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Review by Alexander Popov

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Alternate History seems to never be out of fashion. An early popular representation – Louis Geoffroy's *Histoire de la Monarchie universelle: Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (1812-1832) – imagined a globally triumphant Napoleonic empire. Others would focus on different branching-off points: the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire, the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars. The capacity of the genre to juxtapose the actual and the potential makes it a powerful meditative device, its literary machinery employed so often to process afresh fundamental historical events and to extrapolate their effects on a global scale.

It is likely that each generation is preoccupied with its own idiosyncratic historical 'what-ifs.' *Possible Worlds Theory and Counterfactual Historical Fiction* (2020) is a study of the sub-branch of Alternate History which deals with large-scale differences in historical timelines and which Riyukta Raghunath refers to as "counterfactual historical fiction" (CHF). In the close readings demonstrating the merits of her theoretical models she deals with a popular kind of scenario in which Nazi Germany has emerged victorious from the Second World War. This thematic focus at times constrains the discussion of general literary problems such as fictionality, genre, and world building. On the other hand, it allows the author to present a clear-cut treatment of the research problem, namely: what cognitive-narratological structures mediate the readerly experience of CHF. Raghunath's book should be of interest both to scholars of this particular genre and to theoreticians tracing continuities between multiple genres.

Raghunath's model sits firmly on top of Possible Worlds Theory (PWT) – a set of meaning representation formalisms developed by analytical philosophers and later appropriated by literary theorists. PWT has been specifically designed to deal with the interpretation of linguistic counterfactuals, such as lies or conditionals. Thus, it sheds copious light on the nature of Alternate History, whose starting point is namely the question 'What if…?' PWT provides tools that can explain what cognitive or metaphysical structures need to be in place for such questions (and narratives) to make sense. In the first chapter, Raghunath provides a concise overview of the existing research on CHF, including various genre taxonomies. In Chapters Two to Four, she outlines the aspects of PWT relevant to her work: its various interpretations and subsequent modifications for the purposes of

literary analysis. These strictly theoretical chapters are useful on their own merit, as they provide an apparatus applicable to most genres.

When applied to linguistic data, PWT typically works with relatively small sets of propositions (that is, logical statements) about a closed world composed of a finite number of entities and possible relations. When used to analyse fiction, it needs to account for much larger sets of propositions describing an open world in which characters can become alive and plots can unfold. This challenge brings attention to the ways in which propositions about entities are interrelated – within a single world and across multiple worlds. These relations between the actual and the potential – what is and what could (should, must, can) be – are what makes a world more than just a bag of things. These *modal* relations – of possibility, necessity, obligation, desire – are the vectors of power that breathe life into any world and transform it into a structure perpetually in motion. The capability to compare worlds in terms of such vectorised fields of possibility is the great boon of PWT, allowing us to think systematically about the origins and interactions of these force fields – about the fundamental structures that supposedly shape history and the human mind.

Worlds are collections of *compossible* entities, things that can exist together – an idea introduced by Gottfried Leibniz and adopted by PWT. Conditions on compossibility determine what constructs can function as fictional worlds and what kinds of mental gap-filling readers engage in so that the textual core expands into an authentic world. A similar concept – that of *relations of accessibility* – is used in PWT and fictional semantics to determine whether and under what conditions certain worlds can be seen as possible versions of the baseline reality.   Raghunath briefly mentions compossibility in relation to the work of Lubomír Doležel and uses extensively Marie-Laure Ryan's schema of accessibility relation types (2, 162). Compossibility within and accessibility between worlds are structured by modal operators indicating what is possible, necessary, obligatory, or desired. But worlds are not globally integrated structures in which particular modal settings hold universally. At this point Raghunath makes crucial use of Marie-Laure Ryan's modal system developed in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991). Ryan centres fictional reality around a so-called *textual actual world* – a construct standing apart from the actual world of the writer and the reader and serving as a semantic representation of a *textual reference world*: the underlying reality that the text is supposed to reflect. Around both the actual world (AW) and the textual actual world (TAW) Ryan posits a constellation of satellite possible worlds – mental creations of the sentient citizens of AW and TAW. Some of these include K-worlds, O-worlds and W-worlds, or the private systems of knowledge, obligations and wishes that mediate people's relations to the reference world. While K-worlds in particular are useful for analysing constructs such as character point of view, Raghunath explicitly extends the notion to the reader of fiction and posits a new structure – reader knowledge-worlds (RK-worlds), which she contrasts with character knowledge-worlds (CK-worlds).

RK-worlds – the epistemological framework through which a reader approaches a text – are, according to Raghunath, central to how readers experience CHF:

> Making use of the term RK-worlds enables a clear distinction between the actual world that is used as an epistemological template for counterfactual historical fiction and RK-worlds that readers use to interpret and understand the significance of these texts. [...] [I]n counterfactual historical fiction it is important to reflect on the actual world history by comparing it to the counterfactual history and this kind of reflection is solely dependent on the type of RK-world that a reader possesses. (68)

Alternate History relies to a much greater extent on readers' knowledge of actual history; a large part of its energies are expended specifically towards drawing attention to the differences between AW and TAW. RK-worlds preserve the machinery of PWT, while at the same time they provide a possible cognitive explanation of the process of reading itself. They also allow Raghunath to introduce further conceptual modifications to the PWT model: *ontological superimposition* and *reciprocal feedback*. The first one refers to the specific kind of direct comparison of historical timelines central to CHF. In other non-realist genres, according to the author, the TAW diverges in terms of its objects, technologies, or scientific facts. Alternate History exploits RK-worlds in order to force a juxtaposition that is much more clear-cut because it involves direct contradiction of historical reality. Thus, actual and fictional worlds are superimposed in the same space of representation (the RK-world) and a peculiar kind of ontological oscillation between them becomes possible. Amidst this "ontological flickering" (a term Raghunath borrows from Brian McHale), the two worlds provide reciprocal feedback to each other:

> this movement between worlds allows the reader to contextualise and evaluate the textual actual world within the domain of the actual world and also contextualise and evaluate the actual world within the domain of the textual actual world. (86)

This schema is certainly useful for the analysis of CHF, but I would disagree that it is specific to Alternate History. Any Science Fiction (SF) narrative which operates within Darko Suvin's framework of *cognitive estrangement* – introduced in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1971) – creates a TAW in dialogue with the AW – a thesis brilliantly elaborated as the notion of *trivalent discourse* in Samuel Delany's critical-theoretic work *The American Shore* (1978). SF precipitates the same kind of inter-world reciprocal feedback mediated by the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge. If we should look for a feature to distinguish it from Alternate History, I do not think it is to be found in the process itself. Rather it is based in the kind of modal relations thematised by different genres – what is known to have happened in Alternate History and what is known to be possible in SF. But even such a distinction seems superfluous, since plenty of examples can be adduced in which both modalities are intimately intertwined – Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) being only the most famous one. Suvin's *novum* as a mechanism for differentiating between realist and SF prose has

never been constrained to purely technical and/or scientific novelty, and Alternate History does not need to emancipate itself from SF along such lines. On the contrary, its study can only benefit from the theoretical apparatuses of SF studies.

Issues of taxonomy aside, *Possible Worlds Theory and Counterfactual Historical Fiction* provides insightful readings that illustrate its theoretical interventions and demonstrate their soundness. Chapters Five to Seven deal with three novels about alternative versions of Nazi Germany that have survived after the war: *Fatherland* (1992) by Robert Harris, *The Sound of His Horn* (1952) by Sarban, and *Making History* (1996) by Stephen Fry. Raghunath's modified PWT yields robust interpretations of multiple distinctive features of these narratives. For instance, "conceptualising actual world sources including images, historical documents, and quotations used in a fictional context as having varying degrees of fictionality" (136). This fictionality scale supporting the reader's reconstruction of the TAW is implicitly accessible due to the RK-world construct, which enables the necessary ontological superimposition of the alternate worlds. This leads to a curious effect, whereby fictional reality is located in an uncanny no man's land between fiction and actuality.

Another phenomenon that Raghunath explains is the way some of these narratives refer to actually existing beings and processes, activating historical knowledge in the reader without explicitly using names. *Fatherland*, for instance, weaves a TAW whose *intensional* structure – that is, the interrelation of beings inside it – is very much reminiscent of the USSR in terms of its suppression of information concerning genocide. In *The Sound of His Horn* and in *Making History* the same mechanism of relating intensional webs of meaning via RK-worlds is available to the reader; its use can lead to the recognition that the novels present full or partial counterparts to central Nazi figures like Hermann Göring and Adolf Hitler – without explicitly naming them, or even by naming them differently:

> If readers are able to make the epistemological connection between the Count in TAW2 and Hermann Göring in the actual world, they may be able to further see how TAW2 is accessible from the actual world. TAW2 can also be said to be physically, taxonomically, and analytically compatible to some extent—the two domains share some truths in that TAW2 is an exaggerated retrogression of the actual world presented as a future dystopia. (166)

Raghunath's model accomplishes at least two important things: it provides a tool that can formally elucidate the relations between actual and fictional worlds and it situates the aforementioned tool in the tradition of cognitivist theory. The second accomplishment seems significant as a cognitivist account can handle the various prototypicality effects generated by CHF – all of the partial similarities between timelines, entities, historical processes. Cognitive psychology has multiple tools for similar problems, like the theory of Idealized Cognitive Models developed by George Lakoff in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987), or the encyclopedia model for knowledge representation. Even

though Raghunath criticises the theory of Conceptual Blending, a central cognitivist hypothesis, cognitivist models seem to be a good fit for the further elaboration of her RK-worlds. Such an extended, hybrid theory could speculate on even more interesting topics: not just how readers compare actual and fictional worlds, but to what effects; a kind of cognitive-narratological poetics of genre.

Narratives that thematise a proliferation of possible worlds – Alternate Histories, but also time loop and parallel world stories – seem to be gaining popularity in mainstream media. Recent examples abound: *Counterpart* (2017-2019), *Russian Doll* (2019-present), *For All Mankind* (2020-present), *The Plot Against America* (2020), *Palm Springs* (2020), *Tenet* (2020). As we gradually come to grips with the extent to which our identities are overdetermined by structural factors, and as we slide irreversibly in the slow apocalypse of climate change, narratives about alternative possible worlds might help us process trauma, think about past mistakes, or contemplate future courses of action. *Possible Worlds Theory and Counterfactual Historical Fiction* is a valuable update of Possible Worlds Theory, one which can potentially lead to useful literary analyses dealing with a much wider spectrum of fictional works – opening up the field of fictional semantics to the challenges of narrating alternative versions of the past *and* the future.

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