

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Vol 5 Issue 1

<https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-5-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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SIDEWAYS IN TIME: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON ALTERNATE HISTORY FICTION (2019) EDITED BY CHARUL PALMER-PATEL AND GLYN MORGAN

Review by Paul March-Russell

Morgan, Glyn and C. Palmer-Patel, eds. *Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2019. 203 pp.

The old masters had it (sort of) right: “What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation.” T. S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” (1935) begins with a kind of alternate history, “Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened,” but does so in order to argue that “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (189). Written under the shadow of Albert Einstein’s relativistic theories of space-time, Eliot sought to redeem time and to recuperate memory in *The Four Quartets* (1944); what could not be redeemed and recovered – the what might have been – Eliot closed down upon. Nonetheless, Eliot’s fragile evocation of “the rose-garden,” inspired by Rudyard Kipling’s poignant portal fantasy variant “They” (1904), contains within it the mystery and intrigue of the alternate history fiction.

As Stephen Baxter writes in his foreword to this most timely collection, alternate history taps into our innermost desires and can be traced as far back as the Roman author Livy. The desire to change the past delves, I think, into deeper emotional content: the child’s anxiety/frustration with his or her parents – what if these were not my parents? What if I lived with somebody else’s? What if my imaginary friend was real? The psychology of portal fantasies, from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) to Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), feed upon such desires. But, in a sense, all alternate histories are portal fantasy variants – ‘the door in the wall’ or the ‘door into summer’ – in which the hinges that time rests upon spring apart, and for this moment, the door opens this way and not that. What lies within the uncanny chamber revealed, this crypt of secrets encased within the familiar? For, in a further sense, alternate histories – like portal fantasies – are cryptological: the movement sideways, ‘through the looking glass,’ is also a movement within. Alternate histories are our familiars, our doubles, our imaginary friends (or silent enemies), and this is perhaps why, at a visceral level, we are drawn to them.

Does the profusion of alternate histories indicate a form of monster theory? As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, the monster appears at the fork in the road: “it will haunt that place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision” (4). Is there something monstrous, revelatory,

about the very idea of alternate history that Eliot wanted to contain? As the editors note in their introduction, counterfactual histories are considered apocryphal by the historical profession – they are no more than speculation, devoid of evidence, and playing fast and loose with the determinism of cause and effect. Yet, at the same time, alternate history – like the more recognisable monsters that Cohen deals with – gnaws away at the bones of official history; its contagious presence is to be shunned by historians as the gatekeepers of ‘clean’ and unvarnished historical practice. Counterfactuals, then, pose questions as to the taxonomy of what is and is not history; they are, potentially, a means by which we – writers, readers, historians – can police the borders between what is ‘real’ and ‘fake’ history. In particular, can we not, as with Cohen’s monsters, do something with the *historicity* of their arrival, that always culturally constituted point of irruption into official history by the alternate?

To a large extent, the essays in this collection dance around that question, sometimes veering towards an exploration of historical taxonomy, sometimes towards a hauntological engagement with history, and sometimes moving towards more generic topics of the relationship between Science Fiction (SF) and alternate history. Adam Roberts, in his opening essay, collapses the two, arguing that Science Fiction is inherently a form of alternate history in that its empirically flawed extrapolations into the future constitute an ever-branching series of possible future histories. Taking into account the historical profession’s disapproval of counterfactual histories, maybe this is a further reason as to why SF has been deemed at best – although significantly in this regard – as a ‘para-literature’? Roberts’ Borgesian, rhizomatic depiction of SF as an endless sequence of forking paths has its roots, though, in one of the great historical novels of the nineteenth century: Leo Tolstoy’s representation of history, in *War and Peace* (1869), as an indeterminate and chaotic series of chance events. (It is a curious feature of Roberts’ account that his counter-definition, like the more canonical description of SF as ‘a literature of ideas’ (derived from Honoré de Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* [1843]), is indebted to nineteenth-century realism.) Roberts uses Tolstoy to offset the ‘Great Man’ thesis that underwrites Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy’s *Napoléon Apocryphe* (1841), arguably the first alternate historical novel. It is this binary opposition that is replicated in later essays within the collection although, in truth, the Great Man thesis is harder to deconstruct than the contributors suggest. For example, as the editors note, one of the most popular sub-categories of the alternate history is the ‘Hitler Wins’ story. Although writers of this sub-category place overt emphasis upon the character of Adolf Hitler, to downplay his personality is to omit one of the key socio-political determinants as to why Nazism was so more violent than its nearest cousin, Italian Fascism. Following Roberts’ account, it is perhaps advisable to offer a more relativistic version of the Great Man thesis than to dismiss it *tout court*.

Subsequent chapters in the volume tend to do that. Chris Pak’s analysis of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), an archetypal alternate history insofar as it predicated upon a classic ‘what if’ question, argues that a discussion of historical determinism is built into its narrative structure. Pak is especially keen to redeem the narrative frame, set within the Buddhist conception of the *bardo*, from critics such as Farah Mendlesohn who argue that it has no place within an otherwise secular narrative. By contrast, Pak argues that the alternate history is a polysemous form and that the metaphysical narrative frame is but one thread within the whole text. The frame is

important, however, since it not only embeds a non-Western conception of metaphysics within the geopolitical shift of the novel but it also counterpoints the panoramic view of historical development lifted as much from the Annales School as from classical epic.

Whereas Pak emphasises a systemic approach to reading alternate history, Anna McFarlane's account of Lavie Tidhar's *Osama* (2011) foregrounds a subjective response based upon trauma and affect. Tidhar's private eye protagonist, who may have fabricated not only his identity but also his entire society as a traumatised response to the events of 9/11, remains permanently estranged from the movement of history. He can witness, but he has no understanding of what he is witnessing, so that his narrative teeters upon a chasm between what is known and what is felt. Within this breach, this *différance* between meaning and non-meaning, looms the monstrous truth of 9/11 that defies all comprehension. The muteness of alternate history, its inability to address 'real' history, here speaks volumes to the walled zone that is 9/11.

In-between these chapters occurs a pairing that can, more or less, be said to offer a hauntological reading of history. Jonathan Rayner's wide-ranging account, which takes into consideration alternate history but also other science-fictional narratives, explores the inability of Japan to get beyond its idealisation of military heroism during World War Two. Using retellings of the real-life kamikaze mission of the battleship, *Yamato*, as his hook, Rayner addresses the historicity of these media representations. However implausible their stories are, they speak to a deep unease within contemporary Japanese culture about how to remember their wartime legacy and the country's current global position following the collapse of its economy in the late 1990s. If the *Yamato* recurs as a spectre in Rayner's chapter, Brian Baker makes this spectral reading explicit in his response to Ian Sales' rewritings of the NASA space programme. Baker sets the initial optimism associated with the Space Age in dialectical tension with Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds' hauntological reading of nostalgia as a retroactive fixation with what was and what might have been. Sales' quartet of alternate histories first exposes the hypermasculine sexual politics of the NASA space mission, then celebrates its optimism by reimagining the astronaut pioneers as female, before wondering what would have happened if Science Fiction itself had remained a feminine-coded literature: planetary romance. Baker argues that the increasingly self-reflexive strategies of the quartet move beyond the nostalgia diagnosed by Fisher and Reynolds to fixate instead upon the sublime pathos of the space programme.

The second half of the collection picks up on Baker and McFarlane's contributions to explore more experimental usages of the alternate history. Molly Cobb's account of Alfred Bester's forays into the genre offers the total antithesis to the Great Man view of history, in which Bester's time travellers are unable to affect history beyond their own timeline. The alternate histories which are potentially created, for example in "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed" (1958), are instantaneously nullified elsewhere in every other timeline. Cobb effectively demonstrates that Bester's negation of the alternate history as a genre complements not only his characteristic play with SF tropes but also the Cold War context in which the individual appeared to be dwarfed by impersonal and abstract geopolitical forces.

The chapters by Derek J. Thiess and Chloé Germaine Buckley explore the alternate history as apocrypha. Thiess' exploration of Juan Miguel Aguilera's hybrid novel, *La locura de Dios* (1998), argues that the imbrication of alternate history with, amongst other tropes, a lost world narrative and a Lovecraftian cosmic horror merges a materialistic reading of history with a religious explanation. Whereas *The Years of Rice and Salt* uses a metaphysical frame as part of its polysemy, Thiess argues that Aguilera collapses the two but does so in order to emphasise that apocryphal histories are always a matter of selection and exclusion. Both Pak and Thiess gesture towards a postcolonial reading of the alternate history, in which non-Western philosophies are foregrounded as part of the text's apocrypha, although neither ultimately engage with postcolonial theory as such. Germaine Buckley meanwhile focuses on the en-Weirding of the Sherlock Holmes stories in the 2003 short story anthology, *Shadows over Baker Street*. As Buckley acknowledges, only Neil Gaiman's contribution, "A Study in Emerald," is a fully-fledged alternate history; the other stories revolve around the encounter between Holmesian empiricism and the uncategorisable (although still materialistic) entities of the Cthulhu Mythos. Germaine Buckley does a fine job in elucidating these fictions through the now familiar rhetoric of speculative realism but, other than Gaiman's story, none of them has much connection with the alternate history as understood in the editors' introduction, being more like exercises in metafiction. Furthermore, they also seem to rely upon a caricature of Holmes – his louche Bohemianism has some affinity with popular representations of the male decadent; an association that M. P. Shiel would make more explicit with his Count Zaleski stories – whilst none address the gender politics that is already present in the original tales. In particular, there is already an uncategorisable and thoroughly materialistic entity in Holmes's world: namely, Irene Adler.

The final chapters, by Andrew M. Butler and Karen Hellekson (perhaps the leading critic on alternate histories), return to slightly more familiar territory. Butler adapts Brian Aldiss' accusation of the 'cosy catastrophe,' to describe John Wyndham's disaster stories, to a consideration of Wyndham's 'uchronias' (a utopian version of the alternate history), all of which turn upon thwarted love. Focusing in particular upon "Random Quest" (1962) and its film adaptation as *Quest for Love* (1971), Butler argues that 'cosy' is the right epithet for these tales. I think that is true but, equally, why would it not be since these are stories of love regained? Although going beyond the purview of the chapter, another approach might be to read the uchronias alongside the disaster fiction – let alone Wyndham's female utopia, "Consider Her Ways" (1960) – so as to gain a more rounded view of this enigmatic writer. Hellekson, by contrast, offers a taxonomy of televisual alternate histories, drawing upon examples from eight series, ranging from the BBC's *An Englishman's Home* (1978) to Amazon's adaptation of *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019). As Hellekson argues, the contingencies displayed in each of these narratives are ultimately there to encourage the agency of its central characters: the moral that individuals can make a difference. The contrast with the protagonists in *Osama*, *La locura de Dios* and Bester's short fiction is palpable, begging a comparative analysis between television and print fiction, and in particular the very different corporate ownerships that underwrite their productions.

The volume closes with a brief resumé by the editors that seals the impression of this being a tightly packaged collection, whilst at the same time inviting further study of the genre. Taken as a whole, it is a fine addition to Liverpool University Press' own, ever-branching series of critical reflections upon SF. Despite its preoccupation with genre, it can also be enjoyed by readers for whom SF is not their primary interest. I very much hope it finds as large a readership as possible.

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