

## PROPOSAL for *Colloque international IA Fictions*

### **Robots, Clones & the Soul Question:**

*Artificial immortality in the work of Tanith Lee and C.J. Cherryh*

Judith Pinter, jpinter@illinois.edu, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In this paper I suggest that the drive to create artificial life is tied to the deeper, older, and darker human desire for immortality. I explore the speculative writings of two prominent female novelists of science fiction, the British writer Tanith Lee, and the American, Hugo-award winning writer, C.J. Cherryh. After noting religious mythology as the traditional source for narratives promising life after death, I look at the worlds imagined by Lee and Cherryh in which that giver of hope has shifted from religion to science, worlds in which robotics, genetic cloning, chemically-enhanced-psychological manipulation, and digitization, provide human society with new paths towards the dream of eternal life.

Tanith Lee (1947-2015) was the first woman to receive the British Fantasy award, and although she is best known for her fantasy and horror, her science novels also have enjoyed global success. In this paper I look at *Drinking Sapphire Wine* (originally released as a two-book series, (Daw, 1976 and 1977), and *Silver Metal Lover* (1981). In Lee's speculative futures religion is irrelevant within mechanized societies but reemerges in relationship to questions of immortality. The first is a dystopian world in which human bodies have been divided from their souls; people live dangerously hedonistic lives with the assurance that they will be lab-reincarnated following any accident or suicide in a choice of body types and genders. Artificially Intelligent mechanized beings run the machines that keep humans immortal, apparently altruistically. They are superior to humans in nearly every measurable sense, but lack a soul, which condemns them to be servants, even though they run the world. The question of the whether a soul could incarnate into a machine-based artificial human Lee takes up directly in *Silver Metal Lover*.

C.J. Cherryh received the Hugo award for *Cyteen* (1988), the story of a brilliant, but flawed scientific genius, Ariane Emory, the mind behind a colonization of space powered by the genetic manipulation and production of human clones, called *azi*. As lab-born human property they are contracted out to various kinds of service. They are given false memories and are "tape-taught" to fill the roles for which their gene-set has been optimized. When Ari is murdered, her plan to bring herself back is set in motion; scientists clone her gene set and raise the child in a simulation of the social, cultural, intimate, and hormonal circumstances that produced the first Ari, so that she can *become Ari*, not only legally, in order to take over the property rights and social identity of her "predecessor," but *incarnating as the former*, continuing the scientific research that no one else can understand, and guided by a chatbot created by Ari to help her clone become her. Cherryh has also explored immortality in her fantasy novels, but in this paper I am most interested in the ways in which technology mediates artificial life and personality – the part of human experience that we most associate with the soul, and the promise of life after death. In this regard, I look also look at two of her short novels, from the same universe, *Port Eternity* and *A Voyager in Night* in which a more literal immortality is achieved, through accident in the first case, and alien intention in the second. The latter novel explores digitized/virtualized immortality, of the kind portrayed in the television series *Black Mirror*. It feels quite modern, but Cherryh was already there in 1984.

The paper will argue that these novels illustrate a narrative shift that has accompanied the rise of AI in which the quest for immortality has leapt from religious mythology to techno-mechanical mythology instead, but that that the essential questions about the nature of the human soul and its relationship to our mortal and tragically short-lived physical bodies remain much the same.

## Brief Bio-bibliography

Judith Pinter is an Associate Teaching Professor, and the Acting Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She directs the Playful by Design Game Studies initiative, and the Electronic Literatures & Literacies Lab, at the University of Illinois. (See [el3.judithpinter.com](http://el3.judithpinter.com)) She has written extensively on hypnosis in history and popular culture, releasing *Hypnosis: A brief history* for Blackwell-Wiley, in 2008 and two chapters for the APA's *Clinical Book of Hypnosis* in 2010, "On a Clear day you can see forever: Hypnosis in literature and film," and "Il n'y a pas d'hypnotisme: A history of hypnosis in theory and practice."

Her more recent work looks at the role of narrative in media persuasion, propaganda and narrative AI (chatbots). A representative work is the forthcoming chapter, "The Valley Between Us: Narrative manipulation and information bias in the racial segregation of Milwaukee," in William Asprey and Melissa O'Connell, eds. *Where to Live: Informational Aspects in the Internet Era*. Rowman & Littlefield. Her work in draft includes *Information Science: The Basics*, for Routledge, and "Stories from the Other Notebook: The poetics of encounter in post-war Croatia," in William H. Leggett and Ida Fadzillah Leggett eds, *Field Stories: Teaching the Relevance of Anthropology in the 21st Century*, Lexington Press.

Her last academic presentation (as of submission of this proposal) was "Trolls at Play: Teaching media manipulation & election interference through classroom role-playing (online!)," at the *European Union Center Online Speaker Series*, at the University of Illinois in April 2020. Her next presentations are slated to be "Uncontinuous Adventuring: A geographically disruptive collaborative game jam," at the *Electronic Literature Organization Conference and Media Celebration: (un)continuity*, University of Central Florida, July 2020; and "Where Wikipedia meets Minecraft: Collaborative game design as transmediated public history," at the *Resources and Visibility in Digital Humanities* conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago in October, 2020; and "The Problem of Innocence: Suicide in the films of Vinko Brešan, Goran Paskaljević, and Pjer Zalica. For the *Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Meetings*, Washington D.C., November 2020.

Pinter is also a storyteller, musician and author of interactive fiction. Her games can be played on her personal website: [judithpinter.com/wp/interactive-fiction/](http://judithpinter.com/wp/interactive-fiction/). Her music can be heard on Spotify and iTunes.