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Submissions

SFRA Review is an Open Access review journal published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association. SFRA Review encourages submissions of reviews, review essays, interviews, and feature articles. Submission guidelines are available at http://www.sfra.org/ or by inquiry to the appropriate editor.
Call for Associate Editor

*SFRA Review* is seeking an Associate Editor, the duties of which will include:

- Aiding the Editor in soliciting content for the Features section
- Aiding the Editor in compiling at least two symposium sections per year (see *SFRA Review* #327 for an example), which may be based on a conference or on a specific theme
- Aiding the Editor in developing the journal’s content and direction generally
- Aiding the Editor in planning and scoping an online, HTML-based version of the journal

Applicants for the Associate Editor position would ideally be late-career graduate students and/or early-career scholars with a proven track record of scholarship in science fiction studies and related disciplines. Scholars interested in academic editing who are more advanced in their careers may also apply, and #AltAc scholars will be happily considered as well. No prior editorial experience is necessary, though it is highly suggested. Applicants should be familiar with the field, institutions (including conferences, organizations), and publication venues (including journals, book series, typical publishers, etc.) of science fiction scholarship. Applicants should be SFRA members.

To apply for the position of Associate Editor, please send a 200-300 word statement about your interest in and qualifications for the position (in short: answer why you should be Associate Editor) and a CV by August 1, 2019 to the Editor, Sean Guynes, at guynesse@msu.edu.

Selection process: the Editor will choose the top three candidates (or two, depending on the size of the applicant pool) and pass these to the journal’s Editor and Review Editors, who together will vote to decide on the Associate Editor. The purpose of this particular process is to ensure the least amount of bias in selecting an Associate Editor for *SFRA Review*.

Call for Assistant Media Review Editor

*SFRA Review* is seeking an Assistant Media Review Editor. The ideal candidate will have a passion for and familiarity with sf media and scholarship at a graduate level. Prior editing experience is not essential, but it is desirable. Applicants should be SFRA members.

Responsibilities will include:

- Assisting the Media Review Editor in compiling a list of reviewable media items, particularly non-Anglophone and global media.
- Aiding the Media Review Editor in regularly soliciting content and expanding the contributors’ list
- Assisting the Media Review Editor with preparing final edits of reviews to be delivered to the Editor

To apply for the position of Assistant Media Review Editor, please send a short statement (200-300 words) that covers why you are interested in the position and your qualifications, as well as your CV, by August 1, 2019 to the Media Review Editor, Leimar Garcia-Siino, at leimargarcia.siino@gmail.

Selection process: the Media Review Editor will choose the top three candidates (or two, depending on the size of the applicant pool) and pass these to the journal’s Editor and Review Editors, who together will vote to decide on the Assistant Media Review Editor. The purpose of this particular process is to ensure the least amount of bias in selecting an Assistant Media Review Editor for *SFRA Review*. 
In other news, I have received a contract to write a volume in Auteur Publishing’s Constellations series. My volume is on Paul Verhoeven’s Starship Troopers (1997), and will have a chapter on the strange franchising history of that film, in addition to chapters on production and reception, historical context in the "long nineties," and discussions of satire, fascist aesthetics, and nameless "bug" enemies. My other big news is that I am now co-editing a new book series of mini-monographs in comics studies to be published by the University of Nebraska Press. So, if you’re a comics scholars interested in pushing forward the boundaries of comics theory, please consider Encapsulations: Critical Comics Studies. More information here: https://seanguynes.com/encapsulations/.

That’s all from me, but there’s plenty of SFRA Review left to read! This issue includes the regular columns from our trusted president and vice president, and two retrospectives honoring recently deceased professionals in science fiction: Gene Wolf and Carol Ermschwiller. In our Features section you can find an essay on the Anthropocene in Philip Reeve’s Predator Cities quartet, the first of which, Mortal Engines, was recently adapted to film. We’ve also got a new column from Rachel Cordasco on science fiction in translation and an interview with an incredible young scholar, Andrew Shephard, whose work you all need to read. And then there’s the meat: eight reviews of recent scholarship, fiction, and media texts that keep science fiction studies going strong.

Well, that’s all until next time. Be seeing you.
PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Sunscreen and Country Reps

Keren Omry

AS BIRDS BEGIN to sing and flowers to bloom, spring is upon us and preparations for our next conference are in full sway. The conference organizers have done an incredible job and as you’ll see from the program, we have a very full, very rich, very exciting three days planned for us. If you’re intending to attend, please make sure to renew your membership, book your accommodations, and bring sunscreen! And, speaking of conference locations, a number of members have expressed interest in one day hosting an SFRA conference. Thanks to the magic of Katherine Biship, our SFRA webmaster, members can now go to our site and check out the Hosting a Conference tab. You’ll need to be logged in and then you can access all the information you need and download the template to submit a bid for hosting. We have started planning a few years ahead so feel free to put your name in the hat.

Another project we’ve been working on that you’ll be hearing more about soon is our pilot delegation of Country Reps. Pulling together our increasingly diverse and international pool of members with our increasingly energetic social media presence, we have devised a way to make official the work so many of you are already doing. Active, appointed members from different countries and regions will serve as conduits of information, spreading the SFRA word to diverse local sf organizations and programs, while using our own facebook, twitter, and listerv to share sf activities we may not have otherwise heard about. This is a unique opportunity for junior members to take a more active role in the Association without, we trust, creating an undue burden. Warm thanks to those of you who have already committed to this. If you are interested in volunteering or in hearing more, please contact me or Sonja Fritzsche, the Vice President, who will stand at the helm of the program. Lastly, stay tuned for next quarter’s column where you’ll hear more about the award commitees and executive board positions that will need filling but, in the meantime, feel free to use your imagination to start trying them on for size! As always, if you have any suggestions, ideas, or requests, do not hesitate to reach out.

VICE-PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Looking Ahead

Sonja Fritzsche

THE DRAFT PROGRAM for the annual conference SFRA 19 is up on the website; its title “Facing the Past Facing the Future: Colonialism, Indigeneity, and Science Fiction.” More information will be available over the next two months. The conference hosts in Honolulu have been working hard organizing and are looking forward to greeting you from June 21-24, 2019. Keynotes speakers include Nalo Hopkinson (author of Brown Girl in the Ring, Midnight Robber, The Salt Roads, and The New Moon’s Arms.) Special guest Dr. Grace Dillon, Professor at Portland State University in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program and editor of Walking in the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction (2012), will speak. There will be a special plenary and film/media sessions on Indigenous Futurisms featuring native Hawaiian and other Indigenous scholars, filmmakers, illustrators, archivists, comic book, AR/VR Writers, and digital artists. Sessions cover many additional topics of science fiction, among them ecocriticism, the Anthropocene, and more. Housing is available in the Chaminade University dorm or in a local hotel. If you aren’t able to come, make sure to follow the news on #SFRA19. Come experience the beautiful of Hawai‘i and catch up on the most recent debates in science fiction studies.

Look soon for an announcement of the locations of SFRA 20 and SFRA 21. Consider attending the business meeting at the conference to find out ways you can get more involved in the organization or e-mail me if you have questions or an interest for the future. Make sure to check the SFRA Facebook page and the website for recent cfps, events, and other announcements of interest to those who do research on science fiction. If you have a call or an event that you would like to circulate, please send me an e-mail.

Finally, I would like to thank former Vice-President Gerry Canavan. His guidance has been very valuable in helping me to transist into my new role as Vice President. See you all soon in Honolulu!
Gene Wolfe
(May. 1931–Apr. 2019)

Rich Horton

GENE WOLFE died April 14, 2019 (or, to a Catholic like Wolfe, Palm Sunday). His loss struck me hard, as hard as the death last year of Ursula K. Le Guin. Some while ago I wrote that Gene Wolfe was the best writer the SF field has ever produced. Keeping in mind that comparisons of the very best writers are pointless—each is brilliant in their own way—I’d say that now I’d add Le Guin and John Crowley and make a trinity of great SF writers, but the point stands: Wolfe’s work was tremendous, deep, moving, intellectually and emotionally involving, ambiguous in the best of ways, such that rereading him is ever rewarding, always resolving previous questions while opening up new ones.

Wolfe’s personal story has been told often enough: born in Brooklyn in 1931, mostly raised in Houston, Texas. He dropped out of college and was drafted to go fight in Korea, a deeply formative experience. Back home, he got a degree in Industrial Engineering, and married Rosemary Dietsch in 1956, after converting to Catholicism so that they could be married in church. His adopted religion became vitally important to him, and it is everywhere visible in the interstices of his work. He worked for Proctor and Gamble, famously playing a role in developing the machine that makes Pringles potato chips, and also edited the trade magazine Plant Engineering. (I briefly subscribed to that magazine years later, just because Wolfe had been an editor.) Wolfe began publishing regularly in the mid-60s, and published his first novel in 1971, eventually publishing some 30 novels and around 200 shorter works.

It must be said that for me Wolfe lived primarily through his fiction—I can’t really say I knew him, though I did meet him a few times, and I think (unless my memory betrays me) we shared a panel once at an SF convention. But we never spoke at length. I’ll tell a couple of personal stories, though—one of which isn’t really mine.

This first story concerns his magnificent early novel The Fifth Head of Cerberus (curiously, originally published as Three Novellas by Gene Wolfe). I worked at Waldenbooks in 1976-1977, and I ran the SF section. My manager loved SF too, and she insisted we stock The Fifth Head of Cerberus, even though it was well past its sell-by date (it first appeared in 1972). I certainly didn’t complain, but she told me a story. At her previous store, at the Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, IL, she had kept the book on the shelves past when it would normally have been stripped and returned. And one day she saw a somewhat chubby middle-aged man looking at the book, with an expression of gratitude. This was Gene Wolfe, who then lived in Barrington, not far from Woodfield Mall.

My slightly more personal story concerns the first time I met Wolfe—at an autograph table at Archon, the St. Louis area SF convention. I asked him to sign a copy of one of my first anthologies, Fantasy: The Best of the Year 2006 Edition, which included his story “Comber.” He happily complied, then asked, with a certain sharpness (feigned, I think!) “Why didn’t you put my story ‘Memorare’ in the new book?” I didn’t have an answer (though, really, “Memorare” is pretty long, and it wasn’t easy for me to fit novellas in those first, slimmer, books). I did reprint his story “Bloodsport” in my 2011 book.

The stories, though. The stories! He’s best known, I suppose, for his novels, specifically the four volume Book of the New Sun, which completely wowed me when it appeared between 1980 and 1983. I remember voting book one, The Shadow of the Torturer, first in a poll run by the Champaign Urbana Science Fiction Association for Best SF Novel of all time, presumably in 1981 (after all, that’s when I graduated from the University of Illinois.) The rest of his so-called “Solar Cycle” is also exceptional—The Urth of the New Sun, and two more series, the tetralogy The Book of the Long Sun and the trilogy The Book of the Short Sun. There were a few short stories in that series as well, and one of them, “Empires of Foliage and Flower,” is truly remarkable.

Other novels are unmissable as well. My personal favorites include the very early Peace, The Fifth Head of Cerberus, of course, and the fairly late novel The Sorcerer’s House. Other novels often cited are Soldier in the Mist, and his own supposed favorite, There Are Doors. If the latest novels were weaker than the best of the earlier works, that is no particular surprise, and no shame: all had were enjoyable reading, and all incorporated Wolfian mysteries.
Likewise he was wonderful at shorter lengths. Among the short stories I truly loved “La Befana,” “The Other Dead Man,” “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories,” “How the Whip Came Back,” “How I Lost the Second World War and Helped Turn Back the German Invasion,” “When I Was Ming the Merciless,” “Straw,” “The Rubber Bend,” “The Marvelous Brass Chessplaying Automaton,” “Suzanne Delage,” “The War Beneath the Tree,” and “All the Hues of Hell.”

But, then—there are the novellas. SF is home to many fantastic writers of novellas—Ursula K. Le Guin, Damon Knight, and Kim Stanley Robinson come immediately to mind. But nobody matches Gene Wolfe. I’ll just list them—the three from The Fifth Head of Cerberus first (“The Fifth Head of Cerberus,” “A Story,” by John V. Marsch,” and “V.R.T.”). Plus “Forlesen,” “Seven Americen Nights,” “The Eyeflash Miracles,” “Silhouette,” “Tracking Song,” “The Death of Doctor Island,” “The Ziggurat,” “Golden City Far,” “Memorare.” I mean—what a list, what an incredible list of fabulous stories.

I feel that I’m not getting to the heart of what made Gene Wolfe so great. For some of that, you just need to read him. But—what was he about? Part of it was playfulness. Simple things, like his collection The Castle of the Otter, named after a Locus misunderstanding of the title of the fourth New Sun novel (The Citadel of the Autarch.) Or like his “Island Doctor” stories: “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories,” “The Death of Doctor Island,” “The Doctor of Death Island,” “Death of the Island Doctor.” Or the secret of the name of the family in The Fifth Head of Cerberus (and the cute nod to Vernor Vinge in that passage). All that is fun, sometimes serious fun, but fun. But what was he really after? Virtue. Identity. Truth. The slippery nature of truth. Memory. So—the shapechangers in The Fifth Head of Cerberus. The various Silks in the Long Sun and Short Sun books. The secret of the life of Alden Weer in Peace. The quest of Able in The Wizard Knight.

I’ll leave with a quote—thanks to John Kessel for this—from the end of “Forlesen,” one of Wolfe’s greatest, and least appreciated, novellas. The main character, having died, asks:

“I want to know if it’s meant anything . . . if what I suffered—if it’s been worth it.”

Predator Cities in the Anthropocene

Reading the Anthropocene in Philip Reeve’s Predator Cities Quartet

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PHILIP REEVE’S Predator Cities quartet is a series of young adult steampunk novels comprised of Mortal Engines, Predators Gold, Infernal Devices, and A Darkling Plain, published between 2001 and 2006; the first in the series will be released as a feature film by Peter Jackson in December 2018. In this essay I want to investigate how the speculative world Reeve presents can be read from an ecocritical perspective as demonstrating a dialogue between the neo-Victorian movement of steampunk and the ecological crisis known as the Anthropocene. This dialogue will be examined through the alternate history depicted in the series alongside the presentation and the use of technology Reeve’s has developed.

The term Anthropocene is becoming more ubiquitous as scientists, environmentalists, and geologists agree the current geological time scale known as the Holocene should be changed to reflect that we are living during an era in which humans are having a measurable and distinct impact on the earth. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer suggested the term Anthropocene in 2000. Will Steffen, Crutzen, and John R. McNeill have since outlined and proposed three distinct stages of the Anthropocene (616-619). Stage one begins around the latter half of the eighteenth century around the time of James Watt’s invention of the steam engine and finishes around 1945, encompassing the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian era and the First and Second World Wars. Stage two, referred to as the “Great Acceleration,” then begins and finishes around 2015, comprising the second half of the twentieth-century. Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill call stage three, the time we are currently living in, “The Stewards of the Earth,” since from this point on we must begin to have a sustainable, non-anthropocentric relationship with the natural world.

The emergence of steampunk in the 1980s as a subgenre of science fiction coincides with stage two, when anthropogenic effects on the earth’s natural resources impacted the public’s consciousness. Steampunk responded to dissatisfaction with the modern world, the technology being utilized, and the fear surrounding events such as the Chernobyl nuclear power station disaster, which caused humanitarian and environmental devastation, the effects of which are still palpable today. The secondary worlds found in Steampunk novels, regardless of being set in the distant future or past, are always concerned with contemporary issues. Steampunk worlds reflect the pastoral convention of retreat and return by creating a safe space for anxieties and fears surrounding the ecological crisis to be discussed by retreating into the alternate world and returning with “insights into human qualities” (Gifford 18) that may provide new ways of approaching the situation.

The first book of Reeve’s Predator Cities quartet, Mortal Engines, is set almost a thousand years in the future where the earth has entered the “Traction Era,” wherein cities and towns no longer exist as we know them but move around the earth on giant wheels. Following the ancient “Sixty-Minute War,” the world was plunged into chaos and devastation and the only possibility of survival was developed by Nikolas Quirke, who mounted the surviving city of London onto traction wheels; other cities, towns, and suburbs followed. At a preliminary glance, this does not set the scene of steampunk’s neo-Victorian aesthetic, but Reeve employs Fredric Jameson’s “postmodern fantastic historiography,” a strategy common in steampunk novels. The fictional part is established by mixed ontologies that convey “the feel of the real past better than any of the ‘facts’ themselves” (368). This is achieved by means of historical detail, often through anachronisms that appear in the text but are clearly meant to be of that period, such as forms of dress or language, or by introducing technologies that might not have existed a hundred or more years ago but have the “right feel.” Furthermore, Jameson asserts that “the purely fictional intent is underscored and reaffirmed in the production of imaginary people and events among whom from time to time real life ones unexpectedly appear and disappear” (369). The alternate Victorian history experienced in Predator Cities therefore is not the “dark satanic mills” of William Blake’s
industrial London but is a potential future shaped by our human actions in the present.

In Predator Cities, Reeve’s reaffirms his alternate history through the influence of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, in which the process of natural selection was first presented. Central to the Traction Era is the principle of “Municipal Darwinism”; as a result of the devastation caused to the earth following the Sixty-Minute War, the cities now mounted on traction wheels are forced to roam the “Hunting Grounds” in search of prey, in the form of smaller towns they are able to gobble up into the lower portion of their own city. This is introduced in the opening of *Mortal Engines*, where we witness London “chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the North Sea” (3). London has been successful at surviving by capturing smaller towns and cities for their resources, including fuel, food and people, we are informed, “The great Traction City had once spent its days hunting far bigger towns than this, ranging north as far as the edges of the ice waste and south to the shores of the Mediterranean” (3). The introduction of London summarizes the world humans now inhabit: water is scarce, as the oceans have largely dried up, and earth’s natural resources, such as coal, are similarly non-existent, a scale of ecological catastrophe that forces the Traction Cities to hunt one another in order to survive.

The practice of Municipal Darwinism is introduced by the protagonist Tom. It is while enjoying London’s chase of the mining town Salthook that Tom explains the principle of Municipal Darwinism. He contemplates how frightened the residents of the smaller town must feel with London chasing after them but “he knew he mustn’t feel sorry for them: it was natural that cities ate towns, just as the towns ate smaller towns, and smaller towns snapped up the miserable static settlements. That was Municipal Darwinism” (11). Once a city is captured by the giant mouth of London, the catch is taken to “The gut . . . where London dismantled the towns” (15). Essentially, they are after anything useful for fuel and any “Old-Tech,” which is highly prized as ancient technology has not yet been re-established and even the people are recycled in the shape of slaves and on London as subjects for experimentation. Tom experiences this for himself when attempting to get back to London with his travelling companion Hester Shaw; they smuggle themselves aboard a pirate township called Speedwell but are quickly discovered and are to be sold as slaves. The mayor of the town tells Tom and Hester “times are hard . . . We need spare parts for our engines” (68), so they must be sold as a means of purchasing the parts.

In the series, “mortal engines” refers to the fallibility of life and the unsustainability of the Traction Cities in the series, but also to our own earth. Through the principle of Municipal Darwinism, Reeve explores issues relevant to how humans utilize the earth’s resources. The chasing down and literal “swallowing up” of smaller towns and suburbs by larger Traction Cities is relevant to the issue of Green Belt land in the UK that routinely gets swallowed up by slowly encroaching larger towns and cities. England’s fourteen Green Belts cover over a tenth of the land and exist as a buffer between towns, and the town and countryside. The fundamental aim of the government greenbelt policy “is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open” (*House of Commons* 4). Loopholes in local planning guidelines, however, result in this land being allocated to new, affordable housing, signalling that anthropocentric needs and human development take precedent over the protection of supposedly protected land.

Reeve’s Municipal Darwinism also nods to the current reliance on and utilization of technology. The alternate history presented by Reeve represents a Victorian world because in essence human use of and interaction with technology “degenerated,” implying through the use of Darwin’s theory of evolution that the Ancients had evolved to rely too heavily upon technology and paid the price for it. Reeve’s thus holds a mirror up to our own society, presenting one possible conclusion to our current state. The philosophy of technological collapse Reeve’s presents emphasizes the steampunk philosophy that “modern technology [is] offensively impermeable to the everyday person” (Onion 145); some desire to “return to an age when . . . machines were visible, human, fallible, and, above all, accessible” (145). Steampunk’s desire an accessibility to technology that is “available to the disempowered: women, children and members of the working class” (152). In Predator Cities, much of the technology becomes accessible to the disempowered. Tom, who was a third-class apprentice historian when he was on board London used to daydream of adventure and excitement but knew he would spend his days polishing the technological artefacts found and retained in the city’s dusty museum and Hester, an
orphan seeking revenge for her parent’s murder, learn to pilot and navigate airships in their teens and make a living transporting goods. The group known as the “lost boys,” who inhabit the underwater town of Grimsby and are reminiscent of Fagin’s gang of pickpockets in Charles Dickens *Oliver Twist*, operate a fleet of submarine limpets and mechanical messenger fish to inform their leader, the affectionately titled yet sinister “Uncle” about what they discover. Similar to his use of Municipal Darwinism, Reeve uses the steampunk philosophy of technology to discuss contemporary issues. As the series progresses through its four novels, the rediscovery of Old-Tech by the wrong hands again presents a threat to the sustainability and existence of human life on earth.

This threat exists because of the conflict between the Traction Cities and the Anti-Traction League who seek to create static settlements. In the first two novels the Anti-Traction League resides in a static settlement in Batmunkh Gompa, located around the Himalayas. The League has a shield wall to protect them from being swallowed up by the Traction Cities and exists in relative safety whilst carrying out plans to bring an end to the Traction Era in the hope of creating a sustainable future. The engineers that work aboard London have discovered “something from the Sixty Minute War . . . The old American Empire was quite insane towards the end . . . terrible weapons: quantum energy beams” (*ME* 227). We are told that during the “Sixty Minute War . . . the Ancients’ terrible thunder-weapons had blasted their static cities and poisoned the earth and sky” (189), making it clear that these are weapons designed to obliterate and are potential global killers. London plans to blast through Batmunkh Gompa’s shield wall in order to destroy the Anti-Traction League since it poses a threat to Municipal Darwinism. Through this conflict, Reeve argues that the use of information and advanced technology for destruction and as a means of maintaining power leads to world-devastating consequences.

In the fourth book, *A Darkling Plain*, these antagonisms reach a conclusion: the Anti-Traction League has been replaced by a splinter group called “Green Storm,” whose mission is to “make the world green again.” As a more direct, violent group intent on ridding the world of Traction Cities, the Green Storm is not against utilizing Old-Tech themselves to accomplish their ends. The most significant technology used by the Green Storm are “Stalker Armies,” which are developed by resurrecting dead soldiers through technology. In *A Darkling Plain*, the Stalker named Fang is the resurrected leader of the Anti-Traction League, Anna Fang; having malfunctioned, the Stalker exists in a liminal state between her old identity as Anna and her new identity as Fang, leader of the Green Storm. Believing she has been betrayed by her own side, Fang decides that the world needs the chance to start again and so wakes a weapon that was placed into orbit by the Ancients. Fang begins to use the weapon against small targets and reveals her ultimate plan to Tom towards the conclusion of the book—to turn the weapon on volcanoes so that “The ash of volcanoes will choke the sky and shroud the Earth in darkness. Winter will reign for hundreds of years. Mankind will perish . . . When the skies clear at last, the world will grow green again” (505). The Stalker leader of Green Storm believes “It’s human beings that are the problem. Everything that they do pollutes and destroys . . . If we are really to protect the good earth we must first cleanse of it of human beings” (504). In this declaration the Stalker Fang is more human than machine recognising that anthropocentrism is the problem, in the past, the present and if not addressed the future.

As the series concludes, Reeve demonstrates the dangers of an overreliance on technology to control the earth’s resources, but he also suggests that it may serve as a means to correct the current ecological crisis; the techno-critical trappings of steampunk provides a safe space for contemporary issues to be discussed by removing the constraints of modernity and highlighting that humans are not a separate entity from nature, we are part of its fabric and must exist in a reciprocal relationship in order to maintain a sustainable, habitable planet.

**Works Cited**


Jameson, Frederick. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural...*
The SF in Translation Universe

Editor’s Note: “The SF in Translation Universe” is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #325).

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It’s time once again for me to tell you about so many exciting works of SF in translation that you’ll despair for the vertical integrity of your TBR pile. I’m not sorry.

Before we get into the novels, collections, anthologies, and short stories, however, I should update you on the results of the first annual “Favorite SFT of 2018” poll. Spanish-language SFT claimed all of the top spots, with “City X” by Alberto Chimal (tr. Sara Caplan et.al.) winning for “Favorite Short Story,” The Bottom of the Sky by Rodrigo Fresan (tr. Will Vanderhyden) winning for “Favorite Novel,” Alphaland by Cristina Jurado (tr. James Womack) winning for “Favorite Anthology/Collection,” George Henson winning for “Favorite Translator,” and Latin American Literature Today winning for “Favorite Publisher/Journal/Magazine.” Runners-up included Japanese and Italian SFT, with readers also showing their love for World Literature Today and Bill Campbell’s Rosarium Publishing. I look forward to the second annual poll and seeing once again what captured readers’ imaginations.

One more note, but this time on an upcoming event: if you’re in or near Madison, Wisconsin over Memorial Day weekend, you must check out WisCon 43. Not only is WisCon the only feminist science fiction and fantasy convention in the US, but the guests of honor this year will be Charlie Jane Anders and G. Willow Wilson. Plus, I’ll be moderating the SF in Translation panel, which is now in its fourth year. I’ll also be hosting a party/salon for anyone interested in nerding-out about all things SFT. I hope to see you there!

And now to the books. April was anything but the cruellest month this year for SFT, giving us novels from the Chinese, French (Quebec), and Spanish (Argentina), and collections from the Slovak, French (Belgium), and Korean. Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide (tr. Ken Liu) is one of the four major releases of Chinese SFT in 2019 (alongside the Broken Stars anthology, The Redemption of Time [Three-Body trilogy fan fic by Baoshu], and Supernova by Liu Cixin) and it packs the proverbial punch. Globalization, e-waste, migratory labor, the next step in human-machine symbiosis: Chen takes on all of these issues, and he does it via his characteristically-bold style and inventiveness. Dark Constellations, too, explores the relationship between the biological and artificial by asking us to consider the possibility of a computer virus turning into a biological one.

Continuing the steady stream of surrealistic collections that we’ve received in recent years are The Night Circus and Other Stories (Slovakia) and Flowers of Mold (Korea). Both are composed of numerous brief glimpses into the world(s) that lurks beneath “reality”: a spatula causes amnesia, dream dogs are liberated from a refrigerator, bathrooms become rainforests, and tenants hatch a plan to murder their landlord. This blend of naturalism, surrealism, fairy tales, and more seems popular in multiple languages around the world at the end of this second decade of the 21st century- something that needs to be explored further.

May, however, offers us a very different group of books: a dystopian novel about the China of today (China Dream), a collection of short stories from Sudan (Thirteen Months of Sunrise), and a magical-realist novel that asks what would happen if every Palestinian suddenly disappeared one day (The Book of Disappearance). Not only do Thirteen Months and Disappearance add to the growing amount of Arabic SFT available to Anglophone readers, but these two are also both written by women, allowing us, like

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Reeve Philip. A Darkling Plain. Scholastic, 2006
Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue*, to learn more about the Arab world from a female perspective.

Strangely enough, I haven’t come across any SFT scheduled for June (July, however, is looking great!), though I wouldn’t be surprised if that changed at any moment. But let’s lift our spirits by thinking about the short stories we’ve gotten since the beginning of April, including a short Italian piece about an extremely old robot becoming human (“Holes”), a Dutch work of fantasy about talent-bombs giving people special abilities (“The Knack Bomb”), and Chinese sci-fi about an AI surviving beyond humanity all the way to the end of the universe (“The Lord of Rivers”). April also kicked off the first of nine short works of Korean SFT to be published in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, thanks to a grant from the Literature Translation Institute of Korea.

Thanks for reading, and I’d love to hear what you’re reading now and/or looking forward to: rachel@sfintranslation.com.

**Meet the Future: W. Andrew Shephard**

Editor’s Note: "Meet the Future" is a regular column appearing in the Features section of *SFRA Review* (beginning with issue #326). It is an interview series conducted by the *SFRA Review* editor that highlights the work of up-and-coming sf scholars, typically graduate students, postdocs, and recent hires.

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**Hi, Andrew, could you tell us a bit about yourself? As much (or as little) as you’d like!**

Hi! Thanks for inviting me to do this. I was born and raised in the Washington, D.C. area. I come from a family of fairly nerdy SF and fantasy fans and remember being exposed to things like *Back to the Future* and *The Never-Ending Story* by my aunts and uncles pretty early on. Much to my mom’s chagrin, I discovered horror on my own. I remember sneaking around and watching things like David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* at a not at all appropriate age. I got hooked on prose SF and fantasy through William Sleator’s YA science fiction novels and Lloyd Alexander’s Chronicles of Prydain series. From there I graduated to the adult books and was pretty methodical about reading the major classics about both genres.

I got my B.A. in English literature at the University of Maryland-College Park and I am currently finishing up a PhD in English at Stanford University. I’ll be starting a tenure track position as Assistant Professor in African American Literature & Culture at the University of Utah in the fall.

**How do you describe yourself professionally?**

I consider myself to be a scholar of genre fiction. Most of my research has been in the speculative genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the weird tale, but I have an interest in noir/crime/detective fiction and the western as well. I’m interested in these genres as they vary across media forms, including prose literature, film, television, and comics/graphic narrative. I am particularly interested in the ways in which people from historically marginalized communities make use of genre material in order to speak to concerns native to their identities and their communities.

I also work on African American literature more broadly. I’m particularly interested in exploring the common threads between the African American literary canon as academia understands it and the Afro-speculative tradition with which we in SF studies tend to work. I believe that the boundaries between the two are not as rigidly defined as traditionally assumed. The earliest forms of Afro-diasporic narrative preserved and recorded are folktales which often contained some sort of speculative component. Many of these tales would go on to inform the literary production of black people throughout the centuries. Consider the conjure lore which inspires many of Charles Chesnutt’s most famous works, on the influence of haint tales and the myth of the flying Africans on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* respectively.

For that matter, contemporary authors like Colson Whitehead and Mat Johnson hopscotch back and forth over the line between “literary” and genre all the time. I think there’s a lot to be gained from talking about such works as speculative fictions and putting them into conversation with works written for the genre fiction market.

**Why does sf matter to you?**

Honestly, a lot of it is the sheer pleasure of being offered a glimpse of a world that, if not necessarily
better than our own, is at least more interesting than workaday reality. SF and its sister genres aren’t only about escapism, but I do think that it’s a significant component of its appeal and that this isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

The speculative genres also make certain types of phenomena or affective responses available for representation which might otherwise be too abstract in a realist context. Take Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, for example. It’s basically a novel about a contemporary black woman being forced to confront the horrors her ancestors had to endure in order for her to exist in the present. If you tried to represent that in a strictly realist context, without any type of speculative conceit involved, it probably would be very dull. There’d be no narrative conflict, just Dana solemnly reflecting to herself and feeling vaguely unsettled—maybe reading about slavery in a history book or talking matters over with her husband. The speculative conceit allows Butler to address the profundity of that feeling in a way that feels more direct and concrete to the reader.

Similarly, a series like *Buffy* takes the metaphor that “high school is hell”, something that all of us have probably felt when we were young, and makes it literal. Because such sentiments are so commonplace, so utterly normal, it’s easy to dismiss them as unimportant. Using actual end of the world scenarios as a metaphor for those feelings gives the viewer permission to truly feel them in a cathartic way as opposed to trivializing or dismissing them.

**What brought you to sf studies?**

I was in the English Honors program at the University of Maryland, which helped to prepare promising undergraduates for attending grad school. The program gave you the opportunity to write a 40-page thesis on a literary subject of your choosing, which you would work on over the course of three semesters. I’d just become familiar with the works of James Tiptree, Jr. (a pen-name for Alice Sheldon) thanks to the Masters of Horror adaptation of her short story “The Screwfly Solution” and Julie Phillips’s excellent biography of the author, which had recently been published.

My thesis was on Tiptree’s explorations of transhumanism and the possibility of it as a solution to the biological drives/stimulus-response triggers that she saw as a deleterious influence on human behavior. I was very fortunate to be paired up with Jane Donawerth as a mentor and thesis advisor, who many readers will know is quite accomplished in the field of feminist sf studies. She was a tremendous asset to me, exposing me to sf formalist theories like Darko Suvin’s novum and Attebery’s and Hollinger’s parabola, as well as helping to flesh out my knowledge of feminist theory. She was also the person who introduced me to the SFRA. Ten years ago, at her suggestion, I presented an excerpt of my thesis at SFRA 2009 in Atlanta.

Once I found out that I could actually specialize in sf studies in academia, there really was no question about what I wanted to do as a career. I used my Tiptree thesis as my writing sample during the grad school applications process and was pleasantly surprised at how many doors it opened.

**What project(s) are you working on now, and how did you get there? What question(s) really drive your work?**

I’m currently finishing a dissertation entitled *“Temples for Tomorrow”: African American Speculative Fiction and Historical Narrative*. My primary argument is that due to the troubled history of Afro-diasporic peoples, including slavery, colonialism, and the deliberate erasure of our cultural roots, a lot of Afro-speculative thought involves reimagining and revising the past both as a means of coming to terms with what happened to us and in preparation of building a more utopian future. The dissertation discusses such genre luminaries as Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Steven Barnes, as well as more canonical African American authors such as Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins.

The project spun off out of a directed reading that I did with my advisor in my second year. My initial interest was in comparative study of various Afro-diasporic speculative traditions and what makes differentiates black authors working in those genres from the rest of their peers. Eventually, it dawned on me that history, both the tragic story of imperialism and the Middle Passage, as well as the glories of pre-colonial Africa weighed heavily upon a lot of the fiction that I was reading. Given my own interest in history and how it informs my own reading practices, this seemed like an ideal contribution I could make to the scholarly conversation surrounding black sf.
What do you envision for the future of sf studies and sf scholars? What do you want to see us accomplish?

I’d like to see more recovery and recuperation of early speculative works in danger of being lost or forgotten. I’m sure there’s tons of stuff from the pulps, glossy magazines, and British penny dreadfuls to be rediscovered. For that matter, the early 20th century period recently dubbed “the Radium era” seems like it’s full of forgotten works, in part because the speculative genres hadn’t coalesced into the well-honed marketing machines that they became under figures like Hugo Gernsback and Farnsworth Wright. I’m particularly thinking of a lot of the speculative works published by black authors that haven’t been recognized as such because they was published outside of the SF genre market—stories like the ones published in places like *Colored American Magazine* under Pauline Hopkins’ tenure or the pulp science fiction and detective stories that George Schuyler serialized in the Pittsburgh Courier.

I’m sure there are probably works by other historically marginalized peoples equally deserving of attention and preservation—these are just the ones I feel the most qualified to comment on. But Lisa Yaszek and Patrick Sharp have done a terrific job of highlighting under recognized women writers from the pulp era with their book *Sisters of Tomorrow* and I’m sure there’s plenty more where those came from. Even thinking about Tiptree, it’s a shame that most of her fiction is currently out of print and has been for decades, despite our acknowledgement of how important she is to the science fiction tradition.

Some of the specialty presses such as Valancourt have been reprinting a lot of lesser known genre stuff, they’ve done a great job of recovering authors like Charles Beaumont and Michael McDowell. And even Penguin Books has started reprinting authors like Ray Russell, a mid-twentieth century horror writer who considerably under-read today. However, there’s still plenty of stuff out there in need of saving.

If you could write a dream book, or teach a dream course, what would it/they be?

I have a few dream projects/courses. One is on H.P. Lovecraft and the current generation of Neo-Lovecraftian authors who are working with his Cthulhu Mythos and/or familiar tropes, but are tackling the more problematic elements of his fiction head on. Lovecraft is my favorite author, he has been since I was sixteen years old. A friend of mine leant me his copies of the Del Rey editions with the awesome cover art by Michael Whelan and John Jude Palencar and I was pretty much hooked. But even before that, I loved things like *Ghostbusters* or *Alien*, which were heavily influenced by him.

As a black man, it’s safe to say that I have complicated feelings about his attitudes on race and a lot of other things. And yet, I also think it’s difficult to separate his racial views from the many things that are appealing about his work. Based upon a lot of the Lovecraftian fiction of the last decade or so, it would seem that I’m not alone in these sentiments. So, I’m interested in seeing how other politically progressive Lovecraftians—figures like Victor LaValle, Ruthanna Emrys, and Livia Llewelyn—grapple with that difficult legacy. I’m preparing to teach a course on Lovecraft and his pop cultural descendants this fall, so we’ll see how that goes.

Thank you, Andrew! Your labor and thoughts are valued and appreciated, and we look forward to seeing all the amazing things you will contribute to our growing community.
**Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction**

Bridgitte Barclay


IN DARWINIAN FEMINISM and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons, and Women, Patrick B. Sharp expertly asserts that Darwinian feminism impacted western science fiction well into the twentieth century, making it an important area of study to fully appreciate and analyze women’s early twentieth century SF texts. He incorporates Brian Attebery’s argument that the Darwinian “scientific megatext” created a science fiction “master narrative,” which included Victorian notions of colonization and human nature. Building on Jane Donawerth, Sharp argues that some women SF writers addressed and amended Darwinian feminist ideas, using five story-telling tactics: sexual selection, expansion of the domestic sphere, women as carriers of civilization, warnings of masculinist science, and Amazon and angel representations. In addition to Attebery and Donawerth, Sharp utilizes the critical works of Carol A. Kolmerten, Robin Roberts, Justine Larbalestier, and Lisa Yaszek, adding additional insight to this strong scholarship on women’s early SF. His first two chapters are overviews of Darwinian evolutionary science, its impact on scientific masculinities, and feminist responses. In the following chapters, Sharp thoughtfully analyzes women’s SF at the turn of the twentieth century through the 1930s and the impact of publication practices on women’s SF.

In the first chapter, “Scientific Masculinity and Its Discontents,” Sharp thoroughly lays out the history of western scientific discourse, the master narrative it creates in relation to colonization and gender, and how women writers adopt and subvert that narrative. Sharp explores the exclusion of women from scientific culture and how gendered binary stereotypes fed into violent and paternalistic colonial narratives. He cites Sandra Harding, Londa Schiebinger, Mary Terrall, and others to establish that science was motivated by colonial profit, not a noble search for truth. In addition, such colonial scientific expeditions fueled a specific type of masculine expeditioner scientist, reinforcing gender and racial binaries. Sharp convincingly argues that Margaret Lucas Cavendish and Mary Shelley contended with these masculine narratives and are precursors for later Darwinian feminist tropes in early 20C women’s SF.

Sharp’s thorough and insightful foundation of discourses that Cavendish and Shelley engaged with leads well into the second chapter, “Charles Darwin, Gender and the Colonial Imagination.” In it, Sharp argues that despite the ways in which Darwin problematically naturalized gender and colonial stereotypes, many women SF authors embraced his ideas of sexual selection and natural evidence because his “appeals to specific examples from nature opened the door for counter-examples that could dispute his conclusions about gender and the relative superiority of men.” Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Eliza Burt Gamble, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, specifically, cited the animal kingdom to show alternatives to gendered ideologies of humans and utilized Darwin’s essentialist ideas of the sexes to promote motherhood’s importance in civilization. Sharp deals with the full entanglements of this, though, stating that while birth control and science education were part of what women embraced, they also often utilized Darwinian premises of racism, classicism, and colonialism.

In Chapter 3, “Evolution’s Amazons: Colonialism, Captivity and Liberation in Feminist Science Fiction,” Sharp makes an interesting argument about the connections among western captivity narratives, Amazonian narratives, colonialism, and masculinity. He notes that the “unnaturalness” of violent women and/or matriarchies, a hallmark of male-authored adventure and SF stories, was subverted by women SF authors. To provide evidence for this, he examines the ways in which Mary Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1880-81), Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett’s *New Amazonia* (1889), Inez Haynes Gillmore’s...
Angel Island (1914), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland (1915) engage with science as a way to improve women’s lives by socializing labor and controlling reproduction, in particular.

These topics also pervaded late 1920-30s women’s SF texts, Sharp asserts. In Chapter 4, “Women with Wings: Feminism, Evolution, and the Rise of Magazine Science Fiction,” he argues that the rise of magazines such as Amazing Stories, All-Story, The Black Cat, and Weird Tales—which steadily published SF—provided a space for women writers to “reframe, qualify and critique Darwinian feminist arguments and assumptions as they wrote them into the genre system of the new SF magazines” (101). He analyzes how Clare Winger Harris, Minna Irving, M.F. Rupert, Leslie F. Stone, and Lilith Lorraine often subverted masculine SF tropes, engaging with Darwinian feminist discourses. Specifically, these women often wrote worlds in which scientific developments fostered women’s access to education and politics.

In Chapter 5, “Darwinian Feminism and the Changing Field of Women’s Science Fiction,” Sharp shows how cultural, political, and editorial climates impacted which women SF writers were published, which stories were told, and how some women suffered backlash. This chapter, in particular, offers insights for scholars and students of this period of women’s SF. By showing the editorial trajectories of various SF magazines, Sharp outlines the history of genre debates and gender debates that persist today. Sharp analyzes the works of Lilith Lorraine, Leslie F. Stone, C.L. Moore, and Leigh Brackett in this changing publication landscape, noting the ways in which each engaged with or eschewed Darwinian feminism. Sharp ends by noting Darwinian feminism’s impact on SF, traces of which can be seen in “such popular SF sub-genres as space opera, the techno-utopia, and the tale of mad science” (173).

Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction is an important piece of scholarship for students, and scholars of SF and utopian literature. Sharp adds to the strong body of critical work on early twentieth century women’s SF, providing a thorough history of the scientific and cultural discourse that shaped SF themes, noting both the tools the women used and the shortcomings of their approaches. The breadth and depth of Sharp’s analysis of primary texts may bring texts to the readers’ attention that even those familiar with the field did not know, and his discussions of SF magazine editorial histories illuminate those texts smartly. Finally, his attention to the nuances of Darwinian feminism and its impact provides a complex look at women’s late nineteenth and early twentieth-century SF texts, as he emphasizes that the gender arguments the Darwinian scientific megatext enabled often relied on racial and colonial premises in the women’s SF.

### Wells Meets Deleuze

Sarah Canfield


In WELLS MEETS DELEUZE, volume 57 in McFarland’s Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy series, Michael Starr provides a remarkably lucid introduction to key elements of Gilles Deleuze’s post-structuralist philosophy as well as a thought-provoking study of H.G. Wells’s most popular novels. For a reader such as myself, thoroughly grounded in Wells scholarship but with a more passing familiarity with Deleuze, this unusually theoretical examination of the scientific romances provides an engaging, if not entirely necessary, reminder that Wells remains significant not merely as historic progenitor of sf but as a provocative and relevant figure still active with and within contemporary sf texts and discourses.

Indeed, considering the rich resonances that Starr finds, I am rather surprised that no one thought to make these connections before. Deleuze’s philosophy, with its use of scientific metaphors and concepts (the rhizome, the virtual, the machinic) not to mention Deleuze’s own claim that “philosophy itself must be a kind of science fiction,” has been applied with increasing frequency to sf, but most of those applications have been to comparatively recent texts and films. Starr argues, crisply and succinctly, that the qualities in sf that make a Deleuzian approach to the genre so effective are
not only present in Wells's fiction, but indeed derive from Wells's work in a fashion that calls out for a Deleuzian analysis: “Wells's position is rhizomatic not arboreal; he occupies the position of the ‘virtual,’” the imaginary that constructs the actual.

The introduction and final chapter of Wells Meets Deleuze provide the theoretical frame surrounding three Deleuzian case studies of The Island of Dr Moreau, The War of the Worlds, and The Time Machine; the whole constructs a persuasive and original analysis of Wells not as the father of science fiction, but as a vital and relevant “becoming-minor” author in the Deleuzian sense: “becoming-minor refers to becomings that depart from dominant identities, inventing new forms of collective life, consciousness and affectivity.” In his overview of Wells criticism, Starr notes that despite Wells's historical significance to the genre, his work resists simple categorization or critical consensus. Everyone agrees that Wells is important to sf, but the nature of his importance varies. Was it the scientific romances? If so, are the romances themselves great works, or is their significance mostly in their codification of so many classic sf tropes (time travel, alien invasions, evolution)? Perhaps his later nonfiction deserves more attention? Was Wells a modernist, a postmodernist, a poststructuralist, a posthumanist? Certainly all of these positions can be found in Wells criticism.

Connecting Wells and Deleuze in rhizomatic fashion, Starr argues that the point is not to settle such questions, but to recognize that Wells’s openness to such combinations and interpretations is a mark of his significance and continued relevance. One does not apply Deleuze to Wells (or any other author)—but orchestrates an “encounter” between them to find inspiration, to extract concepts, but also “to develop new, non pre-existing concepts.” Ultimately, Starr’s concluding chapter frames Wells as a “Deleuzian weapon.” Wells has rarely received such a thoroughly nuanced theoretical treatment, and this critic, at least, is buzzing with new and renewed consideration of both the scientific romances that are central to this book and for Wells’s overall significance.

The space of this review does not allow for a thorough examination of all of the theoretical apparatus that Starr brings into play. I have touched already on a few, and Starr’s text provides a far better explanation than can be accomplished in one or two paragraphs. Each of the case studies enacts an encounter between one of the scientific romances and a key theme of Deleuze’s philosophy, to the benefit of both. For Moreau, Starr connects the transhumanism of Wells’s vivisector to Deleuze’s focus on “becoming.” Becoming is not a rigid, organized linear progression from one form to another, but a rhizomatic, associative, destabilizing process that is a continuous enactment and creation of possibilities and potentialities. The War of the Worlds encounters the “body without organs . . . an assemblage of biological components that are capable of interfacing with other non-biological organs.” Finally, The Time Machine exemplifies Deleuze’s approach to time and memory, wherein literature is a crucial part of our ability to “rethink time” in order to transform our futures, as well as his idea of “nomadic thought . . . the philosophical process of thinking outside and across institutional boundaries . . . an alternative approach to understanding the history of civilization.”

In each case, the chapters fruitfully consider established readings of the romances in combination with the insights provided through the Deleuzian analysis, not because the texts are always successful demonstrations of Deleuze’s ideas but because they are thought-provoking experiments that allow us to read both Wells and Deleuze with greater insight—an insight which reaches beyond both authors’ works to the larger cultural assemblages in which they participate. I will also note that the case studies, while admirably clear deployments of Deleuzian analysis, are also quite dense. This much Deleuze in this compact a space makes for a rather whirlwind feel that has me itching to return to the theory as much, if not more, than the fiction. If you are a Deleuzian focused on more recent sf, you might respond with the reverse, an urge to look again at Wells. For myself, the combination of interesting readings and inspiration to follow up makes Starr’s volume well worth a look.
Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy

Dennis M. Kratz


The shift of scholarly emphasis from the influence of authors from Greek and Roman antiquity to the creative transformation of Classical sources is a salutary development that has yielded new insights into both the enduring value of the Classical tradition and the process of “reception,” that is, the process by which artists adapt inherited materials to increase the impact and attraction of their own work. This fine anthology, a complement to the editors’ Classical Traditions in Science Fiction (2015), focuses on the reception of Greco-Roman antiquity by authors of Fantasy.

The Introduction emphasizes Fantasy as a flexible and conceptually unstable genre to illustrate the challenge of adequately defining a narrative tradition that is concerned with transforming and transcending accepted realities. The inevitable uncertainty involved in concurrently dealing with a shape-shifting genre and the multiple traditions on which narratives draw, the editors forewarn, leads to contributions that are “deliberately less definitive than exploratory.” Variations on the theme of “flexibility” are applied, both to Fantasy and to the nature of Reception, throughout the volume—literally from the first essay to the last. The first essay, by Jesse Weiner, cites C. S. Lewis’s celebration of “[Fantasy’s] flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis digression, reflections, and ‘gas’.” Weiner’s examination of correspondences between Classical epic and modern fantasy leads him to speculate that “whether we view the influence of Classical epic on fantasy as direct or as mediated through a number of heterogeneous strains, epic might (italics mine) emerge as both a mother and grandmother to fantasy.” Weiner also explores possible causes for the lack of appreciation bordering on disdain for fantasy expressed by prominent academics such as Harold Bloom and Clement Greenberg. Later essays return to the problem of defining Fantasy. A valuable contribution to this thread is made by Marcus Folch, who suggests that the concept of “family resemblance,” developed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein as a lens through which to view “heterogeneous but notionally interrelated phenomena” such as Games, can be applied productively to the study of Fantasy by focusing on shared elements within specific works rather than seeking a universal definition or “essence” of the genre.

Folch contributes one of two essays that explore Lewis’s reception of the Classical tradition. He examines the way that Lewis incorporates, in Till We Have Faces (1956), the allegorical tale of Cupid and Psyche (Love and the Soul) that appears in the philosophic novel Metamorphoses (2nd century CE), aka The Golden Ass, by Apuleius. Lewis, a medievalist, blends the Greek tale inherited from Apuleius with Germanic, Jewish and Christian traditions—Folch suggests - to create an identifiably Christian allegory of temptation and redemption, thus accomplishing in a modern novel “the central project of medieval theology.” Jeffrey Winkle, meanwhile, examines Lewis’ adaptation, in Voyage of the “Dawn Treader” (1952), of the core theme of the Metamorphoses: the transformation of a man into an ass as a symbol of his descent into a bestial existence. Likewise, Lewis recounts the transformation of Eustace Scrubb into a dragon. Both characters recover their humanity and human form only through a combination of personal revelation and divine intervention.

A danger of reception-based criticism is the temptation to overstate the importance of a particular thread. Brett Rogers’ provocative essay on the Harry Potter series ponders the implications of a choral ode from Aeschylus’s Libation Bearers (458 BCE) that appears as an epigraph for Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (2007). After examining significantly different interpretations of this epigraph by other readers, he argues that Rowling’s adaptation of elements from Aeschylus has far greater implications for the entire series than has been recognized. Rogers addresses the problem that his bold interpretation raises: What constitutes a
[Classical] reception? In some respects, this question permeates (whether explicitly stated or not) the anthology. In translation, we speak of a range of valid translation, much as a performer might recognize an interpretation beyond that suggested (allowed?) by a score, and perhaps analogous to the scientific notion of a theory’s range of applicability. Robinson Peter Kramer addresses this issue directly by prefacing his thorough discussion of H. P. Lovecraft’s use of themes, motifs, direct quotations and plots from Classical literature with evidence of Lovecraft’s long fascination with Greek and Roman antiquity. Lovecraft uses antiquity to widely varying effect—at times with apparently loving craft to evoke “an unimaginably ancient horror” but at other times inaccurately and with little apparent artistic impact.

Especially impressive are two essays that deal specifically with modern Fantasy and Classical epic. Jennifer Rea integrates a survey of the Roman hero Aeneas in modern fantasy, an interpretation of Jo Graham’s novel Black Ships (2008), and a meditation on the use of fantastic fiction to examine cultural values—specifically the tensions and anxieties of a “post-9/11” America where “individual liberties are ceded to communal security.” The Aeneid (c. 29-19 BCE), epic narrative, and the changing values of “heroism” figure prominently in the final essay, a study of George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire (1996-) by Ayelet Haimson Lushkov. The interpretation that she offers proceeds “from a flexible model of reception.” She begins by surveying the reception of this plot-line from the Aeneid by other epic poets in order to demonstrate that the reception tradition is “inherently flexible”; she then argues convincingly that the characters Nisus and Euryalus from The Aeneid are re-imagined in Martin’s narrative—complexly and rather brilliantly—as Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell. The greater question that Lushkov raises is the role of the reader’s knowledge of The Aeneid in recognizing and realizing the potential impact of this reception.

To return to the concept of reception criticism as a salutary force: the philosopher Georges Canguilhem characterized a healthy organism as one that is flexible (that is, able to adapt to new situations) and adventurous—two qualities that many essays in this collection display. One of the many laudable aspects of the anthology is the consistently high quality of the contributions. In a moment when the study of literature and the Humanities in general are infrequently described as healthy, it is encouraging, even energizing, to encounter the intellectual flexibility and adventuring in this outstanding collection of interpretive essays. I recommend it to anyone interested in the literature of fantasy and the enduring importance of Classical culture.

**Between Psience Fiction and Pseudoscience**

Rob Latham


As these two new books make clear, science fiction has drawn as much, if not more, inspiration from pseudoscientific beliefs and theories as it has from legitimate science. Since its origins as a pulp genre in the 1920s, SF developed story ideas from an eclectic array of paranormal traditions. Andrew May’s Pseudoscience and Science Fiction provides a detailed history of these borrowings, while Damien Broderick’s Psience Fiction: The Paranormal in Science Fiction Literature offers incisive summaries of relevant novels and stories. Broderick’s study is limited to texts dealing with forms of ESP—i.e., clairvoyance and telepathy; by contrast, May’s coverage ranges over an array of pseudoscientific beliefs, including UFOs, “mind power,” anti-gravity drives and other fringe science, and extraterrestrial technologies. The books complement each other well, with May providing wide-ranging historical context while Broderick supplies compelling close readings of individual texts.

May’s introduction begins by distinguishing science from pseudoscience: while both operate by means of hypothesis, only the former submits its conjectures to rigorous verification. In fact, “pseudoscientific hypotheses are often constructed so as to be untestable—and hence incapable of disproof.” Pseudoscience, May argues, appeals to people’s desire to believe and thus draws on imagination and fantasy rather than skeptical inquiry. This allies it in many ways with science
fiction, though the genre’s reliance on imaginative beliefs does not necessarily imply an endorsement of them: “Most science fiction writers only want to tell a good story, not to make a didactic point.” Still, in the process of telling those stories, SF writers have been quite willing to embrace a range of pseudoscientific ideas, as May details in the eight chapters that follow. These chapters canvass: the paranormal researches of Charles Fort; anomalous phenomena such as the Bermuda Triangle and the Tunguska explosion; “high-tech paranoia” such as the Shaver Mystery; flying saucers; “mind power” and other super-normal talents; space drives and anti-gravity; “ancient” and alien technologies; and conspiracy theories such as fake space missions and mind control.

While these topics have been treated before, in scattered critical articles and the occasional book (such as Curtis Peebles’ superb 1994 study of UFOlogy, Watch the Skies! A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth), Pseudoscience and Science Fiction is the first attempt to draw them together into a single, synoptic volume.

While the seams show at times — there is a tension, for example, between the topical organization of the chapters and the unfolding historical narrative — May’s book is a thought-provoking and valuable addition to scholarship in the field. The author’s research is wide-ranging: he has a firm grasp of SF history as well as of the extensive literature on paranormal phenomena, some of it buried in off-trail journals and self-published books. While his analyses of individual stories are not as detailed as Broderick’s, they are always intelligent and often quite striking; moreover, May also addresses relevant SF films and TV programs (especially The X-Files), while Broderick limits his coverage to literary texts.

A few of May’s readings compel re-evaluations of the careers of specific authors. For example, his chapter on Charles Fort ends with a fascinating analysis of the short fiction of R.A. Lafferty, which he views as a compendium of anomalous or alternative realities akin to Fort’s anthologies:

The majority of [his] stories tell of times in the past—often the not-very-distant past—when the laws of physics were different, or human abilities were different, or animal species were different, or time itself was different. Almost no-one is aware of this, though, because history quickly reshapes itself to cover up the changes.

Other writers who have been generally neglected in the critical literature — e.g., Fredric Brown, H. Beam Piper, Eric Frank Russell, Ian Watson — receive close attention because of their fondness for seeding their fiction with outré ideas. And notorious incidents in SF history — such as Raymond Palmer’s promotion of Richard Shaver’s wild conspiracy theories or John W. Campbell’s connivance with L. Ron Hubbard in the advent of Dianetics — are placed in careful context and intelligently analyzed. I would recommend this book highly to scholars and students of modern SF.

Broderick’s Psience Fiction can also be recommended, though it is of more limited scope and its organization as a series of textual readings rather compromises its value as a critical study. The brief introduction provides background on SF’s treatment of “psi” phenomena, focusing in particular on Campbell’s promotion of the topic during his long editorship of Astounding/Analog. “[F]or a time — especially in the 1950s,” Broderick argues, “ESP was the hottest trope in the fields of science fiction.” That decade, and the years immediately preceding and following it, form the core of the book’s coverage, accounting for 23 of the 44 chapters. Each chapter focuses on a specific novel, series, or selection of related stories, some 61 in all. There are two appendices, the first providing an overview of paranormal research (such as J.B. Rhine’s work at Duke University during the 1930s) and the second addressing the ancillary topic of tales of psi powers that shade into stories of immortality or after-death experience. Readers are encouraged to read Appendix 1 before tackling the main body of the book, since it provides useful historical context for Broderick’s close readings.

These readings are unfailingly erudite and insightful, ranging from Olaf Stapledon’s Odd John (1935) to Connie Willis’s Crosstalk (2016). Texts covered include the famous — Alfred Bester’s The Demolished Man (1952), Philip K. Dick’s Ubik (1969) — and the obscure (e.g., J.T. McIntosh’s The ESP Worlds [1952], George O. Smith’s Highways in Hiding [1956]). The vast majority were originally published in SF magazines or otherwise marketed for genre readers, though a late chapter analyzes two novels written by professional psychics, Ingo Swann’s Star
Fire (1978) and Uri Geller’s Ella (1998). This token inclusion of extra-generic texts by true believers in paranormal powers rather begs the question of whether other works by such figures deserve inclusion. What, in short, counts as “fiction”—much less “science fiction”—in such a context? But this is a quibble. As a study of SF works that treat “psionic” themes, Psience Fiction is as comprehensive as one could wish for.

That said, one is unlikely to read this book cover to cover because of its deliberately fragmentary arrangement. Indeed, the volume is more of a reader’s guide or handbook than it is a cohesive critical study. Each chapter is a unit unto itself, offering biographical information about the author, background context on the composition of the story, and a brief but usually penetrating textual analysis. Some effort is made to assess the literary value of the texts under review—e.g., Broderick calls Robert Silverberg’s Dying Inside (1972) “one of the perhaps three richest novels of psience fiction”—but such appraisals are not Broderick’s main purpose, which is to gather and review relevant work on his theme, regardless of their quality. For most readers, his three-page summary of Lan Wright’s 1958 novel A Man Called Destiny is all one needs to know about that book.

While certain strands of discussion recur—such as the influence of Dianetics on numerous SF works of the mid-to-late 1950s—the checklist format vitiates any developing argument. Thus, while Broderick is an amiable and efficient guide throughout, most readers are unlikely to pause at every stop on his tour. Still, I would recommend Psience Fiction to scholars and students of modern SF who are interested in the genre’s handling of paranormal phenomena. It is a virtually encyclopedic treatment of that topic, especially when combined with May’s Pseudoscience and Science Fiction.

Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology

Terence Sawyers


EDITED BY Rob Latham, this collection of essays, talks, and editorials offers an overview of the theories and debates that are key to the historical development of science fiction criticism. As indicated by the subtitle, it aims to be essential, rather than comprehensive. As a result, this collection never feels overwhelming, with a carefully chosen and limited selection that is used to elucidate clear themes and debates. The book is broken into five discrete sections, each of which has an introductory paragraph that outlines the respective themes as well as curating the works included in that section. To accompany this introduction, each section has its own annotated bibliography of recommended further reading, allowing the reader to go deeper into any of the specific threads of discourse. This format, matched with a particularly detailed index, increases the usefulness of this as a reference book for anyone interested in the field of science fiction studies.

There is a general introduction to the collection that lays out objectives as well as a short overview of each section. As stated above, the explicit objective is to introduce the reader to the key milestones in the development of science fiction criticism. However, there is an implicit objective, or at least flavor, that is also present in the introductory statements and that serves to frame the entire book. The implication is that science fiction is a genre that is ideally suited to challenging and undermining established systems of legitimacy and power. This disruption is signalled by science fiction’s disrespect for established boundaries. First, sf has refused to stay relegated to the fringes of critical discourse, disrupting established canons of literary value. Second, its critical community is not restricted to the academy, with important contributions by “reflective writers and editors, or by highly engaged fans.” The implication that sf is a genre that is ideally suited to challenging and undermining established systems of legitimacy and power is therefore seeded in the introductory essay and blooms throughout.
The disruptive potential of sf criticism is supported by Latham’s decision to include examples from both “amateur” and “professional” critics—where “amateur” indicates writers, editors, and fans and “professional” is used to denote academic scholars. This deliberate mixing of so-called professional and amateur writing opens important lines of inquiry that may have otherwise remained hidden. A good example of this strategy is seen in the 2009 talk cum-performance “Report from Planet Midnight” by author Nalo Hopkinson, in which Hopkinson responds to the 2009 “RaceFail ’09” incident contemporaneously, creatively, and subjectively; all three of which responses would be problematic for an academic following the prescriptions of scholarship.

The first two sections of the collection, “Definitions and Boundaries” and “Structure and Form,” both address formal questions about what counts as sf, and then within that category, what counts as “good” sf. Two themes are apparent across these discussions. The first, a well-worn theme of any discussion of genre, holds that what counts as sf is constantly being renegotiated. The second is that “good” sf is provocative and progressive. This last assertion is contested across the first two sections, with a dialogue emerging between those keen to construct and police boundaries between “good” and “bad” and those who oppose the attempt to legitimise “good” sf at the expense of “bad” sf.

The remaining three sections, “Ideology and World view,” “The Nonhuman,” and “Race and the Legacy of Colonialism,” offer typical examples of intersectional cultural studies familiar from other collections of essays in the humanities. Each section examines a cultural studies strand in relation to sf. A criticism here is that the section dealing with ideology and world view covers too much territory with the consequence that it is less coherent than the sections on humanism and race.

The anthology includes essays from scholarly heavy weights including Fredric Jameson, Darko Suvin, and Donna Haraway. This is unexceptional, as these essays are reprinted in many other similar collections. However, the juxtaposition of these famous essays with lesser known and unexpected works, and the resulting dialogue, produces new insights into essays that will be familiar to students and scholars of science fiction.

From the opposite direction, the co-mingling of writing from different traditions will provide entryways for an engaged non-academic audience. For example, Darko Suvin’s complex essay is immediately preceded by a highly accessible piece by science fiction writer Samuel Delany. Delany’s piece can act as a primer for those who wish to tackle Suvin’s essay but are not already conversant in the terminology and style of Suvin’s academic prose.

Overall, sf is treated as a literary genre with only the occasional foray beyond literature. Although there is coverage of sf films, tv, and art work, the weight of the collection treats sf as synonymous with sf literature. This betrays ironic disciplinary hang-ups; exhibiting boundary policing that the collection otherwise does so well to undermine through both its form and content. Given that the collection aims to be essential, and therefore remain at a manageable size, extended sections exploring the diverse locations of sf criticism may be undesirable. However, some explicit recognition and contextualisation of the focus on literary criticism would add to the work.

One final, though minor, matter is worth comment. The original publication details could be organised more accessibly. As it is, the original publication details are split across three different locations in the anthology. A one-sheet original publication bibliography would be a useful reference point for scholars and students. Furthermore, including the original publication dates in the contents page and on the first page of each entry would benefit the sense of historical dialogue that the collection is striving to promote.

Ultimately, by covering many bases without being laborious, Latham’s Science Fiction Criticism manages to offer a high use-value for students of science fiction while also appealing to non-academic fans. However, established scholars of science fiction will find that they already have access to many of the essays collected here, so the use-value for them can therefore be found in the illustrative juxtaposition of different works of criticism.
Fiction Reviews

Ball Lightning

Russell Alexander Stepp


FOR WESTERN readers interested in tackling Liu Cixin’s Ball Lightning, the best place to start the novel is at its end. Not the end of the story, but rather, at the author’s afterword, in which he describes his relationship to science fiction and how Eastern and Western traditions shaped his writing. Liu first encountered Western science fiction in 1982 when translations of Arthur C. Clarke’s 2001 and Rendezvous with Rama first became available in China. Liu then goes on to explain that, even though Chinese science fiction has more than a century-long pedigree, the “period was dominated by the invention story, a form that was preoccupied with the description of a futuristic technological device and speculation on its immediate positive effects, but which barely touched the invention’s deeper social implications, much less the tremendous ways such technology would transform society.” On the surface, Ball Lightning seems to have all the trappings of a Chinese invention story, but Liu’s debt to Western science fiction becomes apparent once the story’s protagonist, Chen, unlocks the secret of the still-unexplained phenomenon of ball lightning. Once this secret has been revealed, the novel shifts to an anti-war commentary on the dangers of unchecked ambition when pursuing technological innovation.

However, the influence of the Chinese invention story is still strongly felt in Ball Lightning, and a reader trained to the modern conventions of Western science fiction may be occasionally frustrated by the novel’s focus on technology and inattention to character development. The novel was first published in Chinese in 2004 and later distributed in an English translation by Joel Martinsen (who also translated Liu’s novel The Dark Forest) in 2018. The translator does provide occasional notes to clarify aspects of the Chinese language or culture. However, despite these notes, the novel is deeply embedded inside China, which may cause occasional, but manageable, moments of confusion for its English readership.

Given the novel’s unusual pedigree, it would be most accurate to classify Ball Lightning as a work of Chinese science fiction, rather than attempting to force it to adhere to Western generic conventions. However, it would be no stretch to understand the novel as a work of hard science fiction. Liu’s technical background is clear in all his fiction – he worked as a computer engineer in a Chinese power plant – and readers with a solid technical background will likely get more out of the novel than those without. The complex academic and military bureaucracies through which the characters navigate will resonate with those who have worked in scientific research, as the bulk of the story follows Chen’s drive to research ball lightning and later find an application for it. Furthermore, the novel requires a basic intellectual knowledge of quantum mechanics in order to fully interact with the speculative theory behind Liu’s explanation of ball lightning. Liu does not demand a specialist’s engagement with modern physics, but readers for whom terms like excitation energy, waveform, and superposition are foreign words will likely feel disoriented at points and fail, perhaps, to fully grasp the novel.

Ball Lightning stands as a bridge between Liu Cixin’s roots in traditional Chinese science fiction, (focusing on the invention story), and tradition that invests further in the human and social ramifications of technology. Liu’s interest in and debt to Western science fiction is clearly manifest in his most famous work, and winner of the 2015 Hugo Award for Best Novel, The Three-Body Problem, but these are not as prominent in Ball Lightning. In the afterword to Ball Lightning, Liu suggests that the novel can be understood as a prequel to Three-Body and that work’s sequels that make up the trilogy Remembrance of Earth’s Past, but the connections are by no means obvious. The principal points of intersection seem to be the proposition that, in Ball Lightning, the hypothesized alien observers are the Trisolarans from Three Body, and that a version of Ding Yi, a major character in Ball Lightning also makes a brief appearance in Remembrance of Earth’s
Past. He explicitly states that he had mainly developed *Remembrance of Earth’s Past* before publishing *Ball Lightning*, but chose to write the latter as he felt that it would receive a better response in China.

*Ball Lightning* serves as an intellectual prequel to later novels, in that, in *Ball Lightning*, Liu is still wrestling with the tension between Eastern and Western approaches to science fiction. Stylistically, *Ball Lightning* clearly appeals to Chinese sensibilities over Western, and it is likely that the novel would never have come to light in English translation had Liu’s later work not been such a critical and commercial success. While the novel can stand on its own merits and is an engaging foray into fictionalized quantum mechanics, its research value is likely limited to scholars interested in Liu and his corpus or those willing to investigate the intersections between Eastern and Western science fiction. For the latter group, *Ball Lightning* may be of particular interest as it exhibits clear characteristics of both traditions and might be read as an author’s attempt to merge two generic forms.

*Captain Marvel*  
Thomas Connolly


*CAPTAIN MARVEL* is the first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to feature a solo female protagonist as its central superhero. It is not the first to feature a female superhero—that honor goes to *Iron Man 2*, which introduced Black Widow—nor the first to feature a female superhero in its title—last year’s *Ant-Man and the Wasp* wins the prize there. But it is the first to concentrate solely on the origins and development of a female superhero.

This is a significant fact in several ways. *Captain Marvel* offers a much-needed redress to the MCU’s exceptionally poor record on female representation. The problem has not been a lack of well-developed female characters, of which there are many: Black Widow, the Wasp, Pepper Potts, Scarlet Witch, Valkyrie, sisters Gamora and Nebula, and a handful of others. The issue has been that the development of most of these characters has been predicated on their relationship towards male figures whose concerns ultimately overshadow those of their female counterparts. Even Hela, villain of *Thor: Ragnarok*, framed as one of the most powerful beings in the Marvel universe, is motivated almost entirely by obsessive hatred for her father Odin, and is eventually toppled by Thor. (Well, actually by the demon Surtur, but Thor is the indirect cause of this.)

This is not an issue that Marvel Studios should lightly get away with. Over the course of its eleven-year history, the MCU has come to dominate the landscape of Hollywood cinema, rising to a level of global cultural visibility possibly unequalled in the history of popular culture. Disney’s recent acquisition of 21st Century Fox extends this cultural hegemony to astronomical heights, and so there is an evident need to critique the ideological positions adopted
by the cultural products of Disney and, by extension, Marvel Studios. The prior failure of the MCU to give central place to any of its female superheroes reflects the studio’s relatively conservative view of the superhero genre as a largely masculine affair, and invokes a wider cultural perception of white men as the primary agents of political and historical change. In *Captain America: Civil War*, for example, one of the more politically sophisticated entries in the franchise, the central ideological conflict—that of whether superheroes should submit themselves to governmental oversight or remain independent of state control—is personalized into an emotional brawl between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers. This foregrounding of white male experience as an ostensibly neutral vehicle for complex ideological and political debate occurs at the expense of more diverse characterization.

For SF scholars and readers, this narrative maneuver merely reiterates the historical silencing of female and POC authors within the genre—a silencing that, in recent years, has been challenged in significant ways. To take just one example: in 2018—a year that saw both the bicentennial of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the sad death of one of SF’s most accomplished authors, Ursula Le Guin—a majority of Hugo Awards (including all awards for fiction) went to women and people of color in a variety of creative fields. This instance of popular recognition of the creative efforts of these artists and writers reflects broader efforts within SF scholarship and publishing aimed at recovering—to adapt a phrase from Lisa Yaszek—“The People History Doesn’t See”. As Yaszek notes in the introduction to *The Future Is Female!*, a 2018 anthology of stories by twentieth-century female SF authors, “SF was never just about boys and their toys”. Alongside such feminist interventions in the field, there has also been significantly increased interest—in both academic and publishing terms—in Afrofuturist and other genres of speculative fiction by people of colour, and more broadly in SF that moves beyond the historically mainstreamed perspective of the white American male. N.K. Jemisin, for example, has been perhaps the most celebrated SF author of recent years, with an unprecedented three successive Hugo Awards for her “Broken Earth” series. The visibility and recognition thus accorded to Jemisin goes some way towards addressing the cultural invisibility that has been enforced upon women of colour in SF, vulnerable to cultural and political prejudice along intersecting lines of race and gender.

Given these shifts within the broader genre of SF, it is significant that, in the last twelve months, Marvel Studios has taken specific steps to redress the MCU’s lack of diversity, first with the release of last year’s *Black Panther*, and most recently with the release of *Captain Marvel*. This has been a very deliberate move by the studio, though the stated rationale behind it is open to scrutiny. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* in February of this year, Kevin Feige, the chief of Marvel Studios, noted that the character of Black Panther was created “in the middle of the civil rights movements” as an attempt at a positive representation of an African character—“[to] be able do that on the big screen”, Feige goes on, “and explore the world of Wakanda and see a cast of characters that is entirely people of color, that was what excited us.” These are noble aspirations—yet a more cynical interpretation might suggest that the studio is yet lagging in the wake of public opinion that has long been demanding a greater diversity of representation in Hollywood cinema and other cultural venues. (It should be noted that the MCU’s television outings, the lamentable *Iron Fist* excepted, have taken the lead in this regard, with *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* led respectively by female and African-American superheroes.)

The notion that audiences consume their political views by seeing them re-enacted in Hollywood cinema has been developed most eloquently by Mark Fisher (see *Capitalist Realism*), and there can be no doubt that a certain percentage of moviegoers will consider the very appearance of a female Captain Marvel in a big-budget Hollywood vehicle to be a sign of political progression, and worth the price of admission. In this light, the release of *Captain Marvel* on International Women’s Day can be read either as a signal of political commitment to diversity or as a particularly canny marketing strategy. In either case, the critical and commercial response to both films
seems to support Marvel’s gestures in this regard: *Black Panther* generated $1.35bn and three Oscar wins, while at the time of writing *Captain Marvel* is the second highest-grossing film of 2019.

The film itself, which is set in the 1990s, centers on Carol Danvers (Brie Larson), a.k.a., Captain Marvel, a warrior capable of harnessing powerful energy forces. At the beginning of the film, Danvers resides with, and considers herself a member of, the Kree, a militaristic and technologically advanced race of humanoid beings from the planet Hala. The Kree are involved in a protracted war with the Skrulls—shapeshifters capable of appropriating the appearance and recent memories of any other being. After being captured by the Skrulls and brought to Earth, however, Danvers learns of her previous life on Earth as an air force pilot, and of a tragic incident during which she acquired her superpowers but lost her memory. Having regained her lost past, Danvers sets out to protect Earth from an interplanetary threat.

Whereas *Black Panther* explicitly engages with Afrofuturist themes and the legacy of both American slavery and European colonialism, *Captain Marvel* takes a more muted approach to the question of gender. This approach, according to co-writer Nicole Perlman, was quite intentional: “the responsibility and the way we made sure of doing a good job is that she’s not just a woman and it’s not just that she’s strong ... She is not strong in spite of being a woman or that her strength comes from her being a woman. I feel like this is a great superhero and an incredibly inspirational person.” Indeed, although a large chunk of the core cast of the film are women, very little explicit attention is paid to this in the course of the film’s narrative. Instead, *Captain Marvel* looks to depict the experiences of its female leads not as inescapably delimited by the constraints of gender ideologies, but as merely one facet of their complex characterizations.

Perhaps the most significant example of this is the character of Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch). Maria, who is African American, is Danvers’ oldest friend and a fellow air force pilot, and also a single mother to the eleven-year-old Monica (Akira Akbar). (One looks to Monica—a character who, in the comics, comes eventually to lead the Avengers for a time—as potentially the first lead African-American female superhero to arrive into the MCU.) The potential social prejudice that Maria faces is complex, and at times openly acknowledged: she recounts, for example, how she and Danvers were forced to work as test pilots because the air force would not allow female pilots to fly on missions. Yet the film does not reduce Maria to a helpless victim of gendered or racial oppression simply because it does not allow the audience to conceive of Maria’s life as helplessly constrained by socio-cultural forces. Maria is instead portrayed as having carved both a successful career and a loving domestic life for herself, while any potential prejudice that she may have faced is left implicit. Her most significant relationships are to her daughter Monica and friend Carol. The film, in other words, takes it as a given that women can lead emotionally satisfying lives without the presence or assistance of men—a relatively simple idea that has nevertheless taken an exceedingly long time to soak into the cultural consciousness of popular cinema. When Maria announces that she will not be accompanying Danvers on the final rescue mission to near space, she is scolded by her daughter for setting a bad example. The message here is clear: the traditional image of motherhood as a confined and confining role that limits women to the domestic space will no longer fly (pun intended).

Thus the importance of *Captain Marvel* as a feminist work lies, ironically, in the relative lack of attention that it pays to the gender of its protagonist—as Captain Marvel herself states, she has no need to prove herself either to her male mentors or, by implication, to her audience of Marvel fans. Other aspects of the film’s political subtext are somewhat less nuanced. The intergalactic background of the film, for example, contrasts rather mundanely with the largely apolitical and highly Americanized image of militarized technocracy exhibited by both the Kree and the Earthlings. As in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, whiteness continues to function as the default skin colour in all corners of the galaxy. For instance, though the standard skin tone of the Kree race is a dark blue, the two most significant Krees—Danvers and her superior Yon-
Rogg (Jude Law)—are both white, a discrepancy that, if narratively creditable for the former (given that she is an Earthling, though this also assumes a universal whiteness on that planet), is rather clumsily ignored for the latter.

In other regards, however, the film shows a sensitivity to issues of racial prejudice. The Skrulls, for example, initially framed as the inscrutable villains of the film, are soon revealed to be complex and sympathetic beings, while their plight in the war against the Kree comes eventually to take on uncomfortable parallels with the ongoing refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe. In this conflict, the Skrulls occupy the position of an oppressed minority seeking refuge. This portrayal echoes the anti-immigration sentiments that have taken unfortunate root in many western democracies in recent years: the shapeshifting abilities of the Skrulls make them the natural object of political fears regarding the “infiltration” by a faceless enemy into an ostensibly “superior” culture (in this case, the Kree), while their inhuman appearance in their natural form functions for others characters—and, initially, for the viewer—as an index of their inner “evil.” The initial deployment and later overturning of this stereotypical trope—the visibly different Other treated as an object of suspicion and hatred—is perhaps the most radical political message of the film, and one that, like Black Panther’s Killmonger, offers a refreshingly distinct and politically charged take on the often dull villains of the MCU.

Overall, then, Captain Marvel offers a solid entry into the MCU, and an expanded understanding of the superhero figure that happily edges it further away from its traditional vision of the superhero as super-whitestraightmale, and into more interesting, and less unexplored, territory.

Detroit: Become Human

Shirley McPhaul


Detroit: Become Human (henceforth DBH), is a video game developed by Quantic Dream and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment for the Playstation 4 on May 2018. The video game is set sometime in the not-so-distant-future in Detroit, Michigan, where androids have become part of the population’s daily lives, performing tasks such as care-taking, housekeeping and other types professional assistance that do not require advanced education or training. However, some androids have suddenly gone rogue, disobeying and sometimes even hurting, their human masters. The video game’s plot revolves around the android’s deviancy, its origins, and consequences. It is through the representation of these scenarios that the narrative exposes various ethical and humanitarian conflicts, and where the greatest opportunity for discussion lies.

It is worth pointing out at the fact that DBH has a branching narrative, where different choices will result in the unlocking of different narrative pathways and therefore (according to players) up to 45 different endings. This characteristic makes playing DBH an interesting exploration of hypertexts in interactive narratives, especially because the game offers a detailed diagram with all the possible pathways after each chapter, showing the player which scenes she has unlocked and how much of the possible narratives she still has to discover.

The video game follows the intertwining stories of three main characters, all of them androids; Connor, Kara and Marcus. Connor is a prototype android given to the police department to aid in the deviants’ investigation. Kara is a deviant; she escapes her abusive human master with who is presumed to be his young daughter, Alice, and with whom she (Kara) travels to the Canadian border as she tries to save herself and the little girl. Lastly, there is Markus. Markus is also a deviant, but rather than trying to escape, he becomes the leader of a group that seeks to “free” the androids from human mastery.

The narrative theme in DBH is “rise of the machines” or “AI uprising”, where human mechanical creations suddenly seem to become sentient and
turn against their masters. This makes DBH akin with other similar narratives, such as Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. However, DBH is less concerned with the potential violent aspect of an uprising, and more with the ethical and philosophical questions that stem from machines becoming sentient or somehow simulating human emotions while gaining awareness of an individual “self”. Questions about artificial intelligence and the boundaries between what makes humans “human” are explored throughout the narrative, and interactive possibilities offered by the video game’s branching narrative truly aid in making the player think about these themes while she navigates the game. Secondary conflicts explored by the narrative are the displacement of human workers by the androids, the emotional attachment humans may experience towards their android caretakers, and the constant questioning of whether having machines that resemble humans so closely is truly a good idea.

DBH asks interesting philosophical questions about how androids should be treated. Their human resemblance makes it easier to empathize with them, which creates a disturbing sense of injustice when they are being mistreated. However, they are still machines, programmed to act in certain ways under certain circumstances, and the game is very ambiguous about whether their deviancy is due to a true “awakening” of consciousness or a simulation of human emotion. The game also briefly explores the existence of sex androids and whether or not this sort of purpose is legitimate. Nonetheless, the narrative seems to be skewed towards persuading the player into believing that the androids are capable of “becoming human”.

The game treats the AI as an equivalent “Other” rather than a truly artificial object and portrays them in scenarios that could be used for discussions about gender, violence and/or race amongst human. This humanization of the androids makes objective readings quite difficult, since the video game purposefully builds empathy between the player and the androids through cinematographic techniques, dialogue and emotion. In this sense, DBH is not so much about androids becoming human, but rather an experience built to question the boundaries of the player’s own humanity; will the player do whatever possible to save the androids? Or will she purposely put their lives in danger in order to experience a particular narrative or ending?

As a result, it can also be argued that the degree of the android’s deviancy is up to the player and the narrative she wants to experience. At the end, however, DBH is telling a very specific story with a finite amount of paths and endings, thus the narrative is being navigated, rather than constructed; all endings are predetermined, therefore there is no true agency as of how the game will end, but only on which variations of the ending the player gets to experience. This is to say that DBH should not be considered an exploration of what would happen if AI goes sentient, but rather just as a specific narrative within the topic.

DBH would make a good teaching tool for critical analysis and ethics surrounding AI, especially because the player has to make some difficult choices along the game, sometimes being faced with the decision of endangering, saving, and sometimes even killing one of the main characters or some other third party. The game is not very long, and because the player can replay chapters without having to experience the whole narrative from the start, this creates the opportunity to use specific chapters in a classroom environment, and have students navigate the narrative’s possibilities and discuss the consequences of each different possible scenario. All in all, (with caution) DBH is a good alternative for academics looking for a video game that explores branching narratives, AI becoming sentient, and seeks to challenge ethical perceptions through interactivity, all while arguing for a type humanity that lies well beyond being human.
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