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SFRA Review

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Submissions
The SFRA Review encourages submissions of reviews, review essays that cover several related
texts, interviews, and feature articles. Submission guidelines are available at http://www.sfra.org/
or by inquiry to the appropriate editor. All submitters must be current SFRA members. Contact the Editors for other submissions or for correspondence.

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this year. However, I wanted to announce that I will be organising next year’s conference at The University of Liverpool in the UK. This will be a joint conference with CRSF: Current Research in Speculative Fictions, and will take place from the 27th-30th June, 2016. The theme will be “Systems and Knowledge.” I will be releasing more details via the usual channels, including the next issue of the Review. In the meantime, to all those who are attending SFRA 2015, enjoy the conference; to those who aren’t, do take advantage of the social media coverage of the event - see Craig’s column for details. And to everyone, enjoy the summer. I’ll look forward to meeting you next year in Liverpool.

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

#SFRA2015

Craig Jacobsen

THE SFRA’S ANNUAL CONFERENCE is central to the association’s mission. We gather to share our scholarship and our fellowship, to attach faces to names, to recognize excellence in our field, and to begin or add installments to highly episodic relationships. But, of course, we can’t all be there. Or not entirely there, anyway.

This year’s conference will be in Stony Brook, New York, from June 25th through the 27th (www.sfra.org/sfra2015). I look forward to spending a few days with as many of you as can attend, and to involve many of you who cannot get there in person. We are making a concerted effort to use a range of social media to help members (and non-members) experience some of the conference. We’ll be posting photos to Instagram (@sciencefictionresearch), and tweeting from both the general SFRA Twitter account (@sfranews) and the conference-specific account (@sfra2015), so if you’re active on either of those, add us to your feed. Anyone who wants to pitch in on whatever social media channels they traffic should use the hashtag #sfra2015. Of course the Science Fiction Research Association Facebook page will be active as well, if you’re following us there.

We’re not livestreaming any events, nor will the banquet be available to enjoy via your virtual reality goggles,
but we're working to make SFRA 2015 at least a bit more technologized. If you're a long-time subscriber to the SFRA listserv (now at mail.vtlibraries.com/mailman/listinfo/sfra-l_vtlibraries.com in case you lost track of it during its recent server relocation), but otherwise firmly embedded in your luddite skepticism, let this year’s conference be your excuse to add another channel to your information feed.

Whether you’ll be there in person or virtually/vicariously, I hope that many of you will participate in this year’s exploration of “The SF We Don’t (Usually) See: Suppressed Histories, Liminal Voices, Emerging Media.”

VICE-PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Live Long and Prosper

Keren Omry

THERE’S NOTHING LIKE a blackout to make you appreciate technology. As you’ll all have noticed, our SFRA listserv is finally back after weeks of radio silence. A lot has happened since we were last in touch: Spock died; Le Guin lambasted Ishiguro who may or may not have written a Fantasy novel, Puppies – both Sad and Rabid – seem to have taken over the Hugos, sparking a “Puppygate” uproar; the score for an SF Video Game scored top ranks in a Classical Music survey; news and trailers are out for a new Star Wars, a new Terminator, a new Blade Runner, the provocative Ex-Machina, and a plethora of new Superhero films that promise to extend and revise the SF cinematic canon. In other science fictional news, liquid water may have been found on Mars, female chimpanzees have been documented using spears to hunt, and Google is working on a Robot army (as if ever we were in doubt that Wells, Clark, Asimov, and others of their ilk weren’t the parents of the Contemporary!). The good news is that the absence has given us opportunity to miss one another. The even better news is that it’s given us the chance to realize it might be time to flex our technological muscles and expand our use of the various platforms we have available. This is something that the EC is working on but I’d like to encourage you all to share your CFPs, your questions, your comments, and thoughts on the SFRA Facebook page or Twitter account.

As the debates on genre wars continue, and the politics of SF and the science fiction of Politics rage ever on, we can do worse than keep doing what we do in the study of Science Fiction and Fantasy. Spock is still dead so in the meantime, live long and prosper. And see you in New York!

SFRA Business

Sideways in Time
[conference report]

Chris Pak

I ATTENDED the first day of a two day conference about alternative histories, Sideways in Time, held on the 30th and 31st of March 2015 at the University of Liverpool. This event was co-organised by Glyn Morgan (University of Liverpool, founder of CRSF: Current Research in Speculative Fictions) and Chucky (Charul) Patel (Lancaster University, founder of the Fantastika series of conferences), and was partly sponsored by Lancaster University. Keynotes included Karen Hellekson, author of the critical text The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time (2000), Stephen Baxter and Adam Roberts. An author event was hosted on the Sunday before the conference at Waterstones One, a discussion between Stephen Baxter and Adam Roberts that set the tone for the conference to follow. This charming and fascinating conversation about the process of writing alternate histories was both enjoyable and a welcome insight into the work of two authors whose contributions to alternative history have been wide-ranging.

The conference began with Hellekson’s keynote entitled “Agency and Contingency in Televisual Alternate History Texts.” Hellekson presented an overview of her structural anatomy of the alternate history detailed in her book and applied this reading to several works of SF television, including Charlie Jade (2005), Fringe (2008-) and An Englishman’s Castle (1978). Hellekson notes that televisual alternative histories are not about history but are focused upon the individual’s agency and upon self-contingency. She draws on Richard Rorty’s formulation of contingency, irony and solidarity and points to how we create stories or narratives to explain one’s origins and to trace cause and effect relationships. Contingency is thus a narrative and temporal construction with which to frame agency. In his own keynote titled “Alternate Cosmologies,” Stephen Baxter discusses the place of the Sidewise award, for which he is one of the judges.
and surveys a wide range of alternate conceptions of the universe in sf, including some of his own contributions as well as (with many collegial jokes) Roberts’ own *Swiftly: A Novel* (2004).

The first panel, “Examining Female Perspectives of Alternate History,” featured papers by Amanda Dillon, (University of East Anglia), Rosie M. Lewis (Durham University) and Sarah Lohmann (Durham University) (all in the UK). In “Speaking Unspoken Timelines: Feminist Time Travel and Alternate Histories in Kage Baker’s *The Company,*” Dillon explores the use of alternative history in a specific work by Baker in order to highlight how female oriented time travel narratives view the past as fixed, thus limiting female agency and highlighting how history is subject to male authorship. Lewis “Re-envisioning Female Subjectivity, Aesthetics and Collective Resistance in Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames*” examines Borden’s innovative cinematic portrayal of a dystopian future where a women’s radical feminist revolutionary army exposes the racism of a patriarchal US state. Lohmann’s “On the Edge of Time: Feminist Utopias, Complexity Theory and Parallel Future Histories” reads the dynamism of the critical utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) in terms of complexity theory to address the interrelations of time, space and utopia in the novel.

“Responses to the Enlightenment,” panel two, featured fascinating papers by Alex Broadhead (University of Liverpool) and Jim Clarke (Coventry University) (both in the UK). Broadhead discussed Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “P’s Correspondence” (1845) – the first fictional English language alternative history – in his talk “The Romantics in Alternate History from Hawthorne to Card: Beyond Enlightenment Historiography.” Broadhead describes how the lives of the Romantics offered a rich source of material for the imagination of alternate histories and that this has continued to the present day in works such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990), Orson Scott Card’s *Alvin Maker* series (1987–2014), Susannah Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004) and, as was raised in the question and answer session, Dan Simmons’ *Hyperion duology* (1989–1990). In “Unwriting the Reformation: Anti-Catholic Uchronias in Science Fiction,” Jim Clarke explores Catholicism and its oppositional relationship to Enlightenment values in such works as Keith Roberts’ *Pavane* (1968), Kingsley Amis’ *The Alteration* (1976), Anthony Burgess’ *The Wanting Seed* (1962) and Walter Miller Jr’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959). He shows how these alternate histories unravel the influence of the Enlightenment by presenting futures that restrict scientific development on the one hand, or that position Catholicism as addressing the anxieties surrounding Malthusian overpopulation and unbridled technological development on the other.

Panel three, “Moments and People of Power,” featured papers by Francis Gene-Rowe, (Birkbeck College, UK), Fred Smoler (Sarah Lawrence College, US) and Jonathan Rayner (University of Sheffield, UK). In “Blasting Open the Historical Continuum: Antihistoricism in Benjamin, Dick & Le Guin,” Gene-Rowe cites Walter Benjamin’s call for historicism to be resisted and reads works such as *Valis* (1981) and “The Lathe of Heaven” (1971) against his conception of utopia and the accumulation of debris. Smoler analyses the question of the dominance of great men in (alternative) history in “Refiguring the Heroic in Two Alternate Histories: Stephen Vincent Benét and Harry Turtledove,” focusing primarily on Benét’s “The Curfew Tolls” (1937) and Harry Turtledove’s “Counting Potsherds” (1989) Rayner explores the contemporary imagination of an alternate Japanese history in anime in “Forever Being Yamato: Alternative Pacific War Histories in Japanese Film and Anime,” focusing particular attention on the place of the flagship Yamato, a battleship commissioned during World War II, in film and anime.

The last panel of the first day, “Alternate History in Europe,” featured papers by Mikhaylo Nazarenko (Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, Ukraine), Marzena Sokólska-Paryż (University of Warsaw, Poland) and myself (Lancaster University, UK). Nazarenko explained in his illuminating survey of Ukranian alternate histories, “Post-Colonial Alternate History: The Case of Ukrainian Literature,” that such works are examples of “Chimerical Prose” and are written in both Ukrainian and Russian. The Ukranian appellation for alternate histories translates as “wishful thinking.” Nazarenko explains that the history of conflict in Ukraine has meant that its history is effectively mysterious and infrequently discussed. Nazarenko’s survey points to several works of Ukranian alternate history that speak back to questions of national identity and conflict that have a special resonance in the context of the current civil war in Ukraine. To conclude, Nazarenko argues that in order to go forward, Ukranian alternate histories have attempted to address the need to construct a past as a guide to the future. Sokólska-Paryż’s “Ideological (Mis)Uses of Genre: Dystopian Visions of the ‘Past-Present’ in Daniel Quinn’s and Stephen Fry’s Alternate Histories” explores one of the most popular forms of alternate history, the
Nazi victory in World War II. Sokółowska-Paryż explores representations of history, the third Reich and Jewishness against the context of René Girard's generative mimetic scapegoat mechanism and Michael Goldberg's multidirectional memory. In my paper, “It Is One Story: Writing a Global Alternative History in Kim Stanley Robinson’s The Years of Rice and Salt,” I explore Robinson’s use of the alternate history to interrogate the assumptions underlying conceptions of nationalism, race and history itself.

The first day of Sideways in Time was an illuminating exploration of the rich diversity of alternate histories throughout time. As I mentioned above, I was regretfully unable to attend the second day, which featured Adam Roberts’ keynote and papers by Andrew M. Butler (a keynote at CRSF 2015), Chloe Alexandra Germaine Buckley, Molly Cobb, Daniel Dohrn, Laura Ettenfield, Leimar Garcia-Siino, Hellen Giblin-Jowett, Alan Gregory and Dawn Stobart, Pascal Lemaire, Anna McFarlane, Matt Mitrovich, Ursula Troche and Rachel Mizsei Ward. An edited collection of essays based upon the papers presented at this conference is currently being planned. Sideways in Time is another excellent example of the contemporary research into speculative fictions being conducted internationally, and it further illustrates the importance of the University of Liverpool as a centre for the study of the mode, along with Lancaster University as a valuable and supportive partner in expanding research in speculative fictions.

BSLS: British Society for Literature and Science [conference report]

Chris Pak

THE TENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE of the British Society for Literature and Science (BSLS) was held at the University of Liverpool from the 16th-18th April, 2015. The conference was organised by Greg Lynall under the auspices of the “Literature, Science and Environment” research cluster at the university. Keynote speakers included the literary critics Claire Preston (Queen Mary, University of London) and Patricia Fara (University of Cambridge), and the scientist Keith Barnham (Imperial College London). While this conference was not a sf conference, it hosted several presentations from researchers working on sf. This report will account for the sf elements at the conference and will therefore necessarily elide some of the fascinating research into the relationship between literature and science in other literary domains that is currently being conducted.

On the first day of the conference, I presented a paper on the “Environmentalism and Climate Change” panel with Alan Rauch (UNC Charlotte, US) and Anton Kirchhofer and Anna Auguscik (University of Oldenburg, Germany). Rauch’s paper, “Terra Rima: W. H. Hudson, Environmentalism, and the Collapse of Nature” explored the work of the naturalist and writer of the speculative utopian fictions A Crystal Age (1887) and Green Mansions (1904). Although an extremely popular writer whose Green Mansions has been adapted for film (starring Audrey Hepburn as Rima), there has been little contemporary research conducted into the significance of Hudson’s work for ecologically inflected sf. I presented a paper based on my work on terraforming, entitled “The Rich Sun, / The Power of Growth, the Lever of the Future: Climate Change, Biospheres and Sunlight in Science Fiction.” Focusing on Frederick Turner’s epic poem of terraforming, Genesis (1988), and Kim Stanley Robinson’s 2312 (2012), I show how these works use the motif of sunlight to represent the expansion into the solar system in terms of the enlargement of a terran biosphere. Although they explain that they are not currently working on sf, Kirchhofer and Auguscik’s “Visions of the Immoral Scientist: Morality and the Perception of Science in Ian McEwan’s Solar and other Contemporary Climate Change Stories” takes a reader-response approach to fiction by analysing reviews of works in a manner that chimes with Joan Haran’s call for more attention to reviews in her article “A Multi-Sited Reader Response Archive” in The Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction <http://eatonjournal.ucr.edu/>.

The second day featured the panel “Invention, Imagination and Technology”, with Courtney Salvey (University of Kent), Andy Sawyer (University of Liverpool) and Nickianne Moody (Liverpool John Moores University) and Patrick Parrinder (University of Reading) (all in the UK). Salvey provides an excellent analysis of technological invention in “That ‘Light Bulb Moment’: Inventing Invention in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain.” She argues that technological invention refers both to a thing and an event and that this moment has often been told in terms of the genius of an inventor-hero. In “Jane Webb Loudon’s Science Writing: Knowledge within Boundaries,” Sawyer and Moody explore the sig-
nificance of Loudon’s engagement with science through her work of sf, The Mummy! (1827), and her editorial work and authorship of texts relating to gardening and horticulture. They argue that Loudon’s editorship of The Gardener’s Magazine was well ahead of its time and that Loudon carefully positions science as a source of enjoyment that women could have access to, thus highlighting the oft-overlooked contributions and engagement with science by women in the 19th century. Parrinder explores in “Science vs. Alchemy under the Microscope: Fitzjames O’Brien’s ‘The Diamond Lens’ (1858)” the representation of the microscopic in an early work of sf. He shows how the new perspectives being opened up by the microscope and the telescope allowed writers to posit a plurality of worlds separated at the scalar level. Parrinder points to O’Brien’s allusions to Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” and Count de Gabalis (1670) by Abbé N. de Montfaucon de Villars, which he contends was common source material for both Pope and O’Brien.

The third and last day saw several panels of sf interest. “Teaching Literature and Science to Literature Students and Scientists” featured a discussion by Will Tattersdill (English Literature, University of Birmingham), Nick Battey (Biological Sciences, University of Reading) and John Holmes (English Literature, University of Reading). Vic Callaghan (Computer Sciences and Electronic Engineering, University of Essex) and Ping Zheng (Business, Canterbury Christ Church University), and Duncan MacKay (Astrophysics, University of Kent). Tattersdill recounted his experiences teaching sf and science to undergraduate literature students while Battey and Holmes (the chair of the BSLS) discussed their interdisciplinary course for students studying either science or literature. They remarked on the challenges that undergraduate students faced when focusing on science and literature and noted that far more students of science applied for the course. Callaghan and Zheng discussed the ways their students made use of sf scenarios to widen their thinking about possible business ideas. Zheng noted that many business students who foundered when asked to think of possible ideas had far more success when asked to think in terms of a fictional context, allowing them to conceptualise business products that were far more exciting than they were previously able. Callaghan discussed his experiences working with Intel, who are pioneering the use of sf scenarios to think about technological development in the near future so as to be better able to adapt their business to change. Finally, MacKay explored his experiences teaching literature to science students, noting how strategies such as the reordering of poems into an analogue of mathematical formulas – which he notes that some linguists take to the extreme in their grammatical and semantic tagging of texts – allowed science students to engage with poetry and to think about literature in different ways.

The final panel discussed in this report – “Scale: European Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (SLSAEu) panel” – featured a presentation by a regular contributor to the SFRA Review, Victor Grech (Medical School), and his colleague in literature, Ivan Callus (both at the University of Malta). This panel was organised in association with the European Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (SLSAEu), an organisation that promises to widen the scholarly engagement with sf internationally. In his presentation “Cosmic Scale,” Grech surveyed the multiplicity of levels to the scientific categorisation of scale and in doing so hinted at the way in which science, far from closing down the creative imagination, opened further vistas for speculating about the unknown. Grech’s paper functioned as a kind of preamble for Callus’ fascinating speculation on the possibility of achieving an all-embracing theory of literature in his presentation “Scale and Literature, or, A Literary Theory of Everything.” Far from advocating for the possibility of such a project, Callus drew on Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Aleph” (1945) and “The Library of Babel” (1941) to point out how such an endeavour, if attempted at all, would be a fraught process that would be science-fictional in itself.

My first experience of the BSLS, then, involved an exciting recognition of the range of engagements with science that scholars of literature, culture and film are making. This event speaks to the growing interest in science in literature, one that necessarily includes a widening interest in sf. Other panels that I was unfortunately unable to attend included the panel “Animals and Hybrids”, featuring papers by Emily Alder (Edinburgh Napier University) on “Doctor Moreau’s Pink Rabbits” and Laurence Davies (University of Glasgow) on “Superdogs in Mikhail Bulgakov’s Heart of a Dog (1925/1968/1987) and Olaf Stapledon’s Sirius (1944).” Jenni Halpin, a former SFRA secretary, was also in attendance and delivered a paper entitled “Haber’s Poison: Feeding the Imagination.” The conference also hosted an ASLE-UKI panel, an organisation affiliated with the SFRA, demonstrating a further connection with a group that has been expanding its engagement with sf. In sum, the BSLS, with its links to SLSAEu, ASLE-UKI and, through myself and Halpin, the SFRA, promises to expand sf scholarship in new and exciting ways.
Teaching Science Fiction
Brian Baker

YESTERDAY I GAVE a lecture on Blade Runner to a cohort of first-year English Literature students on their core literature course. Blade Runner has been worked on that course for a few years now as a film text that can be discussed in the light of key ideas and theories about postmodernism. The day before, the students had been treated to an introductory lecture on the postmodern by Professor Terry Eagleton; it was my job to follow this up, show a clip or two from the film, and suggest how they could think about postmodernism through Blade Runner, and Blade Runner through postmodernism.

And so I began with Fredric Jameson, attempting to historicise the idea both through Jameson’s own proposal of a ‘rupture’ around 1968-73, making manifest the emergent pressures and cultural formations that can be identified with a period of postmodernity:

New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture – these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society (‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, Foster 1983: 124-5).

In the course of the lecture I asked the students to think about the film, and in particular the representation of the city, through the shift in relations of production and consumption identified by Jameson, and especially in relation to the condition of the replicants as artificial subjects. We began at the beginning, looking at the opening sequence of the Los Angeles of 2019, the centrality of the idea, and then the Voight-Kampff scene between Holden and Leon. What is the difference between human and replicant, I asked, and what happens when we see them die? Do they not bleed?

Even in a large lecture hall, many students (most quite near the front, I must admit) put up their hand and contributed, looking at the film images and thinking about the ethical implications of empathy as a marker of difference between human and replicant. At the end of the lecture, a few students came down to ask questions, several of them about issues of post-coloniality, the replicants as subordinate others, Baty (and perhaps Deckard) as a slave. A few more followed up the lecture with an email, asking about further reading; one, who confessed he hadn’t read much sf but was enjoying Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, asked me whether I could recommend some other sf texts to him as it had really made him interested in the genre.

Such responses, in a core literature course for first year undergraduates, many of whom would have little experience or interest in sf, is of course very pleasing. It’s surprising how quickly one can engage undergraduate students of English in sf, in courses which are not specialist genre-based modules but instead are thematic, survey, period, or form-based. On a second-year course in Literature and Film, taught by two 90-minute interactive lecture-workshops per week, a week is given over to sf, where we have looked at Dick’s ‘The Minority Report’ and Spielberg’s 2002 film. Again, the responses are excellent: thoughtful, engaged, inquisitive. We look at the ways in which the short story is adapted, and (through watching and discussion of film clips) we think through ethical issues of pre-emption, the biopolitical, time and determinism; film spectacle, contemporary cinematic sf, and the rhetorical strategies of persuasion that are central to the film; and how film sf and the sf short story differ formally.

In the “Design, Delivery and Evaluation” essay that closes Teaching Science Fiction (2011), Andy Sawyer and Peter Wright note that ‘most students are familiar with sf in its televisual and cinematic forms’ (235), and rather than attempting to disabuse them of ideas of what sf might be and enable them to discover what sf “really” is, it’s important to work with the body of knowledge and experience the students already have at their disposal, their frames of reference or what I call their “internal libraries”. In a book-based discipline, English literature, it would be tempting to privilege the complex and sometimes difficult matter of science fiction (literature) texts, rather than the pleasures of televisual or cinematic sf. I like to work across disciplinary boundaries, as must already be evident, and foregrounding what the stu-

1 Department of English and Creative Writing, Lancaster University.
students bring to the seminar table enables them to think through their own approaches to the genre, to become more self-aware as scholars of the genre. As all teachers know, getting past the initial ‘I don’t like this’ response to any kind of literary or film text (especially ones that challenge mainstream patterns or normalised responses and reception) is one of the things you first learn to deal with. With students of sf, it’s often a matter of the reverse, of course: allowing oneself to be critical of what one likes.

The exposure to ideas and scholarship about sf is really helpful (to me), I think, when students choose their optional classes for their third year. My module in science fiction (which looks at literary and film sf) is always very popular, recruits excellently, is very lively and great fun to teach, and produces excellent work. It is, in some senses, an “ideas” course, and my intention is not simply to ask students to consider the generic specifics of science fiction in both textual and filmic forms, but to face outwards onto the worlds that produce those texts and films. There’s more depth to discussion and deeper wells of knowledge to engage, as you would expect from a third-year class who either like sf already or find the prospect of finding out more intriguing. But in some senses my approach to the class is similar to when I teach Blade Runner to first-year students: how do issues of class, gender, ethnicity, power, ethics, biopolitics, space, violence and so on work through this text we have, what does it say and not say, how does it make us think differently about the world?

As Sawyer and Wright insist, Darko Suvin’s ‘conception of science fiction as “cognitive estrangement” is [...] essential’ (233–4) in setting out the conceptual ground for students coming to sf as a field of study in an undergraduate degree program. When I teach science fiction as a discrete module, it’s never just about sf, and nor is it about the relation between the text and its time and place of production, nor even what it reveals about “our” world by imagining another.

When I teach sf, I hope to bring the students along to a sense of ourselves in that time and space, in that classroom, with those backgrounds, with those experiences. I neither wish nor expect students to aspire to or achieve a kind of objectivity with regard to their relation to the texts. I’m committed as a tutor, to them and to the work in hand and to a way of studying literature (not just science fiction), and my politics are entirely up front. I don’t expect students to agree with me – in fact, in the very first session I like to set up an informal atmosphere of open discussion and (friendly, collegiate) contention, a dynamic which will help maintain a spirit of open enquiry and participation – but I do expect them to be present, and not just in the classroom. Understanding and acknowledging the ground upon which you stand is crucial to what I do as an academic and scholar, and that’s what I encourage with regard to my students’ engagement with the course.

James Gunn, writing about teaching science fiction on the Gunn Center website, suggests three ways in which one could approach teaching science fiction:

The first might be called “the great books” course, in which the focus would be on novels and their critical analysis and what made them great. The second might be called “the ideas in science fiction” course, dealing with how SF stories can be used to dramatize contemporary problems. The third would be the historical approach—what is science fiction and how did it get to be that way? (http://www.sfcenter.ku.edu/teaching.htm)

Sawyer and Wright, referring to Gunn, suggest a fourth: ‘teaching another subject […] by considering how these subjects had been treated in science fiction’ (2011: 220). Gunn confesses that he ‘got trapped into the great books approach in 1969 when my son and a friend organized a course, and asked me to be the teacher of record’, but quickly shifted his approach to something that ‘would focus on the historic development of science fiction so that the students would be able to place their SF reading in better context and continue their later reading with greater understanding’. Gunn’s suspicion of a “great books” approach is reflected by my own. Creating a viable syllabus which will engage students, encourage dialogue between texts and allow a developmental sense of the genre (allowing for chronology without ones’ choices being determined by strictly linear historical placement) is far more important to me than any sense of the “value” of an sf text or otherwise, particularly as the critical history of sf, as Sawyer and Wright note, ‘has engaged in a distinct argument with traditional literary studies [and] primarily against the idea of the canon and the liberal-humanist approach of studying the “best” books (2011: 233). My approach would most closely approximate Gunn’s second suggestion, the ‘ideas in science fiction’, but perhaps couched more as ‘ideas through or negotiated by science fiction’, indicating that sf sometimes carries ideological or cultural freight of which it is unconscious.

As I wrote above, it is in what texts do not or cannot
say, as much as what they explicitly and intentionally imagine, that the work of the seminar takes place. In this, I draw from the work of Pierre Macherey, and in particular his 1978 text *A Theory of Literary Production*, on which I lecture elsewhere on the English Literature degree program. In a chapter called ‘The Spoken and the Unspoken’, Macherey argues that ‘the speech of the book comes from a certain silence […]’ [T]he book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it could not exist’ (85); the interrelation of speech and silence indicates the gaps, the absences, ‘the precise conditions for the appearance of any utterance’ that are part of any text (86). These silences are, he suggests, ‘what the work cannot say’ (87). The work of the critic, then, is to ‘make this silence speak’, to reveal the gaps and investigate what cultural and ideological limits form the very fabric of the text (86).

Of course, considering what I suggested above about the class becoming aware of their own space and time and place in cultural production, what we should also become aware of (through thinking about and with estrangement) is our own silences, what we cannot say.

What do we talk about, then? About the books and films and all their detailed, complicated, contradictory matter, of course. But certain ideas, themes and issues recur. Some of these have to do with my own interests, and I’ve deliberately chosen texts that reflect those, or current research, in order to discuss with students what they think, to bring different readings as well as testing my own. As well as working in the field of science fiction, I’ve also published two monographs on cultural representations of masculinity, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000* (Continuum, 2006) and *Contemporary Masculinities in Fiction, Film and Television* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), and so this has been a recurrent touchstone in terms of discussion, as well as in terms of discussions of gender representation in the genre more widely. There would be a long list if I were to enumerate all the ideas that have informed seminar discussions over the years – some of which have surprised me, or connections which have only become apparent in retrospect – but here are a few more.

[1] Time and time travel. I have sometimes created a ‘cluster’ of texts which re-work the theme of time travel, and these have usually been kicked off by a focus on *The Time Machine* (1895), although I have recently often used Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, a 30-minute film shown in the first session (2 hours in length) as a kind of ice-breaker, allowing the class to develop a dynamic not only as a discussion forum but in the shared experience of watching a film together. The unusual technical and formal aspects of *La Jetée* also allow an interesting approach to the formal differences of sf more generally. I have sometimes followed this up with a separate session on Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), a re-make of Marker’s film, but within very different cinematic codes. Both films generate interesting discussions about the relation between narrative chronology and the means by which the story is told, what Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) called ‘histoire’ (the underlying chronology) and ‘récit’ (the form in which it is narrated), or what Russian Formalist critics named the ‘fabula’ and ‘syuzhet’. The uncoupling of narrative time and chronological time is, of course, present in all narratives, but time travel texts explicitly thematize the textual apparatus of narrative and are meta-textual, in some senses.

[2] Gender, genre and trauma. I have often taught Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (2004) as part of the time travel ‘cluster’, partly to ask the students to test the generic limits of sf (is it a romance?), partly because it’s an excellent teaching text and engages the students very easily, and partly because its complicated and doubling narrative opens up some very interesting lines of discussion. Some students express unease about the text, feeling that the masculine protagonist, Henry deTambe, ‘grooms’ his future wife Claire in their meetings when she is a child; but it is also clearly a novel about loss, and dislocation, and the physical and emotional trauma that time travel creates. A “classic” text like Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959), another text I regularly schedule, works particularly well when approached through discussions of masculinity, discipline and punishment and the construction of the subject (often with recourse to the work of Michel Foucault), as well as its more overt Cold War themes. I am also very aware of the need, when composing the syllabus, to reflect an inclusive gender balance and to look beyond the work of the white, male “classic” writers of the “twin tradition”, though my approach to this varies.

[3] Empire / the colony / evolution. Both *The Time Machine* (and, more overtly, *The War of the Worlds*) and *Starship Troopers* allow a direct introduction to themes of Empire and constructions of otherness, and discussion of the roots of British sf in particular in the scientific romance, and parallels between that and the adventure narratives of the Imperial romance. Here I recommend the critical work of John Rieder. Evolutionary themes, central to Wells’s imaginary, are taken up in a range of later texts, from Ballard’s *The Drowned World*...
(1963), Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and the Kubrick film (all of which appear regularly on course syllabi), to the Gareth Edwards film Monsters (2011), in which motifs of invasion, biological difference, and white 'Westerners' travelling across other spaces are given a particular War on Terror complexion.

[4] The Machine. Following on from Roger Luckhurst's reading of the centrality of the machine to the imaginary of science fiction, different modulations of technology in changing historical periods allow good comparative discussion, from the robot (classic manifestation such as in Asimov's stories, to a very interesting articulation of machine sentience and autonomy and struggles for 'human rights' in 'The Second Renaissance' short from The Animatrix (2000), to the cyborg or android (particularly in cyberpunk) and AI. Through estrangement strategies, this often provokes very interesting discussion with regard to constructions of 'the human' and the markers of difference – the artificial subject as 'other'.

[5] Cinema, spectacle and the visionary. As I teach literature and film, it is important for literature students to grasp, even at a simple level, the different formal operation of film narration, and in particular the importance of visual composition, editing, sound, and for sf cinema in particular, spectacle. This means that in weeks in which we are studying a film text, although they will have seen the film prior to attending class, the majority of the work in the seminar room is organised around the direct analysis of film clips, using those as a springboard for discussion. Even for students untrained in film studies, a high level of visual and cinematic literacy can be engaged quite easily with slow, detailed and thorough unpacking of key scenes or even single images. With a film such as 2001, a discussion of the StarGate sequence returns us back to what can and cannot be said or shown: how to represent or evoke the transcendent, or God? Where effects become not simply spectacle but an index of the divine, or the sublime (referring to Scott Bukatmen's work on this in Matters of Gravity (2003)) opens up interesting areas of discussion.

[6] The Other. I have used Murray Leinster's classic "First Contact" (1945) as an opening gambit with regard to thinking about sf's representation of the other, or even discussions about whether sf can truly do so. (At my first institution, I taught a course, not designed by me, on sf, Gothic and horror film called 'Representing the Other'.) Wells, and particularly the Time Traveller's misapprehensions about himself and the world of the future, open up the debate about the hidden or repressed connections between self and other, from the markers of radical biological difference in the film Alien (1979) to a politicised reading in Monsters. I have also, through Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer (1998) as well as Foucault, introduced material to do with biopolitics into discussions of contemporary sf in particular, such as Code 46 (2003) or Never Let Me Go (film, 2010).

Having been asked to write an article about teaching science fiction, it allowed me to go back over my time as a lecturer in higher education and, through the wonders of a digital archive that has been passed through the hard drives of at least 4 home computers and as many again at work, to look at the schedules and texts that I’ve put on science fiction modules here at Lancaster University (where I have taught since 2006) and, before that, at the University of Chester (2001-2005). There has been quite a lot of consistency, I find, but also significant change.

The first sf courses I taught at Chester were more explicitly organised around dystopian fiction, the subject of my own doctoral work and area which I have half-consciously underplayed as a formal concern in my sf teaching until recently, through over-familiarity with the materials. I should say, at this point, that course structures and syllabi change year-on-year not only in response to direct student feedback, and how I myself have felt about how certain sessions have gone or how one text or another might fit into the dialogue between texts, but also to keep my own responses fresh. Over-familiarity is a great deadener in the seminar room.

The first course at Chester, in the early Spring of 2002, began with an introduction on cities, spaces and dystopia; a week on Gibson’s Sprawl in the Burning Chrome collection; and then a week on Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and imagining Utopia. I then organised three “clusters”, with a central text a week with supporting material and contextual discussion: on Brave New World (1932), Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968) and The Handmaid’s Tale (1984), with a concluding week for discussion and revision. The next year, I added Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and altered the order, removing a couple of the more general sessions, as I remember feeling that the students (particularly those with less familiarity with the genre) had difficulty dealing with abstractions and were much more happy when able to discuss conceptual matters through direct relation to the text itself. This was a valuable lesson to learn, in terms of lesson-planning and scheduling, and in terms of pedagogical method. I will return to those issues shortly.

The third year marked a shift of ground, and this was due to a re-organisation of courses. A colleague took
over the utopias/dystopias course, and I planned and introduced a separate module on science fiction, beginning with *The Time Machine* (which would stay on my science fiction module until 2011), followed by Dick’s *Ubik* (1969), *Starship Troopers* (which I would teach at Lancaster from 2007 to 2014), weeks on the time travel and first contact short stories, and finishing with Iain M. Banks’ *Excession* (1996), which I had personally enjoyed but which students found very difficult.

This was another valuable lesson to do with personal investment in texts and materials and in responding to other readers whose experience of the text was markedly different from your own. In teaching, understanding why a particular session might not have worked as well as hoped, even if precisely the same strategies or texts had worked marvellously before, is vital in how a tutor learns herself to gauge and engage the dynamics of a seminar group, each of which will be very different. (I have had some who have been lively to the point of rowdiness, and some who need coaxing a bit more, even if the depth of the discussion might exceed the more exuberant class).

The next year saw the introduction of *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, which I would teach regularly up to 2013, and the return of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which again, students unfamiliar with the genre had found dense and difficult, but which I was determined to try again. And would fail again.

When I came to Lancaster University in 2006, the science fiction module took a shape which has proved very successful, with variations. This is the list:

**Texts**

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895)

**Films**

*La Jetée* (1962); *Twelve Monkeys* (1995)
2001: *A Space Odyssey* (1968)
*Alien* (1979)
*Blade Runner: the Director’s Cut* (1991)
*The Matrix* (1999)

Over time, *The War of the Worlds* has replaced *The Time Machine* because of a clash with another course; *The Drowned World* has made regular appearances, while Philip K. Dick has dropped off; and Lem’s *Solaris* (1961), Beukes’s *Moxyland* (2012), *Neuromancer* (1984), Tiptree’s stories, and the film *Monsters* have variously been scheduled. In 2016 I am changing things more radically, with the inclusion of *The Dispossessed* (1974), in the hope that I am able to manage discussion of Le Guin better than in the past; *The Forever War* (1974); and the films *Children of Men* (2006) and *Akira* (1988).

Representation, of course, remains an issue, despite my attempts to emphasise global manifestations and traditions of sf, and to find some kind of balance with regard to gender. I should say that the academic year at Lancaster University is organised in terms, and I teach science fiction as a one-term module for third-year students of English Literature, and that is likely to remain the case, despite regular student feedback which declares that the course should run all year. If only it could.

As you can see, my selection of texts is very far from a “great books” syllabus, but attempts to give some flavour of different modes and periods of sf without aspiring or claiming to offer “coverage”. A syllabus is always a negotiation between what you would like to look at, what is available (though less of an issue now than it once was), what works to form a coherent structure, coherent to students as well as myself. I’m particularly interested in sf’s borderlands and border texts, as this is an effective way through which to approach what it is that constitutes, if not perhaps what defines, sf.

I have often begun a course by putting students into groups and asking them to produce a one- or two-line definition of science fiction, which they then share and discuss with the group. It’s a very useful exercise, not least to emphasise the problem of definition that has haunted critical discourse on sf since its inception. It also helps foster a group dynamic and the emphasis on sharing knowledge and ideas which is not always a primary motivation to arts and humanities students, whose assessment tends to be individual and a matter between student and marker. This can lead to a “hoarding” mentality with regard to class participation, that students are reluctant to share and discuss their analyses because they feel it would put them at a competitive disadvantage (particularly if they feel that other students are not collaborating in good faith).

In the assessment for my science fiction module, I try to tackle this individualistic (indeed selfish) culture, an approach which has reaped great dividends. The assessment is two-part: there is a summative essay of 3000
words, which constitutes 60% of their course mark, to be submitted at the end of the course; but there is also a seminar paper of 1500 words, in which the student writes a shorter analysis of a scene or idea from a film or text. This is chosen by the student and is submitted prior to the week in which that particular film or text is studied in the seminar. I mark the paper and return it to the student in the class, giving them formative feedback, and I also ask the writer of the seminar paper to take a more directly leading role in terms of class discussion. Two or three papers are submitted each week, and I ask them to liaise with one another to avoid overlap. What makes this different from the essay is that when I have received all the papers electronically for the week, I post them on the course VLE site for all the other students to read prior to the session. (The marking process, of course, remains confidential.) This has worked excellent over a number of years, and regularly receives great praise in student feedback. In “Design, Delivery and Evaluation”, Sawyer and Wright propose an end-of-course student conference in which they can present (an excellent idea in itself); in a 10-week term, there is no space for such an event, but the seminar paper works to similar effect, with the addition that students receive formative feedback and annotations that will help them in preparation for the longer essay.

The seminar paper also, when working at its best, enables an emphasis on student-led discussion and investigation which emphasises the non-hierarchical and open manner in which I conduct the seminars. I occasionally receive requests for mini-lectures but resist, as this would tend to compound the sense of me as “teacher” and the students as “learners”, when we are really discussing and exploring the texts as peers. As any tutor of an sf class will know, there will always be students who have read more deeply in certain areas than you, have seen films or read books or know something you do not, and that is not a source of embarrassment but an opportunity both to learn and to incorporate the student’s “internal library” into the framework of discussion. In the last 5 years or so, discussion of gaming in relation to sf often takes place at the borders of the seminar, before it starts formally or during a short interval, and although my knowledge in this field is severely limited, I try to draw this form of the sf imaginary into discussion, to open it up to the kind of analysis we bring to bear on the course texts.

The borders of the seminar, then, are porous, as are the borders of the genre and of the course. My science fiction course runs alongside a full-year course on Contemporary Literature, on which I give a couple of lectures (on Ballard’s experimental short story “The Beach Murders” (1966) and on Watchmen (1987)), in which the relation between sf (and fantasy) and literary fictions, as well as forms such as the graphic novel, can be explored in a plurality of ways. Students often explore sf in their third-year dissertations, and also in the core second-year course on the Theory and Practice of Criticism, in which they can choose the subject for their final project. This helpfully suggests, of course, that I need not worry unduly about the “coverage” in my own sf course: there are plenty of other opportunities for students to develop their own studies and independently research into the genre.

In a department of English and Creative Writing, where I collaborate with Creative Writing colleagues on research and writing projects and also in the design, delivery and assessment of courses (such as on New Media and Narrative), the proliferation of writing in and on science fiction lends a particular flavour to studying, and teaching the genre. Many of my students write creatively and some write sf; many read widely in sf/f, and in the last few years a science fiction reading group has emerged, founded and run by undergraduate and postgraduate students. (I attend when work allows to show my support, but take a back seat in discussion.) I write a blog about science fiction and other things called (SF)365 (http://sciencefiction365.blogspot.co.uk) which began as a means by which to write informal posts in support of the science fiction course (its number is, happily, ENGL365), but has strayed off into other things, but I know some students read it, and some former students still do.

This is cheering, but for me emphasises a necessary breaking down of boundaries between academic scholarship and study, and a personal interest or investment in sf that is crucial to sf readerships and communities, from reading groups to conventions to blogs and forums. Even in a research culture that, in the UK, is ever more fixated on measurable “impact” upon the wider community, much sf scholarship, published in academic journals that reside behind paywalls, or in books or collections of articles that never go beyond a hardback run that might cost £80 each or an e-book at £50, will have a very limited readership.

The SFRA Review then fills an admirable role in reaching across this gap. The excellent ‘101’ series has recently been collected into a very affordable e-book SF 101: A Guide to Teaching and Studying Science Fiction, edited by Rich Calvin, Doug Davis, Karen Hellekson and Craig
Jacobsen, and its very title points towards the connection between teaching and learning, teaching as learning, which is central to my own experience and practice. A colleague in Film Studies at Lancaster, Dr Bruce Bennett, has recently talked to me about the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere and the figure of ‘the ignorant schoolmaster’. Ranciere investigated the work of a 19th-century lecturer in French literature, Joseph Jacotot, who, when teaching French to Flemish students in 1818, having no Flemish himself, gave his students a dual-language copy of a French novel and asked the students to learn it by heart, using the Flemish translation to help. What he found was that the students learned to write good grammatical French without instruction.

Ranciere, in his readings of Jacotot, proposes that the educational relationship between tutor and student is one deeply invested in power. “Explication”, teaching the student in a position of mastery over the subject and imparting knowledge, is then one which enforces a position of powerlessness on the learner. Instead, Ranciere suggests, which gives the title to his book The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1987), the teacher must be “ignorant”, enabling the learning of the student by abandoning the superiority of the “master”, allowing a participatory investigative process among equals. When the tutor asks a question, then, it is not to lead the student toward his or her own mode of understanding and acquired knowledge; rather, it is in attempting to open up the students’ own path of investigation, to hear what they really think. It is only this shared participation among intellectual equals that produces what Jacotot describes as “emancipation”.

This may sound utopian, and when students in the UK now pay £9000 per year for tuition, to proclaim that one has nothing to teach might seem strange or even offensive. But what interests me about the idea of the “ignorant schoolmaster” is that I’m not “teaching” science fiction but learning about it, each time I go into a seminar room with a group of third-year students. As I wrote above, often the course makes a different sense at the end of it, because the class has shared in a process, and I’ve learned a lot from it – perhaps different things, but still learning. If I were asked in a year or two to write this article, it would take a very different shape, or I hope it would. Through the practices of learning as teaching, of shared investigation and analysis, my understanding of the genre and of the dynamics of education change over the years and, hopefully, keep on developing.

Works Cited


To Bottom Out: An Incomplete Guide to the New Venezuelan Science Fiction

Rowan Lozada-Aguilera

LIKE ALMOST ANY OTHER Latin American country, Venezuela was very much involved with the magic realist movement during the boom of science fiction in the United States after its emergence in England. But the fact that science fiction was not popular in this country until relatively recently does not mean that there was no science fiction at all during the reign of the aforementioned autochthonous genre. Of course there was science fiction, but it only manifested in very sporadic and timid approaches. Even if they are not as related to the current wave of Venezuelan science fiction as anyone might think at first, it is still worthy to begin with them.

So underground they were, that it is actually hard to set a birth date for the Venezuelan variety of the genre since most specialists give as a fact that the first national science fiction ever is a short story by Julio Garmendia, included in his first book La tienda de muñecos (The Doll Shop), originally published in 1927 with the title La realidad circundante (“The Surrounding Reality”). Regarding this, Jorge de Abreu, for instance, states:

Julio Garmendia (1898-1977), one of the precursors of Fantastic Realism in Spanish America with The Doll Shop (1927) also opens the science fiction in Venezuela with the story “The Surrounding Reality”, minor work that integrates the famous collection. In “The Surrounding Reality” Garmendia postulates the use of a gimmick to modify human adaptability to the varied and changing physical, cultural or social conditions of the environment (2007, 4, own translation).

Indeed, Garmendia’s tale made reference to such a device, but only as a fake gadget which is being sold by a scammer. Alas, it is not a really functional machine; it is just a lie, like several of the so-called wonders that many street vendors sell with promises that are never fulfilled, simply because they cannot be fulfilled. Evidently a story like this one, yet very respectable, cannot be considered science fiction since even when the science or technology involved in the genre’s pieces are fictional, they must actually work in the given fictional universe where the story takes place. And this is not in any way the case. On the contrary, “The Surrounding Reality” is just the story of a scammer and his victim:

Now, I’ve discovered or invented an artificial capacity that advantageously supplies the spontaneous or natural adaptability. It is a small and seemingly insignificant device or accessory, of ingenious composition, simple to use, lightweight and small; and I call it “special artificial ability to incontinently adapt to conditions of existence, the environment and the surrounding reality” (Garmendia, 2008, 58, own translation).

That is the way in which the scammer describes his so-called invention in Garmendia’s short story, and it actually sounds pretty much like a typical science fiction black box. He even talks later on about a concept he calls ‘scientific adaptation to real life’ (59), but on the other hand, the tale ends like this: ‘There it is, still today, on the table where I write, and ever will have served me—I don’t deny it— as paperweight on the leaves of a new implausible story...” (60). Those are the words of the customer of the device, the character who serves as storyteller and the person who indirectly admits in the very end that he has been scammed after purchasing a useless artifact. So, again, this is not a science fiction story, but a tale about the infamous near-sorcery-art of conning, and it was almost certainly never intended to be any different.

Among the precursors—and it is better to consider them as precursors rather than pioneers—of Venezuelan science fiction, it is commonplace to find names such as Bernardo Nuñez, with books like La galera de Tiberio (Tiberius’ Galley), published in 1932, and Julio Garmendia himself. Nevertheless, and even if he is certainly not the first Venezuelan who dabbled in science fiction, Luis Britto García may be considered the first major Venezuelan science fiction writer, particularly because of his short stories such as Futuro (“Future”), included in the
anthology Lo mejor de la ciencia ficción latinoamericana (The Best of Latin American Science Fiction), published in 1981. In his story, Britto García reflects upon the future of the human species, which is extinguished shortly after achieving the long-sought goal of a perfect society:

Freed from work, freed from hunger, freed from sex, freed from death, the human brain was about to throw in the face of what created its most powerful fruit: the one that would not be born of any urgency of the viscera, of any appetite of meat. A huge event was about to come [...] Indeed, the human brain, also no longer necessary, got atrophied as well and finally disappeared (Britto García, 2007, 13, own translation).

Even if he is not a dedicated science fiction writer, he is definitely a recurring one. Also, references to the genre’s imagery can be found throughout much of his lifetime's work, and through him some other writers made their own entries into the genre. In 1979, the so-called first Venezuelan science fiction short story compilation ever, Ciencia-ficción venezolana (Venezuelan Science-Fiction), edited by Julio Miranda, was published. This book unites a series of tales by different authors, most of whom made that contribution their only incursion into the genre. However, most of the stories are not actual science fiction, but fantastic pieces with elements related to the genre, much like the aforementioned story by Julio Garmendia. Jorge de Abreu himself points this out in his previously quoted article:

Most of the works in the anthology are the author's only entries into the genre; very few have the courage to relapse. In general, the stories are essentially fantastic and the element of SF is often incidental. Due to the limited nature of SF literature when editing VENEZUELAN SCIENCE-FICTION, this anthology has almost exhaustive connotations (2007, 4).

That compilation includes authors such as Humberto Mata, Francisco de Venanzi, José Balza, Pascual and Ednordio Quintero, among others. Also published during that generation were works related to the genre, like the short story books Quorum, by David Alizio; Andamiaje (Scaffolding), by José Gregorio Porras; and Me pareció que saltaba por el espacio como una hoja muerta (I Thought that I Jumped into the Space like a Dead Leaf), by Armando José Sequera.

As for film, there is not much to tell about. The so-called first Venezuelan science fiction film ever is, again, not an actual science fiction piece, but is widely recognized as such among the specialists in the country. The movie from 1965 by Maurice Odreman, titled EFPEUM—an acronym which stands for the Spanish for “Functional Structure To Find Oneself”—is a circa 30 minute long film about a building designed for such purposes. There is technology involved in the project, of course, but the core of it is alchemy, a discipline more related to magic rather than science. ‘To achieve this you must become an Architect-Alchemist’ (1965), is an actual line from the film. From then on, it turns into a sort of mystical story.

So it is around the 1980s when Venezuelan science fiction actually starts by its own law, even if not yet at full throttle. It is then when a new generation of authors take over the genre and start to create their own stories, stories in which the science fiction elements are no longer incidental but are the core itself. It is a rupture, however, because the members of this new generation hardly read the previous one, at least not until long after having written their own pieces, precisely because those works were hidden too deep in the underground for them to be discovered in time. It is a fresh start, a generation with no literary parents inside the country, but inspired mostly by foreigners and, of course, by their changing reality.

In fact, as science fiction itself was born from a rupture called the Industrial Revolution, it is fair to say that Venezuelan science fiction—with its entire letters—was born from another, quite different rupture, not only related to the generational issue just described, but also a much bigger change: the crack of the Venezuelan economy on February 18th 1983, a day known domestically as “The Black Friday”, which Melvin Nava summarizes this way in the website Venelogía:

The Black Friday is a milestone in Venezuela, which changed our economic history […] Since that day, the constant devaluation of the Bolivar [the Venezuelan currency], complications with payment of external debt, accelerated deterioration of purchasing power and the implementation of an exchange control […] made the exchange rate stability of the Venezuelan currency vanish (Nava, 2010, ¶3, own translation).

Further on, the article continues with this:
From this day, known as “The Black Friday”, monetary policy in the country has been characterized by high interest rates, high inflation (currently the highest in America and one of the largest in the world), devaluation, capital flight, exchange controls, corruption, compensation to depositors under inflation, and uncertainty (¶10).

It may sound merely like an economic problem but the fact is that the Venezuelan economy has not been capable—even more than 30 years later—to recover from it. On the contrary, it gets worse and worse, and what started as an economic crisis has led to a series of social problems such as unemployment, poverty, rising crime and shortages of every kind; which have significantly damaged quality of life in the country and, probably the most important, produced a cataclysm of perspectives on the future. This is something that clearly affected the universes imagined by the new generation of authors, whom, in most cases, set their stories in utterly pessimistic scenarios. Venezuelan science fiction concentrated heavily—but not exclusively—on the country’s growing contemporary problems, which would be extrapolated into grim, dystopian futures. Into societies that would ultimately bottom out.

*Fantasmas computarizados* (Computarized Ghosts), published in 1988, is another compilation of short stories, which pieces are mostly fantasy horror related to computers. Nevertheless, there are also a couple of actual science fiction stories: *2084*, by Juan Nuño; and *Las tribulaciones de Bajin Sija* (Bajin Sija’s Tribulations). The first one is some sort of spiritual sequel to the famous novel *1984* by George Orwell, this time in the context of a future Venezuelan dystopia that heavily resembles 1984’s Airstrip One (Capriles et al, 1988). The second one is a story set in a fictional Caribbean country ruled by a military government, which uses an advanced artificial intelligence system to try to find the most qualified individual to preside over the nation in the near future, but the AI ends fooling everybody and ultimately taking the power itself.

The period between the mid 1980s and early 1990s is arguably the most active era for Venezuelan science fiction, even if not the most mature. In those years the first national science fiction associations, like the Simón Bolívar University Science Fiction Club, named UBIK after the 1969 novel by Phillip K. Dick, were formed. UBIK was officially formed in 1984, and two years later began to edit the very first Venezuelan science fiction magazine ever, *Cygnus*, which focused both on articles related to the genre and short stories by novel authors. If there is a group of people that truly deserves to be called pioneers of Venezuelan science fiction, it is precisely the one formed by the founders of UBIK: César Villanueva, José Ramón Morales, Imre Mikoss, Yampil Madi, Víctor Pineda and the aforementioned Jorge De Abreu. They started a stream that inspired others to create more, so *Cygnus* was the first national magazine of the genre, but it would not be the last one. In the following years, more publications appeared, such as *Koinos*, *Solaris*, *QUBIT*, *Nostromo* and *Eridano*, among others. Even if most of them had a very short lifespan of usually no more than five issues, and were produced mostly by amateur fans rather than by professionals, these magazines served the undeniable purpose of being the incubator of the new generation, consisting of more or less dedicated authors and academicians.

Indeed, that was the spark that started societies like the AVECFF, acronym in Spanish for Venezuelan Association for Science Fiction and Fantasy, and ALFA, the Venezuelan Free Association for Anticipatory Fiction. From this last one would be born the first cathedra dedicated entirely to the genre, the Cathedra of Science Fiction Cinema of the Mass Communication College in Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB for its acronym in Spanish), established in 1992 by Professor Francisco A. Pellegrino, also inspired by 1991’s very first domestic Science Fiction Narrative Workshop, organized by the Rómulo Gallegos Center for Latin American Studies (CELARG for its acronym in Spanish) and lectured by Julio Miguel Vivas. In the same vein, there also appeared the national Star Wars Fan Club and the Star Trek one, both of which organized and promoted activities not only related to their respective franchises, but also to the science fiction genre in general.

From then on, science fiction started to become—slowly but firmly—a regular feature in Venezuelan media. There is a developing community of authors working in the genre’s territory both in literature and film. Committed writers such as Ronald Delgado, Illeana Gómez Berbesí, César Oropeza, Susana Sussman and the aforementioned Jorge de Abreu; among others, have been constantly producing novels and short stories mostly set in dystopian universes, futuristic or not, related with local or global present-time issues. Even if their works are not yet well known or highly popular, these authors have been able to make a number of allegorical yet accurate portraits and dissections of the society where they are living:
Although there was indeed a shy little group of believers in the hereafter, none of the inhabitants of the metropolis had the slightest suspicion that the alien invasion had begun. But this did not happen in the sensed and announced way. There were no flashing lights or balls of fire falling from the sky. No noises or electronic effects, no fragments of twelve-tone music or close encounters of any kind. The only thing that was happening every morning was that the atmosphere was overloaded and a dense and warm fog clouded the sky, both in the capital and in other large cities (Gómez Berbesí, 2007, 22, own translation).

The previous paragraph is an excerpt from Ileana Gómez Berbesí’s short story Los invasores del siglo XXI (“The Invaders of the 21st Century”), in which she made a sort of chronicle of the advent and rise of chavismo in front of the unaware eyes of Venezuelan media, political parties and society. Of course, she did not write a literal recounting of those events, but an allegory in which chavismo itself is replaced by the spread of an alien amoeba throughout the country’s air that ends changing—much for the worse—not only the lifestyles of the population but also their minds.

But not all Venezuelan science fiction is about Venezuela and its calamities. Authors such as the aforementioned Ronald Delgado and Susana Sussman rather prefer storylines about the future of mankind in general, usually with tragicomic connotations:

“Don’t worry, Mister Archer” the doctor interrupted. “You had an accident in your plane and, sadly, you suffered too many injuries. We couldn’t save your body but, fortunately, we could download your consciousness on time”.
“T died again?” Archer asked with a cheerful voice. Everyone smiled.
“Yes, Mister Archer. You died again”.
“Ther!” he said. “What remained of me is still reusable?”
The doctor looked at the carcass lying on the gurney.
“I don’t think so, Mister Archer. You will have to clone a new one”.
The computer sighed.
“Nothing that a few millions can’t solve, right?” (Delgado, 2007, 52-53, own translation)

For instance, the previous excerpt of Ronald Delgado’s Conciencia recuperada (Retrieved Consciousness) portrays a future world in which is possible to live forever thanks to the bioengineering technology. Yet not tragic itself, the resolution of the story outlines that, exactly as in the more obscure periods of human history, health is still a privilege of the rich. Anyway, not everything is grim in the Venezuelan science fiction futures. There is a rare example of a utopian Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela in Blanca Strepponi’s Caracas, 2050. However, this happy new world is only possible after a nightmarish period. Again, after the nation bottomed out:

Frequently the proud Caraquenians, famous worldwide for their good humor and veneration of beauty, gather without any distinction to participate in the big and emotional restitution ceremonies during which they honor their ancestors, the ones that endured the continuous suffering of a society that never matured definitively, and heaping of frustration sought refuge in failed leaders. There, under the light of novae at the flashing plains of chalk produced by plastic biodegradation, before the beautiful synthetic monument to citizen, they all sing the anthem of the universal community: all you need is love (2012, ¶ 7, own translation).

So it looks like even in the best scenarios, the Venezuelan future is signed by a quite tragic stage. Fortunately—as the old saying goes—when darker is the sky, closer is the dawn; so the dystopia is frequently the set yet not necessarily the ultimate outcome in Venezuelan anticipatory science fiction. In fact, there are even some humorous approaches, made by non-dedicated authors, such as the fake-news website El Chigüire bipolar (The Bipolar Capybara) and the comedy collective Santo Robot (Robot Saint). The first one being much more critical of the social and political situation of the country, has many entries related to time travelling, in which the protagonists voyage using a time machine to either pasts or future times of Venezuela. There are stories like the one of a man who built the aforementioned device during the general strike of 2002 only to arrive to an even more economically depressed 2013, one that relates the story of a scientist who traveled to the country’s colonial times to kill the first Venezuelan who skipped a queue and with that manages to change the future and return to a present-time in which the nation is a world economic power, or one in which an intern of the website
travels to the distant future to discover that chavismo has become a whole religion. On the other hand, Santo Robot has only rarely focused on political issues. Its two science fiction video entries, both from 2013, are one titled El super imbécil (The Super Imbecile), about a genetic experiment to create the ultimate breed of the imbecile man; and a second one titled Viajero del tiempo del sentido común (Common Sense’s Time Traveler), about a person who travels from the future to kill people that had particularly stupid ideas in the past, such as the creator of the Harlem Shake, the executive producer of Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides, and even Lindsay Lohan’s drug-dealer.

Now, precisely after discussing those videos, it is opportune to introduce the audiovisual branch of Venezuelan science fiction. After the aforementioned EF-PEUM, wrongly considered the very first Venezuelan film in history, there was not much of anything related to the genre in the domestic cinematic scene, with some exceptions during the late 1980s and early 1990s, represented by student short films so experimental they are hard to classify within the genre unreservedly. However, there is something really important about those short films, and it is where they were produced. Indeed, most of the Venezuelan science fiction cinematic entries come from these incubators: the College of Arts of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) and the College of Mass Communication of the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB). Both the previously referred to generation of amateur filmmakers and the current, more mature even if not necessarily yet professional, come from these two institutions. It was necessary, though, to wait until well into the 2000s to watch the first actual science fiction films produced in Venezuela.

And in the same vein as the literary entries, the Venezuelan cinematic approaches to genre have been usually grim and pessimistic about the future. Putting aside the bunch of not-very-serious short films about zombies that have recently emerged in the country, most of the rest of them are related with universal concerns. One of the first films of that relatively recent generation is DAT, by Jonás R.G. This ten minute piece from 2006 is more focused on aesthetics rather than on an actual storyline, yet it presents the trip of a space traveler—or inter-dimensional, the issue is not completely clear—who arrives to Caracas after a journey in his pod. The movie, yet with the limitations of an independent, student film, tries to resemble the visuals and paces of masterpieces such as Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and Andrei Tarkovsky’s Solyaris, and also to outline similar questions about human nature and reality itself. On the same line, and also produced in the UCV’s College of Arts, is Asdrubal Barrios’ Monica Electrónica (Electronic Monique) from 2010. This piece draws from many science fiction classics, mainly from George Lucas’ THX 1138, but also from worlds as divergent as Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek. In essence, the short film tells the story of a man who works as a slave for an almighty company in a dystopian corporation-ruled future and falls in love with a colleague he has only met by video chat. However, assuming that this incipient relationship could mean problems for the efficiency of its employee, the company sends him a surrogate of his beloved colleague. Of course things do not go well and ultimately both he and his colleague must escape from the control of the company.

On other hand, there are also some productions from the students of UCAB’s College of Mass Communication. There are at least a couple of particularly well executed short movies both in terms of production and storyline. One of them is Julio Ottaviano’s 10-09-2008, a found-footage film from 2010 about the experience of a group of friends during and immediately after a contact with some sort of unidentified—presumably alien—life form. Another one is Víctor Hernández’s AER, a piece from 2012 made with the specific intention of recreating the aesthetics of the average 1980’s dystopian universes, sets its story in a future where the effects of climate change have destroyed the capacity of plants to produce oxygen, so it is up to a group of mutants—themselves being a consequence of the change—and a brilliant yet amoral scientist to try to restore the life in the planet.

Though pieces such as the previously mentioned ones are the sole and only entries of its authors in the genre and were produced by students rather than professionals, they represent solid contributions to the configuration of science fiction in Venezuelan screens. It is not coincidence that shortly after the beginning of this wave, the first professional films started to reach the movie theaters. Probably the most notable one is Alexander Henao’s La uva (The Grape), a story set in a future Venezuela stricken by climate change, scarcity and presumably warfare. This short film was included in the 2011 feature Cortos Interruptus, consisting of a total of five short films, La uva being the only science fiction one. Both the piece and the whole feature had a fairly positive reception from domestic audiences, which can only mean more incentive to produce Venezuelan science fiction. In fact, there are a couple of science fiction feature films in production at the moment, both
zombie-related, that would be the first feature length science fiction movies in the history of Venezuelan cinema. These are Manuel Pifano’s Z and César Oropeza’s I Love Zombies, this last one based on a novel with the same title and by the same author. And naturally, none of this is the end, but just part of a new and hopefully definitive start for the genre in Venezuela.

Today, besides the film and literary productions mentioned above, science fiction has its space in many other activities, such as the science fiction narrative workshops organized by Asociación Civil Corriente Alterna and CELARG, currently lectured by Ileana Gómez Berbesi and Ronald Delgado, respectively; the Cathedra of Science Fiction Cinema of UCAB’s Mass Communication College, lectured by Francisco A. Pellegrino; and the Science Fiction, Fantasy And Horror Bull Sessions hosted by Susana Sussman; all of them with several editions and years of work under their belts. Also, it is worth mentioning the Solsticios First Venezuelan Contest of Fantasy and Science Fiction Literatures (Solsticios), inaugurated in 2014, and which winner in the science fiction category was Rafael E. Figueredo with Epidermis, a short story on the cyberpunk subgenre, à la Venezuelan. Moreover, if there is a best part in all of this, it is—despite the redundancy—that all of this is just an small part of all that is still hidden in the underground.

They say that with a crisis there is always something good waiting to happen. Blissfully, such an assertion has its foundations in history itself, and that is not anything to be disregarded. The evolution of human societies has been possible to a large degree because of the stages of crisis, the moments at which humanity has faced dead ends and must, in order to survive, reinvent their current ways to become something different. Even when the outcome is something not necessarily better than the prior, it is definitely a step forward, and step by step is how greater things are discovered, created or, in any case, achieved.

As the Industrial Revolution produced and accentuated many kinds of social, economic and ecological problems; it also granted humanity the capacity to go beyond and progress in an unprecedented way, and the dawn of science fiction was part of that progress. Venezuela, in its turn, is currently going through one of the longest and most serious crises in its history, but that does not mean there is anything good to be taken from such a certainly painful process. After all, obstacles and mistakes are there to learn from, something that Venezuelan society must definitely do, and seems to actually be doing.

If the development of a science fiction movement among Venezuela’s authors can be considered a step forward through this crisis, then it is something positive. If science fiction—or at least anticipatory science fiction—originates from a concern about the future, then it is something tremendously good that Venezuelan authors are in fact starting to do so, to create stories that serve as an instrument to meditate on the world—or the country—of tomorrow as a direct consequence of the acts and decisions of the present. Indeed, some people consider anticipation as a vaccine against the woes that could affect society in the future, so creating science fiction is also creating awareness about what could happen tomorrow as a result of what is happening today. If a severe crisis was necessary to let that occur in Venezuela, it is still not a price too high to pay for. Because that means that, ultimately, the future will not be as grim as the present, not in reality if fiction actually serves as a proper vaccine.

Transforming a national crisis into its own signature, Venezuelan science fiction is living today its most remarkable moment yet, and that is something that was hopefully be proven here. It does not matter if it is still delayed in comparison with the original latitudes of the genre, the Anglo-Saxon world, and is more or less going through the same process that science fiction experienced during the 1930s in America with the boom of the pulp magazines—this time with a bunch of independent and mostly amateur authors, publishers and electronic journals—while that only means living its own stages of maturity, catching up on and, surely, growing to become something valuable for itself and for its own society. This is something that is happening—yet slowly and probably shyly—in the Venezuela of today. Late, yes, but Venezuelans have never been famous for their punctuality anyway. What they seem to have is a capacity to overcome their disadvantages, even if—much like a rubber ball—that means to bottom out and rise again.

Works Cited


The American Shore: Meditations on a Tale of Science Fiction by Thomas M. Disch

Virginia Allen


Order option(s): Hard | Paper | Kindle

THIS IS A BOOK with a past and future history about the making of histories and theories of science fiction, best not read without some understanding of that history unless your tolerance for ambiguity is thick enough to withstand the very real frustration of reading it. In the “Author’s Introduction,” Delany gives fair warning to a reader in need of a preliminary text on SF as a genre to “find another book” (xiii), and also gives due acknowledgement to Jean Marc Gawron, Marilyn Hacker, and Joanna Russ, who “subjected [him] to an astute and unremitting criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse” while he worked on the original edition back in the late 1970’s. Given my own capacious intolerance for what Delany refers to as the dangers of “polysyllabic silliness” (xi), I confess I should have spent either a good deal more time with the text, or a good deal less. I fear I may sound like the art critic who complains that if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse I may sound like the art critic who complains that if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse I may sound like the art critic who complains that if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse if I remit criticism of the entire concept of difficult discourse.

Briefly, The American Shore is a line-by-lexeme discursive, diffusive commentary on a chapter, “Angouleme,” by Thomas M. Disch within a concatenated text published as 334 by Avon in 1974 and reprinted by Vintage Books in 1999 and again in 2014 under the title 334: A Novel. The reading process is very like following instructions for assembling modular furniture, except that you don’t know whether it will turn out to be a bookcase or a chair until the job is done. Despite the author’s assertion, I find it neither “simplistic” nor “pernicious” (American Shore, 25) to the tale within its much larger context. Like “Angouleme,” history itself is often lost or comes down to us distorted, misremembered, misrepresented (rather like Picasso’s Weeping Woman, to continue the analogy), a palimpsest of overlapping moments, an alternate world constructed from “the subject’s sum of knowledge of the period he chooses to fix during his first trips”: the quote being a reference to a drug-induced fantasy such as “Everyday Life in the Later Roman Empire” from the re-titled 334: A Novel (Disch, 334, 94). Angouleme (the name given to New York on the first European map of the eastern shore of our continent), by further analogy, is quite a notable moment in the history of cartography that has been reduced to a bronze plate in Manhattan’s Battery Park overlooking New York Harbor, where a group of children on the verge of puberty consecrate their “basic childhood need to grow up and kill someone” in the story/chapter under analysis (334, 141). If you find this paragraph difficult to navigate, you have a fair sense of what reading The American Shore feels like. To quote Delany himself from “The Diffused Text” at lexeme 24, on retrieving overlapping textual paradigms: “We leave the pleasure of its divination to the reader” (55).

Never quite abandoning his pedagogical commitments, however, Delany footnotes Robert Sheckley’s Journey beyond Tomorrow (Dell 1962), “the exemplary thesaurus of such s-f rhetoric.” The jaw-dropping simplicity and elegance with which Sheckley, by way of contrast, overlaps and casually distorts Athenian democracy and the founding of the United States is a reminder to the doubting reader that science fiction really is an emergent evolutionary event, strikingly rich with possibilities not available to mundane fiction. Delaney’s text is brimful of such nuggets: I used the FIND function on my Kindle to good effect to track down themes like “The New Sentimentality” and “trivalent discourse” to impose some order on the diffused text of The American Shore, to make it more readable.

My primary interest has been in the linguistic/semantic theory, and I do wholeheartedly concur with Patrick Parrinder’s 1979 assessment in “Delany Inspects the Word-Beast” (Science Fiction Studies 1979) that the essay “About 5,750 Words” is a classic, although Delany himself protested that such a claim was premature (“Some Reflections on SF Criticism” (SFS 1981), professing his own adherence to Stanley Fish’s rather conventional (so to speak) view, which was already a linguistic anachronism when Delaney demurred about taking his rightful
place in the history of rhetorical figuration. Delaney's problem when he looked at sentences such as “The door dilated” was that a vocabulary for what he was observing had yet to be invented in 1979.

The two-plus-millennia-old tradition of rhetorical figuration was grounded in the presumption of a distinction between literal and figurative language that stood unchallenged until 1980, when Lakoff and Johnson began to hammer out the first new theory of metaphor since Aristotle in *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press).

What you learned about metaphor from Aristotle's *Poetics* is that the ability to make good metaphors is a sign of genius in which a like thing (tenor) is compared to an unlike thing (vehicle) astonishing the reader with its aptness (more recently recognized as its grammaticality); what you may not have learned from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is that the way to make difficult ideas accessible to those who haven't the spark of genius is to frame them as metaphors, which ordinary people find so much easier to process and understand than plain (literal) speaking.

The ancient rhetoricians presumed a straightforward distinction between literal and figurative expression. The literal word is mundane, capturing the known world with its arbitrary and conventional signifiers; metaphor, the master trope, is poetic: an exception to the literal expression of the truth of how the world really is, and – oh, by the way – how it might be different, changeable, evolving. Dilating doors do not fit the rhetorical system of figuration, and Saussure's linguistics (profoundly trounced by Chomsky) did not point Delany in a productive direction.

I am not able to summarize 20th-century linguistics in 1,000 words, but let me say quickly that every attempt to theorize human language has foundered on the tropes of ancient rhetoric. Romanticism embraced the exceptionality of poetic language and, as a logical entailment, an epistemology grounded in subjective experience watched over by a priesthood of “superior” literary critics.

And yet, if language is an evolutionary outcome, a product of natural selection, how could it come about? Behaviorism could not explain something as commonplace as ambiguity in sentences, so the New Critics made an aesthetic virtue of it. Chomsky wreaked havoc among us by borrowing Skinner's black box and putting a fully formed and functioning linguistic module inside it. Every normal human child acquires any language to which “he” is exposed, automatically and without instruction irrespective of IQ. After the on-set of puberty, when Mother Nature assumes the organism has scoped out the local environment and has the necessary cognitive tool kit for this particular reality, the language acquisition device goes idle as the brain shifts to more urgent, more local survival interests (i.e., sex). And what is the Golden Age of Science Fiction? 12. Or maybe 13. Everybody knows that.

Building on Chomsky's generative syntax, Katz and Fodor tried to explain semantic features as the properties of words: “nurse” = +human, +female, +adult. Well, that didn’t work: “trying to get syntactic blood from naïve metaphysical turnips,” as Geoffrey Pullum is fond of saying. When it came to anomalous sentences (“This tree is very intelligent” and “John is a snake in the grass”), the whole enterprise collapsed. [See Randy Allen Harris, *The Linguistics Wars* (Oxford UP, 1993), especially Chomsky’s clash with George Lakoff. See Lakoff’s *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago UP 1987). See Paul Grice’s *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard UP 1989). See Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber’s *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge UP 2012).]

The good lord willing and if the river don’t rise, I will attempt to get this review written up in more intelligible detail. When we finally get there, Delany will be waiting to show us around a science fictional world describable with a vocabulary we have already acquired, effortlessly and without instruction. [See “About 5,750 Words,” in *Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (Weslyan UP, 2009).]

My thesis is that when the cognitive linguists hypothesized metaphor, not as an exception to normal human language, but an ordinary evolutionary adaptation, a product of natural selection in a changing environment, the next stage would necessarily be, not “Big Ideas and Dead End Thrills,” as Disch hypothesized (*Atlantic Monthly*, February 1992), but a map through the crucially contested border land between fantasy and science fiction where postmodern “knowledge” of the external world is not mere rhetoric, an excuse to indulge a critical taste for irrationality, but amenable to discovery.

*The American Shore* doesn’t get us all the way there, but it’s a good start.
Space and Place in The Hunger Games: New Readings of the Novels

Thomas J. Morrissey


Order option(s): Paper | Kindle

ANYONE WHO HAS WITNESSED the torrent of essay collections spawned by The Hunger Games novels might well ask whether another was needed. In the case of Space and Place in the Hunger Games, the answer is most certainly yes. Evans et al. have compiled and skillfully arranged eleven essays that in various ways explore the craft, reception, and impact of the trilogy. In the Introduction, entitled “Taking Up and Entering Critical Space,” the editors present the rationale and methodology for the collection. They first define space and place as themes that connect the essays. “Space” and “place” invoke dimensionality. Space, whether physical or metaphorical, is the venue of potential; place is the realization of potential: “space and place are not binaries but relational: they rely on each other. Space must exist for a place to be imagined and constructed” (1). At the same time, they maintain that their goal was to “create a critical ‘space’ safe enough to welcome a range of scholarly conversations, but ‘radical’ in the sense that the collection would challenge and even transgress conventional scholarship” (4). They have accomplished their objective. The editors’ “Conclusion: Where Can We Go and What Can We Disrupt from Here?” makes explicit their hopes for this collection: “We seek to be a voice, perhaps one ember to fan the flames of activism and scholarship that emerge from this trilogy” (245).

The essays in Part I, “Identifying and Challenging Narrative Spaces,” examine the inseparability of questions of narrative form and Katniss’ agency. Julie Elizabeth Tyler’s fascinating exploration of the impact of the Epilogue on the main narrative and its implications for the revitalization of Young Adult fiction substantiates the editors’ claims that they have created a safe place for radical criticism. Temporally, there is no way to know how old Katniss is when she projects the Epilogue, nor can we know how much she has reorganized and edited elements of her story. Hence, there is no packaged, definitive meaning but rather an open-ended invitation to consider how we tell our own stories, “striving for authenticity, but leaving room for creating an interpretive possibility” (41). Anne M. Canavan and Sarah N. Petrovic compare and contrast narrative choices in the books versus the first film, concluding in part that the agency Katniss developed in the first novel is lost in the film, which focuses far more on the nature and function of Panem’s police state.

“Provoking Change and Creating Radical Spaces,” Part II, treats character development. In “Katniss and Her Boys,” Whitney Elaine Jones looks at the Katniss-Gale-Peeta triangle as it might influence male readers. She concludes that Katniss’s marriage to Peeta “is a template for a future utopian world” (78), one from which a young male reader might learn “that a strong masculine warrior can encapsulate love and compassion, that there is no line between masculine and feminine, and that we are all just jumbles of good traits and bad, and that we can choose which of these traits best define who we are” (79). Susan Shau Ming Tan argues that audiences have responded positively to Katniss’ maturation as a form of rebellion against the stunted growth dictated by the Capital and that in YA fiction at its best, “the YA heroine becomes a force so threatening that her presence possesses the potential to destabilize every aspect of socio-political life, from state to self” (98).

Part III, “Experiencing Trauma in Safe Spaces,” features two essays about the potential for The Hunger Games to evoke compassion for the Other. Anne M. M. Childs shows how privileged adolescent readers—whose social status is more likely to resemble that of the Capital’s citizens than the station of the downtrodden Others of the trilogy—“can potentially transform their own identities becoming compassionate agents of change” (122). Adam Levin’s essay deals with the trilogy’s capacity to help adolescent Jewish readers come to grips with the almost unimaginable and paralyzing horror of the Holocaust. Levin does not claim that Collins has written Holocaust literature but that she has created an engaging and accessible story of dystopian cruelty that might make it easier for young Jews to relate to stories of Holocaust survivors.

Part IV, “Popular Responses in Actual Spaces,” helps to add yet another dimension to this collection by discussing reactions to the text in digital media. Katie Aroste-guy gives us a scholarly but personal essay on mothering in the books; what makes the essay especially valuable is
her exploration of mothers’ Web responses to the novels. As many critics have pointed out, the Arena, like the Panopticon, is a space in which surveillance plays a pivotal role. Deirdre Anne Evans Garriott gives us a glimpse of the larger digital Panopticon where the novels and films have become targets for spectators whose judgmental critiques would make them ideal citizens of the Capital. Perhaps the most shocking revelations concern racist reactions to casting people of color in the films. Talk about missing the point. . . . Linda J. Rice and Katie Wrabel expand upon this theme as they examine young people’s reactions to the spectacles of the cult of celebrity and so-called reality television. Included are important comments by pre-service teachers who see the books as a potential antidote for the Roman Coliseum mentality that pervades our culture almost to the degree it does in Rome and Panem.

Given the largely self-created perils to human happiness and survival, can texts point credibly to a better future? This is the theme of Part V, “Envisioning Future Spaces.” Carissa Ann Baker focuses on the novel’s competing views of nature, specifically Katniss’ comfort with the natural world and the Capital’s falsification of nature, especially decorative bio-alteration of people and the creation of hybrid monstrosities. Citing the growing body of eco-feminist criticism, Baker hopes that “young people will fight for the earth with the same degree of fervor with which Katniss fought” (218). Bruce Martin returns us to the political as he applies theories of the early Frankfurt School to his reading of the novels. Citing Collins’ comments on her mythic and dystopian sources, he establishes that the trilogy carries the “genre DNA” (236) of the dystopian form, but that the novels also present “a glimpse of hope to offset the overwhelming evidence of current and future catastrophe” (237).

This is an excellent collection. There are no weak articles. Notes and bibliographies are extensive. Many of the authors reference articles appearing in an earlier anthology from McFarland, Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy, edited by Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Both books embody socially conscious criticism, and both consider the sensibilities of adolescent readers. In fact, the current volume reads almost like a co-equal sequel to that earlier text. Both collections are essential reading for anyone who teaches and/or researches the YA dystopian phenomenon.

The Liverpool Companion to World Science Fiction Film

Amy J. Ransom


Order option(s): Hard

Amongst the burgeoning number of handbooks and companions to science fiction (among other genres) published recently, Sonja Fritzschle’s Liverpool Companion to World Science Fiction Film stands out. First, it targets a unique subset of SF and is thus itself unique; second, its publication legitimates that subset as an object of study. Given the increasing focus on visual media and on SF beyond the Anglo-American, recognizing “world science fiction film” as a sub-genre seems only natural. As a “companion,” Fritzschle’s edited volume provides an introduction to SF film outside Hollywood, and its accessible essays offer a starting point for scholars and general readers interested in broadening their study and/or consumption of SF film.

The book’s fourteen chapters are organized into six sections by geographical region. Fritzschle’s introduction outlines the volume’s goals and the significance of this rising genre, also offering caveats to the “uninitiated” (1), positing the sophistication of the “meaning-making practices” (1) present in a corpus that might be dismissed by audiences inured to Hollywood spectacle. It thoughtfully outlines the volume’s goal—“to enable scholars to scrutinize and broaden the established ways of talking about science fiction film” (3)—and traces the connections between its various chapters. These chapters cover most of the globe, but a certain imbalance appears, with some sections including only one or two chapters, whereas that on Europe includes six. Certainly, this reflects the unequal conditions of film production around the world, as well as different levels of interest from potential contributors.

Indeed, the first section, on Africa, includes only one essay, Ritch Calvin’s examination of “The Environmental Dominant in Wanuri Kahiu’s Pumzi,” a 2009 Kenyan film the title of which translates as “Breath.” Calvin’s essay is typical of most of the book’s chapters, as it introduces the film first within the context of a national film
tradition unfamiliar to most readers and then situates a film or corpus of films in relation to the more familiar body of SF film and/or applies a theoretical approach associated with SF studies. Calvin examines Pumzi, which extrapolates the global problem of water scarcity into a dystopian future, via eco-feminism. Organizationally speaking, I might have labeled this section “Africa and the African Diaspora” and included here the only essay in the section on “North America,” Robyn Citizen’s “The Role of Black Women in Political and Cultural Transformation in Science Fiction from the US, UK, and Cameroon.” Citizen contextualizes black women characters in SF film in general, then demonstrates how characters in Alfonso Cuaron’s Children of Men (2006), Paul W. S. Anderson’s Alien vs. Predator (2004), and Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Les Saignantes (2005) transcend stereotypes, becoming heroic subjects.

“Part II: Asia” offers a bit more balance, with three essays, one each on China, India, and Japan, nations with varying relationships to the production of SF film. Jie Zhang’s chapter makes the case for “Death Ray on Coral Island as China’s First Science Fiction Film,” situating this 1980 film within the context of Chinese SF literature and the changing landscape of Chinese politics and various regimes’ attitudes to speculative fictions in print or on screen. Jessica Langer and Dominic Alessio survey the genre on the sub-continent, then examine in greater detail the blockbuster success of Endhiran (2011). Takayuki Tatsumi’s ludic contribution is an outlier in the volume. A previously published work translated by Seth Jacobowitz, “On the Monstrous Planet, Or How Godzilla Took a Roman Holiday” is intellectual parkour, combining memoir, erudition, and dramatic mental leaps from Japanese folklore and the Shinto kami to Melville, Oates, and Bradbury’s “Fog,” to trace Gojira’s origins.

The largest and most thorough section covers Europe. Derek Johnson reveals how Hammer films negotiated cultural tensions over American cultural imperialism and British national identity in “The Importance of Transmediality in British Science Fiction Film in the 1950s.” Johnson’s transmedia approach calls attention to Hammer’s adaptation of television successes to the big screen and mentions the novelization of films. Katie Moylan looks at “Science Fiction Interventions in Irish Cinema,” situating Irish SF cinema since the 1990s within the pre- and post-Celtic Tiger economic boom. As Fritzsche points out in her introduction, parody represents a common thread across world SF cinema; Moylan observes Irish cinema’s tendency toward “kitsch and irony” which crosses over into SF in Neil Jordan’s The Butcher Boy (1997), and Martin Duffy’s The Boy From Mercury (1996) and The Summer of the Flying Saucer (2008).

Moving to the continent, Daniel Tron’s “Looking for French Science Fiction Cinema” traces the genre’s problematic status in a nation that associates auteur filmmaking with its own cultural traditions and rejects genre film as both inferior and un-French. After a brief survey jumping from Méliès to the New Wave, Tron demonstrates how Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro negotiate a compromise between French-ness and science fictionality. Raffaella Baccolini’s overview also reveals an “Uncomfortable Relationship Between Science Fiction and Italy” where the filmic tradition of commedia all’italiana results largely in SF parodies like Fascists on Mars (2006). In “Gender and Apocalypse in Eastern European Cinema,” Jason Merrill analyzes three Communist-era films from Poland and the former Czechoslovakia, and Evan Torner looks at “Multicultural Whiteness in the East German/ Polish Science Fiction Film Silent Star.” Noting that this 1960 film pre-dates Star Trek’s multicultural starship crew, Torner critiques the ways in which its tokenism nonetheless reinscribes the Communist Bloc’s white racial identity.

Two essays comprise “Part V: South America.” Mariano Paz looks at “Postcolonial Politics and Cultural Hybridity in Argentina’s Goodbye Dear Moon” (2005), and Alfredo Suppia offers “A Short History of Brazilian Science Fiction Film and Its Fight for Survival in a Rarefied Atmosphere.” The volume concludes with perhaps its most significant contribution, Pawel Frelik’s chapter “Digital Film and Audience,” which addresses not just how the digital age has facilitated the rise of “world science fiction film” but also how it impacts Hollywood SF filmmaking and reception. This essay has broad applications and would be an excellent support text in an array of courses, as Frelik outlines how digital technologies and new media have changed film production, the structure of film narratives, the length of SF films (promoting the return of the short film), modes of distribution, consumption, and reception (out of the cineplex and onto our televisions, computers and hand-held devices), and audience practices, as fans actively and creatively engage with media texts.

This volume represents a solid contribution to the developing field of “world sf film” studies, and Fritzsche’s useful “Recommended Viewing” list offers a starting point for novice viewers. While a number of these films might be found in the usual outlets, however, a significant obstacle appears for some of the works studied.
here, which are not distributed internationally and/or subtitled in English. Hopefully, as the number of such studies grows, increased interest in such films will fuel their release in DVD or in on-line viewing formats.

**Discworld and the Disciplines: Critical Approaches to the Terry Pratchett Works**

Bruce Lindsley Rockwood


Order option(s): Paper | Kindle

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS and reference materials on Terry Pratchett's extensive body of work and the growing body of criticism about it is a useful starting point for readers interested in Pratchett who are seeking to conduct their own research building on what has come before. The turtle moves, and keeping up with it in criticism is increasingly difficult, so this work provides a valuable overview for those seeking to engage with this fascinating and important writer's contribution to our genre.

The core of this collection consists of six essays addressing a diverse range of Pratchett's works (including many ancillaries), each of which contains its own end-notes and detailed list of works cited. Extensive bibliographical material follows, along with short abstracts of seventy-six ‘articles, chapters and monographs’ and lists of relevant interviews, MA theses, and dissertations. No doubt that list is cut off by the publication date of this volume, but its range of authors, scholars and resources should enable anyone seriously pursuing further research and with access to an academic library database to have a solid foundation for bringing it up to date and zooming in on one's particular area of interest.

In their introduction, the editors emphasize the broad range of works by Terry Pratchett, either alone or in collaboration, his international and broad appeal to diverse cultures, and the need to ‘redefine our notions of what exactly constitutes a “text” […] in keeping with the traditions of a variety of literary theoretical frameworks’ (3) in order to accommodate the variety of critical work addressing Pratchett and the Discworld.

Reflecting Susan Bassnett’s “Is There Hope for the Humanities in the 21st Century?” (2000) which argues that Pratchett is ‘a writer whose work encompasses the most important elements of interdisciplinarity’ (3-4), the editors explain this insight is reflected in the variety of essays contained in this volume.

Roderick McGillis’s essay “The Wee Free Men: Politics and the Art of Noise” explores the Tiffany Aching series of novels and the ‘noise of these books’ children, the Nac Mac Feegle or the Wee Free Men’, as reflecting ‘the exuberance of childhood coupled with the acceptance of responsibility’ (15). McGillis argues that the ‘noise that we hear from the Nac Mac Feegle is the noise of the future in the sense that it prompts us to accept humanity in all its confusion and discord to go forward with a sense of life’s loudness, the loudness of togetherness and community. Pratchett’s work is nothing if not dedicated to equality and community’ (16). Suggesting that Pratchett’s work is ‘forward-looking–in a word, futurist’, McGillis argues that a 1913 letter by the Futurist painter Luigi Russolo to Francesco Balilla Pratella ‘offers a useful entrance’ to Discworld and in particular to the Nac Mac Feegle. (16) Citing Perry Nodelman’s The Hidden Adult, which describes forty-five qualities of children’s books, McGillis adds that books for children are ‘noisier than books for adults’ (18), and he then discusses how the Nac Mac Feegle ‘are transgressive: they lie and steal and drink to excess […] but they are also loyal, persistent, and joyous […] [They] teach us that to be human is to err, but they also teach us to engage in life wholeheartedly’ (19).

The second essay in this collection, “Coloring in Octarine: Visual Semiotics and Discworld,” by Anne Hiebert Alton, is a detailed and careful examination of the interaction of the art work connected to the primary texts of Discworld --- the book covers of Josh Kirby and Paul Kidby, decorative art found in the various novels and ancillary works like the Almanacs and maps, and the illustrated novels where the art work is planned as a complete and important contributing part of the story: The Illustrated Wee Free Men, and The Last Hero for example. The art helps ‘to solidify the ways that Discworld and its inhabitants appear in our imaginations’ (26) and ‘consequently they contain an implicit element of translation of medium as they move from the written word to the visual image’ (27). She references the ‘picture book theorist Lawrence Sipe, who notes the necessity of in-
voking interdisciplinary approaches in considering visual literacy [...] Sipe argues that when we read pictures and text, we use a kind of filling-in-the-gap process,’ where each fills in gaps left by the other, and the whole is a ‘fuller meaning’ than either alone (30).

Alton applies this process to a thorough reading of the visual works and their connection to the texts, supplemented by thirteen illustrations and one figure, but implicitly relying on the reader’s familiarity with the works themselves or necessarily requiring a visit to the library or bookstore to reflect on her insights by reviewing the artwork. She explores the connection of Kirby’s style to Titian, Rubens, Hogarth, and Bosch (32) and describes how many of the illustrations remind one of familiar paintings and photographs which give the reader a comfortable feeling of a semblance of realism in the stories they are bound to: Paul Kidby’s cover for Night Watch that mirrors Rembrandt’s The Night Watch, or his cover for Monstrous Regiment that provides an ironic contrast to the famous World War II photograph “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” (38). Following on McGillis’s insight into the role of “noise” in the works, Alton notes the ‘hectic activity’ found in the Kirby illustrations (32) – clearly, sound and fury are key components of Pratchett’s stories. Discussing the maps of Discworld, she raises the question of whether they constrain or restrict the author or reader (66-67), but points out that Pratchett has said they are ‘not completely accurate,’ and I agree that on balance they are both beautiful and helpful, without restricting the creative opportunities that remain for further explorations in the geography of Discworld. ‘The map is not the territory’ (Alfred Korzybski, 1931) after all.

Gray Kochhar-Lindgren’s short “Tell It Slant” initiates an exploration of the religious, philosophical and political perspectives and satire in novels such as Monstrous Regiment, Hogfather, and Small Gods. He writes Pratchett ‘requires not adherence to an ideology [...] but, rather, a quirky kind of faith, a belief, we might say, in the possibility of belief by one [...] in the magic of language. [...] Without fictionalizing, in fact, there would be no real. The truth must be told, but it must, as Emily Dickinson has reminded us, be told “slant”’ (81). He explores Pratchett’s works in relation to Hegel, Heidegger, John Knox, Aristotle, and Derrida, concluding that Pratchett, by ‘not according to the given (of perception, tradition, or ideology), enables us to experience the world anew by asking questions [...] about the apparently given’ (90).

Caroline Webb’s “The Watchman and the Hippopotamus: Art, Play and Otherness in Thud!” does a nice job of exploring the treatment of ‘race and human perceptions of the Other’ (92) and resulting potential for ethnic conflict in Thud!, The Fifth Elephant, Jingo and other works where satire is at play and an implicit critique of contemporary global politics is an on-going theme in Pratchett’s work. Noting the classic work of Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens (1949), Webb recognizes and explores the role games and art play in resolving conflict: deflecting not only the dwarfs and trolls from renewed war at Koom Valley, but defusing Sally and Angua’s visceral distrust with the potential for mud-wrestling (98) and using Commander Vimes’ story-telling to his son from Where’s My Cow? as a means to channel his anger and prevent himself from yielding to his ‘Summoning Dark’ urges (104-106).

The most unusual paper in the volume, “Counting Dangerous Beans,” by William C. Spruiell, seeks to explore Pratchett’s style without resort to conventional forms of interpretation, by applying techniques of “corpus linguistics” – that is, ‘word-counts’ to examine instances of ‘discrete items’ such as ‘type-nouns’ or ‘verbs indicating amplitude modulation (sighed, yelled)’ or type of utterance (stated, demanded, asked)’ to test some ‘hypotheses’ about Pratchett’s style. The paper also looks at Pratchett’s use of (often unusual) names and how they may ‘violate likely reader expectations’ (109-110). The essay includes definitions of terms used, an extensive explication of methodology, statistics, and conclusions with two Appendices which I will leave to those in the field to evaluate. The essay raises, in my mind, the question of determining authorship, or changing style of authorship over time, reflected in the debate over who wrote the Book of Isaiah, which seems to have three different authors, based on textual and historical analysis. My own reading of Pratchett suggests a change in style over time which could reflect maturation of his writing style, but also the role played by his collaborators (such as the work of the artists discussed in this volume) in changing how he thinks about his characters and approaches his work; would corpus linguistics provide a way of exploring these questions? I do not know.

The final paper in the volume, Gideon Haberkorn’s “Debugging the Mind: The Rhetoric of Humor and the Poetics of Fantasy,” explores how the mind makes meaning (Paul Valéry) and the relationship of humor and fantasy in the Discworld novels. Haberkorn examines Pratchett’s use of puns and other wordplay (includ-

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1 [A primer on corpus linguistics can be found in the SFRA Review 311. –ED]
ing understatements, similes, and the use of discursive footnotes), and the works' relationship to magic realism. He argues that Pratchett's novels become 'theoretical fiction, i.e., self-reflexive fiction, fiction about fiction' or metafiction, using in *Feet of Clay* the case of golems who can make their own words as a concluding example: ‘Pratchett uses the Discworld to explore the role of the words in our heads, and how they control us. And how we can make up our own’ (183-184).

Overall, *Discworld and the Disciplines* is a comprehensive, interesting and challenging collection that belongs in academic reference collections and points to areas of further research while being accessible (for the most part) to the general reader interested in Pratchett's work.

**Fiction Reviews**

*The Very Best of Kate Elliott*

Cait Coker


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SHORT HIGH FANTASY is a subgenre that has been neglected in recent years, not least because of the shrinking number of venues that offer such work. The retrospective *The Very Best of Kate Elliott* collects some of that author's shorter works across the past twenty years. The majority of them originally appeared in various anthologies rather than magazines (only one piece, aside from the introduction, is published here for the first time). Elliott is an accomplished novelist, with no fewer than five trilogies and series in print, and several of the stories in this collection appear in the worlds of those other books. That is this collection's strength and weakness--if one is familiar with her author, this volume is an excellent addition to one's library, and if one is not, it is not. Little holds the stories together thematically, and many of them feel not-quite fleshed-out and not-quite finished.

As a reader new to Elliott (though after the fact I realized I had read one of the short stories and two of the essays previously), I was disappointed. A volume of "the very best" promises a useful introduction, though I suppose it is that, but also a cohesive body of work, a key to understanding an author's oeuvre in brief. Elliott suggests this collection is one such in her introductory, autobiographical essay about her life as a reader and writer. "... I chose to write the epic fantasy and science fiction I wanted to see, not the epic SFF I had been sold as the only authentic brand. I chose to write women at the center of my narratives. I chose to create space for myself, by which I meant all of the people I did not see in these stories," she writes (8). This sounds both laudatory and wonderful, but seems to overlook the dozens of women writers who have done the same thing past (Joanna Russ, Anne McCaffrey, Robin McKinley) and present (Elizabeth Bear, Elizabeth Moon, N.K. Jemisin). Perhaps this only speaks to a need for a wider celebration of such authors and topics.

The characteristic most of the stories share is that of women rescuing themselves. In “With God to Guard Her,” a pseudo-medieval fable, the heroine fends off a powerful lord, saving both herself and her family. In “Leaf and Branch and Grass and Vine” the narrator saves her country by rescuing a famous general. In contrast, the heroine realizes that no one can be saved from fame or corruption in “Sunseeker.” The story, “My Voice Is In My Sword” describes the misadventures of a galaxy-travelling actors’ troupe that performs *Macbeth* as part of a diplomatic mission to a new race; that something should go wrong with the Scottish play in this context is a surprise only to the characters. These are the stand-out pieces; the other stories are, unfortunately, rather forgettable.

By far the strongest part of the collection is the four essays that conclude the book: “The Omniscient Breasts: The Male Gaze through Female Eyes,” “The Narrative of Women in Fear and Pain,” “And Pharaoh’s Heart Hardened,” and “The Status Quo Does Not Need World-Building.” Each of these previously appeared online, but having them in print form will be useful for future access. These are also the pieces I would use in a classroom, either for a class on science fiction or for creative writing (and for the first two pieces, especially for creative writing) as they discuss common-to-the-point-of-cliche problems in fiction generally and speculative fiction specifically. These essays also seem to articulate the author's viewpoint on and problems with genre more clearly than the introduction did, and I wish they had appeared before the short stories rather than after, as an illustration of theory and then practice. Perhaps *The
Very Best of Kate Elliott is most useful for what it represents than what it says. The past several years have witnessed numerous schisms in SFF, not least and most recently Puppygate. That this book provocatively sets itself in opposition to the traditional, white male narratives of story and authorship says more about the current state of fiction than the actual stories do.

**Ancillary Sword**

Bill Dynes


ANN LECKIE’S 2013 celebrated debut, Ancillary Justice, swept the Hugo, the Nebula, the BSFA, and the Arthur C. Clarke awards for best novel. Her 2014 sequel, Ancillary Sword, falls prey to some of the familiar challenges of the “middle child” in a trilogy, but is nevertheless a satisfying and thoroughly engaging space opera. Much of the success of Ancillary Sword derives from Leckie’s willingness to avoid merely repeating what worked so well in the first novel, but instead to move her story in new directions. Sword builds on the themes and ideas of Justice, but employs a more streamlined narrative structure that allows Leckie to develop her protagonist more fully and to explore questions about authority, power, and dependency in thoughtful ways.

Ancillary Sword begins shortly after the conclusion of the previous novel. The Radchaai dominate an interstellar empire through their “ancillaries,” human beings who have been networked so that they are essentially extensions of the AIs that control vast warships. Leckie’s protagonist, Breq, was once one of these ships, but is now an isolated individual, no longer an ancillary but more than merely human. After the events of Ancillary Justice, Breq is given the rank of Fleet Captain and dispatched to the planet Athoek, where factional fighting is endangering the lucrative tea export. Breq’s interest in the misadventures of the same warship kill a translator for the alien species Presger, which Breq fears may bring on a war the Radchaai cannot win.

Breq soon finds herself enmeshed in local politics as well. Athoek was annexed by the Radchaai some six centuries previously, and the tea plantations are controlled by local elites who extract labor from conquered peoples who have been transported to the planet. When Breq rejects the romantic advances of a wealthy plantation owner’s daughter, she finds herself the target of an assassination attempt. Investigating that attempt, Breq begins to suspect that there is an important connection between these local and personal disputes and the vast interstellar struggles that threaten the Radchaai empire itself.

This interweaving of the personal and the public is a powerful aspect of Leckie’s fiction. Ancillary Justice drew a good deal of critical attention, for example, for its intriguing approach to gender. Breq, as a Radchaai, doesn’t distinguish gender, and consistently uses feminine pronouns in describing herself and other characters, only switching to male pronouns when talking with non-Radch or when specific evidence demands it. Ironically, what made this element so interesting in Justice was its lack of significance, and that remains true in Sword. The gender of Leckie’s characters is rarely of central concern; in Sword, Breq is surprised by the decorations of the Athoek “Genitalia Festival,” and later has to adjust her language when addressing the transported workers who have been involved in the plot on her life. She makes the correction simply to acknowledge the workers’ language and sense of self, however. The planter’s daughter whom Breq rejected has been taking advantage of the powerless workers, and whether the victims are male or female does not affect Breq’s moral outrage.

By drawing our attention to gender only to downplay its significance, Leckie ties Breq’s ambiguity to larger themes of identity and awareness. Breq is less haunted by the loss of her broader self as the troop carrier Justice of Toren than she was in the previous novel, but her struggles to understand others are nevertheless poignant and compelling throughout her adventures at Athoek. Cybernetic implants give her access to everything that her ship’s AI knows about all of her crew – she can see through their eyes, measure their heartbeats, or assess their REM patterns as they sleep. But she has difficulty understanding those to whom she is not networked, and
while she can draw upon some two thousand years of experience with other people, this doesn't always give her the insight that she craves. The quick pace of the novel doesn't give Breq, or the reader, much time to dwell on these philosophical questions, but they inform Breq's quest for justice in consistently interesting ways.

That pacing is a substantive difference between Justice and Sword. The first novel tells its story by shuttling between two chronologies – the narrative of Breq's quest for revenge against the Lord of the Radch is informed by the backstory of her loss of her Justice of Toren identity. Ancillary Sword is a more straightforward adventure, weaving the military action continued from Justice with the political intrigue of the plantation owners and their serfs. Breq's entanglement with Raughd, the plantation owner's daughter who won't take no for an answer, appears at first to be a distracting interlude. Leckie, however, quickly weaves it into the larger narrative in a manner that continues the plot's momentum yet also permits the reader a closer look at the Radchaa's methods of maintaining order and discipline across their empire. This linear plot structure can occasionally give the reader the sense that Leckie is simply anxious to get all the necessary pieces in place for the trilogy's conclusion, but Breq's adventures on Athoek are more than compelling enough to keep us thoroughly entertained.

Fans of Ancillary Justice praised Leckie's ability to develop the familiar structures of space opera in ways that allowed her to engage big questions of identity, individuality, and commitment. That novel will presumably have a place on any syllabi of classes surveying science fiction or focused on topics such as gender, the human/technology interface, or narration and self. As a sequel, Ancillary Sword may not be quite as valuable as a classroom text; it really is not a stand-alone novel. But it is clear that Leckie has lost none of her touch here, taking fresh directions even within a narrower scope. Ancillary Sword ratchets up the pace and tightens the focus. Scholars interested in the contemporary space opera subgenre will likely be comparing Leckie with writers such as the late Ian M. Banks and Alastair Reynolds, while Leckie's approach to gender compels references to Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree, Jr., Ursula K. Le Guin, and perhaps Joanna Russ. What is most clear is that we have every reason to look forward to the conclusion of Breq's millennium-spanning adventures when the final novel appears this fall.

**We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves**

Chris Pak


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PUBLISHED IN 2013 and released last year in the UK in hardback and softcover, Karen Joy Fowler's We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves has received much acclaim, winning the 2014 Pen/Faulkner award and the 2014 California Book Award for Fiction, and having been nominated for the 2014 Man Booker Prize and the 2013 Nebula Award. It tells the story of a family that has been torn apart by the necessity of separation. Our narrator, Rosemary Cooke, recounts her formative experiences as a child growing up with her sister Fern – so close in age and upbringing that they could almost be twins – and her older brother Lowell, whom she greatly admires. In 1979, when Rosemary is five years old, Fern is mysteriously taken away without explanation, and her family life dramatically changes: ‘a rupture in the space-time continuum of the Cooke family’ (62). Lowell absconds, a double loss that leaves her mother traumatized and her father turning to drink. Rosemary, once an extremely talkative child, becomes silent and detached from her peers and her parents and, when she enrolls into college, she moves halfway across the continent from Indiana to UC Davis, California, in an attempt to escape her past. Reviewers have found it difficult to discuss the novel without compromising its lauded narrative twist. This review will explore the details of that twist after the following paragraph.

The narrative is Rosemary's memoir of the mysterious territory of her past, told from a moment in the present as she approaches her fortieth year. The narrative itself is non-linear, jumping backwards and forwards from the events of her childhood and her experiences at university. She takes her father's advice, given to her when she was a talkative child so as to shorten her stories, and begins in the middle in 1996 when she was enrolled at UC Davis. This allows Rosemary to probe her past by circling around these events from different perspectives, inviting subtle shifts in significance and contributing to the impact of several surprising and sometimes shock-
Rosemary’s deferment of the much-publicized twist to the novel is part of her storytelling technique. It is her attempt to make the reader understand and vicariously experience – as much as is possible – her perspective toward the circumstances of her childhood without compromising the veridicality of those experiences. She attempts, in other words, to avoid springing the trap of widely-held assumptions that might overwhelm the truth of her experience. Her memoir is a kind of recovery of speech and memory that surprises even the teller: her memory, as she discovers, has itself been under revision as much as the narrative itself revises these experiences from the reference point of her almost forty year old self. The revisionary status of memory in the wake of trauma and the novel’s narrative structure – with its constant re-circling of themes and events that present another aspect for the reader to reflect upon – folds together the narrator’s attempt to explore that lost terrain, along with the reader’s induction into her past.

The twist to the narrative is fundamental to this storytelling strategy and exemplifies the way new information leads readers to dramatically revise their understanding of Rosemary’s life. Fern is a chimpanzee, who was adopted by Rosemary’s parents and paired with their own child as part of a contrastive study on language acquisition, animal behaviour and child developmental psychology. Rosemary and Fern spent their inseparable young lives as subjects involved in a multiplicity of assessments with her father and his graduate students. Her mother, too, was equally involved in this programme and recorded the experiments in her journals, which she passes to Rosemary when she is in college. It is from her depth plunge into her memory, her strained conversations with her parents, and the evidence of her mother’s journals that the narrative is stitched together. Epigraphs from Franz Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” align Rosemary’s narrative with Red Peter’s, the ape that learns human language and manners in Kafka’s short story, but raises several questions that remain tantalizing and unresolved. In Kafka’s narrative, Red Peter leaves behind his ape existence and can no longer remember what it was like as he had experienced it. Obvious parallels with Fern highlight how, brought up with a human family and identifying herself as human in distinction to other chimpanzees, she is unable to fully enmesh herself in ape society. Yet Rosemary, too, is not quite able to develop the sometimes awkward yet entirely familiar relationships that people form with their peers. She has acquired mannerisms that mark her as different, placing her as the object of the uncanny-valley response, ‘the human aversion to things that look almost but not quite like people’ (102).

The history of primate studies brings other stories into the orbit of Rosemary’s narrative. Rosemary lists several tragic real-world human-ape studies, from Gua and the Kelloggs family, Washoe and Nim Chimpsky, and she frequently reflects on animal experimentation and even cites the use of chimps in space to highlight a history of primate exploitation. Fowler’s 2002 story, “What I Didn’t See,” with its allusion to James Tiptree Jr’s “The Women Men Don’t See,” shows how the issue of perspective and the relationship between the human and other have been longstanding themes for Fowler, and have long found a ground in its instantiation in the relationship between humankind and apes. Donna Haraway’s Primate Visions, too, dialogizes extremely well with Fowler’s narrative, which is no surprise: at the SFRA 2011 conference in Poland, during which Donna Haraway received the Pilgrim award, Fowler explains that “What I Didn’t See” is a response to Primate Visions (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42HisZwKAgQ). We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is in part an extension of that response.

Rosemary’s reflection on her relationship with Fern is an interrogation of the species boundary and of the possibilities for responsiveness across the human-animal divide. The narrative raises many questions about the difficulty of companionship and the dangers attendant on attempts to erase or ignore difference. Yet it is quite clear that Rosemary and Fern are able to respond to each other, if not always in the ways that Rosemary believes she was able to as a child. Lowell is essential to this aspect of the story as it is through his work as a member of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) that we are able to see what lies beneath the use of animals for scientific research. Lowell is able to track Fern down after she has been sent away, and this discovery propels him into a career of animal welfare activism. He is thus an eye into the unacknowledged and unrepresented foundations of much science, industry and commerce – of society’s quiet assumptions with regard to the place of animals in a schema that identifies humankind as exceptional. Lowell’s membership at the ALF is not presented as some route to salvation or as a noble quest, however, and it falls to Rosemary to tell the whole story. This is another reason for why it becomes so important for Rosemary to tell her story. It is Lowell’s story, too, as much as it is her parents and Fern’s – and because Fern cannot speak, Rosemary must find the voice that she once had and pass the story on.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is an extreme-
ly successful exploration of memory and narrative, of what it means to be human and part of a human society, and what it means to relate to animals. It is a story about growing up in extremely unusual circumstances, but more than that it is about exploring the significance of the past on present action. It is poignant, touching in its portrayal of the ruptured Cooke family and Rosemary’s estrangement; it is distressing, especially so in the revelations surrounding Fern and her life after she is sent away; it is also funny and lighthearted, as Rosemary’s stories about her college friend Harlow and their shenanigans attest to. Fowler brilliantly weaves the assumptions underlying behavioural psychology and its opposing voices into the texture of Rosemary’s memoir, allowing her to explore the social impact of science through their psychological ramifications on an individual and her family. I would highly recommend this novel to anyone interested in the push and pull between memory and narrative, primate studies, and reflections on the self and other.

Works Cited


WALLACE (WALLY) WOOD should be a familiar name to anyone interested in comic book Science Fiction (or comic books in general, for that matter), as his art graces some of EC Comics’s best SF stories and therefore some of the best comics SF of the last century. By the mid-1960s with EC long gone (except for Mad), and the repressive Comics Code thoroughly entrenched, there were few venues for comics artists wishing to do more personal or adult work than was permitted at the major comics companies. The Underground scene was in development but had not yet become the cultural phenomenon into which it blossomed (if one can describe underground comics with such a term). Wally Wood decided to create such a forum: an alternative to the mainstream comics market, where artists could do what they wanted without editorial interference. The result was the magazine witzend, an idealistic forum for artists to publish whatever they wanted and retain the copyright in their work (almost unheard of in comics at the time). The first issue, published in 1966, had a “Statement [sic] of NO Policy” on the inside front cover, announcing the magazine’s artist-centric plan to present work without editorial interference. Wood put together the magazine for its first few issues before ceding control (though he remained a contributor) to Bill Pearson, who helmed the magazine through the remainder of its 13 issue run, before folding the magazine in 1985. Fantagraphics, one of the leading publishers of classic and contemporary comics material, has brought the entire run back into print in a lovely oversized (9 x 12.5), hardcover two-volume boxed set, excellently and lovingly printed and including an essay by Pearson as well as reminiscences from many of the artists involved. This is an invaluable resource for anyone seriously interested in the genesis of alternative comics, especially comics with a SF/Fantasy orientation, as Wood himself and many major contributors are primarily associated with such genre work.

witzend [comic]

Dominick Grace


Order option(s): Hard
The list of artists whose work appears is a virtual who's-who of major SF and Fantasy-oriented comics artists. In addition to Wood, there is also work from Vaughn Bodé, Howard Chaykin, Reed Crandall, Steve Ditko, Frank Frazetta, Jeff Jones, Jack Kirby (only one pin-up, sadly), Gray Morrow, Ralph Reese, Al Williamson, and Berni Wrightson, and numerous other well-known and not so well-known comics artists. (There is even some early, undistinguished work by Art Spiegelman, though generally figures associated with the Underground are glaringly absent from witzend—Spiegelman and Bodé being among the few exceptions). Despite the talent involved, though, the result is very much a mixed bag. There are two probable reasons for this.

First, an editorial policy of no policy is great in theory, but theory is almost always better in theory than in practice. The openness to diverse material in some ways is a strength for witzend, in that it allowed for an eclecticism rare in comics publications at the time, and it is certainly interesting to see the range of materials here—from the almost photorealistic styles of figures such as Frazetta or Reed Crandall (several issues run some stunning illustrations he did for the works of Edgar rice Burroughs) through the more stylized work of figures such as Ditko to the cartoony work of, say, Don Martin—rubbing metaphorical shoulders with each other. On the other hand, the absence of editorial policy or direction means that the magazine really has no voice, vision, or direction. Material advertised as forthcoming in subsequent issues never materializes; stories begun are not continued; and some bizarre shifts and turns occur (notably the fascinating but anomalous issue devoted entirely to the film work of W. C. Fields).

Second, while witzend offered its artists the copyright in their own work, it offered no other compensation, and when it began, there were few other venues for author-owned material to be published. It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that the number of well-known and highly-visible comics creators decreased drastically by the end of the run. None of the 1980s creators one would see as on a par with Williamson, Ditko, Wood himself, and so on turn up in the later issues.

So, the content is hit and miss; however, there is much of interest, especially in the earlier issues, and certainly to readers interested in genre work. Vaughn Bodé is one of the relatively few underground artists who had a strong interest in genres such as SF, and a couple of his stories (including the well-known “Cobalt 60,” which has been widely acknowledged as an influence on Ralph Bakshi’s film Wizards) appear in early issues. Their presence alongside the more classic SF stylings of figures like Williamson and Frazetta allows for some fruitful consideration of the underlying assumptions we have about how SF should look; Bodé is rather an innovator in his creation of a messier, more baroque SF landscape than was typical of comics in the 1950s and 1960s, with their clean lines and clean-cut heroes. To be fair, even the more classically-oriented artists here begin to challenge the expectations of SF-oriented comics, notably Wood and Williamson in “Savage World” in the first issue, an unpublished and reworked Buster Crabbe comic that looks like a typical 1950s/60s SF story in some respects but offers a slightly more nuanced and disturbing view of human/alien interaction. Frazetta’s “Last Chance” (issue 3) offers a similarly revisionist post-apocalyptic scenario, albeit with a disturbing casualness about rape.

Most interesting, though probably of least direct relevance to SF, are the major Ditko stories here: the first Mister A stories, in which Ditko’s Randian revisioning of the crime-busting masked hero first appeared; and his two “Avenging World” stories, dizzying Randian allegories in which a personified planet Earth pontificates politically.

In short, this is probably not a book anyone would want to assign for a SF course—especially not at its high ticket price—but it is definitely of value to anyone interested in researching the genesis of alternative comics and/or the broadening of the parameters of SF and Fantasy in comics, and there are certainly several stories that one could profitably assign to students for analysis, should one’s library happen to have the book.

**SF-Worlds and the First-Person Perspective**

Lars Schmeink


Order option(s): *NaissanceE | The Talos Principle*

Since their inception, video games as media have been closely entwined with the genre of science
fiction, not only recognizable in the thematic proximity of early games such as *Spacewar!* (1962) but also in the technological development of the medium itself. The success of the first-person shooter (or better the subjective perspective used in action games) for example has sf to thank for many of its favorite themes and tropes, which led games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1993), *Doom* (1993), *Quake* (1996), and *Half-Life* (1998) to their success, and provided the dominant position that first person perspective has in today’s mainstream games market. The subjective perspective has become one of the most important game mechanics used today and would probably not have enjoyed so much success had it not been for the strange landscapes to be explored and the alien threats to be eliminated that the sf genre presented.

One aspect that yields an interesting analysis of the “productive intersections between SF as a cultural mode and video games as a medium” (227), as Pawel Frelik put it, might be the evolution of this first person perspective, as showcased in recent years by games such as *Portal* (2007), *Mirror’s Edge* (2008), *Dear Esther* (2008/12) or *The Stanley Parable* (2011/13). Two independent game developers have made use of the proliferation and variability of the first person perspective in 2014: *The Talos Principle* by Croatian developer CroTeam and *NaissanceE* by French studio Limassee Five.

*The Talos Principle* is technically a puzzle-game, in which players are tasked to find Tetris-like sigils in a ruined landscape. In order to do so, they have to explore an antiquity-inspired world, which is nonetheless equipped with highly technological equipment to hinder the player in gathering the sigils. Players will need to use equipment such as jammers and connectors in order to bypass force barriers, guard drones and gun turrets to get to the sigils. These, in turn, allow the player to open new paths to other parts of the world or to receive additional equipment for solving the puzzles. As with *Portal*, the creative use of the first person perspective is essential to the puzzle designs and players will need to experiment with the limitations, combinations and possibilities of each solution. How everything works is not given in a tutorial but needs to be experienced. There is a disembodied voice, but its instructions are rather philosophical in nature and do not address the game mechanics. Aside from this commentary aimed towards the avatar, the game does not provide a direct communication with the player, but counts on his/her intrinsic motivation to explore the intradiegetic cues for background narrative (such as QR codes and computer terminals with emails and archival information). Players will need to explore the world, traverse it and experience it physically (by moving their avatars) in order to grasp their own being in this world – by doing so, they will discover that they are playing an android and that the game world is a virtual simulation designed to test the cognitive skills of the avatar. The puzzles are symbolic representations of the growing self-awareness of the android AI and within the game, two oppositional forces vie for the player’s allegiance. The conflict between Elohim (the disembodied voice) and Milton (the archival AI of the terminals) enacts a philosophical debate on the concept of free will, on human knowledge and science and on the possibility of transcending human nature and allowing for a future in which humans do not exist.

Similar to games such as *The Stanley Parable* or *BioShock* (2007), *The Talos Principle* in addition opens up a metafictional level of discourse in which the game comments on the constructivist nature of the human experience, connecting the game experience (of simple puzzle solving) with the experience of the world. Which set of rules do you follow? How do you decide if all moral guidance and compass are missing? How is the human experience defined? What parts do faith, knowledge, obedience and free will play in being human? The game mechanics – referring to self-perception (via the first person perspective), individual decision-making (which guide to follow – Milton or Elohim or neither?) and the solving of puzzles (as representative of individual growth and education) – are thus entwined with the message of the game, dealing with human cognition and construction of the world. The topoi of sf – most importantly discourses of posthumanism and the singularity – are shifted from passive consumption to interactive manipulation and experience.

*NaissanceE* on the one hand also has parts that function as a puzzle game, but larger portions need to be seen as a game of dexterity and exploration (similar to *Mirror’s Edge*). This makes the experience of the game much more physical for the player (in the sense that you will need hand-eye coordination, delicate movements and perfect timing to master the levels), leading to frustration of less experienced players. The game begins in *medias res* with a disembodied avatar being chased by a black worm-like creature through a surreal cityscape. Aside from the introductory words “Lucy is lost” and a few subtitles to explain the controls of the game, no further communication with the player is given. There is no tutorial and no apparent goal of the game, except to explore the landscape and “find a way out” (whereto is unknown). The traversal of the world and the explo-
ration of the surroundings are emphasized as key to the game. In terms of mechanics, the game thus blends aspects of puzzle gaming – allowing players to manipulate objects such as balls of light, elevators or barriers – and aspects of a dexterity game, in which the traversal of the Labyrinthian world is key and timed jumps between platforms provide the challenge. Both of these aspects do not provide a storyline though; there is no narrative element motivating the movement through the game space – exploration is key. Non-obvious challenges to the game experience are the disembodied nature of the avatar (no bodily limit can be seen, no hands or legs) and the lacking precision of the collision programming – leading to frustrating deaths in the game, when, for example, the non-existent avatar fails the jump.

The central appeal of the game is not its (lack of) narrative though, but the world, which needs to be explored in detail. And it is here that NaissanceE reveals its science fictionality by presenting a specific iconicity in its design. On the one hand, the game reduces its representation of world to the interplay of light and dark, extracting color (for the most part) and concentrating on optical illusions, shadow play and the disorientation of over-exposure to light. In this, there is a scientific reduction in the construction of world that limits the experience to geometry and optics. On the other hand though, the game celebrates form and abstraction of design beyond the scope of reality or practicality, flaunting excess in level design that can only be described as visually science fictional. Players fluent in the visual language of sf will find designs reminiscent of and going beyond that of the high rises in Blade Runner (1982), the CPU architecture of Tron (1982), the subterranean world of Harlan Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth…” (1968) or the industrial tunnels and shafts of the death star in Star Wars (1977) – at the end even the desolate and disorienting deserts of Arrakis (from Dune [1968]) or Tatooine (from Star Wars). NaissanceE is an experiment in architectural abstraction – it explores the sf worldliness of industrial vents and tunnels, huge alien halls, inhospitable landscapes and hypertecnologized cities, all of which is made the central novum of the game world.

In terms of player experience then, NaissanceE is challenging at best, if not frustrating for players, especially in its resistance of standardized game mechanics such as a narrative motivating gameplay, a teleology for players
to pursue or even a satisfying moment of closure (where the game reminds us of Vincenzo Natali’s film *Cube* [1997]). All of this is an intentional negation of player expectations and a feature of the game, which highlights the geographical exploration of the game space as motivator for play. In terms of sf then, the game needs be understood, as Frelik argues, as an “iconographic archive of science fiction in which signature images […] are not only deployed in various permutations but also literally mobilized and made available to the players” (233) – the game provides a living canvas of sf imagery.

The variability with which sf video games such as *The Talos Principle* and *NaissanceE* appropriate entrenched game mechanics such as the first person perspective and redesign its use, makes clear the expressive potential of the cultural form of the video game. The “productive intersections” of genre and medium are important starting points for academic inquiry into our understanding of the function of video games beyond a pleasurable reprieve. Similarly, they provide evidence that games are able to blend artistry and message with game mechanic and thus allow for a deeper and more meaningful game experience, as well as pushing the envelope on what encompasses science fiction in the 21st century.

**Works Cited**


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**The Signal [film]**

Artem Zubov


**Order option(s): DVD | Blu-Ray | Amazon**

YOUNG DIRECTOR William Eubank’s *The Signal*, the second title in his filmography (following *Love*, 2011), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in early 2014. Both films present the director’s reflections on human nature and how far a human will go in order to survive or save a loved one. While both films may seem to be categorized easily as science fiction, the director only uses conventions of the genre to create impossible situations to play out how characters react, elucidating the extremes of human nature. Responding to questions as to what *The Signal* is about, the director himself notes that it is “a personal story about a kid trying to examine his emotional and logical self” (Zimmerman 2014) and “is kind of about choices and sort of what drives somebody – the decisions we make, whether we make them based off of thinking logically or thinking emotionally” (Thompson 2014)

From beginning to end, *The Signal* addresses a variety of ‘horizons of generic expectations.’ It starts as a road movie —fellow hackers Nic (Brenton Thwaites) and Jonah (Beau Knapp) and Nic’s love interest Haley (Olivia Cooke)—are going on a road trip. Nic (a former runner who had to quit because of a leg injury) gradually becomes distant from Haley in order not to be a burden for her. Since Haley is headed for a year-long study program, this road trip is their last chance to be together. Simultaneously, the movie promises a solid cyberpunk sub-plot with Nic and Jonah trying to locate a hacker (we only know his nickname—NOMAD) who almost got them expelled from MIT and is now sending them enigmatic e-mails. Locating the hacker’s computer signal, the trio is led to an abandoned house somewhere in Nevada, where they get attacked by an invisible foe. This completes the movie’s first, ‘realistic’ part and takes us to the second, ‘science-fictional’ part.

Transported to a laboratory, Nic meets Dr. Damon (Laurence Fishburne), who tells him that the three friends experienced ‘contact’ with EBE (‘an extra-terrestrial biological entity’) and are now dangerously contagious. While Damon says that Nic and his friends are
the ones who were contaminated by the aliens, viewers suspect strongly that Damon himself is the alien, owing primarily to Fishburne’s ‘Morpheus’ charisma, which makes us feel like he knows more than a regular human being could or should.

Attempting to ascertain what is happening, Nic learns that Jonah and Haley are also being kept at the laboratory. At that moment, he decides to follow the path of his emotions and to save Haley, who is in coma. According to Eubank, this is the climax and the apogee of the plot—Nic faces a choice between logic and emotions, and he chooses emotions. At the same time, the rest of the film offers a number of science fiction elements that make it hard to believe that the entire plot can be reduced to an easily decipherable ‘Bildungsroman,’ or ‘coming-of-age’ story. The filmmakers’ inventiveness and the abundant imagery of The Signal promise too much to write them off that easily.

The Signal does not reveal its generic affiliation till the very end, preventing discovery by setting up ‘false’ generic expectations. A scene in the abandoned house where the friends were supposed to find the hacker recalls the hand-held-camera horror genre; talks of contagious diseases invoke the zombie film or The Andromeda Strain by Robert Wise (1971). The Signal even makes a nod to the ‘superheroes’ genre. Nic’s injured legs, Jonah’s arms, and Haley’s spine were replaced with prosthetics that—as Damon explains—were created using alien technologies. Those prosthetics lend Nic and Jonah superhuman abilities: Nic can run faster than the speed of sound and break walls with a single kick; and at one point we see Jonah hitting the ground with his prosthetics and creating a pulse wave that crushes his pursuers.

The underlying plot strategy that informs the entire movie is revealed only at the end. Escaping the laboratory, the protagonists reach the “edge” of the earth—a huge canyon that blocks their route to escape. Trying to evade their pursuers, Jonah is killed and Haley is taken away. Nic sees Damon for the last time and realizes that “Damon” is an anagram for “Nomad,” the hacker, who had lured them into his trap. In Ancient Greek, “daemon” means “godlike power,” or “fate.” Indeed, Damon emerges as an incomprehensible entity, “a wandering god” (Nomad-God) who observes and experiments with other biological species. Thus, pointing at Nic’s prosthetics, Damon claims that Nic manifests “the perfect integration of human will and alien technology.” Infuriated, Nic runs away at the speed of sound and crashes into an invisible wall.

Final shots reveal that the narrative structure of The Signal is composed like a Russian ‘nesting-doll’ toy, placing the film in the same context as the Wachowskis’ The Matrix (1999), Josef Rusnak’s The Thirteenth Floor (1999), and Alex Proyas’ Dark City (1998), (the final shot is reminiscent of the latter). Following the same formula, Eubank starts The Signal with easily the identifiable and recognizable ‘real’ world of the road movie genre. But the world we see in the finale is openly fantastic—it is either an alien planet-size spacecraft, or a cybernetic network of virtual dimensions, or possibly both. Although this image strikes us with its aggressive science-fictional nature, it is presented as the only ‘real’ world. While the similarities with the Wachowskis’ and others’ approach are strong, Eubank explores the transgression from the fantastic ‘real’ world to the real ‘fantastic’ more thoroughly by using our familiarity with different genres of popular culture and by playing with our expectations.

Since The Signal embodies multiple generic formulas, it is a perfect demonstration of how we ‘communicate’ with works of fiction via genres. The film would be of great value for theorists of genre studies, especially the disciples of reader-response criticism. In academic courses, this film would be a valuable example of contemporary low-budget science fiction films demonstrating that inventiveness and creativity often hide in-between different genres and contexts.

Works Cited

Call for Papers—Conference

Title: PAMLA 113th Annual Conference: Neal Stephenson, the Long Now, and the History of the Future
Deadline: 16 May 2015
Conference Date: November 6-8, 2015
Portland, Oregon
Contact: Jonathan Lewis, Troy University <jlewis94822@troy.edu>

Topic: We are looking for papers that address issues of history in Stephenson’s fiction. Of particular interest are papers that connect Stephenson’s work to The Long Now Foundation, the 10,000 Year Clock and other long-history projects, and/or the history of the future.

Submission: Email Jonathan Lewis, Troy University <jlewis94822@troy.edu>.

Submission: Email Jonathan Lewis, Troy University <jlewis94822@troy.edu>.

Title: Eighth Anniversary Sessions of the Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Legend Area
Deadline: 1 June 2015
Conference Date: October 30-31, 2015
Colby-Sawyer College in New London, New Hampshire
Contact: Kraig Larkin (kraig.larkin@colby-sawyer.com) and Michael A. Torregrossa (NEPCAFantastic@gmail.com)

Formed in 2008, the Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Legend Area celebrates its eighth anniversary in 2015, and we seek proposals from scholars of all levels for papers that explore any aspect of the intermedia traditions of the fantastic (including, but not limited to, elements of science fiction, fantasy, fairy tale, gothic, horror, legends, and mythology) and how creative artists have altered our preconceptions of these subtraditions by producing innovative works in diverse countries and time periods and for audiences at all levels.

Special topics:

- Given the proximity to Halloween, we are especially interested in proposals related to monsters and the monstrous.

Please see our website NEPCA Fantastic (http://nepca-fantastic.blogspot.com) for further details and ideas.

Submission: If you are interested in proposing a paper or panel of papers, please send please send the NEPCA Paper Proposal Form (download from http://nepca.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/nepca-paper-proposal-form1-1.pdf) along with an abstract of approximately 250 to 400 words and a one to two page CV to both the Program Chair AND to the Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Legend Area Chair at the following addresses (please note “NEPCA Fantastic Proposal 2015” in your subject line): Kraig Larkin, Program Chair, kraig.larkin@colby-sawyer.com; and Michael A. Torregrossa, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Legend Area Chair, NEPCAFantastic@gmail.com.

The Northeast Popular Culture/American Culture Association (NEPCA) is a regional affiliate of the American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Association. NEPCA is an association of scholars in New England and New York, organized in 1974 at the University of Rhode Island. We reorganized and incorporated in Boston in 1992. The purpose of this professional association is to encourage and assist research, publication, and teaching on popular culture and culture studies topics by scholars in the northeast region of the United States. By bringing together scholars from various disciplines, both academic and non-academic people, we foster interdisciplinary research and learning. We publish a newsletter twice per year and we hold an annual conference at which we present both the Peter C. Rollins Book Award and an annual prize.

Membership in NEPCA is required for participation. Annual dues are currently $30 for full-time faculty and $20 to all other individuals; dues are included in conference registration fees. Further details are available at http://nepca.wordpress.com/membership-information/.

Title: The Second Star Trek Symposium 2016
Conference Date: 2016
Malta

Welcome.

2016 marks the 50th anniversary from the launch of Star Trek: The Original Series. To commemorate such an event, plans for the second Star Trek Symposium are under way. This will differ from the traditional Fan-Based Convention in that it is a platform for academ-
ics from across many disciplines to meet and explore the intersection of humanities and sciences. It will be an academic meeting, with the presentation of scholarly papers that will explore the intersection of the humanities and the sciences.

The first *Star Trek* Symposium held earlier this year was well received, thus motivating the organizers to plan and thus promote another symposium to celebrate *Star Trek*'s Golden Anniversary. The organizers are also in the in the process of compiling and publishing all presented papers of the said symposium in a book. Hopefully it will be out for the public later on this year or the beginning of next year.

The event will be held under the auspices of HUMS, a programme at the University of Malta that has been set up to explore and encourage the interfaces between the humanities, medicine and the sciences, and aims to facilitate and disseminate cross-disciplinary research.

The *Star Trek* Symposium is an event that will appeal to scientists and fans of science fiction alike.

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**Call for Papers—Articles**

**Title:** Jamie Bishop Memorial Award  
**Manuscript Deadline:** 1 September 2015  
**Contact:** Amy J. Ransom <ranso1aj@cmich.edu>

The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts Announces its 10th annual Jamie Bishop Memorial Award for a critical essay on the fantastic written in a language other than English. The IAFA defines the fantastic to include science fiction, folklore, and related genres in literature, drama, film, art and graphic design, and related disciplines. For more information on the award and on past winners, please see [http://www.fantastic-arts.org/awards/jamie-bishop-memorial-award/](http://www.fantastic-arts.org/awards/jamie-bishop-memorial-award/) (please note the updated submission criteria, below).

- Essays should be of high scholarly quality, as if for publication in an academic journal.
- We consider essays from 3,000-10,000 words in length (including notes and bibliography).
- Essays may be unpublished scholarship submitted by the author, or already published work nominated either by the author or another scholar (in which case the author’s permission should be obtained before submission).
- Essays must have been written and (when applicable) published in the original language within the last three years prior to submission.
- An abstract in English must accompany all submissions; an English translation of the title of the essay should also be included.
- Only one essay per person may be submitted each year.
- Submissions must be made electronically in Word format.

**Prize:** $250 U.S. and one year’s free membership in the IAFA to be awarded at the annual International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts held each March. Winning essays may be posted on the IAFA website in the original language and/or considered for publication in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* ([http://www.fantastic-arts.org/jfa/](http://www.fantastic-arts.org/jfa/)) should they be translated into English.

**Submission:** Amy J. Ransom, Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures & Cultures, 305 Pearce Hall, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859 USA, ranso1aj@cmich.edu.

**Title:** SFFTV Special Issue CFP: “Star Trek at 50”  
**Manuscript Deadline:** 1 September 2015  
**Contact:** Mark Bould (mark.bould@gmail.com), Sherryl Vint (sherryl.vint@gmail.com), and Gerry Canavan (gerrycanavan@gmail.com)

*Science Fiction Film and Television* seeks submissions for a special issue on “Star Trek at 50.” Since its premiere on September 8, 1966, Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek* has become shorthand for liberal optimism about the future, even as the franchise’s later entries have moved towards increasingly dark depictions of aging (ST II-VII), war (DS9), lifeboat ethics (VOY), and post-9/11 securitization (ENT). This internal tension has now culminated in the rebooted “Abramsverse” depiction that — while nominally directed towards re-invigorating the franchise by returning it to its youthful origins— has seen the Spock’s home planet of Vulcan destroyed by terrorists (ST) and the Federation itself corrupted by a coup from its black-ops intelligence wing (STID).

*SFFTV* invites fresh approaches to Star Trek media in the context of its amazing longevity and continued popularity, with possible emphases on:
- revivals, retcons, and reboots
- canon and canonicity
- Star Trek and/as “franchise”
- fan cultures, fan productions, and fan sequels
- Star Trek ephemera and paratexts
- lost episodes and unproduced scripts
- parody and pastiche (Galaxy Quest, Star Trek XXX, “The Wrath of Farrakhan,” etc.)
- spinoff media like video games and comics
- Star Trek and politics
- Star Trek and science/technology/invention
- Star Trek and race
- Star Trek, sex, gender, and orientation
- Star Trek and disability
- Star Trek and aesthetics
- Star Trek and aging
- Star Trek’s influence on other works or on the culture at large
- Star Trek and other Roddenberry productions (The Questor Tapes, Earth: Final Conflict, Andromeda)

Submission: Articles of 6,000-9,000 words should be formatted using MLA style and according to the submission guidelines available on our website. Submissions should be made via our online system at http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com:80/lup-sftware. Articles not selected for the special issue will be considered for future issues of SFFTV.

Any questions should be directed to the editors, Mark Bould (mark.bould@gmail.com), Sherryl Vint (sherryl.vint@gmail.com), and Gerry Canavan (gerrycanavan@gmail.com).

The deadline for submissions is September 1, 2015, with anticipated publication in Star Trek’s 50th anniversary year.
**SFRA Review**

Four issues per year. This newsletter/journal surveys the field of science fiction scholarship, including extensive reviews of fiction and nonfiction books and media, review articles, and listings of new and forthcoming books. The Review also posts news about SFRA internal affairs, calls for papers, and updates on works in progress.

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One issue per year. Members’ names, contact information, and areas of interest.

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Ongoing. The SFRA listserv allows members to discuss topics and news of interest to the SF community, and to query the collective knowledge of the membership. To join the listserv or obtain further information, visit wiz.cath.vt.edu/mailman/listinfo/sfra-l.

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**Science Fiction Studies**

Three issues per year. This scholarly journal includes critical, historical, and bibliographical articles, review articles, reviews, notes, letters, international coverage, and annual index.

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**Immediate Past President**
Pawel Frelik  
Dept. of American Literature and Culture  
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University  
Pl. Marii Curie-Sklodowskiej 4  
Lublin 20-031, Poland  
pawel.frelik@gmail.com

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Three issues per year. British scholarly journal, with critical, historical, and bibliographical articles, reviews, and letters. Add to dues: $36 (seamail); $43 (airmail).

**Science Fiction Film and Television**
Three issues per year. Critical works and reviews. Add to dues: $59 (e-issue only); $73 (airmail).

**Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts**
Four issues per year. Scholarly journal, with critical and bibliographical articles and reviews. Add to dues: $40/1 year (US); $50/1 year (international); $100/3 years.

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Critical and creative works. Add to dues: $50 (US); $95 (US institutional); $60 (international); $105 (international institutional).