both

writers are deeply engaged with particular places (Cheshire for Garner, London for Sinclair) in which myth, ritual and writing unlock hidden or unseen stories and, for good and ill, ancient forces. It is the poet, the artist, or the writer who becomes the 'tube' or 'conduit' between myth and place, between sky and land, between modernity and 'deep time.'

In *Thursbitch*, a dual time-frame is used, but the historical distance is far less than is found in *Boneland*. The primary narrative concerns the valley of Thursbitch in the mid-eighteenth century, and the "jagger" or traveling tinker Jack Turner, who assumed a shamanistic role in relation to the powers or forces that occupy the valley. Turner ingests fly agaric mushrooms as part of leading the community's ancient (pagan) rituals, and distributes his own urine to some of the denizens as "piddle juice," which can induce ecstatic hallucinations. This narrative is interwoven with that of Ian and Sal, two contemporary walkers in the valley, who walk there as a consequence of Sal's ongoing struggle with motor neurone disease and her wish to keep mobile and active for as long as she can. Ian is, the novel obliquely suggests, a Catholic priest and perhaps a former lover of Sal's; as Andy Roberts suggests in his walking notes on *Thursbitch*, the Anglican vicar responsible for Jenkin Chapel in the valley "had, surprisingly, never been there but he had been, among other things, told at his induction [...] *it would not be safe for a man of the cloth to enter that valley* [and] had been told by inhabitants of the area that it was '*not right*'" (4). In the novel, as David Punter has suggested, the narrative of Jack Turner presages the end of the "old ways," "the land [...] threatened [...] by the arrival of a 'new master' who wants to settle the desolate but sacred valley of Thursbitch, build a farmhouse, and disrupt the ceaseless singing of the stones" (570), the Neolithic standing stones that have been built into the eighteenth-century landscape as gateposts and markers. However, if "*Thursbitch* dramatizes a moment of change," as Punter suggests, "it does so without coming to a final conclusion as to what succeeds what, as to whether the sheer force of modernity can ever eradicate older systems and signs" (571-72). The narrative of Sal and Ian suggests that there *are* survivals, not only in the stones themselves but in the forces that allow an intersection between historical periods, between Jack Turner's wanderings in the valley and the contemporary walkers. This is different to *Boneland*, where the two times do not materially intersect, except in the shape of the Edge and the relation between sky and land. In *Thursbitch,* the connection is physical.

Garner's fiction articulates ideas of "sentient landscape," what Andy Roberts identifies with a *genius loci* or "spirit of place," that is expressed directly by Sal as she walks the valley: "Most geologists agree about sentient landscape. If you do enough fieldwork, you can't avoid it. Some places have to be treated with respect, though that doesn't get written up in the literature" (*Thursbitch* 87). This isn't simply the idea of the hidden or occluded histories encoded in practices of psychogeography, familiar from Sinclair's work, nor is it the recovery of the Old Straight Track (or ley lines) identified by Alfred Watkins in his book of that name (which do, though, have a direct connection to *The Moon of Gomrath*). Consciousness is embedded in, and transmitted through a sense of place. Sal and Ian look across the valley and consider the relation between land and sky:

> "The earth shifts on its axis." [says Ian]
>
> "I thought it was just me." [she replies]
>
> "The moon really was impressive. And from here, Bellatrix is clearing the outcrop. Which means that Orion will rise, though we'll scarcely see it. Dawn's not – look out!" (89)

They hear a cry, and a stone – carbon fluoride that has been hollowed out and polished within, and which "glowed white and violet" when the torch shines inside it (89) – cast by Turner in the eighteenth century lands at Ian's feet in the twenty-first. We have here a conjunction of place and time that is articulated through the relation between land and sky, and particularly the constellation of Orion, which 'moves' through the sky as (of course) the Earth rotates. The constellations watched by Ian and Sal are directly important to Jack Turner's narrative, as we will see in a moment. The conjunctions caused by the movement of sky and earth connect place across time. We can consider the sky and earth as two related planes which, in moving, come into alignment.

This is most clearly articulated by Jack Turner in *Thursbitch* right at the end of the novel, immediately prior to his death, when Jack explains to his dog Bryn about the Hunter and the Bull, Orion and Taurus, and the relation of the constellations (and the mythic stories associated with them) to the valley:

> There's his eye, Bryn. It must peep over yonder first, to see as all's well. And now he's seen, up he comes, sithee, to look on us. Isn't that a bonny sight, him with his highmost step?
>
> [...] And now who's that coming out of there? This Big Chap with his club. He's after Bull; for he's the very cut-throat of cattle.
>
> But Bull sees him, and up he climbs to get rid. And the Big Chap's thrutching his belt out of Thoon; so he'll not be held up long. Bull had best be doing. And now he's at his highmost, and the Big Chap's out and walking the ridge. (154)

After the Big Chap (Orion) gets a dog (Canis), it is the land itself that will protect and keep the Bull:

> Bull's going to nip down t'other side of Andrew's Edge to have a quiet crack with Crom in his sleep, and the Big Chap will think as he's gotten him. But no. He'll ketch his foot above Long Clough, and down he'll plump. [...] While Bull shall sneak round under Pike Low to peep at Cats Tor tomorrow night. As long as he peeps at Cats Tor, land man can never catch him. And that's a fact. (155)

The rotation of the Earth, the seeming movement of the stars, enacts a perpetual chase, where the Hunter always chases the Bull but can never catch him, as the Bull will return to the safety and sanctuary of the Earth. This story happens every night through the northern winter (Turner tells this story on Christmas Eve), a promise of the return to fertility symbolised by the Bull. The Man, the erect Hunter, the watching and painting artist, pursues an endlessly revivifying (masculine) power that renews and inspires.

The connection between land and sky is, of course, the horizon. Orion "walks the ridge"; in "The Edge of the Ceiling," Garner discovered "a forest in the ceiling, with hills and clouds, and a road to the horizon" (10); and at the end of *Boneland*, Colin goes to Castle Rock on Alderley Edge:

> The telescope moved in azimuth and elevation to lock onto him. [...] He went to the thrust of the rock above the air and looked down. He looked up. He walked along the brink, along the line of nothing, between sky and ancient river. (149)

The horizon is not a *place*, of course, it is a *relation,* between sky and land. As the sky and Earth move in rotation, co-ordinates align, and the land is fertilised. The telescope, the conduit between land and sky, between human and cosmos, is identified with Colin, the consciousness that perceives. Colin becomes as Sinclair's "raised tube, opened at crown of head & base of feet," silhouetted against the sky and open to its transmissions. As he walks the horizon, the "line of nothing," Colin enters into a mythic relation to the world (and to the universe).

The horizon is also a boundary, an interstitial space. In his essay "Inner Time," also collected in *The Voice That Thunders*, Garner explores the centrality of space, boundary and flow to narrative and to *myth*. The "flow of myth" is, according to Garner, "the most important function of literature, the one to which we turn in our greatest stress":

> Man is an animal that tests boundaries. He is a "mearcstapa," "boundarystrider," and the nature of myth is to help him to understand the boundaries, to cross them and to comprehend the new; so that, whenever Man reaches out, it is myth that supports him with a truth that is constant, although names and shapes may change. From within us, from our past, we find the future answered and the boundary met. It may well be asked why we hold the key to questions we do not yet know, from what space and what time the myth flows. (108)

Colin becomes a "boundarystrider" in the moment in which he is returned to himself. The "mearcstapa" or boundary strider is one meaning of the title of *Strandloper*, Garner's 1997 novel about a Cheshire man transported to Australia: one who walks upon the beach (between sea and land). Within the text, it is a word associated with the central character, William Buckley who says, towards the end of the novel, "Well, I'm sort of like a governor, making folks shape [...] crossing back and to; there's always summat wants fettling. [...] So I'm never still, me" (190), to which another character replies: "You could be describing an estuarine plover, [...] a most busy creature. Its common name is strandloper, in the southern hemisphere" (190). The etymology is unsure, but it seems that "strandloper" has another, hidden derivation, from Afrikaans. "Strandloper" means "beachwalker," and refers to the Bushmen communities of the "Skeleton Coast" of South-West Africa (Namibia) which did not

survive much beyond the nineteenth century. "Strandloper" therefore connotes a colonial name for a particular indigenous people whose way of life was destroyed by the coming of the white settler. This is, ultimately, the story of *Strandloper*.

It begins in Cheshire, in the early years of the nineteenth century. The central character, William Buckley, is a farm worker who is being taught to read by Edward Stanley, the progressive son of the reactionary squire. Reading and particularly writing is characterised as a kind of sedition: "He suffers reading because servants may take instruction thereby. But with writing: with writing, one may instruct. There he is not so generous. And noise of revolution aids little" (23), says Edward. Garner carefully places the opening sections of the narrative in the wake of British political reaction to the French Revolution and then the Terror, and also within the colonial system of punishment that is known as transportation. As Neil Phillip notes, "this is a true story, still remembered in the Aussie slang term 'Buckley's chance' or 'Buckley's' which means 'cat in hell's chance'" ("Beyond the Singularity" 237). William Buckley was a historical person, "transported to Australia on trumped-up charges, escapes the penal colony and is recused in the outback by a band of Wathaurung Aborginies, who regard him as the reincarnation of the shaman Murrangurk" ("Beyond the Singularity" 237). As in other Garner novels with a strong historical emphasis, in particular *Red Shift* (1974), political power is associated with violence and almost arbitrary articulation; in *Red Shift*, the massacre of Parliamentary sympathisers by a Royalist militia at Barthomley Church during the English Civil War is a key incident in the three-strand narrative structure which links events across time. Here, William Buckley is seized in church by the elder Stanley's men, accused of disobeying orders not to cut oak branches, and is taken away. Where the victims of the Barthomley massacre are initially barricaded inside the church, here the officers enter into the sacred (and communal) space, but similar patterns of incarceration and escape remain. In either novel, resisting the violence of power is impossible. There is only flight from it.

William Buckley is taken during a ritual in the church in which pre-Christian observances are intersected with Christian practice. Neil Phillip suggests that Garner "invents a plausible folk fertility ritual out of scraps of English folklore" ("Beyond the

Singularity" 237), a survival that is also crucial to the mythic texture of *Thursbitch*, which is, as we have seen, also partly set in a historical Cheshire village. As Ronald Hutton writes, "*Strandloper* had suggested an enduring, organic, folk religion of the land; *Thursbitch* manifested a full-blown surviving pagan religion among rural Cheshire people" ("Alan to an Academic" 139). Where *Thursbitch*'s ritual is Mithraic, focused upon the masculine fertility symbol of the Bull, in *Strandloper* the symbol is the oak bough, itself associated with power and kingship: little wonder that Sir John Stanley interprets the lopping of the boughs as an act of sedition. *Strandloper* begins with a fertility ritual as a kind of folk game, where the young men of the village hide in a hollow oak while the young women dance around and sing:

> Kiminary keemo,
>
> Kiminary keemo,
>
> Kimiary kiltikary, kiminary keemo.
>
> String stram pammadilly, lamma pamma rat tag,
>
> Ring dong bomminanny keemo (4)

As the game "was now rampage, and the women laughed and screamed in excitement, as the men staggered," Esther Cumberbatch (who is sexually involved with both William and Edward Stanley) grabs hold of William, who is then caught by the men, entangled in a net, and thrown into the mere:

> Shick. Shack. Shick.
>
> Shick. Shack. Shick.
>
> Brick-y Buck-ley
>
> You… Are… It… (5)

A seeming game of tag is, of course, a fertility ritual, the connection between Esther (or "Het" as she is known) and William emphasised by her half-conscious selection of him as "It." It also suggests William's fate, to be bound and sent across water to Australia. Crucially, however, this dance or game foreshadows a more visionary episode in Australia where, as Murrangurk, Buckley enters into the mythic imaginary of the Indigenous community who revive him and partakes of a dreaming:

> The man wound a net about his head, so that he could not see, and held him by the arms from behind.

> The old men stopped their song, but still beat the sticks, slowly, and the echo
> of them bounced off the rock and grew louder, until the rock itself was ringing,
> and he could no loner hear the sticks behind him, but only the clashing of the
> rock before. He felt the hands on his shoulders tighten, and they moved him
> into a balance, holding him, and then, at a pause between the echo, he was
> shoved forward, and would have fallen, but for the hands, and the echo was
> behind him, then silent everywhere.
>
> The hands unwound the net. He was inside the rock, and the old men were
> sitting in a circle, and the walls and roof and floor were all shining crystals.
> (135)

At this point, William/Murrangurk takes a stone, given to him by Het in the village, and places it inside a hole in the wall: "the swaddledidaff left no gap; the wall was made" (135). The mythic fabric of the village in Cheshire and the dream-space of Australia are one: the stone is from, and completes, the wall. The circuit is completed at the end of the narrative when William returns to Cheshire to find Het once again. Having realised that Het has married and has a son, William goes back to the oak, and reaches for the "jackstones" or pebbles that Het had played with 30 years earlier.

> He took out the shiny pebbles. And now he saw they were not jackstones, but
> blades of flint. The People had made them: Yambeetch and Warrowil. The
> People had known the oak. One tree was all, and all the world one Dreaming.
> (199)

How do we approach this closing of the mythic circle? It may seem a plea for an erasure of difference, an assertion that human beings are 'one' in the mythic or imaginary, a gesture that we would be rightly suspicious of as itself colonial or appropriative. In fact, one might argue that the very narrative strategy of *Strandloper* is deeply problematic, in attempting to articulate Australian Indigenous culture and experience. Garner, in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* given at the time of *Strandloper*'s publication, said: "Everything William Buckley experienced – even the 'Aboriginal Dreaming' and the trans-hallucination – I have experienced myself. I am a Western European trained to be a classics professor and I had to let go of all that" ("Beyond the Singularity" 237). We find here, perhaps, the

"invasiveness" that John Clute noted when Fantastika is addressed 'outwards' from the Western World. There may be no simple equivalence of experience, as Garner would have it.

What we have in *Strandloper* is not a story of the submerging of human difference in the ocean of myth, a presumed universality of experience; but rather the novel itself is underpinned by a myth of *writing* which suggests that the poetic act can be the 'conduit,' here horizontally (between human cultures) rather than vertically (between times). That *Strandloper* enacts the planar relation across space but in the same historical period (rather than in the same space but across time) leads to difficulties, I believe. Garner's mythic intention runs up against the historical fact of colonialism. While he is clearly deeply sympathetic to Australian Indigenous culture and their historical plight, and attempts to mediate the problematic of narrating another culture by focalising the narrative through Buckley's experiences and consciousness, Garner's assertion of equivalence seems naïve, at best. What it does reveal, however, is the centrality of the visionary poetic or artistic act as the key connective 'conduit' in Garner's conception of his own fiction.

The act of writing, or of poetic inspiration, as transmission, is most explicitly revealed in a lesser-known Garner text. Garner's short television play broadcast in 1980, "To Kill a King," is a narrative of a blocked writer and what seems to be his muse, filmed in and around Garner's property near the Jodrell Bank observatory in Cheshire. The opening shot of the teleplay shows a train passing through the countryside – grey, wintry, dark – on an elevated railway embankment. As it passes out of shot, the camera rests momentarily on the Lovell radio telescope, before panning and refocusing on the house in the foreground, in which we can see a woman in a window. This is the 'muse.' In voice-over, we hear the voice of Harry, the writer (Anthony Bate), who awakens to find that a message is "already coming." Harry takes dictation, but the lines heard as a female voice-over are not the ones he sets down on the page. When he shows the new work to his long-suffering agent, what is revealed is either Joycean glossolalia or a kind of invocation, a ritual spell: "It is not a piss-one, or a tin-pot to pick with you, my lad…" it begins. Just as the Jodrell Bank telescopes "listen" to the universe, a sky full of radio transmissions, Harry attends to the words "coming in." The gap between *transmission* and *transcription* causes Harry to have something close to a breakdown. In

*Strandloper*, we find a very similar scene: in trying to learn to write, William tries to make letters but, when inspected by Edward, he finds "patterns of dots and circles and waves and zigzag and criss-crossed lines" (23). What William has drawn is, of course, the symbolic lines and dots found in Australian Indigenous art: he has "received" these messages from elsewhere, from the Altjira.

What we have made explicit here is Garner's poetic of transmission, a model of poetic creation that the contemporary British writer Tom McCarthy, in his International Necronautical Society documents, outlines as central to twentieth century poetics, from automatic writing to Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* to Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950). In that film, the poet Orphée is seduced by Death through the medium of radio: another (dead) poet, Cégeste, is suborned to broadcast strange poetry for Orphée to receive and write down, and then fraudulently present as his own. McCarthy reads this relationship as follows:

> What Cocteau is doing, both through Cégeste and through the Cégeste-Orphée setup – the transmissions between and beyond the two men – is establishing an aesthetic of repetition. Orphée, the official author of the fragments, is not their originator but rather their repeater whose composing consists first and foremost of listening. Cégeste (who we never see composing, only repeating, again and again) is also a listener, even when what he is listening to is himself. (166)

In *Orphée*, the radio becomes the (physical) medium through which transmissions in time and space are effected. The relation between communication technologies and the "muse" or poetic creation are identified as a kind of mythic receiving of extant signals. In "To Kill A King," this is emphasised by the increasing dominance of communications equipment within the visual compositions: a reel-to-reel tape machine; disembodied telephone messages; a typewriter that begins to print on its own; and finally television broadcasts, in which Harry is trapped inside the screen of a tv, one that appears in shot directly behind him. Is Harry a creator, a writer struggling to write and suffering mental anguish as a result? Or is he a *receiver*, human communications equipment that no longer functions properly? The same question can be asked of all of the male protagonists in Garner's fiction from the mid-1970s onwards.

In *Strandloper*, as in "To Kill A King," the central male protagonist is central to the idea of poetic vision, to be able to see (or hear) across time and space. As he is about to be seized by Sir John's men in the church, William Buckley is seized with a near-berserker frenzy:

> mocking, taunting, defiant, unafraid before the men, turning his back on them as he leaped high, facing them as he crouched, mouth open, nostrils flared, whooping and howling, and from his mouth came words. "Mulla-mullung mulla-mullung Tharangalkbek! Goomah! Goomah! Goomah! Minggah! Minggah! Minggah! Thnundal!" (51)

Although this echoes the "Shick-Shack" dance, here William is presented as a shaman, possessed by a language of the Indigenous People he is yet to meet, by a language that he does not know. In a sense, William does not write *but is written*: the words are transmitted through him, he is not the originator of them. At the end of his essay "Inner Time," Garner confesses the same position: "whatever the work is, it comes through me, not from me [....] I have no choice but to serve work" (124). As I noted at the beginning, Garner's work is not simply an astro-cartography, but enacts the conjunction of points on different planes (spaces, times, planes of being), and often it is a visionary masculine protagonist that is this point of conjunction. "Inner Time" finishes like this: "Perhaps the artist's job is to act as a cartographer for all navigators, and I simply plot the maps of inner stars" (124), indicating the crucial movement in Garner's fiction is not horizontal, in *Strandloper* between Cheshire and Australia, but vertical: between inner and outer, myth and place, Altjira and the material world. The bridge between these is the mearcstapa, the strandloper: the writer, Garner himself.

In the texts I have analysed here, then, Garner's earlier method of generic Fantasy to articulate the relation of time, space and human consciousness, through the re-writing of myth and legend, is re-articulated through a myth of transmission. The texts themselves offer more oblique means by which to bring into contact different worlds, and different times, partly through a planar structuring of space. The formal structures of the novels reflect this shift, incorporating dislocated protagonists, movement between interiority and exteriority, disarticulated time, and transmissions between different worlds. In Garner's late novels, Fantastika becomes a means by which to investigate the relation between human

consciousness and place; no longer writing 'Fantasy,' Garner instead constructs a specific literary method in which narrative is the means by which to effect contact between the bed and the ceiling, the land and the sky, writing and reading, along the "line of nothing." The text is the conduit of transmissions, and reading is to walk the horizon.

**Works Cited**

Baker, Brian. *Iain Sinclair*. Manchester University Press, 2007.

Clute, John, and David Langford. "Fantastika." *The Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*. <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/fantastika> Accessed 20 February 2017.

Davies, Sioned, translator and editor. *The Mabinogion*. Oxford, 2007.

Garner, Alan. "Achilles in Altjira." *The Voice That Thunders.* Harvill, 1997, pp. 39-58.

---. *Boneland*. Fourth Estate, 2012.

---. "The Edge of the Ceiling." *The Voice That Thunders.* Harvill, 1997, pp. 3-18.

---. "Inner Time." *The Voice That Thunders.* Harvill, 1997, pp. 106-25.

---. *The Moon of Gomrath*. 1963. CollinsVoyager, 2002.

---. *The Owl Service.* 1967. Lions, 1973.

---. *Red Shift*. 1974. CollinsVoyager, 2002.

---. *Strandloper*. Harvill, 1997.

---. *Thursbitch.* 2003. Vintage, 2004.

---. "The Valley of the Demon." (Text of an illustrated lecture given at Knutsford Literary Festival, 2003). *The Unofficial Alan Garner Website.* <http://alangarner.atspace.org/votd.html> Accessed 18 March 2015.

---. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. 1960. Lions, 1971.

Hutton, Ronald. "Alan to an Academic: History and Mythology in Alan Garner's Novels." *First Light: a Celebration of Alan Garner*. Unbound, 2016, pp. 135-40.

McCarthy, Tom. "Calling All Agents." *The Mattering of Matter: Documents from the Archive of the International Necronautical Society.* Sternberg, 2012, pp. 163-216.

Michell, John. *The View Over Atlantis*. Abacus, 1973.

Philip, Neil. "Beyond the Singularity." *First Light: a Celebration of Alan Garner*. Unbound, 2016, pp. 235-42.

---. *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner*. Collins, 1981.

Punter, David. "Snakes, Bulls, and the preoccupations of history: Alan Garner's *Thursbitch*." *21st Century Gothic*. Ed. Danel Olson. Scarecrow Press, 2011, pp. 563-72.

Roberts, Andy. "Thursbitch – Valley of the Demon?: fiction, folklore and  fact in Alan Garner's novel *Thursbitch*." Unpublished walking notes. February 2015. 11pp.

Sinclair, Iain. *Black Apples of Gower*. Little Toller, 2015.

---. *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge*. Granta, 1998.

Watkins, Alfred. *The Old Straight Track*. 1925. Head of Zeus, 2014.

**Bionote**

Brian Baker is a Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, UK. He has published, among other books, *Masculinities in Fiction and Film* (Continuum, 2006), *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) and *The Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism: Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). He is currently making films, writing on 1960s science fiction, and starting a collaborative project on sound, music, and literature.

# Non-Fiction Reviews

## *Horror: A Literary History* edited by Xavier Aldana Reyes

## Review by Tim Jarvis

**Ed. Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Horror: A Literary History*. British Library, 2016. 224pp.**

*Horror: A Literary History* (2016) opens with an introduction by editor Xavier Aldana Reyes which clearly establishes the parameters of the volume, offering a preliminary definition of the Horror mode it will survey as a "literature that actively, and predominantly, seeks to create a pervasive feeling of unease and which, consistently, although not necessarily always successfully, attempts to arouse the emotions and sensations we would normally ascribe to feeling under threat" (10). This decision to focus on horror as an emotional response constitutes a break from conventional studies of the Gothic, which tend to focus on a genre bound up with particular ideological circumstances and circumscribed by settings, characters, and situations proper to it. The contributors are therefore able to read horror as an affect cutting across different kinds of writing, and different historical and cultural situations; to read Horror not as a rigidly defined genre, but as a parasitic mode.

The volume takes the form of a chronological survey, over seven chapters, of the period from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day. In the first chapter, Dale Townshend locates the origins of Horror in the Gothic of the late-eighteenth century. This is a familiar narrative, and one Townshend has previously written on extensively; however here it is seen through a new lens, inflected to Horror as a specific mode, allowing for a narrow and incisive focus. That the origins of some of Horace Walpole's horrifying topoi and linguistic strategies can be found in Shakespeare is also discussed, hinting at earlier precursors. The chapter also discusses a tradition of theorising Horror, in poetry and essays, roughly contemporary with the original Gothic, one which saw horror in the works of poets

such as Edmund Spenser and John Milton, and attempted to explore the affect of fear and explain why readers willingly subjected themselves to experiences that in life would be deeply unpleasant. The chapter also contains a thought-provoking examination of the distinctions between the affect of horror and its more respectable sibling, terror. Townshend demonstrates how these categories arose, discusses their import to later Gothic scholarship, and traces the rise of Horror as a distinct mode in the original period of the Gothic.

In the second chapter Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet explores the origins of American Horror in the American Gothic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She describes how, on arriving in the New World, Gothic literature found fertile soil in a culture already steeped in violence and horror, in the hardships of frontier life and the stark religious dogma of Puritanism. She then traces the development of unique American Gothic themes and tropes through a number of significant early US Horror writers. This narrative of the transplanting of the European Gothic to the American context provides a crucial link between the tradition and twentieth-century US Horror.

In the third chapter, Royce Mahawatte explores the divers Horrors of nineteenth century literature. He argues that though Horror was not explicitly used to term a mode of fiction in this era, there were many ways in which the literature of the century was characterised by horror. Indeed Mahawatte argues that the disappearance of a specific term can be explained by the diffusion of Horror across the whole of literary culture, through literary effects and the disturbing bodies and ideas that underpinned them. The horrors lurking within Victorian realist novels are explored, the ways in which these texts absorbed some of the residue of the conventions of the Gothic, a process that culminated in the sensation novels of the mid century. Mahawatte also traces the rise of Horror in other fiction, in the respectable ghost story and the disreputable 'penny dreadfuls.'

Next, Roger Luckhurst provides a narrative of the consolidation of the elements of modern Horror from the disparate literary trends of the nineteenth century. To lend focus to the chapter, Luckhurst focuses on the career of the author Arthur Machen, which he argues is representative of the transition from the nineteenth century Gothic to twentieth century

Horror. Luckhurst traces the falling away of Christian dread in Horror literature, but notes that this does not result in a complete naturalism of the mode: ideas drawn from psychical research and the occult grow increasingly important to the evocation of the supernatural in this period. Luckhurst also describes how a Darwinian evolutionary perspective that figures the human body as protean, malleable, and as having evolved from animal forms, fed into the Horror of this era, particularly through the trope of a protoplasmic reversion to slime. The chapter ends by describing how these trends fed the emerging Horror tales of the American pulps, and influenced the new medium of cinema, giving rise to the emergence of Horror as a distinct filmic genre.

Bernice M. Murphy's subsequent chapter offers an account of the rise of the domestic Horrors of post-war America; a shift from cosmic horrors to a more psychologically real form. She claims that, in the wake of the true horrors of WWII, the Gothic monsters – ghosts, vampires, witches, and haunted houses – of the Horror films of the studio era seemed out-dated and needed to be reconfigured so as to fit into contemporary settings and to incorporate psychological realism. She also discusses new icons that emerge during the era, including the evil or possessed child and the 'psycho' killer.

In the next chapter Steffan Hantke explores the Horror boom of the 1980s, its precursors and its legacy, the reason for Horror's immense popularity during this period and for its later fall from favour. His thesis is that while Horror was fed in the 1970s, in the US, by the general sense of malaise and the failure of the utopian ideals of the 1960s, its greater popularity in the 1980s, a decade when a neoliberal discourse of plenty circulated was in part due to the fact that Horror as a genre could interrogate those hopeful narratives and point to the dark truths underlying them. Hantke then discusses some of the factors that contributed to the boom, including the rise of novels as the dominant form – novels being more marketable as a medium than short fiction – and the popular filmic adaptations of some Horror novels. The chapter finishes by discussing the continuation of Horror fiction in other guises following its decline in popularity in the early 1990s: the short lived Splatterpunk mode, Crime, Paranormal Romance, and more literary and strange forms.

In the final chapter, Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that Horror is enjoying a second flourishing in the early-twentieth-first century, giving as evidence the continued success of some big names from the eighties, the exploration of Horror themes by cult and experimental writers, and the use of Horror and Gothic tropes by mainstream literary authors. He describes a more specialist market for Horror, which has given rise to a proliferation of dedicated presses and the revival of cult titles from the past. He also discusses how Horror has grown in popularity in other media, including cinema and video games. Aldana Reyes explores the Weird and New Weird subgenres, tracing the influence of Lovecraft and other early twentieth century Weird writers on Contemporary Horror. He then closes the volume by discussing the quintessential twenty-first century monster, the zombie, looking at the ways this figure articulates contemporary concerns and anxieties.

A problem commonly seen in multi-authored volumes that that take a chronological approach is that there are discrepancies, and threads and ideas are discussed then abandoned. This thoughtfully curated volume avoids this pitfall by having chapters refer to the arguments of other sections and to a coherent overarching thesis, focussing on horror as an affect. Accessible enough to work as a general reader or undergraduate text, but complex and incisive enough to offer new insights to scholars of the field, this is a highly recommended volume.

**Bionote**

Tim Jarvis is a writer and a lecturer in Creative Writing at University of Bedfordshire, UK. He has research interests, as a practitioner and critic, in the fields of the Gothic, innovative fiction, interactive fiction, and Creative Writing pedagogy. His debut novel, *The Wanderer*, was published by Perfect Edge Books in the summer of 2014.

# *The Gothic Condition* by David Punter

## Review by Stephen Curtis

**Punter, David. *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche*. University of Wales Press, 2016. 288 pp.**

When is a book not a book? David Punter begins this collection of some of his most renowned articles, conference papers and guest lectures by undercutting its very ontological status, stating that it is "both a monograph and not a monograph" (1). This uncanny liminality at the heart of the book is entirely appropriate given the collection's focus on the continuing shadow of the Gothic in popular culture. The closest comparison is to be found outside of the usual academic realm in the world of music, since this can easily be seen as the direct equivalent of the Greatest Hits albums that mark an artist's continued success. The comparison works more deeply too, as *The Gothic Condition* inherits many of the advantages and drawbacks of such a compilation, with interesting connections being drawn between articles newly brought together, but with some of the more nuanced 'album tracks' being sacrificed for more popular hits. Punter is well known for his ability to bridge perceived divides between 'high' and 'low' cultural texts and this is well evidenced in this collection. However, there are a few repeated texts across chapters that introduce an uncharacteristic air of repetition at times. That being said, this is still a fantastic entry point into Punter's *oeuvre*.

Loosely separated into six parts, the collection successfully demonstrates both the range of Punter's work and the clear critical connections between his various discussions. In his introduction, Punter declares that "the world does now seem, in a very particular way, to be in a Gothic condition" (1). The pervasiveness of this Gothic condition is shown through analysis of texts ranging from the relatively-obscure Francis Lathom to the cyberpunk narratives of William Gibson, with brilliant diversions along the way into disability, cyborgs, zombies, freaks (and *Freaks*), and national Gothic modes in Mexico and Scotland. Such a

structure provides an interesting level of editorialisation but can lead to some moments of temporal uncertainty as the chronology of texts and their contexts is not always clear. Whilst such a collection does not have to be read as a single monograph, with many readers being inclined to rather consult individual essays when relevant, Punter has clearly attempted to impose a critical coherence to the collection, removing it from the realms of the traditional cultural reader.

The introductory chapter, "Spectrality: the Ghosting of Theory" discusses the ways in which colonial and postcolonial discourses are "populated by ghosts" (17). In exploring the impact and influence of Gothic tropes and figures in literary theory, Punter insightfully demonstrates the pervasiveness of the form outside of the texts that conventionally bear its label. Chapter three "Types of Tyranny" begins with a blistering takedown of the hypocrisy of "Rule, Britannia," and its "ideological smugness" (51). It continues by tracing the representation of tyranny through the history of Gothic literature and goes on to raise the significance of our current fascination with the zombie as a way of asking where human liberty can be found, and how can it be maintained. Elements of Punter's analysis of the tyrant seem uncannily prescient given the attitudes and acts of the current President of the USA (although the essay predates the election being based on a keynote paper from 2013). This essay in particular, therefore, illustrates the power of the Gothic in offering a commentary, whether direct or oblique, on political events and goes some way to refuting common complaints about the genre's literary significance.

The middle third of the book collects some of Punter's most influential and provocative writings. The section entitled "Sciences of the Strange" provides a fantastic introduction to the ways in which he applies wider scientific and cultural ideas to Gothic texts. In chapter four, Punter argues that science chiefly becomes of interest to literary studies when it "offers us ways of challenging or expanding what are conventionally taken to be the 'limits of the human'" (72). This discussion is focused on key texts such as *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and the lesser known science fiction text *Light*, by M. John Harrison. The ease with which Punter teases connections between texts that variously occupy Gothic, Horror, and Science Fiction genres will be of particular interest to

readers of *Fantastika*. Following on from this chapter's exploration of the literary potential of science, chapter five zooms in onto the uncanny and uncertain nature of the idea of the family within Gothic literature, whilst chapter six highlights the abhuman body parts that litter the Gothic genre. It is chapter seven, perhaps, that represents Punter at his most influential. His groundbreaking work bringing together Gothic and Disability Studies was initially published in 2000 but still feels entirely topical and contemporary. Whilst "'A Foot is What Fits the Shoe': Gothic, Disability and Prosthesis" will be familiar to many prospective readers, it certainly bears rereading and benefits from the new connections to be made due to its immediate neighbours in this collection.

Ideas of the inviolability or otherwise of the human body take centre stage in chapters eight and nine, the latter of which employs examples from Freud's account of the paranoiac Judge Schreber in order to relocate 'hard sci-fi' texts as Gothic narratives. In doing so, Punter gets beneath the skin of the fantasy of an integral, impenetrable human body, revealing the surprisingly Gothic potential of penetration, both cosmic and otherworldly. Punter's discussion of the fragility of the human body leads to chapter ten's focus on "Monsters and Animals," in which he analyses the intrinsic hybridity of monsters and their relationship to anxieties about the proximity between the human and the animal. In refuting Heidegger's famous claim that animals do not possess "Being," Punter reminds us that humans are animals too; this chapter is thus a fascinating exploration of the continuities and gaps between notions of the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic.

The book's penultimate part contains two essays that are concerned with specific geographical iterations of the Gothic. The first of these is again uncannily topical given its examination of the cybergothic treatment of Mexico in popular culture. The second essay is Punter's seminal identification of a particularly Scottish Gothic and is probably the most essential read contained in this collection. Originally published in 1999, it speaks to the continuation of concerns about the pervasiveness of Gothic ideas across popular culture. My only disappointment here was that there was no coda or new material to examine the effects of devolution on Punter's claims about the Gothic ramifications of Scotland being a "stateless national culture" (179). While such political changes do not contradict Punter's argument,

they do provide extra complications which new readers will find no reference to. I, for one, would be fascinated to read what Punter would make of the current situation of Scotland within, or without, a post-Brexit 'United Kingdom.'

It is this uncanny temporal liminality that dominates my reaction to the collection. It is a fantastic introduction to David Punter's work and is never less than erudite and highly readable but the chronological shifts and sometimes dated examples betray its composite nature. *The Gothic Condition* will chiefly be of interest to scholars of Gothic literature and culture, but there is also much here to appeal to post-colonial scholars and readers interested in the more marginalised aspects of Western culture more generally. Taken together, the essays in this collection build on one another impressively and provide a great overview of the thought of one of Gothic criticism's most important voices.

**Bionote**
Stephen Curtis splits his research between Early Modern and contemporary literature with an interest in the representation of corporeality and the Gothic in both. His current research has a particular focus on blood and horror.


# *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction* by Lars Schmeink

## Review by Jack Fennell

**Schmeink, Lars. *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2016. 282 pp.**

Lars Schmeink's work will be familiar to those who have been keeping track of videogame criticism over the past couple of years, and to those who have contributed to, and made use of, the wide-ranging and succinct *Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction* (virtual-sf.com),

which he edits and publishes. In this book, Schmeink focuses on biopunk, a subgenre of SF in which genes and biology are manipulated to either miraculous or horrifying ends.

As he establishes in his introduction and first chapter, however, biopunk does not happen in a cultural or theoretical vacuum. Using Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' (in which hyper-individualised subjects inhabit a world in a continuous state of flux) as a theoretical underpinning for this analysis of biopunk texts, Schmeink accounts for the cultural shift from physics to genetics as the major paradigm-breaking science – as seen, for example, in the altered origin stories of the Hulk and Spider-Man in recent films, wherein the 'radiation' catalyst of yesteryear is swapped out for transgenic engineering and mutation (180). This is a canny combination, calling to mind Wells's fusion of evolutionary theory with historical materialist analysis in *The Time Machine* (1895), and invites us to imagine what kinds of Morlock and Eloi will emerge under liquid modernity's drive toward commodification and atomisation. As social commitments are increasingly avoided or abandoned, and personal bonds become contingent, we might wonder if our evolution is being directed in new, hyper-individualised directions; what kind of being will survive and thrive in a world where, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, 'there is no such thing as society'? How human is a posthuman? Could we understand the subjective viewpoint of such a being at all?

In the second chapter, Schmeink recounts how biological science and technological innovation proceeded in parallel before the latter eclipsed the former as the defining science of imagined futures, thus giving rise to cyberpunk as the defining non-mimetic literature of postmodernity and late capitalism (20-22). Schmeink differentiates biopunk from cyberpunk on the basis of the 'punk' syllable: whereas cyberpunk was a streetwise genre with outcasts and criminals for heroes, set in anarchic near-future underworlds, biopunk's scientific focus does not entirely allow for this; instead, it draws from the political culture of DIY biology and 'biohacking,' and reflects more of the anti-corporate, anti-government ethos of that movement (25). Thus, in contrast to the indeterminate stance of cyberpunk, which projects an anti-establishment image while its protagonists negotiate the hyper-capitalist status quo without trying to challenge it (22-23), Schmeink sees biopunk as a subgenre that

has realised its political potential, particularly in its presentation of the posthuman. A running theme throughout this book is a critical analysis of liquid-modern 'humanism' and its pernicious links to speciesism and global capital; the posthuman (in its various forms) is a useful figure through which to critique this very partial, co-opted understanding of what humanism should stand for.

The comparative, analytical aspect of Schmeink's project begins with chapter three's comparison between Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) and related short stories, which both portray hyper-capitalist dystopias ravaged by environmental collapse and riven with the unforeseen consequences of genetic engineering. In spite of the horrors wrought upon the world by the commodification of life in these novels, Schmeink argues that Atwood and Bacigalupi articulate a "critical posthumanism" through "utopian impulses enacted in the dystopian landscape" (118). Proceeding from here, Schmeink analyses various applications of genetic engineering in Science Fiction, including zombies, superheroes and the creation of entirely new species. The theme of the 'critical dystopia' – a term coined by Tom Moylan – in which a dystopian setting allows for the possibility of hope and change, is further explored in chapter six, which focuses on the TV show *Heroes* (Tim Kring, 2006-2010) and examines the series' positioning of posthumanity as a solution to intractable political problems, in particular the role of the heroic individual in constructing utopian or dystopian futures. In this schema, the hyper-individualisation of society is embraced, "as it cannot be undone" (198), but cooperation between gifted individuals is still necessary because of the limited and complementary nature of their powers. Liquid modernity is left in place, but there remains the possibility of a better society through the actions of individuals who cannot be contained or controlled by it.

One chapter that particularly piqued my interest was chapter four, "Science, Family and the Monstrous Progeny," not least because Schmeink puts forward a very insightful reading of Vincenzo Natali's 2009 film *Splice*, which I personally disliked and had previously considered to be lacking in substance. It is clear to me now that the film has a number of interesting points to make on the destabilisation of interpersonal relationships in liquid

modernity. Schmeink's analysis of the film rests on the monstrous interface between horror and SF, and the trajectory from the former to the latter in the course of the story (124-25), the blurred distinction between genres reflecting the central character's indeterminate species, gender and familial role. Having established that the only barriers to a "fully realized posthuman life" are "time, money, and the willingness to ignore the science-fictional dimension of consequence" (120), Schmeink uses this film to illustrate the existential threat posed by the posthuman to a world-system heavily dependent on rigid divisions and binaries. "In the posthuman," he says, "we see ourselves and the monstrous other at the same time" (126), recognising enough of ourselves in it to be horrified at its excess and violation of human norms.

I am not convinced, though, that this film is entirely fit for Schmeink's purpose. He states that the scientist characters, Elsa and Clive, mislead themselves by thinking that human-centric categories (such as the male/female dichotomy) can be applied to this situation, as this labelling urge is revealed to be "purely culturally constructed, and irrelevant" in the face of "the 'chaosmic' force of *zoe* ['bare life']" (127). However, one of the film's weakest aspects is that it suggests that stereotypical gendered behaviours are biologically determined: Elsa's previously-buried maternal instincts cause her to bond more or less instantly with the infant splice, Dren; Clive succumbs to Dren's seduction; and Dren becomes violent and sexually aggressive after changing sex to male in the film's final act. However, this does not detract from the validity of Schmeink's points regarding the technological mediation of reproduction, and the tension between the "emotional consumption of children" and liquid-modern resentment at the "obligation" child-rearing represents (134-35); such is the pervasive atomism of liquid modernity that even the continuation of our species is conceived of as an inconvenience, when one could instead be out 'hunting' for new experiences, new expressions of self, "new ways to remain on top" (133).

Another section I found particularly interesting was chapter five, "Individuality, Choice and Genetic Manipulation," which considers posthuman subjectivity and the ideology of individuality through an analysis of the *BioShock* videogame (2K Games, 2007). *BioShock*

and its sequels are first-person shooters, thus placing the player within the viewpoint of the protagonist, and the action takes place in a failed underwater Objectivist utopia, where the ideals of Ayn Rand have been taken to their logical end via the use of individualised genetic engineering. As Schmeink deftly illustrates, *BioShock*'s triumph lies in its use of this setting to ironically highlight the illusory nature of freedom in videogames: no matter how 'free' the player thinks he or she is, the parameters of the game-world cannot be contravened. In this, Schmeink sees an echo of liquid modernity's self-contradictory celebration of individualism, through which an empowering sentiment – "self-assertion and identity creation are any individual's right" (152) – is invoked as a means to ensure obedience, and the blame for not succeeding is attributed solely to the individual, rather than the economic and societal forces arrayed against them (147-48). The in-game enemies, are portrayed "both as collective masses and as individual victims" (155), and the player has no choice but to follow their example if he or she wants to progress (160). Schmeink does an impressive job of arguing how the specificities of videogames (such as game narratives, gameplay mechanics and level design) can potentially articulate criticisms of liquid modernity: as Schmeink himself puts it, "the human stops once the posthuman starts" (156). This chapter left me feeling curious about how Schmeink would read the most recent entry in the series, *BioShock Infinite*, which abandons the underwater city of Rapture for the floating city of Columbia, and shifts the focus of its critique from Objectivism to American exceptionalism, while retaining the core component of individualised genetic engineering.

The third chapter that I particularly enjoyed was chapter seven, "9/11 and the Wasted Lives of Posthuman Zombies," which approaches a different kind of posthuman subjectivity and presents the 'fast zombie' as the evolved liquid-modern subject. Beginning with a brief survey of the post-9/11 'zombie renaissance,' Schmeink considers the speciation of the zombie into 'slow' and 'fast' types (212-16), their coincident re-appearance with the emergence of distributed terrorist networks (210-19) and weaponised viruses (203, 216-17), and the resonances between the zombie apocalypse and Bauman's prophesised collapse of social institutions. Schmeink brings in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Giorgio Agamben, to build upon Achille Mbembe's idea of 'necropolitics' and construct a paradigm in which the zombie can be read as an emblem of human surplus ('wasted life' in Bauman'

terms). The world-systems that produce the zombies exercise power by 'making life,' 'taking life,' and 'allowing to die' (228) while trying to maintain territorial control (230-33); the systems of biopower that pertain in our world, meanwhile, produce expendable *homines sacri* such as the unemployed, the homeless, displaced persons and refugees, with the latter two being figured as invaders that must be kept out at all costs. As with the chapter on monstrous progeny, I was a bit sceptical about some of the texts Schmeink chooses to demonstrate all these points – the *Resident Evil* film series, to be exact – but once again, I was left with the impression that I should watch them again.

*Biopunk Dystopias* represents a substantial contribution to the field and marks Lars Schmeink as a formidable researcher. With the commercialisation of the life sciences continuing apace, the insights he offers in this book will only become more pertinent over the coming years. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in the mutated future rushing straight for us.

**Bionote**

Jack Fennell is a researcher based in Limerick, Ireland. He is the author of *Irish Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2014), and has published other pieces on dystopian literature, Flann O'Brien, and the legal philosophy of comic books. His research interests include science fiction, horror, and literary history.

## *Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction* by Tom Shippey

## Review by Jack Fennell

**Shippey, Tom. *Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2016. 334 pp.**

*Hard Reading* is a collection of fifteen essays, chosen from across almost fifty years of scholarship. They are not exactly presented in their original form: Shippey makes the odd alteration and contextual update, enhancing his points with additional years of experience and judgement. The introductions to each paper give autobiographical insights into his involvement with Science Fiction (SF), the impact of the genre on his other literary scholarship, and 'coming out' as a SF reader in 1960s/1970s Cambridge (where such reading material was considered a sign of moral degeneracy) and Oxford (where the same would be regarded as an "amiable eccentricity, though still a bit suspicious" (3)). The introductions chart a progression from clandestine engagements with sf scholarship, with Shippey using his standing as a medievalist to cover his occasional papers on Science-Fictional topics, to open affiliation with the genre and strident defence of it – such as telling off a BBC radio host for normalising the snobbery and elitism of the 'high-art' literary establishment (274-75).

One aspect of Shippey's work that I have always found enjoyable is his engaging, down-to-earth writing style, for which he has at times received scathing criticism – apparently, he was once termed "a textual rapist" on account of the accessibility of his writing (231). Another is his ironic sense of humour. These traits are all the more pronounced in his side-swipes at the literary intelligentsia, their "gesture politics" (24-25) and the phony rhetoric of novelty in well-established fields (28).

These are, of course, responses to genre snobbery on the part of self-styled cultural gatekeepers: people who 'hate' SF (but never read it), recognise it and instinctively dislike it (but can't seem to define what it is), and dismiss it as 'escapist' (while ignoring the

contingent, temporary nature of 'realistic' norms). Shippey's hypotheses for the causes of these reactions vary somewhat from essay to essay, as is to be expected from a collection like this. In 2001, he argues that academia and literary criticism generally are hidebound, conservative institutions threatened by the novelty SF represents (27), and also that a certain amount of sf contains "imperialist" themes, plots or motifs that don't sit well with twenty-first century readers (36-37); in 2003, he notes that innovation, be it scientific, social or literary, is more easily accepted if it fits into a pre-existing paradigm (161). Writing in 2016, however, he asserts that sf has historically been sidelined by the literary establishment for dealing with 'objective' subject-matter that mainstream scholarship had gone out of its way to dismiss (24-25); more forthrightly, he charges that such exclusion is also due to the fact that most college professors are liberal, and will only allow entry to authors who are politically acceptable from that standpoint (229-30). These are points I will return to below.

Shippey's conception of SF is largely in agreement with that of theorists such as Darko Suvin, resting on the fact that it is "a high-information genre" that requires extra thought-processing to understand. In the first essay, "Learning to Read Science Fiction," Shippey contrasts Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939) with Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1952), to reiterate the distinction between "datum" (shared information from which inferences can be drawn) and "novum," the strange new thing simultaneously understood as "not true" but also "not-unlike-true" (26). This obviously alludes to Suvin's oscillation between cognition and estrangement, but Shippey also adds some new concepts, one of which is "fabril," "the dark, alien Other of the pastoral," a word coined by Dr. James Bradley (University of British Columbia) to describe a literary mode for the invented/manufactured rather than the natural (41-42). This term has not caught on, Shippey says, because of the "two cultures" problem in academia: "literary critics do not mix with engineers" (25). Another very apt recurring notion is *le mot imprévisible*, "the unpredictable word," requiring more mental effort to process than the "right" word (*mot juste*).

One of Shippey's stand-out points concerns SF's relationship to history, in an essay titled "Getting Serious with the Fans," originally published in 1973. The history of scientific achievement is often presented according to the Anglo-American "Whig" model by default

(that is, history as the deeds of heroic individuals, with the present-day as a sought-after outcome), which is opposed to what Shippey terms the "Malthusian" model (whereby historical change is impersonal and often random). Science Fiction, he argues, plays upon the tension between these different models, and he demonstrates this tension through a comparative reading of L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939) and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), highlighting the Malthusian properties of the former and the Whiggish bent of the latter (73-78).

This exploration of history in SF resonates with Shippey's observations on the genre's political capabilities: SF has the capacity to mount devastating political critiques, or more simply to serve as a canary in a coal mine (208); however, a problem Shippey frequently alludes to is that SF readers do not pay attention to politics, while politicians do not pay attention to SF. The perils of ignoring this particular canary are hinted at in a 2000 essay on military SF: whilst Heinlein, Pournelle, and other acknowledged masters of the sub-genre grapple with the moral and psychological consequences of war, mainstream entertainment does not, with mass-market action movies projecting images of invincibility and enemy incompetence rather than dealing responsibly with the reality of armed combat (294). This has turned out to be a prescient criticism, given that at the time of this review, sixteen years later, the world has been locked into an ongoing series of 'asymmetrical' wars in which advanced technologies (such as drones and spy satellites) have failed to bring the swift, decisive end that they promised.

Several essays in the collection focus on particular authors, and I particularly liked the 1993 exploration of "Qualified Reality" in the work of Bruce Sterling, wherein Shippey shows how Sterling's fiction pits heroic *bricoleurs* against "semiotic ghosts," combining the fragments of broken world-systems into something new, in order to fight the imposition of outdated ideologies (61). His reading of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* novels, highlighting allusions to *Faust* and *The Golden Bough*, was another edifying read. Jack Vance's part in dramatising the "dilemma of cultural relativism" is explored in the book, but though Shippey argues the case well, I remain unconvinced by his argument. In Science Fiction, it's possible to create a fictional culture that is 'objectively' evil in order to test the limits of cultural

relativism, but this does not really tell us anything about extant Earth societies. In Vance's work, one finds "one weird or eccentric social system after another" (110), which is fair enough, but I fail to see how those invented social systems – and their strange inhabitants – are supposed to be mapped onto the real world. This is probably, in part, down to my own impatience with "demographic metaphor" SF tales, where the alien or the AI is substituted for some actually-existing human demographic group. Nor was I particularly convinced by Shippey's nomination of Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) as the first true SF novel, though his reading of it is enlightening and intriguing, and he puts forward a better argument than most in favour of his chosen "progenitor text."

Shippey's work is marked by his tendency to speak his mind, often bluntly; given his ironic sense of humour, I suspect that he does so knowingly, for his own amusement. For example, he does not pull any punches regarding sf fans: he charges convention-goers with being more interested in talking about their fandom than about sf and its history (67). He holds fans partly to blame for homogeneity in the genre (89-90); and he notes that many of the fictional far-futures currently being written are "routinely dominated by the kind of geek who in modern life makes a lot of money setting up IT systems which are very advanced but don't work" (294-95).

As a reader, I found plenty in these essays to disagree with: many of Shippey's arguments seem to echo the less-nuanced polemics of the 1990s 'science wars,' with the humanities as a whole cast as a pit of postmodernist vipers opposed to any notion of an objective, measurable reality. This supposed opposition to objectivity is also presented as another reason why gatekeeping critics regard sf as a form of "paraliterature." Present-day critics distance themselves from their predecessors, Shippey argues in 2001, by denouncing the various authorities to which those predecessors willingly submitted. This is the case with the church or the empire. Science, however, is the ultimate "authority" that cannot be refuted, and thus the literati keep anything to do with it at arm's length because it runs counter to their self-congratulating impulses (37-38). This might well be the case, but it might be simpler to explain this tendency in terms of genre stereotypes, or even personal preference.

Another element of this collection that I did not find very constructive was Shippey's treatment of cultural relativism. Whilst there is a legitimate discussion to be had on the subject, such discussions can easily degenerate into lazy denunciations of 'political correctness,' with attendant depictions of foreign barbarism and universities full of wishy-washy liberal strawmen ready to excuse any atrocity. To criticise the notion of inherent Western superiority, the implication goes, is to defend practices such as slavery and cannibalism elsewhere. Shippey does not always manage to steer around this particular pothole. For example, in a 1969 essay, Shippey points out that Alternate Histories, Post-Apocalyptic stories, and Robinson Crusoe-style interplanetary shipwreck tales could only arise in a milieu wherein our cultural "constants" are acknowledged to be contingent and temporary. However, the examples he uses to illustrate this point do so from the most reactionary possible perspective – when the permanence or relevance of Western civilisation is challenged, morality is suddenly "no longer relevant," and things such as rape and forced breeding become necessary for "the survival of the species" (93-94). At the time of this essay's original publication, Shippey points out that SF circles still clung to the notion that cultures could be ranked objectively. At the time, it was also assumed that the best possible culture constructed of "pure democracy and the highest technological level," and that cultures that did not want to progress in this way would have to be educated until they changed their minds, regardless of the upheaval (87). Shippey admits that his stance has changed since 1969, but in the year 2000, we find him still comparing cultures, and complaining about the "unchallenged axiom" in modern anthropology that the loss of "even the most meagre and apparently unsuccessful" indigenous cultures is irreparable. He states outright that only a handful of stalwart "dissidents" dare challenge political correctness and criticise cultural practices that are "foolish, insane or evil" (107). He repeats, as undisputed fact, theories that are still subject to debate.  For example, he cites Marvin Harris's assertion that the Aztecs were cannibals, and defends Colin Turnbull as a victim of a politically correct turn in anthropology that was not amenable to his harsh portrayal of the Ugandan Ik people (107-08), heedless of the fact that Turnbull's methodology has been the subject of long-standing criticism.

All of the above can be put down to a simple difference of opinion, and the reader may disagree with my interpretation. There are, however, a couple of places were Shippey does make notable errors of judgement. In relating his 'coming out' story, he states that being an sf enthusiast in academic has been "rather like being gay" (27). Whilst there may be some similarity in terms of secrecy and potential negative consequences for one's career, the comparison is harder to justify when hate crime is taken into account. A couple of pages later, he asks why there is no "postrealist" movement to go along with the postmodernist, postfeminist and postcolonialist ones, as if all the 'post'-theoretical schools are so labelled as part of some wider consensus (29). Elsewhere, Shippey gives us a very simplistic run-down of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Northern Irish conflict, and the supposed similarities between those two situations. The latter, in particular, is referenced as a turmoil that came out of nowhere, a reminder of how "the kind of jokingly hostile relationship which used to be normal within sections of the UK population […] can turn nasty" (256), which appears to suggest that the Northern Irish 'Troubles' was merely an instance of good-natured ribbing between Catholics and Protestants that suddenly got out of hand and turned violent.

To conclude, the title *Hard Reading* is ironically apt: this book is commendably easy to read, but on the other hand, Shippey puts his arguments forward without equivocation or soft sentiment. Objections and disagreements aside, however, this is an engaging and thought-provoking (or debate-provoking) selection of work.

**Bionote**

Jack Fennell is a researcher based in Limerick, Ireland. He is the author of *Irish Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2014), and has published other pieces on dystopian literature, Flann O'Brien, and the legal philosophy of comic books. His research interests include science fiction, horror, and literary history.

# *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism*
# by Jerome Winter

## Review by Paul March-Russell

**Winter, Jerome. *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism*. University of Wales Press, 2016. 256 pp.**

This is not only the first comprehensive study of the so-called 'New Space Opera' but also the first title in a new series, New Dimensions in Science Fiction, published by University of Wales Press. The editors, Pawel Frelik and Patrick B. Sharp, describe the genre as "a global storytelling form of techno-scientific modernity," and that the series seeks multidisciplinary approaches from scholars "on the relations of science and society as expressed in SF." Winter's book embodies the world-spanning, sociological and literary-scientific aspirations of the series by focusing upon the relationships between contemporary SF, neoliberalism, and globalisation.

The roots of New Space Opera are often traced back to the 1984 call in *Interzone* for a "radical hard SF," which would reclaim a pre-New Wave emphasis upon the technological sciences but with a post-New Wave sensibility of playful experiment and political scepticism. Publication in 1987 of Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas*, although originally written in the 1970s, seemed to confirm this new space-operatic, hard SF whilst the resultant movement was consolidated by the 2003 *Locus* forum on the topic. The emergence of New Space Opera is often related, however, to the so-called 'British Boom' of the late Nineties and early Noughties, whilst in his study, Winter takes a more inclusive approach, tracing its origins to Samuel R. Delany's *Nova* (1968) and M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device* (1975), and taking into account contemporary Caribbean SF by Tobias Buckell, Nalo Hopkinson, and Karen Lord. Taking as his premise the suggestion by Roger Luckhurst, in his 2005 cultural history of science fiction, that New Space Opera should be read in relation to the politics of globalisation and neo-colonialism, Winter tracks the transformation of Space Opera from

such pioneers as E.E. 'Doc' Smith to its contemporary practitioners alongside the development of neoliberal economics in the same period.

The lengthy introduction should really be considered a chapter in its own right. Besides introducing the thesis, the primary topics and the overall structure of the book, it does a fantastic job, firstly, in offering a potted history of neoliberalism from the Bretton Woods agreement of July 1944, which effectively initiated the current economic world-system, through to present-day tensions surrounding globalisation (although, admittedly, from a sceptical left-wing perspective). Secondly, the introduction does admirable work in summarising the ideas of key neoliberal thinkers, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the responses of key critical theorists, such as Manuel Castells and Michel Foucault. Thirdly, the introduction places the effects of neoliberal thought into a global context, emphasising not only the political and economic disparities that have resulted between developed and developing nations, but also demonstrating a firm grasp of postcolonial theory from such thinkers as Aijaz Ahmed, Fredric Jameson and Gayatri Spivak. Winter introduces and discusses concepts such as 'globalism' and 'cosmopolitics,' derived respectively from Manfred Stegner and Bruce Robbins, which shape and underpin his critical analysis of not only neoliberalism's place within the post-war world but also the responses of critics and writers (in Ken MacLeod's words) "to think globally and act locally." Lastly, following on from historians of neoliberal thought such as Daniel Stedman Jones, Winter argues that, although the ascent of neoliberalism is most often associated with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s, its gradual development needs to be charted from the 1930s onwards. Winter tracks this intellectual progression by examining the development of Space Opera within the US pulps, beginning first with the entrepreneurial spirit and technocratic thrill of such pioneering serials as Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (1928). He then contrasts such bold individualism with the deregulated authorities that appear in Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1934) and Smith's 'Lensman' novels. Lastly, Winter offers a compelling reading of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series in terms of Futurian ideology, with its dream of a utopian socialist community left unrealised, and of Leigh Brackett's Eric John Stark stories in terms of a complex and unresolved discourse on gender and race. These unfulfilled, left-leaning texts are contrasted with Robert Heinlein's *The*

*Rolling Stones* (1952) which, although embedding a metafictional parody of Space Opera, nevertheless – according to Winter – asserts a right-wing libertarian, pro-capitalist vision of outward expansion. Winter's handling of this wide-ranging material is impressive but dense – not helped by his tendency to hyphenate descriptive terms – so that, on reflection, it might have been better if the analysis of early Space Opera had been separated from the rest of the introduction so as to be developed at greater length.

The first chapter not only examines Delany's *Nova* and Harrison's *The Centauri Device* but also the later Kefahuchi Tract novels, as well as C.J. Cherryh's *Cyteen* (1988) and Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985). Harrison, who had praised Delany's earlier work only to dismiss *Nova* as a backward step, is positioned by Winter as Delany's dialectical counterpart. Whereas Delany sees in the cyborg a figure of libertarian possibilities, dissolving the binary oppositions between self/other, nature/artifice, white/black, straight/gay, Harrison insists that the escapism inherent in such fantasies is implicated in the ideological deceptions that veil the corrosive effects of neoliberalism. Harrison's negative solutions – in the earlier novel, the Earth is blown-up; in the later trilogy, the singularity of the Tract expands at the expense of both meaning and the fabric of reality – is contrasted with Delany's more affirmative, albeit ambivalent, response insofar as he holds out the opportunities for racial and sexual diversity against the backdrop of a neoliberal economy. Winter's coda not only examines two texts written within the onset of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of the West but also expands the definition of New Space Opera to make the necessary link with the posthuman content of cyberpunk and to include female writers such as Cherryh, who are more often associated with earlier forms of Space Opera, such as planetary romance. The common theme of genetic engineering and corporate ownership links Cherryh and Sterling effectively into Winter's overall thesis.

The second chapter explores two of the writers most identified with New Space Opera – Iain M. Banks and Ken MacLeod. Both writers are singled-out by Winter for their Scottish nationalism, which sets them against the neoliberal policies of the UK government. Although not a particularly new observation, Winter not only offers a careful and assiduous analysis of Banks's Culture novels and MacLeod's Fall Revolution quartet in terms of neoliberal

globalism, he also presents a more-than-welcome account of MacLeod's subsequent Engines of Light trilogy.

By contrast, the third chapter – examining Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian trilogy (but not its prequel *Spirit* (2008)) – is one of the most refreshing analyses in the book. Whereas much of the criticism on Jones's work has concentrated upon the alien biology and cultural hybridity of the extraterrestials and their encounter with humanity, Winter looks instead at the responses of the female humans or human-alien hybrids, such as Braemar in *White Queen* (1991) and Catherine in *Phoenix Café* (1997). As with the earlier discussion of C.J. Cherryh, Winter also cross-references the work of writers more often associated with planetary romance, most notably Lois McMaster Bujold, as well as demonstrating that Jones's examination of women, feminism and economics is prefigured by the so-called 'galactic suburbias' that followed Brackett's work during the 1950s and `60s. Winter makes space, in particular, for three of the key feminist writers of the 1960s and `70s, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Kate Wilhelm. Russ, however, is criticised for her depiction of an Islamic society in *The Two of Them* (1978) in contrast – in Winter's view – with Jones's more informed understanding of women and race (not least because of her work, in the 1990s, for Amnesty International). Winter contextualises Jones's trilogy against the backdrop not only of the relationship between Western neoliberalism and the developing nations but also the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s and `90s sponsored by the neoliberal attacks upon social welfare and the promulgation of a pro-family agenda. The role played by females in the national allegory as wives and mothers is contested in Jones's novels both by career-driven women such as Braemar and the Aleutian sexual biology in which the same genotype can be (self-)reproduced indefinitely.

The final chapter reverses the focus by looking at science fiction from a decolonised region – the Caribbean – subject to the neoliberal and neo-colonial policies of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Winter explores Tobias Buckell's 'Xenowealth Series,' Karen Lord's *The Best of All Possible Worlds* (2013), and an acknowledged influence upon both authors, Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000), which Winter contends shares many of the central motifs of New Space Opera. Each writer is discussed in relation to some

of the governing themes of the book – globalisation, biopolitics, and hybridity – whilst Winter also sets them into context with both the literature of the Caribbean, in particular an indigenous magical realist tradition stemming from authors such as Alejo Carpentier, and postcolonial theory, most notably from the work of Edouard Glissant. Following Glissant, but also the earlier literary example of Delany's *Nova*, Winter argues that, whilst these authors dramatise the hegemonic effects of neoliberalism upon personal and national identity, social and familial relationships, and economic inequality, they also gesture at ways in which these processes can be negotiated, if not actually subverted. Consequently, Winter ends his study on a note of hopeful optimism which is some compensation for the lack of a coda that might have drawn together more comprehensively the various threads of such a dense and wide-ranging analysis.

It should go without saying, then, that Winter has made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of not only New Space Opera – which has often been discussed over the past fifteen years but rarely in terms of such a detailed, insightful and syncretic approach – but also the relationships between contemporary science fiction, the unequal global distribution of wealth and power, and postcolonial theory. Winter's enviable knowledge of world-historical events, cultural criticism and (above all) the SF genre makes his book not only an essential read but also the counterpart to such other critically informed re-readings of the genre as by Jessica Langer, Roger Luckhurst, Sherryl Vint and Lisa Yaszek. Its limitation, apart from its sheer density in a relatively confined word-space, is its own openly left-leaning position. Once he gets past such writers as Heinlein, Winter tends to dismiss *tout court* what he sees as a right-wing tradition in space opera that includes David Brin, Dan Simmons, and Vernor Vinge (presumably the metafiction of Simmons's *Hyperion* (1989) aligns it with Heinlein's *The Rolling Stones* as merely an exercise in politically regressive formalism). Yet, whilst Winter includes Jones's female successors such as Justina Robson and Sherri Tepper, a consideration of the politically conservative Karen Traviss, for example, could have usefully furthered his analysis of gender, race, and neoliberalism.

Lastly, although I want to reiterate the importance of Winter's study to the field of SF criticism, I do feel I should say something about the poor copy-editing that detracts from the

book's success. Since this is the first title in a new series, I do hope that the press learns something from its faults. Missing or miscellaneous words are one thing – for some reason the copy-editor or typesetter has a penchant for repeatedly omitting words like 'of' and 'the' – but the wrong dates for books are another (*Cyteen* is 1988 not 1998; *White Queen* is 1991 not 1993). Although annoying, they are not totally unforgivable – however, when the titles of essays or the names of key characters are changed or misspelt in the matter of a couple of sentences, that's something else. Worse is that Winter often refers to or quotes from critical works – Stedman Jones in the introduction is one such example – only for the cited work not to appear in the bibliography. When a name or title is given, that at least is something to go on, but over-reliance on the Harvard (author-date) method can make cross-referencing almost impossible without consistent copy-editing. Such inattentiveness on the part of the press does a disservice to Winter's otherwise brilliant and invaluable analysis of his chosen texts.

**Bionote**

Paul March-Russell teaches Comparative Literature and Liberal Arts at the University of Kent, UK. He is the editor of both *Foundation* and the SF Storyworlds series (Gylphi Press). In 2017, he is an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge and co-organiser, with Andrew M. Butler, of a forthcoming conference on Clarke's life and work.

# Supernatural Cities Conference

## Conference Report by Karl Bell

**Supernatural Cities: Exploring the Urban Mindscape Conference**
**University of Portsmouth, UK, 30th April 2016**

On 30th April 2016 the Supernatural Cities research project held its first conference. Bringing together academics and artists from the UK and Ireland, the conference aimed to examine how ghosts, hauntings, magic and the occult, psychogeography, and supernatural folklore enable us to explore both affective urban environments and the urban mindscape, both past and present. The ten speakers represented a diverse range of academic disciplines, including historians, cultural geographers, folklorists, visual artists, literary scholars, and proponents of urban studies and heritage studies. The conference also featured an engaging combination of both early career researchers and established academics. As usual, the supernatural proved itself to have broad appeal and the conference drew a mixed audience of academics, creative practitioners (playwrights, short fiction writers, and artists), and the interested public.

The first panel, "The Urban Supernatural: International Perspectives," began with Michael Talbot (University of Greenwich) exploring the role magic and bewitching played in a corruption scandal in Anapa, an Ottoman frontier town, in 1796. This fascinating paper drew attention to the lack of historiographical engagement with magical cultures in the Ottoman Empire whilst also indicating interesting ways forward. Oliver Betts (National Railway Museum) then followed with an engaging piece of social and cultural history that examined occult cultures in the slums of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century New York and London. Drawing upon the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, and also a range of contemporary activities including spiritualism, this paper convincingly explored how the supernatural was used to construct a range of urban 'others,' especially in terms of class and race. Finally, bringing the themes of the supernatural into the present, Tracy Fahey (Limerick

School of Art and Design) drew upon a film piece by artists Michael Fortune and Aileen Lambert. This exploration of folklore in Limerick city, including accounts of banshees, ghosts, and a fairy tree, made for an absorbing paper on the function of oral narratives in shaping local understandings of urban spaces. Forging a rich synthesis between social and cultural histories, this panel was also illustrative of the variety of approaches to the urban supernatural, drawing as it did upon official documentation, literary fictions, and contemporary film and folklore.

The second panel, "Art and Affect: Exploring Urban Geographies," shifted the focus to the role of the arts and sensory experience in exploring urban spaces. Jo Croft (Liverpool John Moores University) showed how a simple walk to work could be transformed into an enthralling exercise in urban enchantment, with the scholar becoming beachcomber and flaneur, alive to both the oneiric and uncanny aspects of the urban environment. Peter Ainsworth (University of Portsmouth) continued with this theme of using artistic approaches and mindsets to tease away at the mundane, or rather to find the magic within it. His engaging mix of visual images and spoken word performance conducted us through acts of exploration and transgression in peripheral urban sites such as flyovers and storm drains, conveying the audience on a search for the intangible within the city's substructures. Both papers reinforced a sense of urban enchantment, something grounded not in the supernatural so much as a heightened sensitivity to the meaning of the mundane.

Steve Pile's (Open University) lively and thought-provoking keynote speech addressed the supernatural in contemporary culture. His subject matter ranging from the zombie craze to his recent project on spiritualism in Stoke on Trent. Crackling with ideas and approaches, Professor Pile made us reflect more deeply on what we understand the term 'supernatural' to mean.

Panel three, "Monstrous and Haunted: Psychogeography and Urban Memory," turned its attention to English provincial cities. Morag Rose (University of Sheffield) led us through a psychogeographical investigation into Manchester's genus loci, specifically exploring the city's waterways and their accounts of aquatic monsters and legends. In doing so she teased

out how these ideas speak to the submerged monstrosity of Manchester, articulating anxieties arising from both its industrial past and post-industrial present. Clare Maudling (University of Exeter) then focused on the haunting presence of lost buildings. Taking Exeter's experience of the blitz and post-war reconstruction as a case study, this paper offered intriguing insights into a frequently overlooked aspect of urban haunting. This panel showcased some of the exciting new work and approaches being developed by early career scholars, and in doing so enhanced our appreciation of the links between urban spaces, collective memory, imagination and identity.

The final panel of the day, "The Unseen Metropolis," focused on London. Alex Bevan (University of Lincoln) took us into the London Underground, exploring through ghost stories and literary fictions the subterranean heterotopia that exists below the seemingly mundane streets of the capital. William Redwood, an anthropologist specialising in the urban occult, guided us through a contemporary esoteric understanding of the metropolis, focusing on sites of magical practice and offering important reflections on the unstable nature of both urban magic and twenty-first century modernity. Both papers reiterated the way an engagement with the supernatural and the occult can alter our perceptions and understandings of urban environments. At the same time, they made a convincing case for appreciating London as one of the great urban centres of occult energy and Gothic imaginings.

Throughout the day the presenters explored the links between the exterior landscape of a range of European and North American towns and cities, and the interior mindscapes of those who dwelt within them. This resulted in a teasing out of the highly versatile functions of supernatural tropes and magical thinking in the urban environment. These ranged from articulating urban anxieties and fear of 'others,' expressing how we think about liminal and heterotopian spaces, absence and enchantment, and informing how we read and remember the urban. Despite being a one-day conference, the ten speakers' papers (and active discussion over refreshments) left us with the sense that we had packed a lot in to the time available. This relatively small conference generated a genuinely warm and enthusiastic engagement from contributors and audience alike. It raised awareness of the ways in which

the study of the urban supernatural sprawls across disciplinary boundaries, and pointed to the rich potential in adopting a more multidisciplinary and, ideally, interdisciplinary approach to this area. We have subsequently been approached about producing an edited collection of essays based on the themes of the conference.

Such was the positive response to this event that we are currently organising Supernatural Cities II: Gothic Cities. This will take place in Limerick on 6th – 7th April 2017 and represents an exciting collaboration between the University of Portsmouth and the Limerick Institute of Technology's School of Art and Design. It is intended that the conference will become an annual event that will haunt different HE institutions in the UK and beyond. If interested in co-hosting a themed Supernatural Cities conference in 2018 or 2019 please contact the project director, Dr Karl Bell, at karl.bell@port.ac.uk or via the project's Twitter account @imaginetheurban.

For more information on the multidisciplinary Supernatural Cities project see <www.port.ac.uk/supernaturalcities/>.

**Bionote**

Karl Bell is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Portsmouth, UK. He is the author of two monographs, *The Magical Imagination* (2012) and *The Legend of Spring-heeled Jack* (paperback 2017). He is the director of the Supernatural Cities project.

# Searching the Borders of Fantasy Conferences

## Conference Report by Evdokia Nesterova

**Searching the Borders of Fantasy Conferences**
**Wroclaw, Poland, 18th & 19th April 2016**
**Moscow, Russia, 16th & 17th November 2016**

Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction are types of literature that have been gaining popularity among both authors and the audience during the twentieth century. The process is still steady and exceeding within the twenty-first century. The idea of a conference focusing on Fantasy Fiction, yet not cutting the genre off from inherently relative phenomena such as Science Fiction or Magical Realism has long been called for. "Searching the Borders of Fantasy" conference is a newly founded event that has already attracted interest. It was organised by Young Researcher's Council's project "*Fantasion*" (Lomonosov Moscow State University – [www.vk.com/fantasion](www.vk.com/fantasion)), School of Philology of Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia), and the Russian-Polish Institute (Wroclaw, Poland).

The first conference took place in April 2016 in Wroclaw, Poland. The town of Wroclaw with its medieval atmosphere feels great as a venue for the fantastic event. Its channels remind of Venice or Saint Petersburg and street trams – of Berlin. Yet the town has its genuine savour and zest. The second day of the event was dedicated to exploring the place and it became not only the arena but also the inspiration for a critical discussion of the topic.

At the first event there were participants from Russia, Poland, USA, Israel, and France. Participants of the conference were from various academic backgrounds – the event was open to students and post-graduate students as well as to the researchers with a degree. Papers concerned pedagogical aspects, history of arts, the origins of Fantasy and Science Fiction works, narrative aspects of video games, and world building as characteristic aspect of Fantasy novels. A part of the papers has been theoretic, others referred to analysing

specific works of the genre. Presentations covered a wide spectrum of the subgenres and closely related forms of fiction from the 'High' Epic and Heroic Fantasy to Magical Realism. Among the participants there were psychologists, philologists, cultural scientists, and art students. Even though the topics seem to be of keenly different fields, the general discussion of borders, limits and limitations and their overcoming or mediating ran as the reoccurring leitmotif bringing to the idea that this issue is the one being the core aspect of Fantastika as both literary mode and the worldview.

The event was opened by the welcoming word from Irina Popadeikina and Rafal Czachor of the Russian-Polish Institute. The main topic of the working session was borders and limits in Fantasy Fiction, taken widely: the keynote speech was devoted to the troubles of defining limits between genres. Keynote speaker Dr. Mark A. Fabrizi (Eastern Connecticut State University, USA) delivered a paper on Fantasy Fiction as a tool in educating critical reading among students. The presentation was based on data collected during interviews with both teachers and students and the results of in-class work of a year-long case study. The study proves that Fantasy literature texts may help in motivating students to read critically and suggests there are no strong differences in this aspect between the canonic mimetic literature and Fantastika works. Two papers were held on the forerunners of Fantasy genre, analysing spiritual novels by F. Marryat (E. Akhmedova, Lomonosov Moscow State University) and the time-space structure of novels of A. Tolstoy (N. Polyakova, Tambov). Two papers concerned the late Magical Realism works: I. Popadeikina raised the question of the possibility of including D. Lipskerov's novels into the genre and N. Samokhvalova (Higher School of Economics, Moscow) spoke about specifics of Max Frye's Magical Realism. Further, three papers studied different aspects of J.R.R. Tolkien's heritage, from its visual representations in the works of modern artists (D. Lebedev, Higher School of Economics) to Tolkien's own view of what Fantasy is (Dr. Simon Cook, Israel). The working session was finished by a lavish dinner that let the guests try the local cuisine.

Nineteen articles based on the presentations made at the conference were published after peer-review. An issue of the Russian-Polish Institute's edition, *Yearbook of Eastern European Studies*, is dedicated to the conference's materials.

As the project grew in success, the committee decided to run another event. The organising committee also expanded as the Russian-Polish Institute and School of Philology of HSE were accompanied by the Philological department of Lomonosov Moscow State University and Gorky Institute of World Literature. On the 16th and 17th of November 2016, the second conference entitled "Searching the Borders of Fantasy: towards a methodology" took place. The second occasion was held in Moscow, Russia. The first day of the conference was hosted by the School of Philology at the Higher School of Economics. The second day's session took place at Gorky Institute of World Literature.

The opening day comprised two sessions running simultaneously. One was focused on Fantasy Fiction works, the other – on Fantastika in general, covering Science Fiction works, pre-Fantastic literary works and Magical Realism. As I was the moderator of the Fantasy Fiction panel, I spent my day there. The program started from studying mythology, mythopoetics and remythologisation. The first paper concerned finding the best and most appropriate definitions for each term (A. Kolesnikov, Lobachevsky State University, Russia). The topic was continued by analysing the impact of A.O. Barfield's poetical language on Tolkien's mythopoetics (S. Likhacheva, Moscow) and the analysis of the tree mythologem in Fantasy Fiction (A. Sokolova, Saint-Petersburg Electrotechnical University, Russia). My attention drew a presentation of modern Japan Fantasy Fiction made by K. Kovlekov (North-Eastern Federal University, Russia) as this area of Fantasy literature is not well-known in Russia yet.

The Fantastika section that day was devoted to Science Fiction. Debates generally hinged on lack or misuse of terms and problems in studying the Fantastika caused by the absence of structured, or accepted and thoroughly developed methodology, which agreed with the purpose of the conference in searching for tools and approaches that could lay the basis of the one in the future.

The second day moved to another venue with Gorky Institute of World Literature as the host. The conference ran in the room under the magic number 13. It clearly put its magic

into practice as the relatively small place somehow managed to house not only the participants of both sessions of the previous day, but also guests who came to listen to the presentations. There were no parallel panels on the second day. The main topic of this joint session were media and interdisciplinary topics. Papers were presented on problems of illustrating Fantastika works; on the Fantastic poetry; on the specifics of Fantastic space; on the non-Fantastic nature of Fantastika – and many other topics. The keynote speaker, Professor Irina Golovacheva (Saint-Petersburg State University, Russia) delivered a paper focused on the division of Fantastika genres due to the actual presence or absence of strictly fantastic events in the work. Golovacheva argued that the presence of such events alone should not mislead us to taking the works as Fantastika one, for such situations, states or events may occur in what is realistic literature and the inherently fantastic work may lack fantastic aspects presented openly in the text. Following all the papers, an open discussion took place of the results and further issues of the conference. The event ran till late in the evening and the discussion carried on in the café nearby after the closure of the official program.

The work of the conference also led to collaboration with a scientific-popular journal *Aesthesis* as its editor-in-chief, Elnara Akhmedova, was a participant of the event. The journal composed an issue dedicated to Fantasy fiction in December 2016.

A collective monograph from the conference is being prepared. As most of the presentations made on the conference were in Russian, the monograph will be published in the Russian language. Anglophone articles based on the presented materials will be published in the issues of the *Yearbook of Eastern European Studies* during 2017.

The next "Searching the Borders of Fantasy" conference is planned to take place back in Wroclaw in the second half of the coming year. The conference will continue to target all the processes occurring within the Fantastika mode, including not only literature only but also art and media. Both diachronic and synchronic analysis, theoretical approaches and studying specific works, interdisciplinary and narrowly focused papers, and topics concerning subgenres or the global (post)postmodernist literature will be welcomed. The

aim of the event as an ongoing project is to gradually work out tools, approaches, and methodology suitable for studying the complex category we know as Fantastika as well as to bring academic attention to the relatively new and not yet thoroughly studied literary and arts' zone.

**Bionote**

Evdokia Nesterova is a philologist; specialist in literary theory and Fantasy Fiction. She graduated from Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia in 2013. Her dissertation focused on the specifics of creating images in Fantasy Fiction (on the example of the One Ring from Tolkien's epopee). She completed her post-graduate study in November 2016.

# Fiction Reviews

## Can You Call Back the Lightning?

## Review by Tracy Hastie

**Alderman, Naomi. *The Power*. Viking, 2016. Novel.**

The opening weeks of 2017 were marked by an outpouring of concerns over the civil rights women have fought hard to gain. Demonstrations all over the globe, showed people joined together to defy attempts to nullify or lessen basic human rights.

In light of such a powerful mobilisation, *The Power*, Naomi Alderman's fourth novel, hits a cautionary note. In this work, described as a Feminist Speculative Fiction, Alderman creates a world in which women have the ability to discharge electricity from their fingertips. It begins with teenage girls before it spreads to the older generations.  Suddenly, women have the upper hand. Only personal choices dictate how the power is used. Alderman's novel explores several 'what ifs': what if women had all the power?  What would it look like in the women's hands?  How would  it change our society?  Would our socially constructed expectations of gender hold if women could easily overpower men?  Alderman successfully takes these questions and allows them free reign to run amok through all aspects of society.

The novel is written from multiple point of views. We follow four main protagonists, three female and one male, through the ten years from the discovery of the new skill leading up to a cataclysmic event.  We meet Roxy, the illegitimate daughter of a London crime boss who was never supposed to be seen or heard; her power allows her to kill her first victim at fifteen. Allie, who comes from a background of neglect and abuse in the foster care system, reinvents herself as Mother Eve and creates a religion worshipping the female. Margot is an

ambitious Mayor who sees the power as a route to realise her vision. Tunde, the male narrator, is a journalist who sets out to document the revolution.

Fast-paced, often shocking and with horrifying passages depicting graphic male sexual abuse, Alderman does not shy away from the darker side of the violence and rage involved in a revolution.  The early days are filled with optimism and hope as young women embrace the change, and the power is used as much to free the oppressed and healing as it is for revenge. Mother Eve begins her preaching with the premise that, "woman rules over man as Mary guided her infant son, with kindness and with love" (83). Yet the female collective anger is like a tidal wave, growing as the women become more confident. We witness paramilitary gangs overthrowing governments, government-funded training camps, private armies, and question how many men women need in this new world.  The book moves far beyond feminist ideas of equality, uprooting the male patriarchal society and stamping all over it in a revolution that is reminiscent of extremist second wave feminist ideas, magnified beyond comprehension.

Alderman's reversal of gender roles is taken to the extreme in the deification of women.  Yet the slow build-up of anger, sense of community, and sisterhood is convincing. Teenagers spread the power to older generations and, in turn, the latter support their outcries at the injustices they have faced. This intergenerational, intersectional sisterhood is one of the issues modern feminism has faced, and the emergence of the power seems to draw women together. Alderman investigates the use of social media and live streaming to spread the word to question if such reporting can be less biased and more honest than established news reporting.

The framing of this text as a historical reference, adds humour and nuance to the tale, as it exposes our contemporary society. Set five thousand years after the events in the text, the timeline set in the future questions the truthfulness of the chronicle and suggests disbelief in the existence of a patriarchal society. The female editor is titillated by the thoughts of male power as men have been reduced to second-class citizens. The male researcher is faced with the suggestion that his work would reach a wider audience should

he publish under a woman's name, reminding the reader of the inequality female novelists such as George Elliot and Charlotte Brontë have faced.

Another strength of the novel, is its author's ability to create sympathetic characters who face injustice and inequality, allowing the reader to cheer them on; the author's world-building skills allow for a full immersion in this new reality, before the revolution turns to horror as women fall to the seduction of power. There is no easy assimilation between good and evil to be found. This is ultimately a book about power, not feminism and Alderman does not portray an optimistic landscape. When Tunde and Roxy question the evil acts they have witnessed, they come to the conclusion: people did it, "because they could" (288). This is the narrative's only unsatisfying answer offered to the gendered violence. While bleak in its portrayal of how power corrupts, the novel offers a sliver of hope for the future. This hope is expressed through the tentative union of Tunde and Roxy and through Mother Eve's belief that society needs to be annihilated before regrowing in a new direction.

The imagery Alderman utilises is that of a lightning strike and a tree. She imagines the tendrils of power to reach into all aspects of society, gaining strength as they spread. Her refusal to supply any clear answers to the ideas held within the book will stimulate conversation that will remain with the reader long after the book is over.

**Bionote**
Tracy Hastie is a first year PhD student at the University of Lincoln, UK. Her focus is on femininity and power in Young Adult Gothic Novels, looking specifically at female protagonists and issues of desire, agency, and voice.

# Cinematic Discourse: Deconstructing Modes of Gender and Time in James Bobin's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016)

## Review by Jade Dillon

*Alice Through the Looking Glass.* **Dir. James Bobin. Perf. Johnny Depp, Anne Hathaway, Mia Wasikowska. Walt Disney, 2016. Film.**

James Bobin's adaptation, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, fixates on the mystical and fantastical elements of aesthetic value challenging Burton's representation of Wonderland dystopia in the 2010 adaptation. Mia Wasikowska (Alice), Johnny Depp (the Mad Hatter), Anne Hathaway (the White Queen), and Helena Bonham Carter (the Red Queen) reprise their roles from *Alice in Wonderland*. The characterisation of Alice and her Underland counterparts varies from that of Burton's design, they are no longer shadowed by the greyscale realism as Bobin's use of vibrant colours illuminates the screen throughout the film. The shift between dystopia and utopia implies the different approach to Carroll's original novels. The dynamism of Bobin's work strongly opposes that created by Burton. Bobin does not replicate Carroll's original intent, nor does it follow the structure of the novel. Instead, it juxtaposes new authorship while paying homage to the original text through the guise of title similarity, much like Burton's 2010 adaptation. While the thematic content is marginally respondent to the series of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the director's approach to the eccentricity and flamboyance of the Underland characters reveals a reinvention rather than a faithful depiction of the Victorian novel.

The cinematic construct of Time as a metaphysical embodiment is deeply symbolic within the text, both thematically and cinematically. There is a multitude of literary devices which foreshadow the meeting of Alice and Time. In the opening shot of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the camera pans and focuses on Alice's timepiece, which immediately stops ticking. This timepiece represents Alice's deceased father, and symbolises his death prior to her adventure. While in conversation with her mother, Alice states that "time is a cruel

monster... a thief and a villain." Similarly, Alice's mother warns "time is against you... and you're being careless with it." Alice follows Absolem, voiced by the late Alan Rickman, through the looking glass and crosses into the Underland dimension. She is welcomed with the task of saving the Hatter, for she has "been gone too long, Alice, and he will be gone before long." Deep within the Castle of Eternity, Time maintains the balance of life and death in Underland. The greyscale image of a robotic man-machine embodies the significance of time itself. Harvested Clocks hang in opposing levels: Underlandians Living and Underlandians Deceased. To save the Hatter from despair that is causing him to wither away, Alice steals the Chronosphere from Time – the mechanism which controls the past, present, and future of Underland. In doing so, Time warns "you ask to disintegrate History… you cannot change the past but you might learn something from it." As the film progresses, Time slowly disintegrates; without the Chronosphere in the Grand Clock, all in Underland will fall out of balance and die. As Time continues to chase Alice to retrieve the Chronosphere, the preconceived idea of villain fades. Following the battle and restoration of Underland, Alice apologises to Time and gives her father's pocket watch to him for eternal peace – "I always thought time was a thief, stealing everything I loved…I see now you give before you take, and every day is a gift, every hour, every minute, every second."

Alice Kingsleigh's desire to escape from the restraint of Victorian England, and her role as the saviour of the Underland, challenge the social stigma of the female archetype. The character exemplifies female resistance in the context of Victorian transgression and is faithful to the stubbornness of Carroll's original protagonist. Alice offers an innovative approach to female defiance in both the real and alternative dimensions. She subverts the socio-normative gender roles as she formulates self-actualisation through action and reaction. Alice's costumes are representative of her transgression; she dons a Chinese Changshan-inspired tunic over wide leg pantaloons. Evidently, her fashion choices sets the character apart from the Victorian archetype of standardised beauty and femininity. Similarly, as Alice falls through the mirror, her hair becomes undone signalling freedom as Victorian women combed their hair in a tight bun.

Similarly the role of the Mad Hatter can be deconstructed to illustrate the nuanced shift in traditional masculinities. This character embodies a new form of gender fluidity, thus challenging the binary conception of gender. Like Alice's physicality, the Hatter's colourisation is relevant to cognitive development. The Hatter's eccentricity diminishes as he alters his attire from vivacious pink and purple to grey. As he fades, the vibrancy of his red hair and flamboyant make-up flatten to a pale image. Following Alice's adventure and discovery, the Hatter returns to his former eccentric and colourful state. Bobin's awareness of cinematic details enhances the audience's experience of Underland.

The construction of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* would not be complete without the impetuous Red Queen, Iracebeth. Following her banishment from Underland and her Kingdom, Iracebeth tries to manipulate Time to gain access to the Chronosphere. Alice travels back to a younger Iracebeth and Mirana , and witnesses the accident that turned Iracebeth bitter and monstrous against Underland. As Mirana and Iracebeth reconcile, Iracebeth questions "why does no one love me?" to which her sister replies, "I love you." Bobin humanises the Red Queen which grants her a redefined identity, one that mirrors the concept of Time – the binary of good and evil is always dependent on perspective.

There are elements of Gothic Naturalism which surround Iracebeth, whereby the servants and palace of the Red Queen include vegetables and rotting vines. The essence of colour surrounding her palace echoes that of Victorian Gothicism. In search of happiness, Iracebeth travels back in time to change the course of her childhood. However, when she makes contact with her younger self, the "past is broken," and all of the Underland creatures begin to decay. As Underland is consumed by death, Alice races to return the Chronosphere. The camera pans through a silent and decaying Underland, and shows a rusted looking glass in the realist realm. The electronic current of the Chronosphere breaks the silence to reignite the life in Underland.

Aesthetically, the visual of this adaptation acts as a fundamental element of Alice's adventure. Bobin cleverly uses cinematography to convey the emotive response of the Underland characters. The setting, characterisation, and colourisation are equally relevant

to the thematic construct within the text. As the aesthetic and cinematic approach juxtaposes with the Carroll-esque moral universe, Bobin creates a fantastical product which examines the importance of limitless possibilities:

> Hatter: In the gardens of memory, the palace of dreams, that is where you and I will meet
>
> Alice: …but dreams aren't reality…
>
> Hatter: Who is to say which is which?

**Bionote**

Jade Dillon is a Ph.D. Research Student and Departmental Assistant within the Department of English Language and Literature in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. Her research interests include: Children's Literature, Gender Theory, Psychoanalysis, Adaptation and Intertextuality, Film Studies, Young Adult Fiction, Illustrated and Animated Texts, Social and Political Ideology, Victorianism, Popular Culture.

## A Multifaceted *Emerald* (*City*): The Reinvention of Oz

## Review by Alison Tedman

**Arnold, Matthew and Josh Friedman, creators. *Emerald City*. Perf. Adria Arjona, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Ana Ularu, Gerran Howell, Jordan Loughran, Vincent D'Onofrio. Shaun Cassidy Productions, Oedipus Productions, Mount Moriah, 2017. Television.**

Striking compositions remain in the mind amid the inventive iconography and rich colours of *Emerald City* (2017), the ten-part television series directed by Tarsem Singh for NBC Universal. While this is not the first reimagined version of *The Wizard of Oz,* it creates a distinctive aesthetic. In one sequence, Dorothy (Adria Arjona) enters a tiled courtyard enclosing a pool, and walks across the white, liquid surface to a raised octagonal platform, where she attempts to control the elements.

In a trope well established by earlier reimagined Fantasy television series, the Dorothy who arrives by tornado is an adult, a twenty-year-old nurse. When the cyclone hits Kansas, and transports her to Oz, she finds herself in a police car which provides essential survival items - a gun, a leather jacket, a medical kit - and a dog to accompany her. Thereafter, intertextual references to L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and to his other Oz series, in addition to the 1939 film that introduced the ruby slippers - here reinvented - permeate *Emerald City*'s characters, narrative, and *mise-en-scene*.

*Emerald City* was a long time coming to the small screen: a version of the script by creators and Executive Producers Matthew Arnold and Josh Friedman was first approved, then dropped by the NBC network in 2014. Tarsem Singh, whose film credits include *The Cell* (2000) and the fractured Fairy Tale, *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), ensured authorial control by stipulating that the whole ten-episode arc was written in advance. A notable prior example of pre-planning is the Fantasy hybrid *Lost* (2004-2010), which for Jason Mittell in *Complex TV* (2015) exemplifies narrative 'complexity.' Yet, while *Emerald City* has an intricate narrative, and there are occasional, subjective flashbacks at key moments, complexity describes its *mise-en-scene* as much as its structure.

The show's camera-work, supervised by Director of Photography Colin Watkinson lends luminous life to a combination of natural vistas and historical buildings from locations in Hungary, Croatia, and three sites in Spain. The result is visually eclectic, with a tangible, architectural quality that vies with digitally rendered aspects of Fantastika, including a giant statue that looms, spear poised, over the city harbour.

In addition to visual references to the Oz canon, including a re-envisaged yellow road that incorporates the film's opiate poppies, characters from Baum's novels are combined or given a fresh slant by *Emerald City*'s creators and by further writers, who include Executive Producers David Shulner and Shaun Cassidy, and Supervising Producer Tracy Bellamo. The series' design by Dave Warren evokes Medieval Fantasy, including a repositioning of tribalism that is also found in *The 100* (2014-present). A magically organic form of

incarceration echoes a more mud-bound version of the labyrinth in Vadim's 1968 Fantasy, *Barbarella*. A Steampunk style appears in inventive uses of mechanical engineering, in what we assume to be the past successes of the Wizard in bringing science to a pre-industrial Oz.

At key points, the original soundtrack by Trevor Morris includes diegetic music from our world, in a manner reminiscent of the use of music as a link between primary and secondary worlds and old and current technologies in the BBC fantasy series *Life on Mars* (2006-2007). Pink Floyd's "Breathe" contributes to the ethereal atmosphere of a masked carnival, paper lanterns floating up into the dusk, as it plays through a loudspeaker. This and another song, Bill Withers's "Ain't no Sunshine," which is heard through ear buds linked to Dorothy's phone, seem to invite meta-textual examination of the lyrics for self-reflexive connotations, while suiting the eclectic style of the series.

This paralleling of the Wizard's and Dorothy's music is indicative of the way in which a large part of the series' power structure is female-centred, from the three cardinal witches, West, East and North; to the Wizard's medieval nun-like advisers, known as "Glinda's Girls"; the imperious Lady Ev (Stefanie Martini); a witch named Mombi (Fiona Shaw); and Dorothy herself. In this, the series draws, as many Oz adaptations do, on the off-cited feminist, matriarchal stance located in Baum's outlook. Female characters are often associated with magic, an exception being the scientist surgeon Jane (Gina McKee).

While female characters are linked to magic or science, males tend to be associated with magic only as its subjects. The use of the *Oz* canon as source material enables a spectrum of often vulnerable masculinities, as in other televisual and film reimagined versions of *The Wizard of Oz*, which include *The Wiz* (1978), the mini-series *Tin Man* (2007), and *The Witches of O*z (2011). Such characters range from the amnesiac soldier Lucas (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), rescued by Dorothy in a sequence visually configured as part crucifixion, part scarecrow; to a sensitive, clockwork cyborg; to the larger-than-life but insecure Wizard (Vincent D'Onofrio), whose flawed character precipitates his entry into Oz. A book on Orson Welles - briefly shown in a flashback - underlines his showmanship, rather than any claim to magic.

Posters extolling science under the auspices of the Wizard are visible on walls in the city. The Wizard forces Oz's central schism between science and magic. Surveillance drones fall on the side of technology as Oz's winged monkeys are reimagined as clockwork cameras: one is hand-cranked to replay a long shot of the tornado in a scratched, sepia rendition of primitive cinema, its 'eyes' rotating to function as camera and projector lenses. Similar Steampunk imagery is found in the earlier, multiple-Emmy nominated *Tin Man* (2007), in which Cain (Neal McDonaugh) is encountered in a metal suit, from which he is forced to re-watch a looped hologram of his family's capture.

*Emerald City* enters into more adult, romantic territories in its relationships than *Tin Man*, the final focus of which is on the power of sisterly and family bonds. In *Emerald City*, emotional drama, jealousy, and angst further the narrative. This aligns the series with what are defined as Woman's film and television genres, although such tropes compete with post-feminist and Fourth Wave discourses in the series' focus on older and younger female power. The series draws on Action genres, in addition to series about contemporary witches and female bonding, with recognisable tropes that range from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) to contemporary action heroism. Dorothy fights using believable skills, creating a sense of genuine female agency that some critical work suggests is problematised by superhuman action heroines. Minor injuries from her struggles are foregrounded through her performance, as reminders of her bravery.

*Emerald City* eschews objectification of female characters, partly through the costumes designed by *Star Wars Episodes I-III*'s (1999-2005) costumier Trisha Biggar. Lady Ev's multitude of masks, many of jewelled filigree work, were hand-made for the series, and are part of a discourse relating to masked identity. Several characters' true selves are revealed to have been obscured through enchantment or technology. The body itself may become part of this concealment, yet revelations create tensions between new identities and appropriate clothing.

Lady Ev's masks and the silver ice hair, gowns, and castle of Mistress North (Joely Richardson); the rock-Goth high-necked black dresses worn by her palace madam sister,

Mistress of the Western Fields (Ana Ularu); the blood red clothes worn by The Mistress of the Eastern Wood (Florence Kasumba) all have a striking individuality. The use of clothing not only for characterisation but also to create sublime visual compositions, re-emphasises the complexly resistant potential of costume explicated by feminist film theorists such as Pam Cook, Stella Bruzzi, Jane Gaines, and Tamar Jeffers McDonald. The series offers an alternative to the physicality by which some post-feminist fantasy series paradoxically conform to the masculinised spectatorship paradigm of Laura Mulvey's 1975 article "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." Mulvey, of course, used Freudian and Lacanian concepts to deconstruct classical Hollywood's female image, as passive focus of a masculinised system of looks. While theoretical developments ensued, evidence for this paradigm lingers in Fantasy media, although feminine spectacle is displaced onto dynamic roles, and re-assessed in postfeminist analysis.

Dorothy briefly glamorises her own image in *Emerald City* when she dons a ceremonial gown to perform the weather ritual described earlier, eliciting a shot of Lucas's admiring response. However, after dominating the ensuing magical action, she strides away across a field, oblivious to the dress and returns to her practical outfit.

Magical televisual reimaginings of well-known Fairy Tales and Fantasy Literature abounded in the first decade of the twenty-first century, including *The 10th Kingdom* (2000), from Executive Producers Robert Halmi, Sr and Robert Halmi, Jr. Nick Willing, who directed *Tin Man*, wrote and directed a dystopian version of *Alice* (2009) that included a likeable rogue called Hatter and a hit man with a white china rabbit head. There are fewer high-profile reimagined shows today, and *Emerald City*'s inventiveness harks back agreeably to that cycle while replacing some of the earlier shows' quirkier excesses with elaborate visual staging.

**Works Cited**

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling.* NYU Press, 2015.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18

*The Wizard of Oz.* Dir. Victor Fleming, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1939. Film.

**Bionote**

Dr. Alison Tedman is a Senior Lecturer, teaching Film and Media Studies at Buckinghamshire New University, UK. Her PhD from the University of Kent was titled *Strategies of Pleasure and Power: The Role of Phantasy in the Fairy Tale Film*. Her recent research includes the article, "Simulation Frames: Young Adult Dystopian Cinema."

# *Beauty and the Beast* of Queer Misrepresentation

## Review by Danielle Girard

**Beauty and the Beast. Dir. Bill Condon. Perf. Emma Watson, Dan Stevens, Luke Evans. Walt Disney, 2017. Film.**

In 1991, *Beauty and the Beast* makes history by becoming the first animated feature film to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards (Don Hahn). To say that the 2017 live action reboot of this animated classic had a lot to live up to is to put it lightly. Classic shoes cannot be filled, particularly when they are enchanted with the spell of nostalgia, though that very spell is, of course, what fills the cinemas with adults all too eager to relive the magic of their childhood. Needless to say, the the 2017 live action film falls short of expectation.

Visually, *Beauty and the Beast* offers a stunning cinematic landscape that draws in the audience with a majestic, fantastical castle and spectacular costuming to match. With a powerhouse cast that includes Audra McDonald (Madame Garderobe,) Ewan McGregor (Lumière), and Josh Gad (LeFou) at the helm of the more extravagant musical numbers, it is unsurprising that the film sounds as good as it looks.

On the surface, it would appear that the live action *Beauty and the Beast* offers something for everyone, but unfortunately it fails to deliver the representation promised. Prior to the film's release, director Bill Condon announced that the remake would "feature Disney's first gay character" (Catherine Shoard). What followed this proclamation of character LeFou's sexuality was a media firestorm ranging from praise to condemnation. The hype surrounding the film – and the so-called 'controversy'– then becomes of the utmost importance.

*Beauty and the Beast* was no longer a family film about inner beauty, instead the live action film morphed from nostalgic throwback to political statement. A family-run theatre in Alabama removed it from the bill of films they would show (Maane Khatchatourian), while Russia gave the film an 'adults only' rating (Clarisse Loughrey). After Disney refused to censor their film – firmly standing behind the four minutes and 38 seconds of proposed cuts – the film was pulled in its entirety from Malaysia (Loughrey).

The plot at the heart of *Beauty and the Beast* is innately problematic. It is an argument as old as time, but both the old and the new film fetishise Stockholm syndrome while suggesting that a woman's best job is to stabilise the home. The 2017 rendition creates an atmosphere of abuse: though the enchanted human-turned-objects make a point of shielding the specifics of the curse from Belle, they are still guilty. Despite the glamour – the primary aim of Beast's staff is to keep Belle imprisoned in an attempt to force her affection for her captor. As Belle prepares to run away from the castle after Beast yells and frightens her, it is unclear whether or not the house staff is attempting to stop her for her own safety or for their chance at returning to a human state. But despite this shady love story, what spurs many viewers to reach for their torches and pitchforks is the minimal inclusion of a gay character.

To clarify, any hope the LGBTQ+ community had for proper representation of a canonical gay character within this film was nullified with the choice to queer LeFou – whose name literally means 'the fool' – a character who exists in the canon of the film as a spineless, immoral sidekick. To come to *Beauty and the Beast* with expectations for a nuanced

representation of queer sexuality would shift the label of 'fool' onto the audience. Yet low expectations were too high. Though the LeFou led number – 'Gaston' – features a few teased hints about his sexuality alongside a number of innuendos, the 'controversial' scene in question occurs during the final seconds of the film and is so short an unassuming one could blink and leave the cinema wondering what all the media fuss was about. As the camera circles Belle and Beast during their 'happily ever after' dance number, for just a moment it shifts to LeFou, who steps into a single dance move with another man before the camera cuts back to Belle and Beast and the credits roll. It is nothing less than insulting to the LGBTQ+ community.

This is not an indictment of Disney, by any means. They are not the first, nor the last, to champion queer representation when the said representation offered is less than the bare minimum. The new *Power Rangers* film – which came out a week after *Beauty and the Beast* – is also guilty of baiting the queer trap. It would seem that new mainstream trend is to claim queerness where it is barely hinted. The difference between the two, however, is Disney's media spotlight.

It is fair neither to Disney nor the LGBTQ+ community that this film became the poster child for queer representation. While *Beauty and the Beast* has been problematically marketed as heralding 'Disney's first gay character,' it is less the film that must come under fire than it is the spotlight it has received for such representation. This highlights another issue which is the gross lack of representation and the stains of heteronormativity that have painted this film as a progressive portrayal.

*Beauty and the Beast* is nostalgic ground so criticising it all opens up a biased discourse. Viewers with ranging backgrounds and sexualities will likely leave the theatre with vastly different interpretations of the film. For myself, a queer reviewer with an academic interest in mainstream pop culture's consistent burial of queer representation, I may give a harsher critique than a reviewer speaking only on the merits of the film. The most frustrating fact remains that – although this film's representation is a small, inconsequential tag-on – it more than most offer. However, if you can stomach the gross negligence of proper

queer representation, then *Beauty and the Beast* is a visually stunning film filled with catchy songs and upbeat dance numbers. It is not the worst way to spend an afternoon.

**Works Cited**

Ahern, Sarah. "'Beauty and the Beast' to Feature Disney's First Openly Gay Character." *Variety*. 01 March 2017. <http://variety.com/2017/film/news/josh-gad-plays-disneys-first-ever-openly-gay-character-1202000261/> Accessed 02 April 2017.

Hahn, Don. "Oscars 1992: How 'Beauty and the Beast' changed animation." *Entertainment Weekly*. 22 February 2012. <http://ew.com/article/2012/02/22/oscars-1992-beauty-and-the-beast/> Accessed 02 April 2017.

Khatchatourian, Maane. "Alabama Theater Cancels 'Beauty and the Beast' Screenings Due to Gay Character." *Variety*. 03 March 2017. <http://variety.com/2017/film/news/beauty-and-the-beast-gay-character-alabama-theater-1202001627/> Accessed 02 April 2017.

Loughrey, Clarisse. "Beauty and the Beast: Malaysian censor reveals demands for multiple cuts to film." *The Independent*. 20 March 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/beauty-and-the-beast-disney-malaysia-censor-pulled-film-gay-moment-le-fou-josh-gad-a7639026.html> Accessed 02 April 2017.

Shoard, Catherine. "Beauty and the Beast to feature first 'exclusively gay moment' in a Disney movie." *The Guardian*. 01 March 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/01/beauty-beast-first-exclusively-gay-moment-disney-movie-emma-wilson-same-sex-love> Accessed 02 April 2017.

**Bionote**

Danielle Girard is a first year, international PhD student at Lancaster University, UK researching *Star Trek* and its place in fan and queer history. She is particularly interested in the gender politics at play when fans slash the textual canon to create homosexual couplings, such as Kirk/Spock.

# Afternoon Tea in the Aether: Adventure, Romance, and [Post]Colonialism in Gail Carriger's *Prudence*

## Review by Shannon Rollins

**Carriger, Gail. *Prudence*. Orbit, 2015. Custard Protocol 1. Novel.**

Gail Carriger's premiere novel *Soulless* (Orbit Books, 2009) garnered *New York Times Bestseller* status and immediately captured the interest of readers across age, gender, and genre demographics; indeed, her Steampunk debut presented both a sympathetic and likable female protagonist, as well as a carefully balanced mixture of romance and adventure. Steampunk, as a subgenre of speculative fiction, had boasted scant few women's voices prior to *Soulless*, with Cherie Priest's wildly popular *Boneshaker* published in the same year. Carriger and Priest's novels have rattled the Steampunk establishment for the better and encouraged women's authorship inside the genre, bringing with them a new paranormal yet scientific flavour.

While *Soulless*, and the remaining four volumes of the *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2012) do capitalise on the buzz generated in the wake of supernatural juggernaut *Twilight* (2005) and its youthful spin on vampire and werewolf narratives, Carriger could never be accused of riding Stephenie Meyer's coat-tails. Where Meyer's American millennial Bella lacks self-confidence – and arguably self-awareness – for the majority of the *Twilight* series, Carriger's heroine Alexia Tarabotti is a self-possessed nineteenth-century English lady grounded in a well-developed identity who vigorously exercises her intellectual prowess. The chemistry between the eponymously 'soulless' Alexia and her werewolf love-interest Conall Maccon is instantly palpable and Carriger weaves a rich tapestry of characters and subplots as she pulls these two equally stubborn Victorians together.

Following the culmination of the *Parasol Protectorate*'s five novels, Carriger penned a young adult series – *Finishing School* (2013-2015) – that examined the adolescence of the

*Parasol Protectorate*'s queer and quirky Genevieve Lefoux, as well as introducing a new cast of personalities, intrigues, and entanglements. Again, Carriger centres her narrative on a strong female protagonist, whose relationships span a diverse field of gender identities and performances, sexualities, supernatural abilities, and social/national backgrounds. And again, I greatly enjoyed her prose. Yet, without Alexia's obstinate and charming presence, *Finishing School* left me simultaneously satisfied and pining for the precocious original heroine.

So, it was with great excitement – and no small amount of anticipation – that I ordered my copy of *Prudence* (2015), a speculative fiction romance novel set twenty years after the *Parasol Protectorate*'s final instalment. With Alexia and Conall's debutante daughter as the title character and lead protagonist, *Prudence* promised the triumphant return of many familiar characters and a much beloved heroine. From the onset, Prudence (Rue to her friends) is clearly her mother's daughter, with both women immediately exuding prominent intellects and unorthodox self-possession for Victorian women – and an abiding love for treacle tart and superlative tea. However, Rue is not Alexia made over. The differences between Alexia and Rue appear early in the novel, as Alexia confronts her daughter regarding her disruptive behaviour at a ball. This conceit runs as a direct parallel to Alexia's debut in the first chapter of *Soulless*, bringing immediate resonance between the two characters.

This trope is abruptly – and cleverly – subverted as the narration reveals Rue's perception of 'Mother' as an aristocratic: "veritable battle-axe, boasting a shape not unlike that of a tragic soprano in a Germanic opera, only with less inclination to throw herself off bridges" (26). Everyone grows up, but Rue's evaluation of her mother as staid, unfashionable, and traditional renders a tough blow to the reader. Has adventurous, chic, and idiosyncratic Alexia been permanently replaced with the straw pillar of Victorian politeness Rue describes throughout Carriger's alternative 1890s? This question remains unanswered as Alexia plays a minor role in *Prudence*, appearing only once more. The novel is called *Prudence*, after all.

Following this brief, and admittedly humorous, interval of aristocratic pretence and relatable mother/daughter loggerheads, *Prudence* reveals its central plot – an expedition to

India in search of a superior strain of tea leaves (Carriger is a passionate and vocal connoisseur of tea, and has applied this quirk to her paranormal heroines). In a truly fantastical spin on nineteenth century gender roles, Rue is made captain of airship "The Spotted Custard." Joining her for the adventure are twins and Rue's childhood friends Primrose and Percy (the children of Alexia's own dear friend Ivy) and Madame Lefoux's son Quesnel, who appeared in *The Parasol Protectorate* as a preteen.

With her friends in tow, Rue sets off for the extreme edge of the British Empire, discovering a new cast of characters and revisiting others. When docking to refuel at the Maltese Tower (itself a whimsical adaptation of a nineteenth century port), Rue encounters the mysterious and sensual Miss Sekhmet. Again, Carriger's flair for the dramatic, as well as her tendency to include wisps of antiquity and mythology, breathes layers of intertext into the novel. Sekhmet is the name of an ancient Egyptian goddess of protection whose familiar form – a lioness – is Miss Sekhmet's supernatural shape. This revelation of "were" creatures beyond werewolves rests at the crux of *Prudence*. Presenting Miss Sekhmet, an enigmatic and sympathetic figure, as a structural element serves Carriger well as her introduction to new supernatural categories reads as both gentle and logical, where it could feel contrived. The revelation that there is at least one supernatural creature outside of the European continent – with no ties to Western civilisation – is a bright reminder of Carriger's academic background in anthropology. This not only adds nuance to Carriger's alternative 1890s, but also runs as a parallel to the historical 1890s and the condition of Indian cultures under British imperialism and the Raj.

Unfortunately, this is also one of my – markedly few – grievances with Carriger's new series *The Custard Protocol*; at times, the post-colonial subtext of her narrative is lost and the reasonable immaturity of her youthful cast reads as clumsy writing. Rue is gobsmacked by the idea that the people of India may not enjoy – nor desire – British rule and the social restructuring that comes with it. As Rue laments this "dissident" conviction, Percy explains:

> It's too late now. Industry is in place – sky trains and rails criss-cross
>
> this land. If he knows history first-hand, he knows that there is no

> progress backwards. There is only the engine of empire, advancing. We
> are civilisation and order. (290)

The "we" in Percy's statement refers to the British, and his conflation between empire and progress is certainly an echo of the epoch. And yet, where other aspects of *Prudence* engage directly with the historical satire and social critique intrinsic to Steampunk fiction, this exchange is *so* of the historic nineteenth century that, at times, Carriger's postcolonial viewpoint is lost alongside Rue's (understandable) difficulty unpacking the complexities of imperialism, race, economics, and diplomacy from her position of aristocratic privilege.

*Prudence* also introduces a new romantic entanglement, between Rue and Quesnel Lefoux. At first I was delighted with this pairing; the two had the same mixture of playful-loathing and tension that made Alexia and Conall such an enjoyable match. However, in the subsequent novel *Imprudence*, the 'will they/won't they' frisson is replaced with a surprising lack of chemistry. This is protracted by the knowledge that weaving inter-personal chemistry is one of Carriger's greatest narrative strengths. I can only hope that this issue is resolved in the third instalment (*Competence*, expected 2018) with improved chemistry between she and Quesnel, a different (and more fitting) love interest, or our young heroine satisfied with her own company.

Minor quibbles aside, *Prudence* and the rest of *The Custard Protocol* series promises a romantic adventure just as delightful and, dare I say treacly, as its supernatural predecessors.

**Works Cited**

Carriger, Gail. *Soulless*. Orbit Books, 2009. The Parasol Protectorate 1.

---. *Prudence*. Orbit Books, 2015. The Custard Protocol 1.

---. *Imprudence*. Orbit Books, 2016. The Custard Protocol 2.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight*. Little, Brown and Company, 2005.

**Bionote**

Shannon Rollins is a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, UK, currently working towards resubmitting her thesis on the relationship between romance fiction and dress in Anglo-American Steampunk cultures. She is also an intern at the Antwerp fashion museum (ModeMuseum). Other research interests include adaptation, crafted bodies, digital humanities, memetics, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

# Weird Currency

## Review by Richard Howard

**Cisco, Michael. *Animal Money*. Lazy Fascist Press, 2015. Novel.**

One of the striking things about the New Weird since its rise in the 2000s has been how much territory the subgenre has claimed. 2011's *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* features, not only Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James, H.P. Lovecraft and China Miéville, but also Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and William Gibson. In the introduction to the anthology, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer note that had there not been rights issues, the collection would also have included stories by Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard (VanderMeer & VanderMeer xv-xx). As Darja Malcolm Clarke claims, the New Weird recalls a time in the early twentieth century "before the genres had emerged or coalesced into the forms as we know them today" (41). Michael Cisco has been comfortable operating in this undefinable space since his early works; the San Venificio novels, *The Divinity Student* (1999) and *The Golem* (2004), take place in a city that resembles a combination of Kafka's and Meyrink's Prague and William Burroughs's Interzone.

The world of *Animal Money* is closer to our world than the world of those novels, but Cisco stretches it with the weirder elements of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. This world has economists, albeit economists that are estranged through the truism that in our

time that particular profession had taken the place of the priesthood as a caste whose edicts should never be questioned. Economists greet each other with the Salutation "the bank is there to save and lend...workers work and customers spend" (Cisco 9), they consult with the gods on economic matters, and are required to take an oath to read certain economic textbooks (13). They are also restricted in the kind of shoes they can wear (37), denote their place in the hierarchy of economists through face markings (62), duel to settle economic debates (125-126) and indulge in the ritual ingestion of fungus (296).

The economists are gathered in the city of San Toribio for a conference, when five of their number receive head injuries preventing them from attending. In a hotel breakfast room that turns into a nightclub during their conversation; the main protagonist Professor Ronald Crest and the four other convalescing economists, draw out a theory of animal money, an idea that none of them singly can take credit for (16). Animal money is a living money, a means of exchange based on qualities rather than quantities (20). It is not a neutral currency (385), and invites comparisons with Theodor Adorno's notion of a utopia based on use value rather than exchange value (Adorno 11). In animal money, speculative and surplus value disappear, leaving "negative traces," the spectral blanks that back the currency (217). Although the economists insist that animal money is intended to streamline rather than subvert the current economic system, as the theory leaks into the world beyond the breakfast room, its subversive potential attracts the attention of the dictatorial San Toribio authorities (55).

As the economists make the acquaintance of the authorities, they are shown around San Toribio's Secret Zoo, where they witness squirrels exchanging eggshell fragments, leading Professor Crest to speculate: "Is money an aspect of biological development analogous to the development of air breathing lungs or the sense of smell" (43-44). At the Secret Zoo, Cisco introduces the labour activist Superaesop, a recurring presence throughout the novel who, in a particularly Burroughsian section, is depicted as the sex slave to a group of chimpanzees (44). Superaesop's line of flight, from sex slave to chimpanzees to hardboiled left-wing activist on the lam, provides much of the forward motion of the narrative, and the voice of Superaesop's more polemical sections embody the spirit of the novel.

Superaesop also incarnates Cisco's disregard for genre boundaries. In *Animal Money*, the author proposes that understanding the post-2008 crash moment necessitates crossing these boundaries. M. John Harrison's observation that the resurgence of Weird Fiction reflects the fact that "life in the West is now a cross-ply of fantasies" (Harrison 330) is echoed in Superaesop's declaration that "you don't find reality by divesting yourself of fantasies" (538), and that "the real problem is that people aren't alienated enough, and they don't keep pace with the runaway weirdness of life" (578). In *Animal Money*, this runaway weirdness is propelled by capitalism, in particular the speculative iteration of capitalism that the author uses to blur the line between Fantasy and Science Fiction. Superaesop remarks that:

> the problem is fantasy. The fantasy money that is traded by the greatest of our world's fantasists. They make their predictions about what will go up or down. They buy and sell bits of the future, and don't know that all along they are writing science fiction. (499)

For Cisco, Fantasy need not be as complicit with ideology as the Suvinian perspective on Science Fiction would suggest (Suvin 3-15). When asked whether animal money is a Fantasy, the economist Crest replies: "Whether or not it is a fantasy is something that will never be known, unless we are successful. And whether or not it is a fantasy is perhaps not the only important question. This fantasy has an internal consistency that is instructive" (55). Later in the section, Cisco writes "Sooner or later, everybody ends up taking a fantasy seriously" (57).

Cisco pulls Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror together through the character of the experimental physicist Assiyeh Neneheseyeh and her project to use a supercollider to "achieve absolute motionlessness" (82). Neneheseyeh's narrative involves communion with the ghosts of her parents (210), a hunt for a floating severed head (143), and a discovery of a means through which to store light "cheaply and easily" (408). In a sustained Science Fiction narrative, related by an unnamed man in a prison cell that Cisco suggests might be one of the five economists responsible for animal money, Neneheseyeh fakes her own death and travels to the planet Koskon Kanona on a starship. Life there is as unsatisfactory as existence on Earth, the planet is described as one that had "bureaucracy already in place,

even though the planet had no intelligent life" (476). The captain of the ship bemoans the narrowing horizons of even this technologically advanced future, remarking that "my fantasy is to have fantasies again" (438). Cisco eventually deconstructs Neneheseyeh's Science Fiction narrative, writing "you aren't real, Assiyeh…you're just a decoy. You're just science fiction" (602).

*Animal Money* is more than the narratives touched on here. The novel turns on numerous bizarre Burroughsian sides, such as Crest's turn as an exotic dancer (282-285), the passage concerning the Black Metal Marxists (629), and the left-wing apostate Eugenio Urtruvel whose tongue gets replaced by a sea louse (163, 702-703). All of this makes *Animal Money* a word-horde that is in some sense unreviewable, a quality inextricably linked to what Cisco appears to be saying. The novel suggests that contemporary culture is best understood through Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, and the Weird traffic between them. Reviewing the novel a year and a half after it was published, it occurs that the cultural moment in which it was written has moved on. In *Animal Money*, Cisco refers to the 2008 crash and its various aftershocks. The exhaustion of the left in the post-Occupy moment is embodied in Superaesop's observation that talking about revolution "used to make me feel better; now it makes me feel like I'm already dead" (449). The post-2008 milieu saw a proliferation of references to Antonio Gramsci's notion of the interregnum, the impending death of neo-liberalism evoking Gramsci's observation that "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci 276). Now that the new has been born and is weirder than anyone could have expected, and the Weird is being posited as a "means of leading us closer to the truth than conventional social novels" (Moorcock) one can only wonder what Cisco will do next.

**Works Cited**

Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Routledge, 1973.

Cisco, Michael. *The Divinity Student*. Cheeky Frog Books, 2013. E-book.

---. *The Golem*. Cheeky Frog Books, 2013. E-book.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Lawrence & Wishart, 1992.

Harrison, M. John. "New Weird Discussions: The Creation of a Term." *The New Weird.* Eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer. Tachyon Publications, 2000, pp. 317-31.

Malcolm-Clarke, Darja. "Tracking Phantoms." *The New Weird*. Eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer. Tachyon Publications, 2000, pp. 337-43.

Moorcock, Michael. "What is the New Weird—and What Makes Weird Fiction So Relevant to Our Times." *New Statesman*. March 12, 2017. <[www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/03/what-new-weird-and-what-makes-weird-fiction-so-relevant-our-times](www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/03/what-new-weird-and-what-makes-weird-fiction-so-relevant-our-times)> Accessed 28 March 2017

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Yale University Press, 1979.

VanderMeer, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, eds. *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*. Corvus, 2001.

**Bionote**

Richard Howard is an early career researcher working at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. His research interests include Irish science fiction, weird fiction, critical theory, science and technology studies, and postcolonial theory. He also writes fiction and has had work published in *Weird Tales*, *Electric Velocipede*, and Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's *The Bestiary* anthology.

# Falling in Love with Familiar but *Stranger Things*

## Review by Rebecca Horton

**Duffer, Matt and Ross Duffer, creators.** *Stranger Things.* **Perf. Winona Ryder, David Harbour, Finn Wolfhard, Millie Bobby Brown. 21 Laps Entertainment, 2016. Television.**

Science Fiction television is usually categorised as either intelligent or outlandish, depending on the audience it is aiming to please. The shows that are most successful occupy a precarious space as they need to be simultaneously imaginative, readily consumable, and unpretentious. *Stranger Things* is all of the aforementioned, and it seems to be developed for critical viewers like me, or at the very least, 80s enthusiasts. I've watched it twice now – once as it was released, and then again shortly before writing this so that I was better able to understand the allusions hidden in the episodes. Closely honouring the mass media of the 1980s, the characters are accessible because of their imperfections and technological innocence. We are taken back to a time in media before we were exposed to gore and pessimism: the series is escapist, sentimental, scary, and fun.

There are arguably two opening sequences presented by the Duffer Brothers (fitting for a dual toned series). One features an underground science lab, with a terrified scientist running through failing lights and sirens, thinking he is safe only to meet a screaming end thanks to an unseen giggling monster. We are then introduced to the heroes of the series in a basement where four boys are finishing a marathon of D&D that lays out what is about to happen. By the time we hit the title sequence, its full-on nostalgia - the font evoking horror paperbacks of the 1980s announces our fall visit to a small Indiana town paying homage to Stephen Hawking. We are treated to the synth music of the same era with titling from *Firestarter* (film adaptation 1984) or *The Terminator* (1984). It conjures thoughts of science, fantasy, adventure, and horror, and that's exactly what the series delivers.

The show follows a title sequence of chapters for the first season, and each episode stays true to the title to build momentum and flesh out the storyline. We start out with the disappearance of Will Byers and the discovery of Eleven, and steadily build through their respective storylines. As the group of friends and family finds a way to communicate with Will, Eleven tries to navigate her freedom and develop her humanity. Methods of communication are tested (the Christmas lights are interesting but not fully explained) and the science of the supernatural is explained while the humanity of those affected is fully proved. The demigorgon and supernatural state of the upside down aren't fully introduced until the final two episodes when the characters, and the audience, are ready to experience them.

*Stranger Things*, to me, is a wonderful journey back to the movies and books that I grew up with. I had an older brother that read Stephen King's short stories to me, and I was immersed in the world of synthesised music and invisible monsters, due in part to the limitations of special effects which forced audiences to do the work in their own heads. When we did see supernatural elements in the older Horror or Supernatural shows, it wasn't CGI-enhanced to the level of realistic versions currently available. Barbara's fate was incredibly similar to the first victim in Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) because of her location in water and her struggle from an unseen monster, but without the mess of today's movies. The audience was warned of it from seeing posters of the movie in the episode, and it made the entire pool scene disconcerting.

As mentioned above, along with reminiscence there is a strong sense of the uncanny throughout the series. Being set in a less-connected time, watching boys ride their bikes through wooded areas and deserted streets seems normal. There are no cellular phones, and the lack of means to connect between characters is uncomfortable to watch. The fact that we see that radios and landlines are easily compromised is deeply unsettling to an audience that can watch the series from multiple media sources, and we are not used to silence. Flickering lights are disquieting in our world of consistency, especially when linked to a crude communication with the supernatural. Not even having a bath seems as relaxing after watching the sensory deprivation exploits of Eleven.

The "Upside Down" or "Vale of Shadows" that the boys & Chief Hopper finally come to grips with in episode 5 is not something new to the world of Horror and fiction. It is something often explored by Stephen King in stories like *The Mist* (novella 1980, film adaptation 2007) and *The Dark Tower* series (1982-2012), and in movies like *Altered States* (1980). The idea that a world exists in direct opposition to ours with such a tenuous barrier is something that has been explored through physics and fiction for decades. Stephen Hawking has theorised that falling into a black hole may in fact lead to alternate universes, and that would explain the gate that Eleven created.

An ensemble of engaging actors is an essential aspect of this show's success. The younger cast have camaraderie similar to those in *The Goonies* (1985) or *E.T.* (1982) without it seeming forced. The ability to create chemistry that seems natural isn't often seen in a long-running series, much less in an eight episode season; the more established players are Winona Ryder, Matthew Modine, and David Harbour. Ryder is wonderfully unhinged and emotional, Modine is creepily generic and sociopathic, while Harbour is arguably the most authentic of the three, able to understand the loss of a child and see past the façade of the government cover-up. Even the extended cameos are great: the diner owner Benny, the pragmatic best friend Barb, the science teacher Mr. Clark, and the demigorgon, which is strongly reminiscent of the Pale Man, the scariest villain in *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), are arguably the most important.

Eleven is the key character of *Stranger Things*: she is the one who was able to visit the "upside down" first; she created the gate through her contact with the creature there; and there is a connection between the two that has not yet been explored. Growing up in a lab where her only meaningful relationship was the result of Stockholm syndrome, she is essentially unaware of her identity, gender, and is devoid of personality. She becomes more human as the series progresses (Mike gives her a nickname; she grows her powers from small object manipulation to fatal intent; she experiments with love and sacrifice) and even with her limited dialogue we glean that she discovers humanity through the actions of the

group that accepts her, discovering her true strength only when she can trust in those around her (namely Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Joyce, and Hopper).

Another reason to applaud *Stranger Things* is that the creators ran it at the right pace. Eight episodes is enough to hold the attention of audiences who enjoy the compact seasons of the BBC; it's easy to consume for Netflix binge-watchers, and yet long enough for those who are conditioned to long seasons and multiple episode arcs of cable serials. There's enough comfort for those of us who watched *The X Files* (1993-2002) or *The Twilight Zone* movie (1983) that we know where the story and characters should go, but we aren't bored. We all long for a good resolution for this band of pre-pubescent kids who make us long for our younger and simpler days of do-or-die friendship.

The final episode of the season may fall a bit short of the bar set by its predecessors, but that is often true of a season finale. Part of its job is to set up the next adventure, which means that it can't dedicate itself to its own storyline. However, episode eight is where Joyce finally meets "Papa," where Steve discovers why Nancy and Jonathan have been hanging out, and where the kids have their chance to see and fight the demigorgon with a battle extracted directly from *It* (1990). There are a few turning points to keep in mind going into next season: Eleven has used her powers with deadly force now, and we get a better sense that she is linked to the creature on a very deep level; Hopper has made a deal with the government, so he is going to be put into a bad position to protect Joyce and explain all the oddities of late; and Will is clearly not fully free from the upside down.

If the foreshadowing in the first season holds true for the second, Hawkins is in for another showdown with a supernatural creature. The Thessalhydra should be the next villain faced, but the dice roll alludes that Will has better luck against this foe. We are also aware that Will isn't free of scars from this last battle – the Christmas Eve flash would lead us to think that the upside down is still very much a part of him. As well, there are a few leads based on the player's rapid fire conversation such as the proud princess, lost knight, and the weird flowers in the cave. The second storyline will see how the town comes to terms with Barb's disappearance, the recent destruction in town, and the relationship between Hopper

and the government agency. There's plenty of ground that could be covered over the next nine episodes, and we can only hope that the series is able to continue as dedicatedly as it began.

**Bionote**

Rebecca Horton has a degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta, Canada. Her academic interests include voraciously consuming books that deal with subversion, horror and humour, learning new languages, practicing photography, and finding brilliant juvenile texts for her children.

## *The Expanse*: No One Told You Space Could Make You Feel So Empty

## Review by Aleksandar Kordis

**Fergus, Mark and Hawk Ostby, creators. *The Expanse*. Perf. Steven Strait, Dominique Tipper, Wes Chatham, Shohreh Aghdashloo. Alcon Entertainment, 2015-2017. Television.**

*The Expanse* is a TV series that premiered On Demand on November 23, 2015 and officially launched on SyFy on December 14, 2015. The plot is based on a series of novels by James S. A. Corey, the pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. In full disclosure – I have not read the books, and will thus be looking at the series based off its own merits. While some call *The Expanse* "the *Game of Thrones* in space," it is much more than simple setting change from one of the most popular show on television.

As with any good SF series *The Expanse* starts in space. Not the kind of space where you can see Earth in the distance and feel connected. This is the empty, cold, desolate space of space, and in that space we see a young woman floating as the tension builds with her noticing the air and water in her suit are running dangerously low. Without jumping knee

deep into spoiler territory, I have to say that the opening of *The Expanse* is more akin to the oppressive representation of space (think *2001: A Space Odyssey)* and not the happy-go-lucky space adventure like other SF forerunners such as *Killjoys* (2015-present) or *Dark Matter* (2015-present). The cinematography and direction of the series lets you immediately know that the narrative accompanying it will not make you long for a future where space is open to everyone. From as early as the pilot episode *"Dulcinea"* the worlds and people in *The Expanse* are shown to the viewer with no embellishment. Whoever thought space would be a cakewalk, or peaceful, will soon learn how wrong they are.

The first character we meet and presume to be the series protagonist is Josephus "Joe" Miller, portrayed by Thomas Jane whom you might remember, or try to forget, from *The Punisher* (2004)*.* Jane is appropriately world-weary, grizzled, hard-drinking, and cynical that even without knowing his occupation we can guess he's a police officer, or a soldier. However, when he puts on a trilby we know he's a detective. From Miller's perspective we get to know more about the state of affairs. Namely, the U.N. controls Earth, Mars is an independent military power, and both of them rely on resources mined from the Belt by people who would in the Middle Ages be equivalent to peasants or slaves. The people of the Belt, called Belters (keeping it simple where possible is always better than technobabble) have for decades been at odds with both Earth and Mars, due to their oppression and use as cheap labour. Miller, as a detective, is sympathetic but has to do his job which also involves arresting kids for stealing water (a precious resource in the Belt due to the lack of frozen caps after years of mining). Throughout the series the Belters and the rebellion forces of the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA) constitute a wildcard in terms of interplanetary politics, and serve as a welcome factor in the proceedings between Earth and Mars. The two major planets, on the other hand, are almost relegated to a background squabble in the first couple of episode. However, this picks up very soon.

While one may think that this will be Miller's story, the true showstopper of the entire series shows up midway through the first episode. U.N. Deputy Undersecretary Chrisjen Avasarala, played by Shohreh Aghdashloo, is called upon during a day of leisure with her husband and family. Her agenda is to gather information from a captured OPA agent, and she

does so through means of modern space-age torture. Since Belters are born and raised in an atmosphere with no gravity an enhanced gravitational pull breaks their bones. Avasarala confesses her disdain for this method, but does not stop it. Soon we come to know that for her Earth comes first and she will not shy away from any method as long as it keeps her home safe. Aghdashloo gives a remarkable performance as the U.N. Deputy Undersecretary, and uses her position (or lack thereof) to further her means from a position of adequate shadow, also steamrolling anyone who might stand in her way. Sympathetic to the plights of any human, but also ruthless in her protection of her own home, Chrisjen Avasarala is a mother bear no one wants to mess with. Her cards are on the table from the beginning, but she is not afraid to cheat when necessary. This makes her an apt emotional and moral anchor for the viewers, but also a fierce political combatant in *The Expanse.*

Last, but not least, the rest of the main cast is shown towards the end of the pilot episode. We see a rag-tag band of workers on the ship called "Canterbury" mine ice fields in order to get a well-deserved pay check at the end of the trip. The second officer is James "Jim" Holden (Steven Strait), joined by navigator Ade Nygaard (Kristen Hager), pilot Alex Kamal (Cas Anvar), chief engineer Naomi Negata (Dominique Tipper), and mechanic Amos Burton (John Wesley Chatham). Notice that I did not mention the captain; that's because some characters are of little to no consequence in space. He's there, and when he's not Holden takes the reins as captain. While not comparable to *Game of Thrones*, in many ways the one thing they have in common is the death of an important character as early as the pilot episode. I will refrain from spoilers as stating who it is would diminish the emotional impact. Nevertheless, the dilemma of the Canterbury serves to showcase the crew. Each member is pleasantly stereotypical, as well as proving substantially more complex throughout the series. Also, each member is from a different part of the system. Jim is originally from Earth, Alex is from Mars, and Naomi and Amos are Belters. The crew has not been together for ages and friendships are not guaranteed due to differing ideals. This gives the series ample opportunities to present the dilemmas of the entire system in a more personal nature, substituting the integration of collateral damage for sake of emotional impact for a more focused outlook on how each situation affects those with whom we have already come to empathise with. While the cast themselves are not star-studded actors, each takes to their

role in spectacular fashion. The acting across the board is more than stellar at times, and at its worst it produces a minor cringe or two. The supporting cast gets enough time to shine and not a single character important for the plot is relegated to just a single line.

For the finale I have to talk about a hallmark of every SF narrative – the McGuffin(s).[1] No SF story would be complete without a hearty dose of thereof to make the proceedings go truly haywire. In *The Expanse* there are actually numerous McGuffins that when combined form the sweet centre of the misery pie. Technology and alien life work in tandem in order to bring all the major parties together in an amalgamation of choices that, when looked at closely, can only benefit one party or none. This is a TV series that by far outclasses many in the genre in terms of presenting human nature. While the technology could benefit all those in the system, only the first party to get a hold of it will effectively use it. There is no caring, and therefore sharing is not an option. The alien life, on the other hand, is even more dangerous and volatile. In essence *The Expanse* is presents a solar system that is in a state of perpetual war, at first clandestine, and later teetering on open annihilation. When the action is at the foreground it is epic, but it is when the politics come into play that *The Expanse* tackles true human morality. The choices presented range from framing an associate, killing a scientist, to dropping nukes on an entire space station. None of these, and even more, are taken or presented lightly. And it is in these moments that *The Expanse* truly shines. The cast fits their mould perfectly and the narrative allows for the integration of SF tropes that are handled with care, and sprinkled with the tears of fans.

All in all, *The Expanse* is one of the most "human" SF series currently airing. In part blockbuster-explosion extravaganza with enough technical flare and expertise to give a creative media student an orgasm, and in part unrelenting drama about the futility of mankind in general, it all shows immense quality. *The Expanse* doesn't care if we are alone in space, or if alien life is friendly, because it knows that humans are not. It does not celebrate technology in the classic sense, as no technology truly makes life better for all. Grab unto any comfort you have (a blanket will do) and go watch it.

**Notes**

**1.** A McGuffin is a plot device that takes the form of certain goal, object, motivation, etc. for the main characters. McGuffins are usually not explained in detail (sometimes not at all), and don't need to be as their presence alone moves much of the plot forward. In SF these types of plot devices are used commonly.

**Bionote**

Aleksandar Kordis is a current PhD Candidate at the English Department of the City University of Hong Kong, researching expanded mapping procedures in *cognitive narratology.* He holds a BA in English and German language and literature, and an MA in English and American literature.

## 'Both Dead and Alive': Zombies Outside the Box in *The Girl with All the Gifts*

## Review by Katherine Cox

*The Girl with all the Gifts*. **Dir. Colm McCarthy. Perf. Germma Arterton, Dominique Tipper, Glenn Close, Anamaria Marinca, Paddy Considine, Sennia Nanua. Poison Chef, 2016. Film.**

*The Girl With All The Gifts* (2016), directed by Colm McCarthy, is not the first work to depict intelligent zombies, or to spin conflict out of their mistreatment by humans, its originality lies in focusing on the zombies rather than the humans – a refreshingly critical take on the premise. Where *Warm Bodies* (2013) comedically highlighted the common ground between humans and zombies, *The Girl With All the Gifts* poses questions about human identity. Although most of the zombies in the film are mindless predators, a small group of infected children appear to be able to think for themselves. The mystery surrounding these outliers shifts the film's focus away from human extinction towards the transition to a new world. As

Melanie (Sennia Nanua) discovers what her status as a 'hungry' means to the humans who imprison her, she comes to question whether humanity is relevant at all.

Boxes, both literal and figurative, are a dominant motif in *The Girl With All the Gifts*, and the way in which they are used foreground the film's major ethical questions: what is Melanie, and why does that matter? Literally speaking, the symbol could not be clearer – Melanie lives in a cell, guarded by soldiers, and the defining characteristic of her life is containment. Figuratively, the film uses the trope to establish two competing ideas about Melanie's nature. The Pandora's Box myth, told by Melanie's favourite teacher Miss Justineau (Gemma Arterton), sets up the first frame of reference for Melanie's role within the film: the girl who releases untold horrors but also gives the world hope. Immediately afterwards, a scientist named Dr Caldwell (played to chilling effect by Glenn Close) visits Melanie's cell and poses the riddle of Schrodinger's cat. Without opening the box, how do you tell if the zombie is alive or dead? This perspective implies that Melanie is an object until proven otherwise. While Miss Justineau's Pandora casts Melanie as an active agent in the world's future, Caldwell clearly suspects that Melanie is only mimicking human behaviour. Her future rests on the answer because Caldwell intends to harvest Melanie's brain and spinal column to synthesise a vaccine that would protect surviving humans against the infection.

Despite these expectations, Melanie is determined to slip free of the boxes in which she is confined and craft her own identity. However the film does not allow this decision to be made lightly; this is no straightforward victory of self-determination, but rather a morally ambiguous choice that is never fully vindicated. For Melanie to embrace her own identity, she must accept her hunger. To its immense credit, the film does not shy away from Melanie's predatory urges. Again, it is ambiguous: while she appears peaceful and content after feeding, the killing frenzies are vicious, and they draw an undeniable line between hungry and human. In one notable scene, she saturates a pink t-shirt and sparkly shoes with blood. These items are gifts from her human companions to replace her prison tracksuit, which symbolises a shift in perspective: they finally see her as a person. And yet, we are reminded of Melanie's dual nature when she does not seem to care that the clothes – and what they stand for – are soiled. It is a shame that the human characters and storylines are not granted

quite the same degree of complexity – the narrative is least interesting when they leave the compound and embark on a generic journey of survival – but this is the point. If the human stories feel secondary, it's because they are. The real story lies with Melanie.

All of this will be familiar to those who have read M. R. Carey's 2014 novel of the same name. Carey wrote the screenplay alongside the book, and it plays excellently on the big screen. The film is an extraordinarily faithful rendition of the book, as is perhaps only possible when the source material is written with the screen in mind. Simon Dennis's cinematography and Cristobal Tapia de Veer's haunting music go a long way towards evoking the inner experience of the viewpoint character which, too often, is lost in the transition from the page to the screen. Melanie's vulnerable yet confident voice is a defining pleasure of the novel, and the film compensates with an intimate focus on her face. The camerawork often requires the viewer to infer surrounding events from Melanie's expression alone, creating a shared sense of claustrophobia and powerlessness. As a result, the experience of the viewer parallels Melanie's life: both are confined and controlled – until the droning vocals soar to feverish heights, at which point we know that Melanie is about to lose all semblance of humanity.

The ultimate concern of *The Girl With All the Gifts* is not whether Melanie is alive or dead, whether Caldwell's intention to sacrifice one girl to save humanity is right or wrong, or even whether humanity deserves to survive. For all of the film's flirtation with moral questions, it also seems uneasily preoccupied with the suspicion that actions matter more than ideas: that the fittest survive where the righteous fall. This is inconvenient for the human civilisation scrabbling to survive a catastrophic attack, but true nonetheless. The film engages with the tragedy of human extinction but never allows it to eclipse the birth of something new – something more than human – and this is perhaps the most innovative aspect of *The Girl With All the Gifts*. The story is not about us anymore. It belongs to the girl who opened the box in which she was kept, and stepped outside.

**Bionote**

Katherine Cox is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University. Her current project examines responses to crisis and trauma in recent superhero films, particularly Marvel's *Iron Man* and *Captain America*.


# *Horizon Zero Dawn* Offers Excellent Exploration of Humanity's Hopes and Fears for the Future

## Review by Molly Cobb

*Horizon Zero Dawn*. **Guerrila Games, 2017. Video Game.**

Set 1,000 years after all life on Earth has been destroyed (literally), *Horizon Zero Dawn* examines how humanity and the world would recover from such an event and how mankind would exist on this recreated future Earth. Living amongst technological ruins of a civilisation they know little to nothing about, and fighting machines they do not understand, the primitive tribes which exist throughout the game are themselves imagined as historical primitive tribes would have originally been. This juxtaposition of the technologically advanced and the primitive is something the game does extremely well. Rather than hunting animals, tribes hunt machines. Faith and religion are based on ancient writings of how the world works. The player will recognise these writings as scientific discourse but due to the tribes's lack of scientific understanding, what appears to us as science, appears to them as the workings of a God.

The narrative behind how the world of *Horizon Zero Dawn* was created is fascinating, if not slightly implausible in places. The ruins in which the character discovers this narrative are vast technological spaces which often result in simply standing and admiring the environment before continuing to actually play the game. The world-building which *Horizon Zero Dawn* has performed for a humanity and Earth which no longer exists is impressive. The

player learns about the nature of the society which previously existed, the people involved in both creating and 'solving' the machine crisis, the political and military atmosphere of this society, and much more. All of this creates a fully realised world in which the player never actually exists or even sees. The game relies on "datapoints" to provide the player with this information. These datapoints consist of emails, voicemails, news articles, etc. which are found by the player and can be read or listened to. Datapoints in the game which are separate from the main quest, and thus not aimed at expanding the main narrative, serve as small windows into mid-twenty-first century technological advancements such as holograms, personal robots (from butler to cleaner to nanny), virtual protests, or even pizza delivery via drone. Perhaps seemingly irrelevant individually, they serve to create a picture of a world which so depended on technology and machines that their ultimate destruction at the hands of these machines was surely inevitable.

However, it was also this reliance on machines which enabled the Earth to rebuild after the machine crisis. Thus, the game introduces the ever-precarious balance between the danger of, and the need for, technology. Dialogue from individuals involved with attempting to solve the machine crisis acknowledges the long history of such dilemmas within the science fiction genre and quips are even made that, because of this, perhaps society should have learned better by now. *Horizon Zero Dawn* is by far not ignorant of the tradition to which it is adding.

This coupling of machines as destroyer and saviour is mirrored in the game's depictions of humans. Ultimately, the game subscribes to the cyclical nature of humanity and the ability of its creations to repeatedly destroy mankind, while, in response, humanity repeatedly rebuilds. The game indicates however that we could theoretically have our technological cake and eat it too if only humans relied more on compassion and less on greed or violence. This may not be an original appeal, but certainly one which the game does well. The game also does well to draw on the player's own compassion by evoking emotion through dialogue from individuals existing just prior to and during the end of all life, especially those involved in attempting to solve the machine crisis, as they examine not only their own death but the death of their entire species along with the rest of life on Earth. The

way in which characters deal with this death is realistic and the choices examined between living it out until the very end or taking one's own life – via suicide or medical euthanasia, for example – questions the player on which choice they would make.

These characters which make up humanity in *Horizon Zero Dawn* are themselves well-designed and varied. Characters are neither clichéd nor unrealistic and the varying tribes which the player encounters are distinct societies. In addition, the game appears to care little for gender, sexuality, or skin colour. Warriors are never only male or only female, tribes are not denoted by their race, and though the player is not able to enter into relationships as in other games, such as the *Dragon Age* series, the game does not differentiate sexuality and has the player propositioned (non-stereotypically and with no judgement from the main character) by both men and women. In instances in which gender roles arise within the world, such as one tribe only ever having a king and never a queen, the protagonist Aloy never just accepts these concepts, but questions them. The game thus ensures that, even where gender roles are not erased within society, they are questioned.

Alongside the narrative and the characters which the game introduces, it also offers sprawling, wonderfully designed environments, which range from forest to snow-capped peaks to deserts. The graphics are excellent and discovering new areas or ruins within the game creates a sense of awe at the depiction of both nature and the technological creations of mankind. The facial animation is not always as smooth in places as it could be, nor is the water animation. However, the game's excellent use of sunlight, and light in general, nearly makes up for these inconsistencies, as does the insertion of night and day cycles and weather (ranging from rain to snow to sandstorms). Areas of the environment which can appear empty are still gorgeous to look at and explore as the player will often stumble upon ruins or wrecked machines. In addition, these areas as never as empty as they seem as any player looking to complete the sets of non-main quest related datapoints will spend a lot of time scouring the landscape. These datapoints are themselves an excellent addition to the game. Not only do they encourage exploration and foster understanding of how the world used to be, the player is never penalised for not finding them all. Since the datapoints not related to the main quest are distinct from the main story, not discovering them does not threaten to

limit the understanding of the overall narrative or force hours of searching if the player is simply not interested.

This player-directed exploration is further encouraged in the way in which the game allows the player to discover and choose their own style of play. The game offers limited tutorials in some aspects and nearly none in others. Players are not rewarded with weapons or outfits (more notably once past the first area), meaning the player must purchase the weapons they wish to use or the outfits they wish to equip. This means that it is highly likely a player will complete the game while never having used or owned a myriad of weapons which the game offers. As such, the player chooses the weapons they wish to use and never feels forced to use particular ones. Though tutorial quests are generated when a new weapon is purchased, the player is under no obligation to complete it. Overall, the game offers direction if the player wishes, but generally encourages a trial and error method of simply using a weapon until the player gets it right. Though this may initially sound frustrating to some players, it feeds back into the player purchasing their own weapons, for it ensures a player will never waste time with a weapon they will never use. It additionally means that players can choose whether to rely on stealth, elemental damage, ranged or melee without ever feeling like they are 'right' or 'wrong' for choosing a particular play style.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* may not be wholly original in regards to the nature/technology juxtaposition or the dangers of overreliance on machines, but it is original where it counts, which is in its combination of, and execution of, these and various other elements. The game world is vast and filled with excellent environments and characters and offers a narrative which is sweeping and brilliantly weaves together the past, present and future of humanity. The game itself is fun to play and ceaselessly interesting. *Horizon Zero Dawn* manages to get both narrative and gameplay right, never sacrificing one for the other. It may not be perfect but it gets close and with endgame implications of what could be a sequel or other tie-ins, there is an opportunity for players to return to this world and perhaps see it made even better than it already is.

**Bionote**

Dr. Molly Cobb is a recent PhD graduate whose research focuses on mid-twentieth century American Science Fiction and the genre's representations of identity and psychology. She is currently based in Liverpool, UK and is an Executive Committee Member of the Current Research in Speculative Fiction conference.

# The Resplendent Review: Looking Through the Spyglass at Netflix's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

## Review by Chris Hussey

**Hudis, Mark and Barry Sonnenfeld, creators. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Perf. Neil Patrick Harris, Patrick Warburton, Malina Weissman, Louis Hynes. Paramount Television, 2017. Television.**

As viewers, we are repeatedly advised by Lemony Snicket (Patrick Warburton) to stop watching the show as it is a tale of woe and misery. The title song echoes the concept, starting with the lyrics "look away, look away," but it makes for a compelling viewing – and arguably, entices the audience further to follow this series of rather unfortunate events.

It is rare to be encouraged not to watch something, even when this is not meant to be taken seriously, but *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is out of the ordinary. Based on the books written by Lemony Snicket, the pen name of author Daniel Handler, Netflix's TV show is directed by Barry Sonnenfeld (four episodes), Mark Palansky (two episodes), and Bo Welch (two episodes).

The series follows the exploits of the Baudelaire children: Violet (Malina Weissman), Klaus (Louis Hynes), and Sunny (Presley Smith, voiced by Tara Strong). After the parents' sudden death in a mysterious fire, the children are placed with their closest living relative,

Count Olaf (Neil Patrick Harris), by the well-meaning bank manager, Mr Poe (K. Todd Freeman). Count Olaf's interest in them is motivated by his financial gain, as he is after the sizable fortune that the children were left after their parents' untimely demise, and his pursuit of this fortune is a recurring theme in each episode.

This is typified by the loose formula employed with regard to the narrative structure that occurs throughout the series. The children are placed in the care of various guardians by Mr Poe, before Count Olaf and his gang of 'actors' manage to trick their way into gaining the adults' trust, using elaborate disguises and backstories, and the children having to convince the grownups that it is indeed Count Olaf each time. While the children, and the audience, can clearly see through the dress-ups as herpetological assistants, sea captains or as female receptionists, there is a humorous sense of farce generated by the fact that the other adults and Mr Poe, in particular, are unable to see past their pantomime costumes. The refusal to believe the children's protestations is a reminder of the belief in the infallibility of the adults, a belief that the Baudelaire children try to set right throughout the series.

The characterisation within the series is a particular strength and a testament to the casting and the individual performances of the actors, as well as to the script. The series certainly seems to proffer an appeal to audiences of all ages, with its slapstick humour and the relatable Baudelaire children, and the more nuanced references to popular culture, such as when charcters extol the virtues of streaming media, comment on the previous film adaptation of the novels, or through the breaking of the fourth wall. These elements provide a more universal appeal, and switching between the various narrative viewpoints of the main characters, interspersed with Snicket's omniscient narration, provides the viewers with both varieties of narration and perspective.

The Baudelaires are the focal point of the series, as it is they who suffer this series of unfortunate events to which the title refers. The children's unceasingly positive attitude to their predicament, and willingness to use their initiative and intelligence, means that they are capable of dealing with these recurring incidents. Their various character traits make them distinct and memorable: Violet's knowledge of mechanics and knack for inventing

things and Klaus's love of all things literary subverts traditional gender stereotypes and helps to set them apart both from each other, and from other children in the genre. Sunny Baudelaire's subtitled baby-talk adds a further element of humour to the series, as it typically reflects what a viewer may be thinking, and what the children are otherwise too polite to say.

Some of the performances by the adult cast may draw more attention from older viewers. Neil Patrick Harris, as Count Olaf, is able to show off his versatility: irrespective of which character and personality he adopts, his conviction to each role belies his talent as an actor. It is ironic, therefore, that the Count's portrayals of these alter egos is perhaps more convincing than his talent as a professional dramatist.

Patrick Warburton's deadpan deliveries and earnest explanations of the story add depth and humour, and are interspersed at appropriate junctures to help link parts of the narrative and skip over specific passages of time for dramatic effect. His breaking of the fourth wall as the narrator suits the quirky nature of the show and helps rationalising some of the more fantastical elements that occur within the series with his explanations for a viewer. K. Todd Freeman's role as the self-serving bank manager Mr Poe, regardless of any good intentions, adds a comic element, as it is his desire to follow the procedure that typically ends up endangering the children. His facial expressiveness is masterful, and his role as a counterpoint to Count Olaf and his various personalities works effectively. Additionally, the motley assortment of characters, mostly stemming from Count Olaf's array of nefarious associates, equally helps to shape the series: their relative incompetence results in comic situations that ultimately undermine any attempt to gain the children's inherited fortune. It often appears that there can be much humour in tragedy, and this cast and set of characters pull this off effectively.

As the first season adapts the first four books from the series of thirteen by Snicket, there are two more seasons anticipated to follow in due course. The TV show is an enjoyable watch, with plenty of intrigue and mystique to keep a viewer entertained from the beginning and for what is beyond. With secret societies and the mysterious fire to be investigated in

the future, there is clearly plenty of scope for the show to continue to develop and is certainly one worth watching.

**Bionote**

Chris Hussey is a part-time PhD Candidate studying Children's Literature at the University of Cambridge, UK. His research explores relationships with real and literary place.

# In Memoriam: *Penny Dreadful* (Season Three)

## Review by Tania Evans

**Logan, John, creator. *Penny Dreadful*. Perf. Reeve Carney, Timothy Dalton, Eva Green, Rory Kinnear, Billie Piper, Harry Treadaway, Josh Hartnett. Desert Wolf Productions, 2014-2016. Television.**

The third and final season of *Penny Dreadful* begins with the death of English poet Lord Alfred Tennyson, who famously declared that it is "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" (1849). Love and loss beat at the heart of this final season, and the fictional death of a major character bleeds into the end of the series, creating an aching space that is unlikely to be filled for many years.

For those who have yet to delve into the series' darkness, *Penny Dreadful* brings to life the gothic monsters of nineteenth-century genre fiction, embellishing the characters' existing mythology with further complexity and celebrating their strangeness. The series' ability to successfully host an array of supernatural figures is a large part of its charm, and their presence is aided by extensive intertextuality. The discerning bibliophile will appreciate *Penny Dreadful*'s explicit and implicit references to Gothic fiction, poetry, and other literary works throughout each episode.

The story follows the supernaturally gifted Gothic heroine Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), the Allan Quatermain-inspired explorer Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), the mysterious 'American werewolf in London,' Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett), Doctor Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway), and his Creature (Rory Kinnear) as they investigate and combat a thread of mysteries and murders in Victorian London. With the assistance of the flamboyant Egyptologist Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale) and Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), the protagonists use their unique skills to confront abject terrors using science and the supernatural, which are effortlessly intertwined. Their seamless symbiosis is supported through stunning costumes, settings, cinematography, and *mise en scène*, which allow the series to glide from bedecked ballroom to derelict basement and everywhere in between.

Unlike previous seasons, which have been set in London, season three begins with the protagonists confronting their demons across the globe. In New Mexico, Ethan travels with one of the witches and recurring character, Hecate (Sarah Greene), on a journey to confront his father, Jared Talbot (Brian Cox). At Talbot Ranch, the travellers are joined by Ethan's Native American Apache ally Kaetenay (Wes Studi) and Sir Malcolm, and together the foursome defeat Jared and return to England. The New Mexico narrative provides suspense and action that energise an otherwise introspective season, although the endless desert journeys are likely to leave viewers parched for supernatural intrigue.

In an increasingly vampire-ridden London, Vanessa fights to preserve her mental health and withstand her own demons with the aid of her psychotherapist, Doctor Seward (Patti LuPone). Neither woman realises that Vanessa's new romantic interest is Dracula in disguise, who finally makes an appearance after orchestrating earlier events in the series. Dracula's attempts to win Vanessa's heart provide an intriguing commentary on how power operates in heterosexual relationships. Dracula promises her power, acceptance, and equality, yet she increasingly functions as an object for male characters to fight over—a dark damsel in distress. Power between men and women is similarly negotiated when Doctor Frankenstein and Doctor Henry Jekyll (Shazad Latif) attempt to turn Frankenstein's female monster, Lily (Billie Piper), into a 'proper' woman and docile bride for her creator.

Lily's narrative in the third season is one of the most fascinating throughout the series not only because it subverts gender, class, and sexual norms, but because it's a provocative answer to the question, what would have happened in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* if the doctor had not torn his female monster to pieces? Would she have birthed "a race of devils"? *Penny Dreadful's* answer is, absolutely. Yet rather than settling down with Frankenstein's male creature and bringing monstrous children into the world - as heterosexual paradigms might lead us to expect - Lily raises an army of London's prostitutes. The women are furious with patriarchal structures which force them to depend upon abusive male clients, and their vengeance is swift and bloody. It is vital to notice that Lily's army is not positioned as a proto-feminist movement; early in the season Lily and her first recruit, Christine, see a group of suffragettes rallying for women's rights, and Lily explains that while "they seek equality," she seeks "mastery." Lily's endeavour ultimately fails - as it should - but it is both fascinating and horrifying to watch it unravel.

As Lily is finally forced to fit the feminine mould, the season threatens to disintegrate. The climax feels underwhelming and rushed on multiple fronts, with one too many expository monologues breaking the first rule of storytelling: show, don't tell. While *Penny Dreadful*'s creator John Logan claims in an interview with Maureen Ryan of *Variety* (2016) that the series' abrupt end was driven by plot rather than ratings, another season or more episodes may have facilitated much-needed fleshing out.

Perhaps it is the problem of flesh itself that is at once captivating and problematic as *Penny Dreadful* draws its last breath. The series is inspired by the nineteenth-century Gothic tradition in which monstrosity is immediately visible on the body. Yet, *Penny Dreadful* continually privileges monstrous characters in a postmodern twist, from the Creature and his disfigured face to Lily's plans for world domination. The protagonists' peculiarities are their strength, encouraging the viewer to embrace their own strangeness rather than capitulate to the ever-pervasive spectre of normality. The series' attack on ordinariness leads us to expect Dracula to join the coalition, but it never occurs. When he is finally defeated, the sun rises on a new day in which neither his creatures of the night nor *Penny Dreadful* are welcome. The subversive possibilities that the season began are contained but not erased,

and we are reminded of Tennyson: "tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

**Works Cited**

Tennyson, Alfred. "In Memoriam A. H. H." *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. Wordsworth Editions, 1994.

Ryan, Maureen. "Creator John Logan and Showtime's David Nevins on the Decision to End 'Penny Dreadful.'" *Variety*. June 20 2016. <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/penny-dreadful-ending-season-3-series-finale-creator-interview-john-logan-david-nevins-1201798946/>

**Bionote**

Tania Evans is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University. Her doctoral project investigates masculinities in George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its television adaptation, *Game of Thrones*. Her articles have been published in *Gothic Studies* and *Masculinities.*

# The Uncertain Hope of *Logan*

## Review by Daniel Huw Bowen

*Logan*. Dir. James Mangold. Perf. Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Dafne Keen. Marvel Entertainment, 2017. Film.

*Logan*, Hugh Jackman's final outing as superhero Wolverine, proves a pleasing and auspicious instalment in the *X-Men* franchise, rescuing it from the flirtation it is currently enjoying with formulaic tedium. Though congested with exaggerated violence and gore, it manages to address contemporary sociopolitical concerns that include migration, violence, gender and mythology. Despite being unable to pose feasible solutions to such issues, it is

however far more assertive in fashioning a promising new path for future *X-Men* films to embrace than more recent incarnations have offered.

   *Logan* does so by shunning tropes associated with typical superhero films in favour of creating a cinematic pastiche. Harvesting the premise from similar road films and adopting elements of source material *Old Man Logan,* the film sees a bedraggled, bearded and likely dying Wolverine reluctantly agree to aid a new mutant, Laura (Dafne Keen) in her escape from the clutches of the nefarious Alkali-Transigen. Accompanied by the aged and now surprisingly comical Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart), the group ventures from the Mexican border across the United States to deliver Laura to meet her peers at a safe haven. The action is set against broad landscapes, from the bare and dusty plains of the American South, the setting of Westerns, to the mountains of the Northern States; both striking marvels and a welcome contrast to the usual superhuman cityscape. The muted colour palette lends the picture an air of grim verisimilitude, unlike the hyperrealistic monochrome the DC Cinematic Universe favours (consistent to the style of producers Christopher Nolan and Zack Snyder) or the candy pop primary colours emphasised by the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These *influences* are married under Mangold's intimate direction: lingering close-ups and slow zoom-ins, likely responsible for the emotional response the film seems to elicit, juxtaposed the bombastic spectacle of blockbuster superhero stories of today. It is overzealous, whilst also belittling to the popular form to claim that because of such qualities *Logan* "transcends the comic book genre," because it is by no means an original (Truitt). It is however a novel approach to the superhero tale on film, a welcome method of reinvigorating the genre.

   Innovation such as this should hopefully continue in the franchise's future, since the Wolverine's mantle is likely to continue with newcomer Dafne Keen's Laura. Logan's genetic offspring, she possesses his healing factor and claws and suffers the same adamantium-grafting procedure that he did. Keen's turn as Laura is impressive and captivating: violently ferocious, menacingly silent but still utterly innocent at times. In one of her earliest scenes, Keen saunters from her place of hiding to confront her enemies whilst holding the decapitated head of an attacker, evoking the slow walk of the cowboy (one of a number of recurrent motifs of the aforementioned Westerns present throughout the film). Her

performance is captivating: the sudden shrug to remove her backpack; the throw down of other items; calculatingly taunting her attackers before baring her weapon. The action that ensues is brutal excessive and, though fitting, can be nauseating. Keen's size at eleven years old makes for a peculiar sight when combined with the speed of the reactions and it can sometimes be unclear as to what is happening. However, this contrast is a constant reminder of Laura's youth: she is prone to capricious outbursts, for example, humorously attacking a toy ride when her credit runs out (she, as we then discover, was raised in captivity and is unaware of social norms). It is understandable later then, while in a peaceful setting, surrounded by Logan, Xavier and a caring family, that Keen deftly and endearingly plays the character with an unsure smile, reticent to revel in the quieter setting.

Keen analytical skills are not necessary to recognise the parallels between the struggles of Laura and her Mexican mutant friends and the Latinx migrants in Trump's America. The plight of the Mexican youth from the grasp of exploitative corporate America, embodied by Alkali-Transigen, which has plagued their lives restores to the franchise the "mutant metaphor" that the abhorrent *X-Men: Apocalypse* seemed to dismiss (Darowski). By inserting the genome of captive mutants into young Mexican women to birth testing subjects, Alkali-Transigen sought to create superhuman weapons that they could groom for their purposes. The group fled captivity and are now hunted by cyborg operative Donald Pierce and tyrannical mad scientist Dr. Zander Rice (Richard E. Grant), both who berate their lives despite being responsible for their creation. The entire existence of this minority is predicated on the commodification of Mexican labour by an American corporation, forcing Mexican bodies to bear their products in spite of the perils to the Mexican lives (the mothers all unfortunately die during labour).

*Logan* calls for an aggressive form of resistance to this process of commodification but at the same time it is hampered by the emergence of toxic masculinity, which seems to be a conscious presence in the film. Logan's shallow philosophical conflict, that is his ongoing desire to relinquish his violent nature, is now but an illusory justification for the fetishisation of violence and gore in this masculine fantasy. This monotonously repetitive crisis would be unbearable seventeen years later if not for Jackman's pained performance that infuses the

character with the needed pathos: the tremors in his hands as he painfully unsheathes his claws, the sustained snarl, the bout of hesitancy before he strikes all contribute. Logan might continue to wax lyrical about his desire for a non-violent existence but this is still not anywhere close to being actualised. The opening sequence of *Logan* sees him dismember a gang in the goriest display of action that the character has enacted on screen to that point, establishing a precedent for the ninety minutes that follow. This inner turmoil finally, though rather unimaginatively, culminates with Logan literally fighting himself – that is, his younger clone, X-24. To combat his *doppelgänger* effectively, as well as other agents, Logan injects himself with a serum to enhance his mutant gifts, entering a feral rage. This vicious aggression, the machismo of Logan, proves however that this type of masculinity is not sustainable and he falters during the final showdown. Ultimately, both versions of Logan fall: the real Logan from his sustained injuries' and X-24, the masculine figure that could have continued this form into perpetuity, except that he is shot in the head with an adamantium bullet by Laura. This act has then halted this dilemma from plaguing the Wolverine legacy further. Laura, the likely successor, is the feminine other to Logan's regressive embodiment of masculinity; as Xavier notes, her mutancy is similar though not identical to Logan's, with the claw in her foot a result of her sex. Though she can be equally violent, with Logan's dying words that she seems to heed, she hopes to reject such behaviour. She is then an androgynous amalgamation of gendered traits, queering the future of the franchise, a prospective alternative to the masculine tradition of violence seen thus far.

Following this ordeal, Laura and the other mutants venture forward to Canada, but their ultimate destination unclear and their contact there unknown. By evoking Christian mythology (peculiarly absent in its source material), the film envisages its own Eden, mapped in the *X-Men* comic books here (a surrogate for the holy scripture). However, it is not the utopia imagined, not the final destination of the mutant pilgrimage. When Logan and Laura finally reach Eden, a small outpost in North Dakota where the other young mutants agreed to meet, they discover that they will continue onwards to Canada – a pursuit that will leave the soiled lands of the dystopian America and Mexico in the film's wake, with no possible retribution. The ambiguous ending is hopeful but uncertain: no material solutions

to the contemporary issue of immigration is offered, only the nebulous possibility that it should improve.

By its culmination then, *Logan* despite the bleak future it depicts is optimistic. Enriched by solid performances and astute direction, *Logan* does struggle with antiquated ideologies that continue to live through Logan's character, but has created a space for further discussion of these topics. This is supported by its rare decision to kill its titular protagonist, a terminal ending, and therefore usher in the possibility of new futurities, spearheaded by Keen's Laura. Whilst Logan bemoans the fact that "Nature made me a freak, man made me a weapon, and God made it last too long," it did not last forever and, for that, we can be grateful.

**Works Cited**

Darowski, Joseph J. *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor: Race and Gender in Comic Books.* Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

Truitt, Brian. "Review: 'Logan' gives Hugh Jackman's Wolverine a Super Sendoff." *USA Today*. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2017/02/17/review-logan-wolverine-hugh-jackman-movie/97995042>

*X-Men: Apocalypse.* Dir. Bryan Singer. 20th Century Fox, 2016.

**Bionote**

Daniel Huw Bowen recently completed his Master of Arts in Contemporary Literature, Culture and Theory at King's College London, UK. His research interests include genres of the fantastic, including science fiction and fantasy, comics studies, theories of violence, queer theory and the politics of representation.

# A Visit from our Inner Demons

## Review by Adele Hannon

*A Monster Calls*. **Dir. J. A. Bayona. Perf. Sigourney Weaver, Felicity Jones, Toby Kebbell, Lewis MacDougall, Liam Neeson. Apaches Entertainment, 2016. Film.**

In this disconcerting and multifaceted film, *A Monster Calls*, the director J. A. Bayona explores the monster as a mean to understand suppressed socio-cultural issues; the title itself echoes a return of the repressed. Bayona effectively carries on the work of Patrick Ness, showing how the monster works as an allegory to discuss the psychological process of repression. The film draws on metaphorical devices from Gothic fiction and monster theory to portray an unsettling narrative involving a child's preoccupation with mortality. Bayona's treatment of social issues in *A Monster Calls* transcends visual gratification, becoming instead a platform that facilitates the discussion of darker themes and repressed cultural anxieties. What is most captivating about this film is how it contradicts the traditional observation of the Gothic villain, examining the monster as a projection of our inhibited subconscious.

*A Monster Calls* revolves around the character of Conor O'Malley (Lewis MacDougall), a young boy dealing with the worsening condition of his terminally ill mother (Felicity Jones). Bullied at school, and without any profound connection to any other family member, Conor locates an unlikely ally in the Monster (Liam Neeson), who emerges at his bedroom window one night. The primordial Monster guides Conor on a journey of self-exploration and self-renewal, fusing fantasy with reality to address the inner turmoil of a young man. Through Bayona's painterly masterpiece, the film articulates the maturation of a preteen as he gradually accepts the darker aspects of life through the lessons of the creature.

It is the teachings of the monster that demonstrate to the boy that he must let go of his suppressed feelings towards his dying mother. The word 'monster' derives from Latin verb *monere*, which means to 'demonstrate' or to 'warn.' Where this may designate that the

monster is a threatening force, the purpose of Bayona's creature is to act as an admonition or revelation of the darkness within, often relegated to darkest corners of the mind. As the film progresses, the Monster is perceived as the manifestation of Conor's insecurities. This adaptation of Gothic text shows the monster as a concept that is no longer external to the human body but is internalised in a way that "the monster lives with you, invading your domestic spaces so that 'evil' acquires a proximity to the self" (Smith 87). To accentuate the bond between the child and the monster, Bayona adds subtle depictions of Liam Neeson in family photographs that imply an intimate relationship with Conor. These suggestions bring forward the proximity of the monster to the Self, whereby the individual will always share some element of identification with the darker forces of both fiction and reality. Thus, the monster "calls to us, invites recognition" (Shildrick 5). The monster is created as an attempt to control the uncontainable and the unknowable, in this case, to contain Conor's underlying grief and anger towards his mother. However, in the film, the Monster admits "I am everything untamed and untameable!" (*A Monster Calls*), therefore it is through the tree-like creature that Conor can release his repressed feelings.

The film depicts a child that is deprived of a role model and has no person in whom he can confide as he spirals out of control. Where the Gothic fantasy that Conor creates for himself acts as his escape mechanism, it also allows him to engage with his multifarious emotions, permitting him to access a domain from which he is usually excluded. Bayona presents this amalgamation of illusion and reality through painterly animations, blending computerised figures with watercolours and collages. Ultimately, it is through these tales of the monstrous creature that Conor can deconstruct his feelings and inner turmoil, whereby the monster assists in both understanding and accepting his suppressed unconscious. Fictional monsters, such as Bayona's Creature, signal "a transformation of the relation between self and other such that the encounter with the strange is not a discrete event but the constant conditioning of becoming" (Shildrick 1). The use of the word "becoming" hints at how the encounter with the monster becomes a learning experience through which Conor understands his true self, allowing him to release the repressed.

The Monster's purpose in the narrative is to tell the boy three stories, and the child must tell the fourth. Unlike the conventional folktales whose structure they mirror, the monster's anecdotes are ambiguous and echo the complexity of the human mind. The tales show antiheroes facing complicated choices which lead them to ambivalent conclusions that transgress the rigid binary of good and evil. As the Creature states, "there is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between" (*A Monster Calls*). The variety of meaning to be derived from Bayona's adaptation reveals the beauty of interpretation and the significance of dual perspective. From our first encounter with the monster, he is presented as a sinister and threatening force; however, through the development of the character and plot, the Creature evolves from a dangerous foe to defensive friend. The monster guides the child, as well as the audience, onto a path of truth, "Not just any truth. *Your* truth" (*A Monster Calls*). The Monster forces Conor to confess his conflicted wish to let his mother go, to stop the pain of having to hold on. The tree-like Creature, therefore, becomes more enthralling because of how it deals with what cannot be spoken aloud, assisting the main character in experiencing and uttering the forbidden.

Conor's only outlet to confront his inner demons is the demonic Monster himself. In this confrontation, Bayona's vision assists a recognition of the monster inside the audience. Hence, the monster is no longer feared as being the violent other who can harm Conor; now the fear is of the potential for darkness within himself. Michel de Montaigne acknowledges that the if a human being attained full knowledge of their character, it would result in fear of the inner Self "the better I know myself, the more does my own deformity astonish me" (Montaigne 503), hence a distance is created between the Self and notions of monstrosity to avoid recognition of the fallacies within. In *A Monster Calls,* Conor's monstrous companion serves as his scapegoat, allowing for the denial of any distorted thought existing within himself. Conor believes this raw guilt is responsible for his Mother's weakening condition, and his subsequent need for punishment is manifested through the Creature. The threatening energy that frightens Conor is not the Monster itself, but his apprehension stems from his lack of control and the monster, in fact, provides the possibility to re-establish this control. Alexa Wright states that at: "times of social and moral unrest in particular, the visible presence of a human monster offers an important form of reassurance that society has a

means of dealing with disruptive forces in play" (166). By the end of the film, the innocent young hero can only survive and deal with his distressing experiences by accepting the presence of his dark side – the Creature itself.

Both Ness's and Bayona's portrayal of the monster's spawning from nature shows the audience the beauty of the sinister elements of life. It reveals how unwelcome emotions and anxieties are innate to life itself, explaining the undeniable natural bond with the inner monsters. The Monster is born from a yew tree, which produces healing herbs, thus the Creature becomes a symbol of therapeutic energy in Conor's life. His remedy allows the boy to release what is repressed and confront his own 'truth.'

**Works Cited**

Montaigne, Michel de. *Works of Montaigne*. Ed. W. Hazlitt. Moore, 1850.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE Publications, 2002.

Smith, Andrew. *Gothic Literature*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Wright, Alexa. *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*. I. B. Tauris & Co, 2013.

**Bionote**

Adele Hannon is a PhD student at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, Ireland. Her current field placement is at Mary Immaculate College as a departmental assistant in the Department of English Language and Literature. She is interested in gender studies, monster theory, popular culture, anamorphic perspective, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction.

# Biomechanical Monstrosities and Western Reveries in *Westworld*

## Review by Naomi von Senff

**Nolan, Jonathan and Lisa Joy, creators. *Westworld*. Perf. Evan Rachel Wood, Thandie Newton, James Marsden, Jeffrey Wright, Ed Harris, Anthony Hopkins. Bad Robot, 2016. Television.**

*Westworld* explores darker territory than the original Michael Crichton movie (1973) which it is adapted from, however the basic premise is the same. Human and animal replicants (robots) are created to serve as hosts in an adult fantasyland. The new series creates a world in which objectification of women is standard, and repeated abuses are inflicted on the hosts whose memories are wiped at day's end.  The series is a hybrid of Gothic themes and Science Fiction, including haunted spaces, a hero-villain, concealed identity, and playing God with the lives of 'people.' One of the underlying themes of the series is a Frankenstein motif, where human replicants are created with a semblance of pre-destination which evolves, as the hosts eventually achieve a level of understanding and self-determination turning on their maker. The series raises a level of moral dilemmas, and ethical questions including whether a duty of care is owed to a non-human creation.

While the first episode is slow, I suggest perseverance. HBO has created another adult fantasy program following in the success of *True Blood* and *Game of Thrones* in *Westworld*. The success of the series relies on a combination of nostalgia and strong performances. The writers have done a commendable job creating a complex storyline with the role of the villain changing hands rapidly, and the seemingly heroic characters unable to maintain the façade. The use of well-known music creates a sense of familiarity for the viewer, even with the orchestral scoring adding to the dramatic effects. The complex subplots and Gothic substructure meld with Science Fiction in the later episodes revealing a detailed artistic structure to the park and with the creation of false memories providing the equivalent of a reminiscence motif. This motif is assisted by the haunting piano and orchestral introduction

to each episode created by Composer Ramin Djawadi. This piece is scored in 6/8 time and underscores the science based nature of the title animations which depict the creation of the hosts and their horses. The most fascinating section of the credits is the biomechanical articulation of the future pianist's hands, and the ensuing replication of the music on a Pianola destined for the western saloon.

At first glance, there are a number of inconsistencies which may stem from the multitude of directors associated with the drama however these are largely resolved, and allows the viewer to follow a trail of breadcrumbs to shocking revelations. The majority of the action takes place in two contrasting destinations, *Westworld* itself, and the futuristic Delos Destinations operations centre, where the robots are created, programming updates are run and decisions are made that shape the ongoing roles of the hosts. The centre is run with minimal staff who retrieve injured or malfunctioning hosts from the park and repair them. *Westworld* is set in a Wild West desert landscape retrieved from the post-civil war era America, and the newcomers are able to experience train robberies, joining with a gang of murders or being the sheriff and upholding law and order. The costuming is lavish especially in Maeve's saloon with extravagant corsetry and period footwear.  Dolores wears the same denim dress each day as she rides her horse into town, changing only when she starts to act outside the bounds of her set programme. Guests are also authentically dressed to fit within the Fantasy world. There are no futuristic items allowed in the park, however a colour photograph is inadvertently left behind, causing a host to question what it is and how it affects his life.

The first episodes introduce the hosts and characters who are important to later plots such as Teddy Flood (James Marsden), The man in Black (Ed Harris), Bernard Lowe – head of programming (Jeffrey Wright) and Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood).  There are fantastic performance rendered by the cast including the minor characters with astonishing attention to detail, and for the robots, allowing quick changes between the aspects of their allowed behaviour and analysis mode. Evan Rachel Wood is surprisingly good in all character modes.  Thandie Newton has developed the role of Maeve from a placid animatronic into the independent woman in a believable fashion, Ed Harris is a sadistic villain as the Man in Black

taking pleasure in the power that he yields over the hosts. Jeffrey Wright is sympathetic, wanting to understand the effects of the changes and tracing the corrupting code to the creator of the park Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), who oversees the character motivations and inserts behavioural modifications into the hosts program which have the effect of a computer virus on the complex synthetic organisms. The effect on the hosts is of a past-life regression and remembrance of previous data or memories that should have been wiped by successive upgrades.

The first indication of this is demonstrated by Dolores when she is brought in for repairs after being raped and beaten. Interviews are conducted as part of the diagnostics and it is the first indication that there is a glitch as she is able to lie convincingly, and later despite her programmed inability to inflight damage on any living creature, kills a fly. As the series progresses, the episodes demonstrate complex machinations and the beginnings of self-awareness amongst the hosts, culminating in the realisation that the implanted memories have no basis in reality, and allowing them to choose a path of self-determination. This is particularly relevant for Maeve Millay (Thandie Newton), the saloon madam who awakens during repairs, and later draws pictures of the technicians in their 'space suits' realising that she has seen them before. Her growing awareness allows her to manipulate lab technicians Felix and Sylvester into adapting her settings in order to gain additional intelligence and charm. Her new abilities allow her to create a new narrative that is at odds with her original programming and previous backstories.

The creators of the world (Ford and Arnold) have made a haunted space, where the traumas inflicted on the host's leave residual memories, and create unplanned behaviours; several of the hosts are created in their images, allowing for a prolonged life. The programmers have also given particulars hosts a grail-like quest hidden within the park. The programmers rely on commands and modality to interview the machines and analyse their answers. Concealed identities and abuse of power are rife throughout the facility staff. The subplots also reveal that experimentation with and exploitation of the hosts is rife. The series contains a large amount of nudity, however the exposure and analysis is dehumanising and has the erotic appeal of a visit to the mechanic as the hosts are highly complex machines

and have not been taught to be ashamed while in analysis mode. The biomechanical and technological advances demonstrated allow machines to build machines, replicating tendons and bones, and demonstrating the functionality of the skeletal system created over a mechanical engine. The subtleties that Ford writes into the "reverie code" have an unforeseen effect on the hosts, and are noted as flaws that are used as evidence that the park is out of control, in a takeover bid. The reasons for the changes to the code are revealed adding to the quest motif of the mysterious Man in Black. In the original movie the Man in Black (Yul Bryner) was an android who after a malfunction runs contrary to programming and enters hunter mode stalking a guest in retaliation. The series adds a new level of complexity to the Man in Black character who is a regular visitor to the park, inflicting pain on Dolores as he seeks her assistance in resolving his obsession with the maze in the middle of the park, in an attempt to pursue an adventure beyond his understanding.

The intertextuality has allowed a hybridisation of Science Fiction reminiscent of *Gattaca* with its selection of preferred traits for propagation, and the Gothic trope of *Frankenstein* with man attempting to create a human. The primary difference is that Ford prefers to oversee his creations, and profit from a form adult entertainment rather than fleeing from his humanoids. The anachronistic effects are a Western Fantasy based more on movies than reality, with musical links to a modern past. The heightened reality, and dramatic scenery allow each of the wealthy guests or newcomers to enjoy different sections of the park and different storylines.

The premise of an unrestricted adult fantasy world is possibly a utopia where adults can choose their own pathways, including the ability to be a hero or villain and to repeat any activities that excite them on a daily basis. Activities including rape and murder against a humanoid devoid of the ability to fight back, or the memory to avoid a dangerous situation. It is the ultimate extension of virtual reality and first person role playing.

The series is fascinating viewing, but should set off alarm bells with the viewer in relation to the powerless members of society. It also paints quasi-dystopian view of a future

world where entertainment is designed to celebrate base human nature and allow humans to act violently without consequences for their actions.

**Bionote**

Naomi is an independent scholar based in Sydney, Australia. Her research interests are vampire fiction, witchcraft and demonology in opera and libretti, Gothic literature, leitmotif, pop-culture, criminology, and fashion. She would love to be a professional student but has to work a day job.

# *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* Flies into the Grey Zone and is All the Better for It

## Review by Lauren Randall

*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. Dir. Gareth Edwards. Perf. Felicity Jones, Diego Luna. Lucasfilms, 2016. Film.

Back in 1977 an opening scrawl became the gateway into a galaxy far, far away. *Star Wars* (retroactively named *Episode IV – A New Hope* in 1981) dropped viewers into the middle of an epic conflict between good Rebels and an evil Galactic Empire through the recapping of a previous battle in which the former had successfully stolen the latter's blueprints for a deadly superweapon, the Death Star. These smuggled plans proved the narrative catalyst for the film awaiting audiences, with droid double-act C-3PO and R2-D2 whisking away both them and Princess Leia's recorded plea to an old Jedi knight: "Help me, Obi Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope." Falling into the hands of farmhand Luke Skywalker, a legacy began. Bearing that in mind then, one of the most popular cinema chronicles, in effect, begins with and hinges upon an event that is not seen. That is, of course, until 2016's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

The first in a planned trio of *Star Wars* spin-offs, *Rogue One* has the unenviable task of being the test-subject, bringing substantial baggage to the film as its slightly awkward subtitle suggests. Beyond the premise of witnessing a precursor, one might be left wondering if there is any purpose to creating a film when the 'ending' is already ingrained in viewers' minds, particularly when factoring in the prequel stumbles of Anakin Skywalker's transformation into Darth Vader in *Episodes I-III.*

However, whilst audiences might have been approaching the film thinking "I've got a bad feeling about this," Gareth Edwards, director of *Monsters* (2010) and *Godzilla* (2014), has created a thrilling entry into the *Star Wars* canon that both respects its origins whilst exploring new space and alternate angles in its universe. Aptly situated in the middle ground between separation and continuation, *Rogue One* is a film that embraces the murky boundaries, eschewing a simple binary of good and evil, of right and wrong, to rifle in the dark pockets of regime and rebellion and plunge into a war-torn world of grey morals.

In such a galaxy, the concept of 'hero' is a little rough around the edges; rather than Jedi Knights, the fate of those crushed by the boot of the Empire relies on the likes of the disillusioned Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones). As a child, Jyn witnesses her scientist father Galen (Mads Mikkelsen) taken from her by Imperial Weapons Director Krennic (Ben Mendelsohn) to assist in the Death Star's construction. Fully-grown, she has created a lonely world for herself. Here, though able to take care of herself, she has the weary vibe of a fighter beaten down by betrayal and abandonment, closed off from everything surrounding her. "You can stand to watch an Imperial flag reign across the galaxy?" she is asked by extremist Saw Gerrera (Forrest Whittaker), a former mentor. "It's not a problem if you don't look up," Jyn retorts. It's a destroying line made colder by Jones's clipped vowels, capturing a world sinking to its knees.

Yet, Jyn joins the rag-tag group of rebels sent out to retrieve the Death Star schematics from Krennic. Her journey from apathetic outsider to ardent fighter is par for the course – and arguably a little rushed – but it works as a result of the similarly uncompromising figures

Jyn finds herself running along. Criticism has been levelled at *Rogue One* for not affording the rest of its hefty cast proper introductions or sufficient depth. This is true to an extent and largely a result of the film's frantic pace but, like any good war film, the audience knows enough to understand and care about them. From turncoat Imperial pilot Bodhi Rook (Riz Ahmed) to Cassian Andor (Diego Luna), a Rebel Alliance Captain unafraid to get his hands dirty, to the double-act of blind fighter Chirrut (Donnie Yen), who has unshakeable belief in the Force, and his mercenary protector Baze Malbus (Jiang Wen), as well as sardonic droid K-2SO (or "Kaytoo," voiced by Alan Tudyk), each character on board Rogue One provides a different perspective on warfare, with these conflicting ideologies a frequent source of tension amidst the banter and unified aim of mission. Here, heroes are so committed to the cause of toppling evil that they are willing to let goodness become a sacrifice. Shades of grey veer close to pitch black at times.

This unburnished version of heroism is explored further by Edwards in the new landscapes of *Rogue One,* such as the bomb-ravaged Jedha, a facsimile in appearance to some contemporary Middle Eastern cities. Tatooine's romantic two suns make way for the claustrophobic sands of a place where explosions might occur at any time from either the Empire or the Resistance. Indeed, Gerrera is considered so extreme by the Rebels that he is an outcast even from them, left to carry out torture for information on his own watch. Touching upon the complexities of occupation, retaliation and the unpleasant truths of both, this aside from the main saga approaches aspects of conflict that the franchise has never really explored before in its central episodes with fearless gusto.

It's an approach Edwards carries across into the climactic battles of the final third, a relentless assault that is one of the most thrilling sequences in *Star Wars* history. Swooping between X-Wing and TIE Striker dogfights to guerrilla warfare down on the grounds of tropical-looking beaches, the pulsating sequence evokes the battle imagery of WWII epics and Normandy landings, as well as Vietnam and *Apocalypse Now*. Crucially, amidst the chaos, the audience forget about what they do know of the ending whilst realising that all bets are off, resulting in ramped-up tension, excitement and emotion as the crew race to achieve their goal.

For all of its darkness, however, *Rogue One* has not forgotten its humour, be that the droll one-liners of Kaytoo (avoiding the Jar Jar Binks pit-and-pratfalls) or the bromance back-and-forth of Baze and Chirrut. Mendelsohn too excels at injecting humour into the mix, albeit of a different kind. The villain of the piece, Krennic is considerably lower down the pecking order job-wise than other *Star Wars* baddies and is desperate to ascend. Mendelsohn is experienced in creating nuanced villains and he brings depth here, swooshing his flamboyant white cape to turn Krennic into a performative middle-man (a manager, even) who continually attempts and fails to replicate the gestures and speech of those higher-ranking than him. Infused with frustratingly familiar entitlement as soon as he walks on screen, his bark has bite but it is also full of feverish froth. Krennic is always in the shadow of Darth Vader, but is placed there by Edwards and Mendelsohn with a wry, knowing smile.

At the risk of bringing spoilers into the mix in this next paragraph, Vader too has a significant role to play in *Rogue One*. One weak pun aside, this is the most terrifying Vader has been for some time, with one particular set-piece primed to go down as iconic in *Star Wars* history. The success of Vader's return is perhaps a contributing factor to why the digital resurrection of one other original trilogy character – for a pivotal role no less – has come under such intensive scrutiny. A trip into the uncanny valley always involves walking the fine line between awe and discomfort and there is certainly an element of both whenever the character is on screen. Yet, for any discussion of grey ethics (which is perhaps an appropriate addition for this film) and the mixed response it has provoked, inviting this character back into the fold undeniably stresses the significance of the Rogue One crew and adds a rich new layer to certain actions in *A New Hope*.

With the return of these two prominent figures, as well as numerous other characters and nods to the episodes, *Rogue One* runs the risk of relying on things already known to lighten the mood, to gain an easy cheer or for a narrative quick-step. However, I would be more inclined to take Peter Bradshaw's positive take on it when he says that the film is full of "fan-fiction energy"; affectionately guided by pop-culture familiarity with its predecessors, *Rogue One* also takes the opportunity to provide answers to questions raised

over the years. Depending on perspective, it might seem a little earnest and haughty to rewrite flaws as intended, as *Rogue One* does with its explanation of why a cunning fascist regime allows a planet-destroying weapon to be built with a fundamental weak spot. But Edwards and his writers handle it deftly, from lovingly playful and unabashedly meta-set pieces (involving, yes, a very important off-switch) to the addition of moral considerations; the semi-serious question surrounding ill-built Death Stars opens up a philosophical debate about whether building a flaw excuses your own work in constructing a force of destruction. If *Rogue One* is anything to go by, it will be interesting to see how future spin-offs address why Stormtroopers can't hit a target.

In a sense, *Rogue One* as a *Star Wars Story* is a bit like Jyn. It can stand on its own and it does, to an extent, but it does not suffer from its attachments to others: it finds strengths in both. Significantly though, *Rogue One* feels necessary. Amidst this current political climate, it is hard not to feel stirred at the sight of numerous representations of the oppressed unite to stand against a dangerous power whilst the odds are stacked against them. Importantly, as gritty and as dark as *Rogue One* can be, it is bursting with hope. Rebellions are built on it, Jyn cries out in one instance and, as with our new heroine, the film suggests it must be embraced as a possibility and not to be given up on. As captured so wholly in its final moments, *Rogue One* is about hearts breaking and being put back together again. In other words, a true *Star Wars* story.

**Works Cited**

Bradshaw, Peter. "*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* – A Sleek Edition to the Fleet." *The Guardian*. 15 December 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/dec/13/rogue-one-a-star-wars-story-review-felicity-jones-gareth-edwards>

**Bionote**

An Associate Lecturer of Literature and Film Studies at Lancaster University, UK, Lauren Randall is currently in the process of finalising a PhD thesis on Sunshine Gothic and its presence in contemporary American narratives.

# Shifting Sands: *White Sand Vol. 1* Establishes Strong Direction for New Graphic Novel Series

## Review by Stuart Lindsay

**Sanderson, Brandon and Rik Hoskin. *White Sand*. Volume 1. Dynamite Entertainment, 2016. Graphic Novel.**

This graphic novel adaptation of Fantasy author Brandon Sanderson's *White Sand* – his unpublished novel about a mystic cult on a desert planet – presents an intriguing premise. Its Low Fantasy setting, which largely eschews direct magical and supernatural elements in favour of religious and superstitious tones, is compelling, and convincingly constructed. The story's central faction, the Sand Masters, who are able to command preternaturally the sands of the planet Taldain for a variety of combatant and survivalist uses, are shunned or downright feared for their arcane power by the world's other groups. Sanderson and Hoskin portray the Sand Masters as an order in decline: few in number, of lessening ability, and on the outskirts of society. Their weakened and ostracised nature enables the narrative to focus on world-building: the other, diverse cultures of Taldain, which contrast with and are sometimes hostile to one another, each rich in its own beliefs, customs, language, and territories. Readers of this first volume of *White Sand* are introduced to these details effectively, in an unobtrusive yet story-enhancing manner. In introducing travelling characters of the Darksider demonym, and employing the 'foreigners in a new land' trope (Sanderson's time as a missionary in Korea may have been useful in this context), the graphic novel ensures discovery is balanced with plot mobility; the story is never bogged down in expositing its own mythos at the expense of character drama.

Strong themes are worked from this premise, namely those of religiously-motivated strife and political subterfuge. The action of *White Sand* begins in earnest when the Sand Masters are caught unprepared in an attack during one of their initiation ceremonies by a rival faction: the Kerztians. The Kerztians are an army of warrior people, who once merely

feared and abhorred the Sand Masters for their magic power. Now, the graphic novel's plot reveals, the Kerztians have been given religious cause to eradicate the Sand Masters, by holy men intent on a political re-takeover of the Kerzta region. One panel depicts a priest dressed in religious robes, arms outstretched before a crowd of Kerztian fists raised in rapture, rallying the assembly, with angry fervour, in the language of the clergy. Parallels of religious radicalisation, warfare, and coups are drawn deftly from our own, twenty-first century concerns, providing the world of *White Sand* with a contemporary, relevant depth. Sanderson's employment of a dual nature to his desert planet – "trapped between two stars, one bright and omnipresent, the other tiny and offering a strange light" (*White Sand* 2) – furthers the complexity of this backdrop. The aforementioned Darksiders, who hail from the half of the planet under the conditions of the latter star, are darker-skinned and more technologically advanced than their Dayside counterparts. This split in the world's inhabitants' identity – more along social than racial lines, it seems – provides the plot with an effective culture-relations focus. The dialogue exchanges in aid of this, between the Darksider group travelling through the Dayside continent and their guide, Kenton (the Sand Master protagonist of the graphic novel and sole survivor of the Kerztian assault on his order), ground *White Sand*'s Fantasy setting with relatable drama.

Any assessment of a graphic novel's quality must involve a review of its protagonist; the trope of the hero, superhero, or anti-hero looms large over the medium, exerting an influence over titles and readers' buying decisions. At the outset of the plot, Kenton is an intriguing character. As the son of the Lord Mastrell – the highest rank of the Sand Masters – much is expected of him. While Kenton does not share his father's extensive prowess to manipulate the sands, they hold common ground in terms of stubborn temperament. For the majority of the story, Kenton's skill lies in his inventive, alternative employment of his limited sand mastery to live up to the expectations of his renowned parentage. This is interesting for two reasons: not only does it show Kenton's determined character and innovations in sand mastery, but it also aids the portrayal of the Sand Masters as an inward-looking order resistant to change – a trait that contributes significantly to their downfall. In one panel, for example, in order to scale a cliff edge, Kenton – lacking sufficient power to command enough sand to levitate to its top – magically projects sand into its crevices to

create footholds, which he uses to climb to the summit. Another, more proficiently-powered Sand Master onlooker exclaims: "Sand Masters should flow and dance, soaring through the air in clouds of radiant sand – not creep up a wall like a drowsy sandling!" (*White Sand* 18). This drama is abruptly curtailed near the end of the graphic novel, however, when an item of clothing given to Kenton by his father suddenly grants him unrivalled sand mastery. Such an abrupt turn of events undermines what could potentially be an interesting character development in Kenton's difference to the Sand Masters who went before him. However, as this is the first volume in what appears to be an ongoing saga, it is difficult to judge the protagonist's progression at this early stage.

The decision to rework Sanderson's unpublished novel into the long-form comics medium was a wise one. The Sand Masters' power of manipulating the sand into ribbons and whirlwinds is a primarily visual spectacle, and therefore fits the strengths of the graphic novel format. A lot of information is depicted efficiently through visual means: the Sand Masters' discrete ranks are each portrayed by a differently-coloured sash, and the Kerztians are identified by their distinctive green tattoos. To signify these details in prose alone would detract from the engaging, rapid pace of the story, particularly the more action-oriented scenes – an issue all Fantasy and Science Fiction authors must grapple with. Coming from a comics criticism background, and not having read any of Sanderson's earlier, prose Fantasy, I'm unable to comment on the extent to which *White Sand Vol. 1* compares to it, and how fans of his existing work might respond to the result in the switch of mediums taken for this story.

As a graphic novel, *White Sand* expertly balances emotive plotting with dense, convincing world-building. The end of this volume raises the question of whether or not Sanderson will take his *White Sand* project further, and if so, to where. Character relationships that appear central to the overall story arc are often clarified only towards the end of this volume – for example, a mysterious figure, Aarik, turns out to be an old friend of Kenton's, and the purpose of the Darksider expedition through Dayside is only made apparent in the very last frame of the book. This clearly suggests that there is more plot to follow. It remains to be seen if, in furthering the *White Sand* saga, Sanderson will write and have adapted into the comics medium further novels advancing the series, or turn

exclusively to the graphic novel to produce new entries. The effect of this choice on the resulting sequel(s) may be worthy of study for comics scholars interested in differences between graphic novels in their own right and those produced through adaptation from other mediums. For now, however, *White Sand, Volume 1* is a pleasing entry in a new and intriguing saga, worthy of attention from graphic novel fans, and those of Fantasy literature.

**Bionote**

Stuart Lindsay is a teaching assistant at the University of Stirling, UK. In 2016, along with Dr. Dale Townshend and Dr. Peter Lindfield, he ran the *Massive Open Online Course: The Gothic Revival, 1700-1850: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, and was the Web Officer of the International Gothic Association from September 2010 to February 2017. His Ph.D. thesis, completed in 2014, concerns psychological trauma in Chernobyl survivors, and the intersection of horror fiction with this trauma. His research focus also includes Gothic and new media: Gothic in comics, videogames, and Internet sub-culture.

# Tarzan, Cheemo and Teddy Drink Beer and Meet Aliens at the Lake. No, Really, They Do: Drew Hayden Taylor's Irreverent Indigenous SFs

## Review by Laurie Ringer

**Taylor, Drew Hayden. *Take Us to Your Chief and Other Stories*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2017. Short Story Collection.**

What happens when "*Star Trek* moment[s]" randomly beam themselves into everyday Indigenous experience? In the title story "Take Us to Your Chief" (*TUTYC*) three Ojibway men are sitting in their regular spot drinking beer on weather-worn couches at Old Man's Point at Otter Lake, and their names reflect a SF collection and an author that does not take

itself/himself too seriously because taking oneself too seriously is a classic colonising blunder.

Of his writing and his heritage, Taylor speculates that SF might be in his blood: "Perhaps it goes all the way back to my DNA – I'm half Ojibway and half . . . not. Combining genres of writing is a favourite hobby of mine" (viii). Taylor describes the development of his writing hobby as serially crushing on SF in comic books, television, novels. These early SF crushes grew into his "first serious sci-fi literary crush" on H.G. Wells (viii). Taylor's later literary crushes and attractions include Jules Verne, H.P. Lovecraft, Golden Age, and contemporary writers. What inspired Taylor about science fiction was the possibilities that fantastic science fiction worlds could unleash, and he develops his literary crushes into nine slipstreaming stories in the *TUTYC* collection.

In the Foreword to *TUTYC*, Taylor admits that "First Nations and science fiction don't usually go together. In fact, they could be considered rather unusual topics to mention in the same sentence, much like fish and bicycles" (vii). Taylor's fish and bicycles approach hybridizes science fiction's "world of possibilities" with traditional beliefs and contemporary issues, in cheeky and poignant directions. As this issue of *Fantastika Journal* focuses on the current state of Fantastika genres, it is worth acknowledging the emergence of Indigenous science fiction *by* Indigenous writers.[1] Just as *Walking the Clouds* "opens up sf to reveal Native presence" (2), so too does Taylor's *TUTYC*.

Taylor conceives *TUTYC* as a sort of AI through which readers encounter "an Aboriginal consciousness" (viii). For non-Indigenous readers, this AI-type collection might feel alien, strange, and that estrangement is essential to reconciling with peoples estranged from their own lands, languages, and traditions by the dominant culture.[2] The story is not in the dominant culture's guilt or efforts to atone (93), but in the representation of Indigenous people as protagonists in narratives from which they and other minority groups are all too often marginalised. Taylor's AI encounters buffet readers in slipstreams of past and present, reality and fiction, past and future. In "Petropaths," for example, an Elder observes that character Duane Crow is "like a lot of youth in our community, stuck between the past and

the future. The true goal is finding enough of both to make your life worth living" (93). The problem is living with the turbulent flows set in play by the complex colonial fallouts that keep returning like SF narratives.

Through his slipstreaming stories in *TUTYC*, Taylor re-narrates twenty-first century Turtle Island (North America) through traditional and science fiction tropes, adapting the dominant language of English for Indigenous storytelling. The potential loss of Indigenous language is a central issue in "A Culturally Inappropriate Armageddon." Character Tracey Greene, the program manager at a radio station, offers "weekly on-air language classes" (3) because "the Iroquoian languages were in danger of dying out" (2). Taylor estranges English from its habitual vocabulary, sound, and rhythm by dropping in Indigenous terms such as Anishinabe (51), Kanien'kéha (6), Haudenosaunee (10), and Kwakwaka'wakw (79) like stones that trouble and ripple English flows toward Indigenous rhythms of storytelling.

Five of Taylor's stories re-constellate first contact narratives. "A Culturally Inappropriate Armageddon" (1-23), "I Am . . . Am I" (24-45), "Petropaths" (92-110), "Stars" (111-19), and "Take Us to Your Chief" (136-46) explore alien contact with Turtle Island (North America) via space ship, through AI, through magic glyphs, and through polytemporal synchronous stargazing.

In "A Culturally Inappropriate Armageddon," an unidentified Haudenosaunee song played on a local radio station attracts a deadly first contact with an alien race. In "I Am . . . Am I," an AI's first contact with the colonial past becomes unbearable intrusion in the present. Through time travel in "Petropaths," a young man finds renewed purpose and danger in travelling to the past. In "Stars," different boys at different times look out at the stars wondering if they are alone in the universe. "Take Us to Your Chief," finds three unsuspecting Ojibway men as ambassadors for an alien species that lands at Otter Lake.

"Lost in Space" (46-55) and "Mr. Gizmo" (77-91) engage with the loss of loved ones and the loss of culture: robots and computers provide surprisingly human-like support. In "Lost in Space," Anishinabe astronaut Mitchell wonders if it is possible to be a "good, proper

Native astronaut" when his people "sprang from Turtle Island. The earth and water are so tied to who we are . . . The voice of the land is in our language" (51). Far away from the land of Turtle Island, recordings of traditional songs allow Mitchell to reconnect with the voice of the land while floating through space. In "Mr. Gizmo," an old electronic toy finds its voice and reaches out to tell its now adult owner, who has just returned from his grandmother's funeral, that it is from a distant planet (82). "We'd like all the First Nations of Canada, the world – what the hell, everybody – to survive . . . . We're there when you need us" (90).

"Dreams of Doom" (56-76) is a SF imbued conspiracy theory in which newspaper reporter Pamela Wanishin gets an anonymous lead and a thumb drive full of shocking information about a commonly used Indigenous symbol that has been appropriated by the government for sinister purposes. Pamela does what she can to save the world, but it is not clear that the world can be saved. The Indigenous superhero in "Superdisappointed" (120-35) transposes stories of pollution of air, water, and land into stories of empowerment. What if pollution was fantastically empowering? What troubles would an actual Indigenous superhero would face? This might be almost as impossible as Tarzan, Cheemo, and Teddy meeting aliens out at the lake. Almost.

In each story, Taylor respects the range of devastating emotions, including anger, resentment, and "the hangover problems resulting from centuries of colonization" (ix); however, *TUTYC* is also humorous and hopeful. Taylor's Indigenous science fiction paradoxically teaches real-time truths. As character Willie Whitefish reflects: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it . . . He hated it when white people were right" (23). Because colonial forms of being "right" are so often invisible, Taylor's stories help to visualise the everyday turbulences of colonialism through foregrounding everyday Indigenous characters in SF situations.

*Take Us to Your Chief and Other Stories* is an invitation into the slipstreams of everyday and SF. What could happen if people spent more time being "far more aural than oral" (137)? Maybe Tarzan, Cheemo, and Teddy are right: listening to alien stories under the influence of open minds (or beer) is not the worst idea ever. Taylor's nine "*Star Trek* moment[s]" (140)

open the possibility of the future through impossible stories as inviting and as estranging as the weathered sofa, the beer, and the aliens at Otter Lake.

**Notes**

**1.** Taylor's stated aim is "to take traditional (a buzzword in the Native community) science-fiction characteristics and filter them through an Aboriginal consciousness. That is what you are holding in your hands" (viii). Another example is Dillon, Grace L., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

**2.** See the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>

**Bionote**

Because life is less like fiction than would be ideal, Laurie Ringer teaches and researches Fantastika texts whenever possible. Current and forthcoming publications include "'With Teeth': Beyond Theoretical Violence in Gothic Studies," "Gothic Bleeds, Sci-Fi Tropes, and Strategies of Resistance," and "Intersectional Feminist Fabulations for Surviving the Anthropocene." Laurie Ringer teaches in the English department at Burman University in Canada.

## Possessed by Popular Culture

## Review by Alan Gregory

**Tremblay, Paul. *A Head Full of Ghosts*. Titan Books, 2016. Novel.**

The Gothic is a mode that has always demonstrated an awareness of its own literary and cultural history. Chris Baldick gestures towards the self-awareness of the genre in what is widely considered the definitive definition of Gothic in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*

(1992): "For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space" (xix). Paul Tremblay utilises both of these conventions, particularly "a fearful sense of inheritance in time," in order to present his novel, *A Head Full of Ghosts* (2016), as a respectful continuance of the Gothic's cultural lineage.

From the outset *A Head Full of Ghosts* presents itself as a text haunted by its Gothic predecessors. Tremblay's novel is written from the perspective of Meredith "Merry" Barrett, a dysfunctional twenty-three-year-old woman, who recounts a series of traumatic events from her childhood to the best-selling author, Rachel Neville. Merry's story begins with her sister Marjorie suffering what appear to be a series of schizophrenic episodes – which her born-again Catholic father interprets as signs of demonic possession – and culminates in the death of her family. Merry is evidently named in homage to Merricat Blackwood of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), while Tremblay's literary curator Rachel Neville simultaneously evokes both Robert Neville of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and the contemporary British Horror writer, Adam Nevill. The author acknowledges the latter reference in the glossary published as an index to the text, which illuminates the plethora of referents within the novel. Ignoring the glossary and attempting to uncover all of the references to Gothic and Horror texts hidden in the novel, however, forms a substantive part of the enjoyment to be derived from reading *A Head Full of Ghosts*. It is the literary equivalent of watching the opening credits for *The Simpsons* episode, *Treehouse of Horror XXIV* (2013); an extended homage to Guillermo del Toro and his influences.

Despite the proliferation of referents to literary and cinematic Horror in Tremblay's novel, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) remains the most prominent urtext. The presence of a film crew documenting the exorcism of Marjorie Barrett for the reality television show *The Possession* does, however, add a welcome dimension to Tremblay's pastiche of Blatty's work and displays a nuanced observation of contemporary culture, augmented by several knowing gestures towards Stephen Volk's *Ghostwatch* (1992). Tremblay constructs an exquisitely precarious relationship between the Barrett sisters, Marjorie and Meredith, with the latter vacillating between displays of devout adoration, and

fear and anger towards her sister. The scenes that feature the interplay between Tremblay's Gothic children at their core are the strongest in the novel. Blatty's *The Exorcist*, however, remains a lingering presence. Marjorie sustains an affectionate yet manipulative relationship with Merry by selectively divulging knowledge pertaining to the authenticity of her possession. Despite being idolised by her sister, however, Marjorie is largely constructed as a desolate figure throughout *A Head Full of Ghosts.* Her isolation intensifies the parallels that the reader is implicitly invited to make between Marjorie Barrett and Blatty's Regan MacNeil, the most prominent spectre at Tremblay's feast.

*A Head Full of Ghosts* is an extended love letter to contemporary Horror fans. Paul Tremblay is evidently well versed in the motifs and conventions of the Gothic and Horror, and deploys them effectively throughout the novel, frequently referring to the work of the various authors and film-makers that have influenced his writing. *A Head Full of Ghosts* also contains moments of genuine Horror, potent enough to affect those individuals desensitised to the transgressions of Contemporary Horror, and these flashes of visceral originality are deftly interwoven into Tremblay's meticulously constructed intertextual tapestry to signal an extension of the genre's cultural heritage.

Despite occasional bursts of primeval creativity, however, *A Head Full of Ghosts* ultimately remains a novel which is unapologetically conscious of the literature and culture that has contributed to its production. Its self-awareness is perhaps most overtly manifest in the brilliantly tuckerised figuration of popular GoodReads reviewer, Karen Brissette, whose Horror blog "The Last Final Girl" is another composite of Tremblay's (inter)textual patchwork which acknowledges the influence of Stephen Graham Jones's novel *The Last Final Girl* (2012) on Tremblay's writing. Tremblay's fictionalised avatar of Brissette states: "I like to imagine [Marjorie] as being possessed by the vast, awesome and awful monster that is popular culture. Possessed by the collective of ideas" (120). Brissette's articulation of the notion of being possessed by popular culture is central to the mechanics of Tremblay's novel. Although we are initially invited to read Marjorie's head as the titular head full of ghosts, it is ultimately Merry who carries those ghosts forward into adulthood. Moreover, Tremblay's

novel is itself an artefact saturated by a plethora of literary and cultural spectres, revealing that the author's head is also one that is 'full of ghosts.'

**Works Cited**

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

**Bionote**

Alan Gregory completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK in 2013. He is currently writing *Disabled Male Bodies in Contemporary Gothic Fiction* for Palgrave Macmillan's Literary Disability Studies series and editing a special issue of *Studies in Gothic Fiction* on Disabled Gothic Bodies. He is co-editor, with Dawn Stobbart, of *Pennywise Dreadful: The Journal of Stephen King Studies*.

## Underwater Sounds: An Audio-Literary Adventure

### Review by John Sharples

**Trunk, Jonny. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Trunk Records. Four Corners, 2016. Vinyl.**

To experience a story anew is a difficult task, particularly when that story relies on strategies of estrangement to create its effect on the reader. Familiarity with these strategies can bring *different* experiences of reading although the same emotional effect might never be experienced again. A thing can never be 'encountered' twice. This is particularly pertinent when re-reading a 'classic' whose novelties, story-lines, and characters have been assimilated and re-presented in a particular genre. Methods of rediscovering a text's power or creating new forms of reading experiences include presenting the material in a new way within other media forms – films, for example, or graphic novels, or cartoons, or stage plays, or music. This is the intention of Jonny Trunk's soundtrack *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea,* made to accompany Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) – a tale whose

primary novelty was its depiction of an undersea world as "a place of marvels and natural wonders to be explored" (*Science Fiction Encyclopedia,* "Under the Sea"). Trunk's soundtrack is published by Four Corners in their Familiars series which attempts to breathe new life into classics. Previous releases in the series include *Dracula*, with new illustrations by James Pyman and *Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor* with art by David Musgrave. Though the effect is somewhat different with an audio soundtrack, these augmented works aim at fulfilling both senses of "Familiar," linking the private and ordinary to the more monstrous and uncanny (*Online Etymology Dictionary,* "Familiar").

Trunk's soundtrack is a collaborative effort - a physical object (31.4 cm x 1.3cm x 32.2 cm) containing a deep blue vinyl, on which are seventeen songs totalling forty-two minutes, in a gatefold sleeve which also holds a copy of Verne's novel*,* with artwork by London-based tattooist Liam Sparkes. The work's conjoining of various sensory experiences is emphasised by the credits of the record: "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea – By Jules Verne. Music by Jonny Trunk. Cover by Liam Sparkes" (*Drift Records*, "Jonny Trunk / Jules Verne - 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea"). Beginning with the sounds, Trunk's soundtrack is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Interspersing longer pieces with brief organ passages, Trunk assembles a variety of avant-garde, shimmering, echoing effects, and jazzy repetitions, sharing much musical methodology with his previous recordings *The Inside Outside* (2004) and *Scrapbook* (2009)*.* Melodies enter and depart. Stand-up bass on opener "Mobilis In Mobile," surrounded by swirling musical sound effects, the waltz of "Singing Fish," and the cinematic "Seven Tenths of the Earth" cover a degree of acoustic territory whilst remaining thematically "aquatic" (Inky Tuscadero, *Record Collector*). A "library enthusiast and producer / label-owner / rare record extraordinaire," Trunk notes that he had "been a collector of underwater sounds and soundtracks (think Jacques Cousteau) for many years" (*Drift Records*, "Jonny Trunk / Jules Verne - 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea"). One reviewer associated the soundtrack with Alessandro Alessandroni's *Biologia Marina* LP and the score of Karel Kachnya's 1976 *The Little Mermaid* – again suggesting, through this entanglement, participation in a genre which has emerged since Verne's novel was written (*Bleep,* "Jonny Trunk, 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea"). The nautical theme is continued with Sparkes's cover and the physical copy of Verne's story which share the blue colour scheme of the vinyl.

The letters of the cover are drawn, in the style of tattoos, to resemble coiled rope whilst various nautical objects are arranged on the page. Four Corners noted that:

> We wanted to create a cover in keeping with the nineteenth-century nautical theme of the book, and tattoos seemed the most natural way to do it. … [Sparkes] created fresh artwork … inspired by themes and moments in the book, including … a giant squid. (*Four Corners Books,* "Jonny Trunk, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea")

Again, the theme is of participation in the genre of underwater science-fiction, utilising its conventions to trigger associations – none of them original or unique to *20,000 Leagues* – revealing the self-imposed limitations of the project. These conventions have the effect of working backwards, re-writing the auditory and textual atmosphere of Verne's text to fit more fully within a genre which has subsequently developed. Transgression is avoided in this sense at the expense of authenticity or adequately locating *20,000 Leagues* within generic chronology.

Despite the convoluted generic influences at work, Trunk's music transforms the process of reading Verne's work. "The literature of cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 15) is not always so. One of the advantages of the soundtrack is as a way of establishing a novel strategy of re-reading *20,000 Leagues* - a way of rediscovering estrangement in familiar texts. As Michel Serres noted, Verne's work is "our Odyssey, both for children and grown-ups, just as in the past. … to speak of them one must become Penelope [Odysseus's faithful wife]. One must remake the tapestry. … These are voyages through a plurality of spaces" (177). One must become child-like. This is easier said than done. Serres finds, as others have, a resistance to this approach in the use of a taxonomic approach in Verne's texts when describing the extent of the wondrous underwater environment which imposes order. Captain Nemo – the commander of the Nautilus submarine upon which Professor Aronnax, his servant Conseil, and the harpooner Ned Land are prisoners - likewise presents himself as something of a Theseus-like explorer, systematically mapping the underwater labyrinth. As Serres notes, "Forewarned, or not, any reader finds himself vertiginously bored by the enormous lists that Verne copied from the taxonomists. … In fact, the Nautilus does not dive beneath the surface of the ocean; by its vertical movement, it indexes the entire range of the

classifications" (179). Trunk's soundtrack sidesteps this sense of order, being more subjective, selective, and presenting a new context for the plurality of spaces in Verne's novel. Verne's words become part of the sound. The sense of 'original' and 'accompaniment' becomes untethered – the idea of a soundtrack, for example, is an odd addition to the text considering a) the soundproof nature of the Nautilus and b) the soundproof nature of the exterior, whether experienced within diving suits or through the windows of the submarine. Trunk's work is supplementary to the original in terms of auditory possibilities, chronology, and authenticity whilst becoming an intrinsic backdrop to the text when the two are played together – an effort to extend Verne's vision of wonder. The effort is only partly halted by the thought that the genre of 'underwater' music, like 'space' music, for example, depends on pre-conceived notions or established sounds absent within the text itself – a parallel architecture. Nothing in Trunk's soundtrack is necessarily 'underwater' except by convention but the atmosphere it creates is intriguing, even to the extent of shutting off the outside world. One cannot sync the text and sound together - instead one swims in Trunk's auditory bath.

The soundtrack, distracting the reader, facilitates, however imperfectly, the childlike mode which Serres encourages. If this only partially restores a sense of mystery and enchantment, at the expense of historical specificity or faithfulness to the text, outside taxonomy, then so be it. Indeed, perhaps Verne's text is not so faithful either. Serres also notes:

> The voyage beneath the sea is a voyage among the lists of the taxonomists …
> in the Marinas Trench … [Aronnax] not only sees the fish of this trench, but
> those of all the other trenches as well. Consequently, he is by no means deep
> within the Marinas Trench; he is in the aquarium of the garden, the utopian
> aquarium of the garden where the beast from the Caribbean is found next to
> the animal from Japan. (179-80)

That is, Verne's lists are themselves a tangle of places and species. This trait of estrangement is shared with Trunk's soundtrack – a list of songs - which gives the listener-reader the possibility of encountering the story in a new context, an anti-taxonomic journey which leaps around, not specifically aligned with the text (the first song "Mobilis in Mobile" roughly lines

up with chapter eight of the text, for example). As Serres ends by stating "I do hope to get lost again and once more to come upon you, Ariadne, my sister" (188), Trunk's soundtrack offers a means of orienting the reader in order to get lost, to rediscover the unfamiliar within the familiar.

**Works Cited**

"Familiar." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=familiar> Accessed March 2017.

"Jonny Trunk, 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea." *Bleep Records.* February 2016. <https://bleep.com/release/71907-jonny-trunk-20000-leagues-under-the-sea> Accessed March 2017.

"Jonny Trunk / Jules Verne – 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea." *Drift Records*. February 2016. <https://driftrecords.com/products/jonny-trunk-jules-verne-20-000-leagues-under-the-sea> Accessed March 2017.

"Jonny Trunk, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." *Four Corners Books.* February 2016. <www.fourcornersbooks.co.uk/#/books/twenty_thousand_leagues_under_the_sea> Accessed March 2017.

Serres, Michel and Maria Malanchuk. "Jules Verne's Strange Journeys." *Yale French Studies,* vol. 52, 1975, pp. 174-88.

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Ed. Gerry Canavan, Bern, New edition, 2016.

Tuscadero, Inky. "20,000 Leagues Under The Sea By Jules Verne And Jonny Trunk." *Record Collector.* March 2016. <http://recordcollectormag.com/reviews/20000-leagues-sea> Accessed March 2017.

"Under the Sea." *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*. 11 August 2016. <www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/under_the_sea> Accessed March 2017.

**Bionote**

John Sharples is a cultural historian. He completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK. His first book – entitled *A Cultural History of Chess-Players: Minds, Machines, & Monsters*

(Manchester University Press, 2017) - is out soon. He has also published on the cultural history of the flying saucer. Correspondence welcome @jjsharples and jjsharples@live.co.uk

# Gender Equality and Self-Fellatio: The Weird and Wonderful World of *Saga*

## Review by Richard Mooney

**Vaughan, Brian K. and Fiona Staples, creators. *Saga*. Image Comics, 2012-2016. Graphic Novel Series.**

Image comics, although leagues behind The Big Two comic publishing houses, remains one of the most exciting and diverse platforms for the medium of comics to date. One such title that stands out is *Saga* written by Brian K. Vaughan with Fiona Staples handling the art. Although on the surface one might consider it to be a space opera in the vein of "Star Wars" with its cast of colourful characters and settings interwoven with a family narrative, its representation of gender, subject matter and darker themes put it into a wholly different category.

In comics, gender representation is a real problem. With a considerably larger percentage of readers being male, most female characters are oversexualised and under-developed, their sole purpose to either please the male reader with her aesthetics or move along the plot for the more important male characters.

Vaughan had already dealt with gender representation in what is arguably his most popular series *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008) where a single male human must navigate a world populated entirely by women. Vaughan readdresses this balance in *Saga* by creating two extremely well-rounded protagonists who exist on equal footing in the parents Alana and Marko. The mother is as tough and dependable as her male counterpart and the father

is as flawed and emotional as his female counterpart. Despite the fantastical nature of the universe *Saga* is set in, some of the problems they face are very real: drug addiction, adultery, and domestic violence all flit in and out of the narrative that is their marriage fuelled by their love for each other and their daughter.

Although gender representation is always present, it does not form part of the actual story. Instead, race is at the forefront of the conflict that drives the plot. Both parents are from different worlds, two worlds that happen to be engaged in a cosmos wide war. Therefore the product of their union, their daughter Hazel, is considered an abomination to both sides. Hazel has acquired horns from her father's species, and wings from her mother's. To us, she is a celebration of diversity and social progress. Though everyone else may see her as a symbol, their interpretation of that symbol is very different. Each empire's desire to eliminate Hazel shows that despite their differences, both sides of the endless war share one thing in common, a xenophobic ideology. Their common hatred of the opposing side reveals they are more alike than different.

Ever since Alan Moore unleashed *Watchmen* (1987) on the world and helped birth the Dark Age of comic books, there has been a sort of one-upmanship in comics as writers push the boundaries of what the medium is capable of. While in one sense this has helped bring awareness to the masses that comics have an audience beyond children as many assume, there are times when the gratuitous nature oversteps the mark where certain scenes and dialogue is merely present for the shock factor.

*Saga* is no stranger to this. For example, in one scene where a fight breaks out between a main character and three henchmen like characters, one of the henchmen grabs the female character and yells "cunting cunt!" The use of extreme profanity is of course present in the world we live in and of course Vaughan is showcasing this by including such profanity in the scene, however, this phrase could easily be replaced and still have the desired effect.

And sometimes Vaughan can stretch out these bizarre scenes like when the characters have to collect some "Dragon Semen" for an antidote. Personally it feels as if he is deliberately trying to set up scenes of a profane nature to deliberately make the reader uncomfortable. So how do they get this final ingredient? It so happens that they witness the male dragon performing self-fellatio and they simply wait until it climaxes to collect the sperm.

These scenes are few and far between and some of them do contribute to the plot. In an early issue an assassin visits a planet that acts as one giant pleasure house where every fantasy and fetish can be found. During his perusal (giving Vaughan a large platform to showcase an array of far-fetched debauchery) he comes across a girl no older than a toddler. Despite the implicit references made to sex with a minor, the assassin rescues the girl and she becomes a part of the narrative down the line. Meaning that the scene played an important part in revealing the nature of the assassin and expanded our view of the universe in which the story is set. I have no problem with that. But when one is greeted with a two page spread of a giant lizard mouthing its own genitalia, you have to question whether it was necessary to the plot or is he simply trying to push the boundaries of the medium or just trying to up the shock factor for the sake of it.

But this is merely a fly on the windshield of a car. The most important thing to discuss about *Saga* is Vaughan's approach to gender, as mentioned earlier, both parents are well rounded characters with strengths and flaws. Both have shades of gender stereotypes in them; Alana's views early on in the comic are based off of "chick-lit" novels many of her peers consider to be trash, whereas Marko suffers a series of moral and personal failures due to his own imperfect nature.

The team behind the scenes is no less impressive than the antics on page. Fiona Staples has established herself as one of the leading artists in the field with her striking visuals and bravery on the art. Not only can she express the subtleties of expression needed to convey nearly every emotion on the human spectrum (and with Vaughan writing, you can

guarantee you will get them) as well as the scenes of debauchery which many would shy away from.

Vaughan excels is creating well rounded and flawed characters untethered by gender stereotypes which allows them to grow and be in flux. Sometimes we love them, sometimes we hate them, and that's what makes them real. It is a refreshing change from the infallible male protagonist and damsel in distress that has come to make Space Opera's so stale.

In fact, right from the very first page Vaughan destroys any preconception we might have of our female protagonist. We see her giving birth, sweat drenched and grimacing she asks "Am I shitting? It feels like I'm shitting!" The combination of opening on her less than flattering position coupled with her use of scatological profanity sets her up as a real person and not a stereotype to fit around the male character. Alana is a woman and her concern is one that many women face during childbirth, it is not unnatural, nor should we be disgusted by it. Something beautiful comes out of this act, and that is how you should view *Saga;* as a series of beautiful and moving moments with the odd reference to shitting in it. A*s* her husband says on the very next page to give us our first insight into their marriage and to begin our journey through the wonderful world of *Saga*, "you have never been as beautiful as you are right now."

To conclude, *Saga* is a comic that is continuously making strides against the two powerhouse publishers who seem to have control over the way women are perceived in comics, the way stories are told and the way they can be told. And I hope they can continue to do so for a good while yet.

**Bionote**
Richard Mooney fought for the academic value of comics at University; now he has written comics which include *The Adventures of Percy Nobleman, Uptown Chronicles* and *Daughter of Titan* from his home just outside of Glasgow, UK.

# Gothic Perils of the Academic Life

## Review by Inés G. Labarta

**Ward, Geoff. *You're Not Dead*. Garn Press, 2016. The Midnight Books 1. Novel.**

> In the Lodge the Night Porter was gazing into the *Sun* (…)
>> – A gun. I need a gun.
>>
>> – Wotcher want a gun for? You ain't gonna shoot the Principal, are you?
>>
>> – No. I'm going to shoot my research supervisor. (Ward 265)

What PhD student hasn't – in the form of a dark fantasy, at least – had such a desire at some point of the research quest? *You're Not Dead*, the first novel by writer and academic Geoff Ward, portrays the daily struggles of a Literature researcher sprinkled with a surrealism that reminds one of Salvador Dalí's masterpieces. So, if you have, have been or even wish to start your own personal adventure in academia, this is a book that will speak directly to your soul.

Miles Proctor is a young professor in London who is given a very special task: to find *Transmutations*, a 1895 book that "it was claimed could literally teach its reader how to perform acts of serious magic" (Ward 4). As expected, this book has a bloody history behind it– it is said to have doomed the magician Alesteir Crowley and sunk the Titanic. Miles will have to fight against demons, immortals and secret societies to add this volume to his university library. And he may find true love on the way, too.

I'm not going to lie here: this is a story you have read before. The actual plot of *You're Not Dead* may not impress the audience with its originality. Secret societies in which members pass on ancient magical knowledge, Egyptian treasures that will grant eternal power to whoever keeps them and a cursed book... these are just few of the many tropes present in *You're Not Dead.* But a story is not merely a plot and a main character – these are the base ingredients of the potion, but a skilled sorcerer will use many more. The rest of

*You're Not Dead* is so original and brilliantly presented that the plot and Miles lose some attention – and this is for the better.

When getting a new book, what is the first thing a reader may notice when opening it? For me, it's the layout and formatting. As happens with cakes, most of the times we choose and 'devour' fiction for its looks. A page with almost no margins where sentences pile on top of each other can be boring and even disturbing, whilst blank spaces let the reader breathe and invite the imagination to flow. George Perec in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997) celebrated this freedom in format: "I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it. I incite blanks, spaces (jumps in the meaning, discontinuities, transitions, changes of key)" (11). I have specially liked the way Ward shows dialogues preceded by an en dash and completely separated from narrative paragraphs. This helps, visually, to highlight the interaction between characters. It also makes an appealing contrast between the florid language in the narration since the dialogues are more direct and, sometimes, hilarious. Thanks to all these innovations, Ward's novel exudes gracility and freshness.

Another strength in this piece of fiction is Ward's ability to mix a wide range of voices. Almost as if the writer is constantly modulating the lens the reader perceives the book through, Ward starts by using a classic omniscient narrator's voice and passes to the first person to reveal a particular character's thinking process. There is no warning when this will happen – apart from the evident change in verbs. Nevertheless, far from being intrusive or forced, this is a feature that gives the story a unique rhythm and allows the reader to enjoy the diversity of this novel's cast, from Miles's indecisive PhD student, Malcolm Coates, to a very peculiar librarian obsessed with Egypt, John Spendrift, to Miles's nemesis, the Glaswegian gangster Kenneth McLeod:

> Good grief, how can they show a goat doing *that* on prime time TV? Can goats d*o* that, anyway? And now the goat's playing the flute or something, while still doing the other, don't make me laugh. Except that it did make Malcom laugh hysterically, great floods of uncontrollable mirth that had him rolling on the floor, howling with lung-emptying convulsions… (260)

The main achievement of this text is the exciting features it adds to an existing sub-genre. Students being heroes – and chasing old books instead of gold treasures– is a recurrent topic in fantasy nowadays. For instance, we have Ariel Manto in Scarlett Thomas's *The End of Mr Y* (2006) a PhD student who discovers a book in a second hand bookshop that allows her to time-travel. *You're Not Dead* also explores the image of books as demonic artefacts, something done by Clive Barker in *Mr B. Gone* (2008), a very particular version of the invention of printed literature. Schools and universities as places where one can attain not only academic but also magical knowledge can be found in more mainstream works such as the J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) sagas. And, as it couldn't be other way, magic in *You're Not Dead* is closely linked to language and the power of the written word, a reminiscence of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* fantasy series (1968-1990).

> – In exceptional circumstances. Words can, if skilfully directed, conjure the things to which they refer. This direction of travel you can see latent in the Chinese ideogram, which is a verbal picturing of the thing itself, or numerous ancient languages. (Ward 287)

Ward's contribution to this sub-genre is his surrealist imagination, which impregnates the novel in the form of metaphors and wonderfully insane images mixed with delicate irony. For instance, in a scene at the middle of the book, Miles is trying to contact Camden Borough Council regarding a problem with overflowing bins in his neighbourhood. Dealing – and getting frustrated with – bureaucracy is something everyone has experienced. However, when a demon decides to intercept Miles's phone line, things get a bit out of hand is one of the most brilliant scenes of this novel.

> – I'm sorry, I couldn't quite catch that. Please wait, and you will be connected to an advisor. If you believe that papalistic followers of Rome have moved to your neighbourhood, why are you wasting your time listening to me, go and do something about it. (…) If you are a benighted retard or live south of the River Tweed, which comes to the same thing, please accept my condolences. (An explosive, ripping fart. Miles held the phone further off.) (…)
> An eighteen inch long tongue flicked out [of the phone] tasted the air, deluging the general vicinity with rank, charnel-house spittle, then retreated. (138)

*You're Not Dead* is a novel of Baroque writing that will enchant fans of works such as Melvin Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946) and those who have any relation with the world of academia. Whilst Miles Proctor still needs to mature as the main character, this is just the first volume of the *Midnight Books*; the author has plenty of time to make us fall in love with his protagonist. The exuberant madness of Ward's world as well as the unforgettable secondary characters make this novel a book that will haunt me for months to come.

**Bionote**

Inés G. Labarta is a writer and Creative Writing PhD student from Lancaster University, UK. Her publications include *Los Pentasónicos* a trilogy of novels (Edebé, 2008-2010) and the novellas *McTavish Manor* (Holland House, 2016) and *Kabuki* (Dairea, 2017). Her PhD thesis focuses on the literary similarities between Ireland and Spain through the creation of a trilogy of novellas. Her ultimate goal is to walk to Japan and then write a book about it.