

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL VOL 2 ISSUE 1

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#### "FANTASTIKA"

A term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute. It embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space.

The goal of Fantastika Journal and its annual conference is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies and collaborations. We invite articles examining all mediums and disciplines which concern the Fantastika genres.



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POST-CYBERPUNK AND THE POTENTIAL ONTOLOGICAL EMANCIPATION OF CYBERSPATIAL EDUCATION IN NEAL STEPHENSON'S THE DIAMOND AGE	

This article defines the 'post' part of Post-Cyberpunk as it appears in Neal Stephenson's The Diamond Age (1995). Marketed as a Post-Cyberpunk novel, The Diamond Age adopts some of Cyberpunk's genre-specific motifs such as setting the novel in a near-future dystopia and embedding cyberspace as a "microworld" (McHale). This article extends and adapts Brian McHale's definition of Cyberpunk from Constructing Postmodernism (1992) to a definition of Post-Cyberpunk, while showing how Post-Cyberpunk can be considered part of the Romantic tradition. McHale defines Cyberpunk using motifs of "worldness," motifs of "the centrifugal self," and motifs of "death both individual and collective." My analysis shows The Diamond Age is Cyberpunk to the extent it adopts this postmodern worldness and dissolution of self. However, the text is also Post-Cyberpunk because it subverts Cyberpunk's motifs of individual and collective death. According to Northrop Frye, Romanticism is a "new mythology" that attempts to recover the life-affirming power of nature in magical terms. Stephenson's subversion of death is Romantic because his protagonist Nell's quest for a better life is a deliberate rewriting of the life-affirming concerns of Dickens's The Old Curiosity Shop (1841). Additionally, Nell's quest is motivated by the magical realist nanotechnological device - the Primer – which allows her to redefine her world in magical terms. I evaluate the extent to which The Diamond Age is truly Post-Cyberpunk based on Stephenson's (mis)use of Jung's spiritual theories and make some suggestions for thinking beyond Stephenson's version of the genre.

#### UNSETTLING LANGUAGE: GROTESQUE DESCRIPTION IN THE FLAME ALPHABET

Mark Heimermann

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Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* (2012) draws upon the aesthetics of the grotesque to create a world where categorical distinctions between supposed binaries like animals and humans break down. This is a common preoccupation of the grotesque, which often challenges traditional classifications as a way for forcing readers or viewers to see the world anew. I argue that Ben Marcus challenges human and non-human distinctions as a way of forcing consideration regarding how people dehumanize each other. This dehumanization makes it easier to objectify others. While we often disavow abhorrent behaviour by calling it inhuman, only humans are capable of being inhumane.

I argue that in *The Flame Alphabet* the relationship between metaphor and the grotesque, which both draw upon their ability to force others to see the world anew, is central to the way in which Marcus challenges classifications. Even when Marcus's figures or images are not literally grotesque, he still uses metaphor to create grotesque juxtapositions based on both appearance and behaviour. He also reveals how the line between victim and victimizer can blur, thus revealing the capacity for people to do harm either through good intentions or a lack of consideration regarding their actions. I argue that *The Flame Alphabet*'s narrative functions within the realm of the grotesque, and I demonstrate how the concept of the grotesque may simultaneously illuminate both bodies and behaviour.

# SUBURBAN GOTHIC AND NEOLIBERAL GOTHIC IN STRANGER THINGS (2016) Stuart Lindsav

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With reference to a range of contemporary Gothic criticism, most notably Bernice M. Murphy's work on Suburban Gothic, and Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's study of Neoliberal Gothic, this article will analyse the first season of the Netflix-distributed television series, *Stranger Things* (2016), namely its connection of American suburban life to a neoliberal monstrosity of political and military-industrial dimensions. My argument centres around the series' single-parent Byers family and their struggle against monstrous forces emerging from a parallel dimension into the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. I claim this event engages with issues of the Suburban Gothic surrounding the single mother as social outcast. The testimony to the supernatural of Joyce Byers, which is explained away as grief resulting from her missing son, Will, reveals the domination of suburbia's liminal figures by its patriarchal authority. The attacks of literal monstrosity on suburban women, family and the home act as an analogy of American, neoliberal, military-industrial patriarchy – represented by the sinister Hawkins National Laboratory from which the interdimensional invasion originated – exposing its excessive

control over suburbia, its hubris, and mistakes. Despite offering a reconstruction of American 1980s, Stranger Things is relevant to contemporary times. The interdimensional attacks on, and defence of, the Byers suburban home are focused on the walls of the house, rendering them as sites of conflict and horror. In the era that saw Donald Trump's rise to ultimate political success in part due to his campaign's discussions concerning improvements to the Mexico-US border wall, Stranger Things taps into an anxiety surrounding the image of the wall as a symbol of American domestic struggle, division, and fear. My analysis furthers this notion to develop the argument that the Hawkins Laboratory constitutes an extended realm of suburbia, exposing the military-industrial and capitalist exploitation of children and mothers as a support for the ideal suburban household, represented by the residence of Stranger Things' character, Mike Wheeler.

# THE MAGICAL IS POLITICAL: DECONSTRUCTING THE GENDERED SUPERNATURAL IN TEEN WOLF

Tania Evans and Madeline Pettet

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Fantasy scholars have increasingly recognised that the genre's key convention, magic, is useful for interrogating accepted ideas about gender and sexuality. Yet little attention has been paid to how magic effects the body, and how it transforms masculine and feminine bodies in different ways. In this paper we build upon existing debates about the magical lycanthropic body to analyse how the supernatural shapes masculine and feminine characters in the MTV young adult series *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017). Masculine characters in *Teen Wolf* develop strong, muscular, eroticised bodies, and gain greater access to violence even as they reject this practice as a means of obtaining power. Conversely, supernatural feminine characters are disempowered by magic in ways that reinforce conservative ideas about the female body, femininity, and female sexuality. This is not to say that *Teen Wolf* unfalteringly promotes subversive masculinities and polices femininities; the text engages in a complex and ongoing ideological struggle over gender normativity and transgression. This interplay is constant throughout *Teen Wolf*, and by analysing how magic operates upon masculine and feminine subjects, we reveal the complex and often contradictory meanings that young audiences are invited to accept.

# CHASING CANON IN J. K. ROWLING'S WIZARDING WORLD: TOWARDS A POETICS OF RECEPTION OF TRANSMEDIA STORYWORLDS

Katarina O'Dette

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Are inconsistencies among texts in a transmedia franchise relevant to academics, particularly those interested in textual analysis? Is the question of what constitutes a franchise's canon solely of interest to fans? As a storyworld extends from its original medium into new media, the expansion can lead to

changes from the source material that conflict with other texts in the franchise. The increasing popularity of transmedia franchises raises the question of how and why canon matters to a franchise like J. K. Rowling's Wizarding World: a question particularly crucial to scholars of Fantastika genres, as most major transmedia franchises fall under the heading of one or more of these genres.

Issues of canon are normally discussed by adaptation and comparative media studies, which focus on differences between media, or by transmedia and fan studies, which focus on canon's sociological impact. Most scholars interested in textual analysis focus on one text or series, ignoring the majority of the franchise's storyworld and rarely engaging with the complicated matter of canon. Doing so ignores how transmedia franchises are intended to be read and can undermine the understanding of these texts.

By putting the forty-eight texts of the Wizarding World franchise into conversation with theories on transmedia, fandom, storyworlds, and worldbuilding, this paper examines the benefit of engaging with questions of canon. By contrasting Rowling's relationship to canon with the fandom's (as depicted in the Harry Potter Wiki's canon tier system), the paper presents an account of how the Wizarding World relates to varying notions of canon and suggests methods that scholars can use to address canon inconsistencies. These transmedia-aware scholars will treat the storyworld as a text worthy of study in and of itself, understanding that engaging with canon may be vital to maintaining a relevant relationship with the texts of Fantastika transmedia franchises.

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# **EDITORIALS**

#### **FANTASTIKA'S ONEIROCRITICON**

#### Adam Roberts

"Tired of the old descriptions of the world" Wallace Stevens, "The Latest Freed Man"

If we take Fantastika to be a mode of mimesis to which the shaping force of the imagination has been applied – take it, in other words, as stories and images that leaven the limitations of 'reality' with the imaginative extrapolation from the known, or more forcefully as reality filtered through unprecedented novums – then it seems to me we are in effect bracketing Science Fiction (SF) and Fantasy with dreams. We experience the world awake in one way, and we experience it in a different, more fantastic way in our dreams.

Mainstream novels and films aim to reproduce the worlds, but SF and Fantasy novels and films aim to represent it without reproducing it, and this entails a formal newness as well as a newness on the level of content. What makes George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) a realist rather than a fantastical novel is more than just the (regrettable, some might say) absence within its text of spaceships and robots; it is the stylistic and representational idiom of the story's aesthetic, the daylit clarity of its moral vision. We may in effect live *Middlemarch*, or an updated version of the text, but we dream *Superman* – or "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream" (Harlan Elison, 1967). James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is a daytime book, and there would be no utility in describing it as Fantastika. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is a night-time book and it is Fantasy through-and-through, even down to the level of its individual words. Perhaps this is why so much SF takes place in outer-space, under those black and starlit skies.

We might go further, and specifically align mimetic fiction with memory and Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) with dreams. Without dreams the mind breaks down, as CIA sleep-deprivation torture has demonstrated, and without the cultural fantastic of SFF and magical realism, the collective consciousness would go mad. In other words, to say this is to make a case for the *necessity* of Fantastika. But what might it mean to describe SF and Fantasy as the dreamwork of fiction as such?

If we bring it down to the individual, psychological level, fantasies (such as daydreams, yearnings, and the more carefully worked-through hopes for the future) and dreams have this in common: they are both about desire. And the curious thing about desire is that it is most effectively articulated by what obstructs it than what enables it. We moon over the man, or woman, we can't get more intensely than the eager companion; we obsess over what is denied to us and barely notice what is freely available. This is why there are so many more (and more satisfying) dystopias written than utopias. Story itself depends upon the friction of desire's denial. After all, there's nothing interesting to say about Superman until Kryptonite enters the picture. No obstacle, no conflict; no conflict, no drama and therefore no story.

We all know that dreams feel simultaneously like life and unlike it. Some of the things that anchor

lived experience are more loosely conceived of in our dreamworlds: causation, for example, or inhibition, and perhaps even things like gravity. Other features of real life are intensified in dreams, especially on the level of affect. I don't know about you, but I personally have felt more intensely in dreams, particularly felt more anxious, and more uninhibitedly desirous, in dreams than I ever have in real life. It's not unrelated that, though I love mimetic literature plenty, I love SF and Fantasy more intensely. To appropriate the language of the lovestruck teen: Fantastika? It's *dreamy*.

Dreams translate experience into their own, weird, disturbing, beautiful idiom. Similarly, Fantastika translates reality into its new and non-mimetic language. We might wonder what it tells us about the original language of reality that we are so much more enthralled by these manifold translations of it into a different language. But to put the question this way risks returning to the old libel on Fantastika, that it is nothing more than a mode of escapism. It may be true, as Pat Cadigan has argued, that there's less wrong with escapism that is commonly supposed ("who opposes escape?" is her pithy way of framing the issue: "jailers, that's who") – but nonetheless I've always been more interested in the ways SF and Fantasy engage with the real world than the ways in which they evade it. And the absolute necessity of dreams to psychological wellbeing indicate just how centrally the oneiroliteratures of SF and Fantasy engage with the real world. The converse may also be true: that paradigm of notional mimesis, the rolling news channel, is more psychologically harmful than anything. If you don't believe me then try going a week without checking the national and international news at all. You'll feel better, believe me.

Unlike art, criticism can never say more than language does, and a critical language that aims for a sort of metamimesis – a pseudo-scientific precision, a notionally systematic accuracy – is always going to miss the one thing that really defines the genre: the moment of inarticulable enchantment, the twist of superlinguistic sense-of-wonder. We might say: it is precisely this enigmatic supplement to the quotidian that is the *point* of Fantastika. Estranging reality is a way of falling back in love with it, just as a couple in a long-term relationship might break their routine and go on a surprise holiday to rekindle their romance. SF is the honeymoon period of reality, we might say: we love it not because it removes us from reality, but because it allows us to return to reality refreshed. The ability to estrange the world without simply negating it is the great skill of the best Fantastika.

What I would like to do, if I had time (and more space than I have here) is to take this thesis seriously: properly to read SF and Fantasy texts as expressions of this fundamentally dream logic – that is, as works that refract the limitations of reality through the shaping forces of the affective imagination. Freud famously said that "the alternative 'either-or' cannot be expressed in dreams in any way whatever" (316) and that does seem to me true of science fiction and fantasy, modes more often and more starkly polarised in the reception than any other. What, as Anthony Burgess's Alex says in A Clockwork Orange (1962), is it to be, then? Is it to be Hard SF or Soft SF, right-wing authoritarian respect-the-laws-of-physics stories or stories of diversity and encountering alien difference? Nostalgia or futurism? Outer space or inner? A variety of practical engineering or a quasimagical fable? Myth or science? Are our aliens hideous monsters out to destroy us or gentle visitors come to uplift us? Can we pride ourselves in our adherence to the laws of physics and still zip between stars faster than light? These either-ors become, in Freud's sense, unworkable in the actual experience of genre, where I find I can love Robert Heinlein as much as Ursula Le Guin, Finnegans Wake as much as Robert Howard's Conan,

Richard Wagner's *Ring* (1876) as much as Joanna Russ's The *Female Man* (1975). Fantastika is, precisely, that beautiful ambiguity. We are such stuff, we lovers of Fantastika, as dreams are made on.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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# "AND I BECAME A LEGEND": STORYTELLING, STAR WARS AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Andrew Tate

In the final shots of *Return of the Jedi* (1983), Luke Skywalker turns away from the shimmering, smiling ghostly shapes of his late father, Anakin, and two mentors, Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi, to join his friends in celebrating the end of the Empire. The film's climactic sequence – revised by George Lucas for the 1997 "Special Edition" cinema re-release and again for the DVD versions – emphasises liberation, joy, and peace. Luke's idealism is rewarded, the past redeemed, tyranny defeated and, one suspects, our heroes now have little more to concern them than a big space booze hangover. However, the 35 years since the cathartic conclusion of the original trilogy have been more conflicted for the *Star Wars* universe, both on and off screen. Lucas' prequel trilogy (1999-2005), tracing Anakin's seduction by the dark side and eventual rebirth as Darth Vader, was a commercial triumph but widely panned by critics and, perhaps more significantly, intensely disliked by many fans of the earlier movies. The multibillion dollar sale of Lucasfilm to Disney in 2012 prompted simultaneous excitement at the prospect of new films and pessimism about the direction they would take under the auspices of such a massive corporate entity.

In December 2015, after 32 years, three prequels, and many spin-off comics, novels, games, action figures, chocolate treats, and tasteful t-shirts, Star Wars fans were finally reunited with Luke. Yet this reunion, deferred to the final few shots of JJ Abrams' The Force Awakens, is not what most spectators might have anticipated. For one thing, Luke only appears on screen for a matter of seconds. Indeed, the whole film is predicated on his absence and this seventh episode in the saga might have been named Looking for Luke. The great hero, a man whose story was so potent that young characters believed he was no more than a myth, has vanished and done everything possible to hide his whereabouts. In The Force Awakens, Luke neither speaks nor saves the day; heavens, he doesn't even use the force to make anything float or to sneak droids past easily duped Imperial minions. Audiences were left with a very odd cliff hanger, conveniently filmed on the cliffs of Skellig Michael, a remote island in the Atlantic that was once home to a monastic order, as Rey, a new contender on a hero's journey of her own, offers the ageing warrior his long lost lightsaber, "an elegant weapon," as Ben Kenobi once dubbed it, "for a more civilized age" (A New Hope). Online speculation about what would happen next was vivid in the two years between Abrams' film and its successor. Will Luke grasp the lost magical object and save the universe again? Rian Johnson's The Last Jedi (2017) restages the scene precisely but cleverly defers it until other narratives are underway. This deliberately anti-climactic and near comic scene plays against expectation. The twenty-first-century version of Luke cuts a very different figure from the optimistic young rebel last seen on the forest moon of Endor. He looks more like a cross between Gandalf and Viggo Mortensen's nameless survivor of the apocalypse in The Road (2009) than a potential leader of the rebellion. In retreating to a wild island on an apparently secret planet, he has become a kind of galactic Thoreau (perhaps "the mass of [Jedi] lead lives of quiet desperation"), rejecting the demands and illusions of civilization. He is a man in flight from the violence of war but, more poignantly, from himself and his own history.

Luke's response to Rey's offer of his old lightsaber, a near sacred relic in this universe, is to casually toss it away. The sequences on this hidden, inhospitable ocean-dominated planet have a self-conscious quality but one that is tonally very different to glib postmodern pastiche. When Luke sarcastically dismisses Rey's call to return to the fight he is, in effect, parodying the trilogy in which he completed a classic hero's journey: "You think I'm gonna walk out with a laser sword and take down the whole First Order?" Luke, in short, definitely does not want to be in a new *Star Wars* film. It is also an indication that Rian Johnson – and by extension the production company, led by Kathleen Kennedy, Lucas' successor – are more interested in the future of the narrative than in venerating its past.

Star Wars has always had a complicated relationship with the concept of history. Few technologies of memory appear on screen; books are almost entirely absent from the original trilogy; recorded messages, such as Leia's holographic plea to Obi Wan to help the rebellion in their hour of need, are often fragmented, partial, or damaged. A Jedi library is briefly visited in one of the prequels, but its records have been redacted. The Last Jedi introduces the sacred texts of the titular ancient religion, carefully preserved for millennia on the island, but it turns out that Luke hasn't actually read them ("Page-turners, they were not," guips a spectral Yoda on very witty form). Oral history takes precedence above the printed word in this universe and even that frequently proves to be unreliable: Obi-Wan is less than a stickler for the truth in telling Luke about the fate of his father; in turn, Luke is not wholly honest about the role that he may have played in Ben Solo's embrace of the dark side. Despite an apparent reliance on moral binaries, the films have continually been concerned with the difficulties of truth telling. Who do we trust? This ambivalence about history is also part of the narrative framing of the saga. The now universally recognized title card, included since the first episode was released in 1977, reminds us that we are about to witness a story that is set "long ago, in a galaxy far, far away." This mythic framing, which confers the logic of fairy tale, is complicated by the opening crawl ("It is a period of civil war [...]"), a device used throughout the saga, that suggests the specifics of historical narrative. The "galaxy far, far away," it is implied, is just as replete with political intrigue, ethical complexity, and bloody conflict as our own mundane reality. George Lucas' original film, superficially at least, seemed to be an escape from the depressing social realities of mid-1970s America: the death toll and defeat in Vietnam, chicanery in Washington culminating in Watergate, and a massive loss of faith in the political system. The film also drew heavily on the iconography of World War II movies, from the aerial dogfights above the Death Star to the Nazi style of the Empire. In some sense, this might explain the crossover success of a film ostensibly made for younger audiences: the evocation of a past enemy who embodied evil was perhaps easier than confronting the depressing social realities and ethical failures of the present. In *Blockbuster* (2004), Tom Shone expresses scepticism about the whole panoply of "Jungian readings, Taoist decodings, and perilous descents into [...] deep mythical structure" that are frequently used to read Star Wars (47). For Shone, the original film's most convincing interpretation or "mythic archetype" is "the one about driving really, really fast with a bunch of new friends" (47). Yet the sequence is explicitly set at a time of civil war and charts the fall of once great Republic, a bastion of democracy and apparent egalitarianism. In many ways, Lucas was every bit as plugged into anxieties about the fate of his own nation shortly after the bi-centenary of the declaration of independence as some of his more unambiquously politically oriented peers. Before he made Star Wars, Lucas was in contention to direct Apocalypse Now (1979), the cinematic re-working of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) that his friend and mentor Francis Ford Coppolla eventually made as a psychological, deeply mythic Vietnam war movie. The defeat in Vietnam certainly casts a long shadow and, as the trilogy progresses, Lucas returns to tropes of the

organic versus inorganic, military might versus tactical improvisation, order versus freedom. For all the flaws and problems with the prequel trilogy – and they have been explored exhaustively elsewhere, many, many times – they turn to the political and historical context in a big way. Lucas is at pains to show how the Republic and the Empire are mirror images of the same culture rather than distinct civilizations. *Attack of the Clones* (2002) – perhaps the worst named successful film of all time – concludes with one of the most striking tableau in the whole saga: manipulated by a Machiavellian leader, the Republic is persuaded of the need to great a grand army and, the once peaceful galactic state, embraces a vast body of cloned, regimented soldiers and an armada of military spaceships. Viewers of the original trilogy who are familiar with the sight of stormtroopers as signifiers of Imperial evil are reminded that they are simply a late legacy of a decadent, easily manipulated Republic. During the sequence, the Jedi look on, helpless but complicit and certainly not the great, wise warriors we first heard tales of in 1977.

Despite the idea that Star Wars represents a fairly simplistic moral vision, the politics of the films are complex and fraught with ambiguities. Will Brooker was one of the first scholars to approach Star Wars from a film studies perspective, to consider in detail its "cuts, compositions, costume, soundtrack and mise en scène" rather than to address it merely as a cultural phenomenon (11). He argues against the prevailing idea that the sequence is "a straightforward, simplistic morality tale and fairy story" and suggests, instead, that it is defined by a vivid clash of sensibilities. Lucas, he suggests, is simultaneously inspired by apparently contradictory aesthetics and practices: we might observe a thriving tension in his films between, for example, tradition and innovation, rules and experimentation, collaboration and individualism. These creative frictions make Star Wars more "problematic [...] and fascinating," he claims, "by the fact that Lucas is invested in, and sympathetic to, the coldly organised aesthetic of the Empire, as well as the raw improvisation of the Rebels" (11). For Rebecca Harrison, who reads The Last Jedi as a "fable for our post-truth times," Johnson's entry in the saga is a "contender for the most unambiguously political Star Wars movie yet." Harrison picks up a number of parallels between the parlous state of the galaxy far, far away and our own troubled, Trump-defined era, particularly the rise of right wing ideologies twinned with the waning influence of liberal, progressive values. In lieu of the promise of a new hope, she argues that episode VIII intimates little more than a "bleak optimism." The subplot in which Finn and Rose visit the decadent casino city of Canto Bight in search of a "slicer" (Star Wars argot for computer hacker) opens up one line of political critique. On the surface level, the scenes set in the casino, with its huge range of aliens and opulent design, echo both the cantina on Mos Eisley in which Luke and Ben meet Han and Chewie and elements of the most affluent worlds of the prequels. Yet Johnson uses this sequence to remind the audience that war generates profit and wealth is often supported by slave labour. Rose encourages Finn to see the injustices of their galaxy as embedded in a system that perpetuates wealth and exploitation of children and non-human creatures. This theme of exploitative labour and unprincipled actions is developed in the pair's encounter with the duplicitous hacker-for-hire played by Benicio del Toro who helps the pair for money but swiftly betrays them for a better price and his own survival.

The political drama of the new trilogy is informed by a subtext about the fate of idealism and the nature of story. In reflecting on the demise of the Jedi order he once revered, Luke sounds more like a jaded fan of the original trilogy who has watched the prequel sequence and discovered disappointing truths. The Jedi, he notes, "are romanticized, deified" but if the 'myth' is looked at more critically, history reveals an unholy trinity of "failure," "hypocrisy," and "hubris." "I became a legend," acknowledges Luke, with a degree of asperity

and he is not happy to embrace this kind of mythic status. He knows that he, like the Jedi before him, has failed to stop evil. The ethical anguish of *The Last Jedi* is connected to its exploration of spirituality. A jumble of religious ideas drawn from Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism have always been at play in the series. In the original film, Luke's nascent faith in the mysteries of the force, nurtured by Obi-Wan, is contrasted with Han's freewheeling, pragmatic scepticism and preference for guile and brute strength over "hokey religions." In this film, Luke regards himself as the end of a particular form of religious practice but continues to believe in the force. In some ways, he is figured as a kind of prophet who believes in the truth of their faith but is convinced that the religion itself has become hopelessly outmoded. Significantly, however, the sacred texts that he proposes to destroy – and which Yoda seems to allow to burn in their tree-like temple – are seen at the end of the film aboard the Millennium Falcon, presumably appropriated by Rey. In an interview with *Empire*, Johnson gives particular focus to the spiritual dimension of the film and Luke's apparent loss of faith: "The universe has put its faith in its false god of the Jedi and they need to forget the religion so they can get back to god, that light can rise from a worthier source."

Zoe Williams observes that in Lucas' original film, the "Jedi ideology is meritocratic"; it is figured by Obi-Wan as a matter of discipline, empathy, and selflessness. By *The Return of the Jedi* (1983), however, "the hereditary aspect" is firmly established: Luke and Leia are potential saviours of the galaxy because of their powerful, force-sensitive lineage (2015). Abrams and Johnson both play around with the significance of this lineage. Audiences are teased with the possibility that Rey – a force-sensitive desert dwelling orphan who also happens to be an instinctively talented pilot – might be part of the Skywalker dynasty. After the first film, this seemed inevitable to the point of predictability. Yet *The Last Jedi* subverts this anticipation: our belief that Rey is a literal inheritor of Luke and Leia's Jedi genes seems to be undermined by her encounter with her disillusioned mentor and in his former pupil. Kylo Ren/Ben Solo may be the latest in a line of villains in *Star Wars* who tell the truth more freely than the heroic Jedi. His claim that Rey's parents sold her into servitude in order to fund their own addictions is yet to be proved. However, Johnson certainly resists the easy and perhaps nostalgic idea that Rey is simply an avatar of Luke or Leia.

The Star Wars films have long been associated with what Fredric Jameson famously names "the nostalgia mode." In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1988), the Marxist scholar considers the proliferation of pastiche in an era "in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible" (1965). In film, this manifest in narratives that evoke a lost past – Jameson notes the French term, la mode retro – such as Lucas' breakthrough rites of passage movie American Graffiti (1973) which endeavours "to recapture all the atmosphere of and stylistic peculiarities of the 1950s United States," though it is set in 1963. Star Wars, he argues, is also part of this nostalgia trip even though it does not present a picture of a lived, historical past. More significantly, it evokes the pattern, style and mood of adventure serials of the 1950s such as Buck Rogers and is "metonymically a historical or nostalgia film." In this sense, Star Wars, with its emphasis on quest, heroism and quixotic exploits, becomes a pastiche of a lost form and, in Jameson's terms, "satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again" (1966). In the post-Disney era, Star Wars displays a much more ambivalent attitude to nostalgia: indeed, I would argue that the recent films have both exploited and resisted this form of yearning for the past. One of the most common criticisms of The Force Awakens – a film that was generally so well reviewed you could hear an audible sigh of relief across the galaxy – is that it so reverent to the original trilogy that it plays things too safely. From production design (mildly modish takes

on the classic stormtrooper armour and X-Wing fighters) and landscapes (the desert environment of Jakku is remarkably similar to Luke Skywalker's home planet, Tatooine) to the pattern of the plot, Abrams did not stray far from the visual poetry of the original trilogy. This slightly conservative, back-to-basics approach might have been shaped by the widespread antipathy for the prequels. Nostalgia – literally homesickness, a longing for home – is part of the narrative: Rey longs to be reunited with the family she cannot quite remember; Finn is in search of a secure home away from the fascist organization which he previously served; and the characters from the original trilogy are, we discover, displaced and itinerant. In one of the most memorable scenes, co-opted for the trailer, Han Solo walks back into his old ship, the Millennium Falcon, and with a melancholy grin says: "Chewie, we're home." This moment is particularly resonant for an audience that grew up with the films – it is a homecoming for them as well as the old crew of the ship.

The Last Jedi, in particular, offers a critique of two kinds of response to the past. Kylo Ren embodies what Svetlana Boym names "restorative nostalgia" (41). His urgent desire to resurrect a defunct political dispensation, one defined by violently enforced hierarchies and ritualistic military regalia, is an analogue of real world fascism. Ren reveres the achievement and legend of his grandfather, Darth Vader, to the extent that he models his own appearance, including a voice distorting mask, on the late Sith lord. In The Force Awakens he even prays to the charred, twisted remains of Vader's helmet. Although in The Last Jedi he urges Rey to "[1] et the past die" and, in more violent mode, "kill it if you have to," it's clear that he is deeply and dangerously fixated on the reactionary values of the Empire that his grandfather served. He even re-enacts, consciously or otherwise, Vader's murder of the Ben Kenobi – the man for whom he was named – by killing his own father. Luke, by contrast, might be associated with what Boym names "reflective nostalgia" (49ff). He is overwhelmed with melancholy, full of regret for missed opportunities and lost friends. When Rey first encounters Luke, he has abandoned the hope of the rebellion and, oddly, is now more of a loner than Han Solo. In fact, the whole sequence on Ach-To is an echo of the sojourn on Dagobah in The Empire Strikes Back (1980): in both films, a young seeker, recently bereaved, seeks out a hidden Jedi Master and asks for their help and training; in both cases, the aspiring student is rebuffed by a disillusioned, somewhat irritable individual who seems deeply unhappy to be found. In Empire, Luke was the young pilgrim, Yoda the reluctant teacher.

The Last Jedi does not, of course, end in despair. Luke returns to the fray and is briefly reunited with his sister in a scene that is doubly heart-breaking because of the death of Carrie Fisher in December 2016. The revelation that this reappearance, witnessed by many of the remaining resistance fighters, is a powerful act of imaginative projection frustrated some fans. His defeat of Kylo Ren, whose anger and arrogance he manipulates with wit and new-found guile, is enacted without a physical return to violence. In one sense, he overcomes his melancholia and embraces the mythic version of Luke: the one that Rey had heard about as a lonely child, living in the wreckage of the war he once fought in on a planet that very much resembled his own native world, and the myth that cinema audiences had embraced almost 40 years ago. His ostensible death after the psychological and spiritual effort of this spectral fight is another echo of the original film.

The very end of the film, after a classic shot of the remaining heroes – now a tiny remnant of the resistance – moves away, for the first time in the saga's history, from focusing on the Skywalkers. The last shot returns to Canto Bight and the young slaves who we briefly encountered during Rose and Finn's disastrous visit. The children are re-enacting Luke's audacious defiance of the First Order with improvised action figures and, it is

suggested, at least one may be developing force sensitivity. Luke's story and his prophecy are perhaps coming true: the light of the force belongs to all, it is certainly not a matter of aristocratic inheritance. The moment acknowledges the creativity of young fans, but it also embraces the idea that stories have the potential to be a powerful force for change and, in particular, is a reminder that capitulation to apparently irresistible tyranny is not inevitable.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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#### A CASE OF ARTIFICIAL JOI: BLADE RUNNER 2049

#### Brian Baker

How do we get beyond *Blade Runner*? The imagination of the future city in Ridley Scott's film (1982, 1992, 2007) has been so influential that it is now difficult to think of how urban spaces might develop without recourse to *Blade Runner*'s ziggurats, mist-haloed neon, retrofitted pipes, billboards and flying cars – all at night. In films, in video games, in artwork and in 'environments' – such as this by Jordan Clarry that popped up on my Twitter timeline as I was preparing this piece (<a href="https://jordanclarry.artstation.com/projects/NEG5P">https://jordanclarry.artstation.com/projects/NEG5P</a>) – the visual influence of the film is pervasive. A further question might be: how do we get past the beginning of the 1980s, in science fiction film terms? Ridley Scott's other massively popular film, *Alien* (1979) has had an extremely influential effect on how the interiors of spaceships are now presented, particularly as work environments in a more 'realistic' vein – everything from 2010 (1984) to *Sunshine* (2007) to *Interstellar* (2014) has a claustrophobic, gunmetal, cluttered visual space as the interior of each particular ship. And of course, *Alien* has recently spawned two further sequels/ prequels. A third film, *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1982), again with a recent sequel, is equally influential on post-apocalyptic visions of a post-peak oil future, with its junkyard aesthetic and high-octane narrative. And the influence of *Star Wars* (1977), which mixes the Flash Gordon aesthetic of the Empire with the retrofitted, used and dirty worlds of ordinary life and the rebel alliance, is at once everywhere and so recognisable that direct imitation and indirect influence are difficult to unpick.

Recently, Lancaster University appointed Benoît Peeters as Professor of Graphic Fiction and Comic Art. Peeters is best known for his work with François Schuiten on the *Obscure Cities* series of books, each of which focus on a different imaginary city, drawing on a particular architectural style. In a recent talk he gave at Lancaster, Peeters described his work with Schuiten in terms of 'Euchronie,' not Utopia but the imagination of different kinds of urban space. The first of these books, *Les murailles de Samaris* (1983, published in a new English translation as *Samaris* by IDW in 2017) features a young bureaucrat sent from the city of Xhystos to Samaris on a mission of research. Once there, he comes to realise that the entire city he encounters has been fabricated for his benefit; he never actually encounters the 'real' Samaris, only a series of mobile sets and environments. First published the year after *Blade Runner* was released, *Samaris* owes little to this mode of future-noir city: instead, the cities of Xhystos and Samaris are grand, monumental, technological, spectacular in their modernity. While neither may be a place one wants to live in, there is a kind of *plaisir* built in to their fabric. Unlike Los Angeles 2019, whose futuristic ziggurats are bound up with surveillance and violence and the operations of power, the very aesthetic beauty of Xhystos and Samaris, as rendered by the exquisite artwork of Schuiten, immerses the reader in a deeply pleasurable imagined world. Perhaps we cannot get beyond the world of *Blade Runner*, but to dream a different future, we have to go sideways from it.

Blade Runner has also loomed large in critical work about science fiction cinema, with a multitude of journal essays, dedicated collections such as Judith P. Kerman's Retrofitting Blade Runner (1991) and Will Brooker's The Blade Runner Experience (2005), books such as Paul M. Sammon's Future Noir (1997/2017) and Scott Bukatman's Blade Runner (1997), and chapters in seminal collections of essays on sf cinema Alien Zone

(1992) and Alien Zone II (1999, both edited by Annette Kuhn). Both conterminous with and deeply influential on the terms of critical debates about postmodernism, Blade Runner became the site of critical analyses of human/artificial ontologies, gender, cultural hybridity, generic hybridity, and the spaces of actual and fictional/generic cities. Such a rich text for analysis was of course only enhanced by its production and distribution history: the theatrical release cut of 1982, with Harrison's Ford's voice-over and the extra footage borrowed from The Shining's cutting-room floor; the 1992 'Director's Cut,' with the unicorn dream taken from Legend (1985) and the excision of both voice-over and revised ending; and the 2007 'Final Cut,' where Scott returned to tinker with some CGI and altered (very significantly) a particular line of dialogue. It is the status of Rick Deckard, the bounty hunter or 'blade runner' played by Ford, which has occupied much of the popular debate about the film: was he human or replicant? While in the 1982 version, it is almost certain that Deckard is a human, in the Director' Cut and Final Cut, it is probably most accurate to read him as a replicant – and in the documentary film On The Edge of Blade Runner (2000), Ridley Scott himself avers that Deckard was indeed a replicant.

How, then, do we read *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve and released in 2017, in which Ford reprises his role as Deckard, not as protagonist but as supporting character found by the replicant blade runner Joe/ K (Ryan Gosling) in Las Vegas, with Deckard a grumpy an old man by now? Deckard clearly hasn't reached the end of his life span, quite yet, and as the father of a miraculous replicant/human hybrid baby (the central idea of the film), is clearly marked as human. Therefore, we can see *Blade Runner 2049* not as a 'sequel to *Blade Runner'* but as a sequel to a particular version of *Blade Runner*, the 1982 theatrical release, significantly altering the critical history of what has been seen as the *authentic* version of the film (the Director's Cut/ Final cut versions). Personally, I prefer the 1992/2007 versions, and think the film makes a lot more sense if Deckard is a replicant, whose internalisation of a master/ slave worldview is irrevocably altered when Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) undoes Deckard's fatal misrecognition of his own ontological status. Only when Deckard understands that "that's what it is to be a slave" can he understand his own artificial nature and be 'free' – whatever that might mean and entail.

Blade Runner 2049 is not the first 'sequel' to Scott's film, in whatever version. K.W. Jeter, in three novels – The Edge of Human (1995), Replicant Night (1996) and Eye and Talon (2000) – continued the narrative of Deckard and other characters, often with quite self-reflective effects (the film of Blade Runner becomes an artefact or document within the world of the novels, a motif taken up by Blade Runner 2049). Prior to the release of the 2017 film, as 'teasers' but also as short films that expand the Blade Runner world, three short films were released – Blackout 2022 (Shinichiro Watanabe), 2036: Nexus Dawn (Luke Scott) and 2048: Nowhere to Run (Luke Scott) – which interpolate between the events of the 1982 film and Blade Runner 2049. While nowhere near approaching the massive storytelling worlds of Star Wars or Star Trek, all of these texts, when taken together (along with Philip K. Dick's source novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1982) and the 1998 'sidequel' film Soldier) can be said to constitute a kind of 'expanded' or 'alternate' Blade Runner universe, where the texts tell different versions of the human-android/replicant-blade runner narrative.

Blade Runner 2049 is both a recapitulation of, and a writing back to, the original film. Ryan Gosling, as the replicant blade runner K (who renames himself Joe, to get the Kafka-esque combination Joe K) operates as a kind of emotional nullity for almost the entirety of the film, his performance a blankness onto which the motivations and desires of others can be projected. (There is an interesting scene where Joe K's female boss –

Robin Wright, sporting a Zhora-style gelled hairstyle – implicitly sexually propositions him, asking what would happen if she finishes a bottle of whiskey while talking to him in his minimal apartment; he declines to engage.) In fact, there are many virtual projections in the film, suggesting a play on materiality: Ana de Armas, as Joe K's spectral girlfriend Joi; the same actress, naked, giant-sized later in the film; Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, and Sinatra as performing holograms in Vegas. Gosling himself is a slight physical figure as a replicant, especially in relation to Hauer as Batty, or even Dave Bautista as Sapper Morton in the film's opening sequence, a Nexus-8 replicant who Gosling retires after a punishing fist-fight. In Blade Runner 2049, the real/ not-real binary is proliferated among many different kind of entities, making Deckard's later claim that "I know what's real" somewhat problematic. (To re-create Sean Young's performance as Rachael from the first film, who is 're-made' to tempt Deckard, Young's likeness was digitally superimposed on another actress, Loren Peta, in a cinematic trucage which (unusually) we are not meant to notice. Who, or what, is real here?) Jared Leto's Wallace, the villainous Tyrell-alike, is of a different materiality again: he is apparently made of cardboard, and like his replicants, is disposable – we never find out what happens to him.

Postmodernism, the frame across and around which much of the critical debate on Blade Runner was formed, often notes an economic and cultural shift from a dominant mode of production - the Fordist imperatives of industrial modernity - to one of reproduction, from Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle (1967), to Umberto Eco's interest in fakes, to Jean Baudrillard's simulacra, to Fredric Jameson's theorisation of the dominance of consumption and "the transformation of reality into images" (Jameson 125). Although Blade Runner is often seen as a postmodernist text, its emphasis is actually on production: of replicants, their legal and ontological status, and what happens when they 'go wrong' (that is to say, they refuse their programming and become autonomous). By comparison, Blade Runner 2049 concentrates on reproduction. Leto's Wallace, in a very strange scene, witnesses the 'birth' of a new female replicant, who falls from the ceiling of one of his building's stark rooms out of a giant glassine envelope. This replicant seems neither grown nor made but is instead delivered shrink-wrapped. The film rigorously brackets off production and labour and instead mystifies the genesis of the replicants: we don't even find the faux-scientific jargon that Tyrell and Batty shoot back-andforth in Blade Runner. Wallace complains that it takes too long to engineer each replicant, and he needs to find the secret of biological reproduction to engender the race of slaves needed for human beings to colonise the stars: "I cannot breed them," he says. "God knows I have tried." Production isn't enough. What he really wants is to capture Tyrell's "final trick - procreation." Disturbingly, he slashes the new-born female replicant across the belly - across the womb - while talking about "the dead space between the stars." The narrative novum of Blade Runner 2049 - that Rachael, whose bones are found buried on Sapper Morton's farm, and who has given miraculous birth to a child - places the 'miracle of birth' directly at the centre of the narrative, as both completely mystified and sentimentalised (the story resolves when father meets daughter, a family reunion) but also technologized and instrumentalised.

In this, Blade Runner 2049 is not unlike other recent sf films that present the body of the mother as a kind of problematic or disruptive natal technology. In Prometheus (2012), Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) is impregnated by an alien-DNA infected shipmate, and then takes to a medico-technological casket to self-extract the squid-like embryo, patching herself up with plaster and antiseptic spray. In Mad Max: Fury Road (2015), Furiosa (Charlize Theron) revolts against patriarchal rule of the warlord Immortan Joe to rescue five 'wives' (young fertile women), one of whom is very heavily pregnant. Perhaps most pertinently to Blade Runner 2049,

Children of Men (2006) presents a world of catastrophic human infertility, where the prospective (miraculous) birth of a new child precipitates conflict over the political and biological changes this event might denote. The protagonist of Children of Men, Theo Faron (played with Gosling-like weary blankness by Clive Owen) has to accompany the pregnant mother Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) on a journey to find a kind of sanctuary from those who would manipulate and exploit her and the child. Throughout this film, Faron acts as a symbolic and literal male midwife, eventually bringing both the child and a new world into being by the end of the film. Just as in Blade Runner 2049, the protagonist cannot be part of the world that he helps bring into being: both Faron and Joe K expire quietly at the film's end, their work having been completed. For a mode of sf film concerned with reproduction and the body of the mother, the centrality of a male protagonist is not without irony.

In Blade Runner 2049, the female body is much on display. I have already noted the several versions of Joi; there is Mariette, the replicant sex-worker (Mackenzie Davis), a dead ringer for Darryl Hannah's Pris, with pink-blonde hair; the naked replicant killed by Wallace; the 'fake' Rachael; giant naked female sculptures in the deserted, sand-entombed Las Vegas; and there is Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), Wallace's super-replicant 'Angel' (PAV fixer/ assassin) who becomes Joe K's antagonist, with another fist-fight between them at the end of the film. All are subject to spectacle and the gaze in some form or other, from simple objects of male desire to Hoeks' action-body in dynamic physical movement (a re-gendered version of what Linda Mizejewski, in the chapter "Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces" in the aforementioned collection Alien Zone II, identified as a particular special effect of spectacle sf cinema). In this, Blade Runner 2049 itself struggles to get beyond the typical codings of mainstream genre film.

One of the most curious scenes in *Blade Runner 2049* is when Joe K pilots his 'spinner' (the flying police car) outside of the city limits of Los Angeles to the environs of San Diego, which is now a vast landfill site sparsely populated by some highly generic and predatory bands of scavengers – *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior* once more. Downed by their primitive technologies, Joe makes his way to what is revealed to be an orphanage. In what is bound up with his own (implanted) memories, Joe comes across a large retrofitted shelter containing a host of young children, who are put to work by an overseer. Initially, this overseer misunderstands Joe's mission: he thinks Joe wants to 'buy' a child, presumably for some form of labour. It's a particularly odd scene because it's one of the few in both films that actually shows labour on screen. (The others are Chew's workshop in *Blade Runner*, and Sapper Morton's farm at the beginning of *2049*.) What are the children doing? Where do they come from? Wallace's lament is that he can't create the numbers of replicants quickly enough to enable humanity to colonise the stars, and yet here we see a large group of children inhabiting a similar mode of bare life, engaged in primitive semi-skilled labour. Wallace bemoans the fact that "we lost our stomach for slaves [...] unless engineered," so then what are these children? Are they not slaves of some kind? What will happen to them? If there is excess labour expelled to the city's margins in this world, what need is there of artificial subjects?

In engaging a Pinocchio-like rhetoric in relation to Joe (Joi tells him that he is a "real boy now"), just as did Spielberg's AI (2001) in framing the relation between human and artificial life, Blade Runner 2049 undoes the fatal complication and implication of human and replicant that we find in the 1992 and 2007 versions of Blade Runner. Batty doesn't want to be 'real': he wants "more life, fucker" (or "father," as the Final Cut amends the line). The entire final speech that Hauer wrote for Batty's death – "I've seen things you people wouldn't

believe" – is predicated on a recognition of difference as well as similarity. I remember reading an American sf magazine's review of the 1982 version at the time of the film's release, in which the reviewer – praising the film – suggested that in saving Deckard, Batty 'becomes human'; but this only works for the 1982 version. For the *Director's Cut* and *Final Cut*, the polarity is reversed: in saving Deckard, Batty ensures that Deckard becomes replicant. The 1982 version reinstates the human-replicant binary as a hierarchy; the later versions undo this and suggest that replicant life isn't just bare life. To be human is no great thing, after all.

For Blade Runner 2049, the crucial role in the narrative of the 'miraculous' child, now grown into an adult (yet 'delivered' to us an as an audience and to her father by Joe K, who midwives the entire narrative) suggests another kind of implication of human and replicant, an equivalence or even identicality confirmed by the promise of biological reproduction. And yet this daughter is no new Madonna, even if Rachael has been transformed into one (albeit offstage): the daughter is presented as somehow enfeebled, damaged, isolated, hardly the mother of a new ontological dream of renewed being. Cannily, the daughter is no new Eve, and Joe K is ultimately no new Adam – the reconciliation between father and daughter offers no renewed innocence, no new Eden, in the promise of a reproductive future. So that cliché is at least avoided. And meanwhile Jared Leto's Wallace waits somewhere in narrative limbo.

My sense, then, of 2049 is that it does not, and cannot 'get beyond' Blade Runner, in the imagination of a world 30 years later, or in the relations between human and non-human life the first film constructed. In effect, Blade Runner 2049 is a kind of shaggy-dog story (or, in John Clute's humorous inversion in reviewing some James Blish novels in New Worlds, a "shaggy-God" story (Clute 338)) in which we're no further forward at the end of film than we were at the beginning. Upon Joe's expiration, the tinkling theme from Batty's "tears in rain" speech appear on the soundtrack, as an emotional cue and invitation to see this as a similar kind of redemption, but it's a cheap trick. What we have instead is a kind of faded photocopy of the denouement of the first film, with the blankness of Gosling at last available as a screen for us, the audience, to project our own feelings about Blade Runner, to give it a resonance and 'meaning' I'm not really sure it deserves, as much as I might like it to. Here, the 'sequel' relies on the emotional punch and depth of the first film to articulate its own emotional trajectory. It's inevitably a bit second-hand. It trades upon the audience's memories (implants) of their experience of the first film to achieve its own closure. 2049 is, in a sense, trapped by the greatness of the film it attempts to extend, revisit and revise. But finally, I feel, Blade Runner 2049 can't get beyond Blade Runner because I can't get beyond it; and, perhaps, in the end, I don't want to.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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# **ARTICLES**

# POST-CYBERPUNK AND THE POTENTIAL ONTOLOGICAL EMANCIPATION OF CYBERSPATIAL EDUCATION IN NEAL STEPHENSON'S THE DIAMOND AGE

Michael Kvamme-O'Brien

Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995) is a Science Fiction novel inspired by the Cyberpunk genre. It is set in a future post-national world of competing ethnic enclaves separated by fragmented ideological interests. Molecular nanotechnology has transformed society, allowing for the creation of matter compilers which construct material goods using energy and molecules supplied by the Feed, in turn supplied by the Source. The Source is controlled by the Neo-Victorians in Atlantis. A potential utopian alternative to the Feed, the Seed, is dreamt up by Neo-Victorian engineer Hackworth. If built it would provide unlimited resources. The Seed's designs greatly interest the Chinese, who have suffered under Neo-Victorian hegemony. The novel's protagonist, Nell, lives in the Leased Territories, an enclave zone between Atlantis and Shanghai. Her home environment is deadly, her mother abusive. Nell eventually runs away, journeying through various enclaves. She finds a nanotechnological book called the Primer which tells her educational stories about "Princess Nell." Through the Primer's education, Nell becomes an elite Neo-Victorian gentlewoman, and leads an army of Chinese girls to protect the material interests of the Neo-Victorians.

The novel borrows some of Cyberpunk's genre-specific motifs as defined by Brian McHale in Constructing Postmodernism (1992), like using cyberspace as an embedded "microworld" and using a dystopian future setting (249). As in other Cyberpunk texts, cyberspace offers the protagonist a way to transcend harsh social conditions. The novel is marketed as 'Post-Cyberpunk,' and while the 'Post' implies movement beyond certain genre-specific limitations of Cyberpunk, the label is loosely defined. This article outlines the ontological status of the 'Post' of Post-Cyberpunk as it appears in The Diamond Age by extending and adapting McHale's definition of Cyberpunk, while placing the text within Northrop Frye's Romantic framework. The capitalised terms 'Romantic/ism' will be used to refer to Frye's definition of Romanticism as a new mythology, and the lower case 'romance' to imply the worldness of medieval romance, which Frye argues is just one manifestation of long-duration Romanticism.

#### **Defining Post-Cyberpunk**

In Constructing Postmodernism, McHale suggests Cyberpunk contains motifs of "worldness" which connect it to "mainstream postmodernist fiction" (247). These are "motifs of the centrifugal self; motifs of death, and the motifs of death both individual and collective" (247). The Diamond Age adopts the Cyberpunk

motifs of worldness and the centrifugal self but subverts those of death. "Worldness" for McHale is how postmodern fiction represents "the normally invisible horizons of world," and how textual settings become self-reflexive "means of exploring ontology in fiction" (247). Stephenson's use of microworlds in the form of ethnic enclaves is an example of this type of worldness. The centrifugal self of Cyberpunk is the postmodern mode of representing selfhood in central characters that act to "undermine the model of the centred, centripetal self upon which modernist perspectivism rests" (260). Cyberpunk's postmodern centrifugal self is a subversion of the Modernist centripetal self, and can "be in two places at once, to occupy two different points of view" (261). In Cyberpunk this takes place in cyberspace: Nell's immersion in cyberspace using the Primer represents a postmodern ontological dissolution of self. Immersed in the Primer, Nell occupies two separate subject positions. Reading a narrative which is both a literal and magical foretelling of her life story allows Nell to become her own anti-material potentiality, Princess Nell.

Stephenson's subversion of Cyberpunk's death motif is what makes *The Diamond Age* Post-Cyberpunk. Its subversion of both personal and collective death is Romantic in its operation. In Cyberpunk, death is represented with characters being subjugated by powerful multinational "domination systems" (Stephenson, "Present and Future" 1). In *The Diamond Age*, life is represented by Nell becoming a leader, and by the utopian possibility of the Seed technology. The Seed could liberate the Chinese from Neo-Victorian hegemony by supplying unlimited resources. Subversion in *The Diamond Age* comes through the Primer permitting Nell to be in two places at once, which allows her to transcend her position in the world (a Cyberpunk motif), and the utopian possibility of the Seed which carries the potential to modify the entropic ontological status of the world (a Post-Cyberpunk motif).

#### Post-Cyberpunk, romance and Romanticism

As McHale argues in Constructing Postmodernism, Cyberpunk borrows the microworlds of medieval romance. McHale states Cyberpunk extends romance's "metaphorical use of enclosed spaces within the romance world: castles, enchanted forests, walled gardens and bowers" replicated as "domed space colonies, orbiting space-stations, subterranean cities" (248). McHale borrowed this notion of worldness from Fredric Jameson's "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre" (1975), which was itself based on Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (1957) and other critical writings. In Anatomy of Criticism, Frye defined Romantic worldness via reference to medieval and early modern texts like Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales (1387) and Spenser's The Faerie Queen (1590). Literature for Frye descends from mythology. He states, "At any given period of literature the conventions are enclosed within a total mythological structure, which may not be explicitly known to anyone, but is nevertheless present as a shaping principle" (5). In contrast to old mythologies which held that God was the only source of civilisation, Frye saw Romanticism as a "new mythology" recovering "the numinous power of nature" while expressing a "revolutionary attitude toward society, religion and personal life" (16-17). For Frye, medieval romance was just one component of this new myth of Romanticism. As this article shows, The Diamond Age adopts both the worldness of medieval romance, and the mythic dimensions of Frye's Romanticism. Stephenson's text can be considered part of Frye's new Romantic mythology because Nell's Primer recounts enchanting stories which recover the magical power of nature while instructing her how to develop a

revolutionary and self-transcending attitude towards her own regressive personal circumstances. Furthermore, Stephenson's use of the grotesque is a Romantic subversion of death which "bring(s) a fundamental principle of mythological thought into rational modes of perception" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* 187).

#### Narrative Operation

The Diamond Age's narrative structure closely resembles a bildungsroman. Its bildungsroman skeleton is augmented with elements of Jungian-inflected Magical Realism so as to inform the development of Nell from childhood to full maturity, on a Romantic quest from microworld to microworld. The use of Magical Realism and Jung's ideas are the elements of the text which bear the greatest emancipatory potential. Fredric Jameson has argued that romance for Frye is "a wish fulfilment or utopian fantasy, which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday reality" ("Magical Narratives" 138). To transform the everyday, Jameson and Frye contend, Romantic literature views the world in magical terms, using enchantment to overcome dark and sinister forces. Nell's primer is a Romantic device functioning to redefine her surrounding Cyberpunk dystopia in magical terms, so she can reconfigure it for her own benefit. Just as Frye suggests the quest romance has forms analogous to "the symbolic structures" of Jungian archetypal psychology, so too does Nell's Romantic device tell magical stories by mapping Jungian "universals onto the unique psychological terrain of one child" (Diamond 95). While the wider purpose of the Primer is Romantic, allowing Stephenson to present a material world in magical terms, the nanotechnological book inserts fabulous mise en abyme stories which penetrate The Diamond Age like magical realist interruptions. The Primer is a magical realist inclusion because it allows for "fabulous and fantastical events [...] in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of [an] objective realistic report" (Baldick, "magic realism"), and the stories the Primer tells are magical realist because they "reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folktale and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance" (Baldick).

Stephenson's dystopia is a post-national global society in which the "cultural logic of late capitalism" is the prevailing ideology (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1). Global society is constituted of groups of people with shared cultural values. These groups – The Han, the Neo-Victorians and the Nippon – are called "phyles." Each phyle has its own sovereign system of rules which filters down into cultural enclaves that constitute the populace of the world's major cities. Setting *The Diamond Age* in a neoliberal, post-national order of fragmented cultural groups enables Stephenson to satirise division and cultural relativism in the contemporary world order of global capitalism. However, Stephenson also appears to endorse it by supporting Nell's will-to-power. As a protagonist, Nell is efficiently integrated with the master-slave dialectic which characterises the ethical climate of *The Diamond Age*. Nell's choice to emancipate family over the Seed technology highlights her conservatism. The Seed should have liberated the Chinese from Neo-Victorian rule by allowing them to grow all the resources they need. This links Nell with the Republican ideology prevalent in America when the novel was written. As Kathleen McClancy notes: "Stephenson's novel echoes the rhetoric of the nineties in calling for a return to a Victorian model of domestic values and hierarchical social structures" ("Reclaiming the Subversive" 69). For McClancy these Victorian values were reflected in Republication governmental policy in

1994 where:

the domestic problems of the country, in particular the problems of the inner-city ghettos, were not considered to stem solely from the poverty of those ghettos; rather, the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family and the increasing moral disintegration of the country created those ghettos and encouraged that poverty (71)

Nell's biological family is a broken family and is the source of all Nell's problems. A return to Victorian values is Stephenson's remedy. Due to this endorsement of Victorian values, Stephenson's satire collapses back in on itself; his version of Post-Cyberpunk falls victim to the same materialism that Cyberpunk does. Nell's emancipated consciousness has limits. Nell ascends ontologically, intellectually, and politically. She does not transcend epistemologically or spiritually.

#### Satirical Cyberpunk Worldness: China, and Bud

Regarding worldness, McHale says that Cyberpunk "brings [...] microworlds [...] to the terrestrial surface and superimposes them on the current map of the world," arguing that "it is especially within these enclave and island microworlds that Cyberpunk SF returns to its distant historical roots in [...] romance world-spaces" (248-249). He argues that in Cyberpunk such as Walter Jon Williams's Hardwired (1986), "the United States has [...] disintegrated into self-contained, warring enclaves sustained by disparate and competing ideologies and epistemologies" (249). The division between the phyles of the Chinese, the Neo-Victorians, and the Japanese in *The Diamond Age* mirrors this disintegration. These divisions satirise "the multiple, competing subuniverses [...] of meaning into which complex postmodern societies have diversified" (249). Early in *The Diamond Age*, Stephenson subverts Cyberpunk's death motif through the caricature figure Bud. Bud is Nell's biological father and a violent criminal. He is a technologically augmented idiot whose hilariously self-defeating behaviour is contrasted with Nell's intelligence. By dropping the alienated Cyberpunk caricature Bud into a divided dystopia, Stephenson parodies Cyberpunk's failure to overthrow oppression in the real world. Bud's idiocy is contrasted to Nell's sagacity. Nell is an adaptive Post-Cyberpunk who learns to use will-to-power properly through the Primer.

Stephenson uses Bud to highlight both the postmodern "crisis of historicity" and Cyberpunk's impotence in mapping out a solution (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 22). For Jameson, the crisis of historicity is that history resists interpretation. This is because when we write history, we modify it. Jameson argues:

If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity [...] to organise its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory (25)

Jameson's phrase "heaps of fragments" is prophetic in describing what Bud becomes when he attempts to map cognitively the postmodern cultural landscape of The Diamond Age. Bud epitomises Cyberpunk's inability to organise past and future into a coherent cosmology. In a section of the novel highlighting both Stephenson's ridicule of multicultural postmodernity and Cyberpunk's subversive impotence, Bud, the idiot-Cyberpunk caricature, foolishly maims one of the extremely powerful Ashanti tribe using his new skullcannon (Diamond 25). Bud believes his skull-cannon makes him powerful too, but really it just acts as a phallic substitute, highlighting his idiotic impotence. In a satirical passage following Bud's pointless maiming of the Ashanti, Stephenson has Bud consider various phyles for physical protection. Because he has no phyle of his own, Bud enthusiastically appreciates that he should get one "real quick," before the Ashanti murder him quicker (25). Bud is "white trash," and realises that the Neo-Victorians "wouldn't take him in a million years" (25). Although he identifies with the Boers, he rejects them out of hand, "because the amount of church you had to attend was staggering" (25), choosing minor convenience over the protection of his life. In the end, he realises the communist Senderistas are a good fit because "they'd take anyone" (26). Their ideological and epistemological requirements are straightforward for a simpleton who can just "quote from the little red book as necessary" (26). Bud is trapped between the gaps of the social order. These gaps reflect the failure of 'humanity' to map its political oneness. However, just as Cyberpunk can be aware of its own subversive limits, so is Bud partially aware of his, shown by his recognition the Senderistas would take him despite his trashy nature.

Stephenson's depiction of Bud as an idiot epitomises the impotence of Cyberpunk protagonists with regards to subverting, escaping, and transcending their social conditions. Bud is sentenced to death by the Confucian Judge Fang for his senseless attack on the Ashanti. Fang invites Bud to take a walk on a "funeral pier," then obliterating him by detonating "microscopic explosives [...] in his bloodstream" (32-37). Bud's annihilation encapsulates Stephenson's intellectual transition from Cyberpunk to Post-Cyberpunk, his evolution from Snow Crash (1992) to The Diamond Age. In The Diamond Age Stephenson aims to create a coherent experience out of the past and future. By having Bud sign his own death warrant through misuse of his skull cannon, Stephenson indicates that the Cyberpunk genre is incapable of subversion through using technology alone. Alternatively, as Stephenson highlights with Nell, Cyberpunks can become powerful through learning the system, using educational technology to become Post-Cyberpunks. In Nell's case, it takes the guiding love of her mother figure Miranda to mentor her through cyberspatial education. Lovingly shown how to reconfigure the system for her own personal gain, Nell learns to dominate it. Bud is dead and so is Cyberpunk. The Post-Cyberpunk Nell lives on.

While in Cyberpunk technology never fully emancipates individuals, instead binding them to service to the world economic system, in *The Diamond Age* educational technology combined with love offers the Post-Cyberpunk Nell the opportunity to escape the predicament of Cyberpunks like Bud. Ultimately, however, the 'Post' of Post-Cyberpunk does not constitute total transcendence beyond Cyberpunk. In Stephenson's text, the term 'Post-Cyberpunk' signifies a privileged vantage point from the top of the political superstructure. This can be opposed to the term 'Cyberpunk,' which in Stephenson's texts describes the day-to-day alienation of disconnected characters living at odds with the system they inhabit.

#### Romance Roots: Nell's Home and Dickens

By launching Nell on a quest reminiscent of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Stephenson subverts Cyberpunk's death motif by framing the genre in Romantic terms. While stating that Cyberpunk maps microworlds onto the world's surface, McHale adds "Cyberpunk also returns to its romance roots through its use of wandering adventurer-heroes as a device for foregrounding its microworlds" (249). In *The Diamond Age*, Nell is "the wandering adventurer-hero," who after escaping an abusive domestic situation wanders freely "from microworld to microworld," and in so doing highlights "the differences among [micro]worlds" (249). This gives her the ability to witness "the normally invisible horizons of world," thereby providing her with a more reflexive view on the ontologies of her world than other characters in the narrative (247). Nell's journey through the phyles means that she sees the normally invisible horizons of surrounding material ontologies. Imaginary journeys through the worlds of the Primer give Nell the further advantage of witnessing the limits of the meta-level ontologies offered by this nanotechnological book. This worldness is Cyberpunk rather than Post-Cyberpunk. However, through using Magical Realism as the narrative mode of the Primer, Stephenson shows how Cyberpunk can evolve through the Romantic myth, to subvert the death motif and approach the terrain of Post-Cyberpunk.

Nell's use of the Primer allows her to be in two places at once. While Nell physically occupies the position of adventurer-hero in real life, Princess Nell in the Primer acts as an equivalent cyberspatial wanderer. In the Primer, Princess Nell mirrors McHale's pattern of a hero roaming "from castle to enchanted forest to cave, to bower to another castle" (249). In real life Nell takes inspiration from Princess Nell to visit various actual world micro-locations in her journey to maturity. While this type of cyberspatial device is not new to Cyberpunk, it is the Primer's educational use of allegory that inspires Nell to leave her home, which marks the beginning of Stephenson's subversion of Cyberpunk's death motif. It is partly through this multidimensional wandering and partly through the meta-awareness the Primer's fabular education engenders within her that Nell can elevate herself from an uneducated victim of domestic abuse to a fully-fledged elite Neo-Victorian gentlewoman. Arguably, Nell's use of technology represents Cyberpunk's ability to subvert itself without ever becoming fully Post-Cyberpunk. Following McHale's definition of Cyberpunk as a collection of microworlds, of which cyberspace is one, reducing Stephenson's text to technological considerations would ultimately render The Diamond Age as merely proto-Post-Cyberpunk. If this were the case, then Stephenson's example of Post-Cyberpunk would simply be a form of Cyberpunk with the ability reflect upon its own limits. However, it is the Seed technology which is the truly 'Post' part of Post-Cyberpunk, to the extent that it is a potentially utopian ontological negation of Cyberpunk's death motif.

Nell's name is taken from Dickens's Little Nell, the protagonist of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which prefigures Stephenson's blending *bildungsroman*, grotesque, and romantic quest elements (Carroll). Stephenson's mimicking of the Dickensian grotesque is integral to his subversion of Cyberpunk. As Dickens wrote in his preface to *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild [...] companions, and to gather about

her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed (Dyson, *Dickens* 111)

Dickens's grotesque as a Romantic symbol of death contrasts with the character of Little Nell, who is a symbol of life. As a *bildungsroman*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* sees Little Nell's maturity hastened by her grandfather's self-destructive gambling addiction. While he gambles to secure Nell an inheritance for her future, it leaves her home alone for long periods. Their home has a grotesque and deathly atmosphere. It is "dark and silent" and composed of "old dark murky rooms" (40-45). Eventually, Nell's Grandfather loses all his money and they are evicted from their home by the evil moneylender Quilp. Stephenson's Nell lives in the Leased Territories, which like Dickens's London is "old and dirty and full of strange people and sights" (*Diamond* 58). Just as Little Nell's home is haunted by frightening humanoid forms, polluted with the spectre of gambling and the negative influence of the malicious Quilp, so is Stephenson's Nell's home plagued by fear and abuse. As in Dickens's text, there is an atmosphere of spiritual death in this house. Istvan Csisery-Ronay Jr. states regarding the use of the grotesque in Science Fiction that:

The grotesque [...] turns the arrested attention intensely toward things, in which it detects a constant metamorphic flux, an intimate roiling of living processes that perpetually change before understanding can stabilise them. This process is one of steady descent into interiors, into grottoes of being, in the hope of finding a core, but always finding more transformation. (190)

Nell's home is in a continual state of flux because her mother Tequila's constantly changes sexual partners. Tequila conceived Nell accidentally with Nell's idiot biological father Bud. She subjects Nell to at least seven other cretinous boyfriends, all of whom abuse Nell verbally, physically, or sexually. Like Bud, Tequila is stupid. She dumps the only "actually nice" boyfriend because she finds his intelligence unattractive (*Diamond* 167). Nell's mother and boyfriends contaminate her home much as Little Nell's grandfather's gambling addiction, sinister home, and association with Quilp do.

The grotesque in *The Diamond Age* is a symbol of the death of the human spirit. Csisery-Ronay Jr. states the use of the grotesque in Science Fiction "introduces mythic thought in a nonmythic context, 'polluting' the pure aspirations of reason with the fluctuating, mutagenic, class-defying world-picture of the sacred" (187). Stephenson uses the grotesque firstly as a mytho-satirical critique of "power disorders," whereby Nell's mother is the dominant party under critique, and secondly to condemn the ignorance and lack of discipline and morality of the working class within the context of capitalist alienation (Stephenson, "Present and Future" 1). With regards to the first reason, Nell's mother is nothing more than a consequent of the state-level "domination systems" (1) formed out of "the history of class struggles" (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* 57). This is signified by her wearing a maid uniform which indicates her working-class servility (*Diamond* 134). The grotesque greed of Mr. Quilp is akin to the immorality that has a created the state level domination systems contaminating Stephenson's postmodern future landscape. Just as Dickens critiqued the total control of society espoused by the Victorian elite through use of the grotesque alongside romance, exemplified by Little Nell's having to live

in gloomy and oppressive conditions, Stephenson records the equivalent postmodern history of the greed, exploitation, and cynicism imposed by the alienating hegemony of the Neo-Victorian elite. Stephenson's use of the grotesque seemingly lays more blame on the working class than the bourgeois Neo-Victorians. Apparently conservative in his Romanticism, Stephenson presents a text bereft of sympathy for stupid people who allow power disorders to contaminate their lives and do nothing to elevate themselves. However, he has sympathy for children because they bring new life. Just as the Victorian Little Nell is forced to escape into the countryside, Stephenson's Post-Cyberpunk Nell is launched onto a Romantic quest of power seeking to escape her deadly home environment. The final episode of abuse that Nell tolerates before deciding to escape her grotesquely abusive home environment is when Tequila's partner Burt gives her a horrific beating. This beating results in Nell suffering internal bleeding and "burns on her arms from Burt's cigarettes" (180). The Primer, voiced by Miranda, is the key to Nell's emancipation from her abusive domestic situation. Stephenson's subversion of the death motif, in which Cyberpunk characters are doomed to enslavement within the microworld(s), is by now well underway.

#### Motifs of the Centrifugal Self: The Primer and Jung

Stephenson subverts Cyberpunk's death motif by having the Primer encourage Nell to escape from her deadly home environment. The Primer is a didactic interactive cyber-novel which functions as a Romantic device by telling Nell magical stories based on Jungian archetypes. This furthers Nell's opportunities to learn about her position of being-in-the-world from an abstract perspective. This abstracted perspective allows Nell to envision a life beyond her abusive domestic background, empowering her to rise to the top of the social food chain. Nell's abstracted perspective is the viewpoint of Princess Nell, an imaginary version of Nell emancipated from the restrictions of material reality. Princess Nell's adventures in the world generated by the Primer are populated by magical narrative devices placed in rational environments. The presence of talking dinosaurs in a story arc depicting the last days of the dinosaurs stands as an example of Stephenson's use of Magical Realism to teach Nell to ascend the class system. Ultimately, magical devices teach Nell how to strategically navigate power relations for her own benefit.

By blending archetypal symbolic structures of Romanticism with cyberspatial technology, Stephenson uses a Cyberpunkian motif to reframe Cyberpunk in Romantic terms. The emancipatory potential of the Primer lies in its ability to "see and hear everything in its vicinity," to "see all events and persons in relation" to Nell, and to use Nell "as a datum from which to chart a psychological terrain" (94). The Primer invents a story which is designed specifically for Nell, achieving this by integrating with the deep structures of Nell's mind to enhance her thinking with higher reflexivity. Hackworth, the Neo-Victorian engineer who created the Primer, states that maintaining a psychological "terrain is one of the book's primary processes" (94). The database used to map this psychological terrain to create maximum levels of reflexivity and child-development is the "catalogue of the collective unconscious" (95). The notion of a collective unconscious is drawn from the work of Carl Jung. Jung defined the collective unconscious as "a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter owe its existence to personal experience" (Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 42). For Jung, "the contents of

the collective unconscious have never been in consciousness," and it "is made up essentially of archetypes" (42). These are mythological archetypes like "the wise old man" and "the great mother" (Bullock, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* 34).

Hackworth, who is "an aficionado of Romantic poets" (Diamond 18), explains the mytho-symbolic function of Romantic literature. He states that "in the old days, writers of children's books had to map" the universals of the collective unconscious, such as the trickster figure, "onto concrete symbols familiar to their audience" (95). However, Hackworth states his team have "abstract[ed] that process" to "develop systems for mapping the universals onto the unique psychological terrain of one child" (95). So, while stories of the past were folkloric by virtue of "consist[ing] of certain universal ideas that have been mapped onto local cultures" (94), Nell's Primer is a uniquely adaptable mentor that fosters deep learning in Nell by blending her individual conscious mind with the collective unconscious. Stephenson adopts Jung's belief that people become mature individuals via a process of "individuation" which happens through "the harmonising of conscious and unconscious" (Jung 275-289). However, while Stephenson's use of the collective unconscious links directly with the magical, Romantic function of the Primer, it misses the spiritual aspects of Jung's theory of individuation. In Jung individuation is essentially a religious process which allows an individual to develop a whole self that unifies the material and spiritual aspects of being human. Stephenson's Post-Cyberpunk is limited by the materialism of will-to-power because the Primer was designed to propagate Neo-Victorian values of domination.

Nell's specially tailored learning program puts her on a higher level of consciousness than her peers. The Primer's daily tuning of her psychological development to the needs of her time gives her a massive intellectual advantage. However, Stephenson's depiction of the human condition as essentially political in nature leads to a rationalism which is more object-oriented than person-centric. Nell's individual consciousness relies upon using the collective unconscious to manipulate totalising political narratives, at the cost of any focus on deconstructing the epistemological status of humanity. Such a deconstruction would expose the material assumptions neoliberal ideology is based upon and allow Post-Cyberpunk to attain higher levels of transcendence. Hackworth suggests that the archetypes of the collective unconscious should be used for political gain. This misses the point of Jung's spiritual unification of the human psyche. Nell's political superiority relies on a hegemonic endorsement of the master-slave dialectic. This can never be truly emancipatory to the human condition. Stephenson's Post-Cyberpunk text occupies a position which is inescapably bound up in the same material limits which limit Cyberpunk.

#### Motifs of Collective Life: Nell and the Neo-Victorians

As the emancipatory potential of Stephenson's version of Post-Cyberpunk begins to crumble under the weight of its own materialism, Nell ends up in a small countryside enclave next to Neo-Victorian New Atlantis named Dovetail. This is where the text's Romantic subversion of death is arguably at its most conservative. Dovetail is a distinctly bourgeois setting populated with "men in top hats and women in long dresses" riding "horses or chevalines" (237). The school Nell is invited to, "MISS MATHESON'S ACADEMY OF THE THREE GRACES," is a disciplinary organisation functioning to propagate Neo-Victorian values. Miss Matheson enjoys

reporting that "the propagation of Atlantan memes is central to" their "mission as a school and as a society" (238). Miss Matheson suggests that "New Atlantis [...] propagates itself largely through education" (291). Michel Foucault, an executor of the Nietzschean method of exposing will-to-power throughout history, states:

Historically, the process by which the bourgeoisie became [...] the politically dominant class was masked by the establishment of an explicit, coded, and formally egalitarian judicial framework, made possible by the organisation of [...] those systems of micropower that are essentially nonegalitarian and asymmetrical which we call the disciplines. (Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* 211)

Living in Dovetail, Nell attends the Academy and is subjected to the microcosmic "disciplinary mechanism" (Foucault 211) of Miss Stricken's class. Miss Stricken, as a bourgeois "technician of behaviour" (Foucault 237), is employed by Miss Matheson "to teach [...] humility and self-discipline" (*Diamond* 291). According to Miss Matheson, these disciplinary mechanisms are "indispensable" to the propagation of Neo-Victorian power structures and the Neo-Victorian way of life (292). As Nell begins to accept such values as control by the Elite, the reader learns Stephenson's subversion of the death motif is aligned with his protagonists finding more strength through will-to-power.

Lord Finkle-McGraw, one of the rulers of New Atlantis, declares that "some cultures were simply better than others," and creates a hierarchy by saying "this was not a subjective value judgment, merely an observation that some cultures thrived and expanded while others failed" (17). Miss Matheson echoes this stating "some cultures are prosperous; some are not" and like Finkle-McGraw creates a hierarchy by stating "some [cultures] value rational discourse and the scientific method; some do not" (291). In a global order where "information technology has freed cultures from the necessity of owning particular bits of land in order to propagate" (291), the Neo-Victorians have learned how to transmit their will-to-power through global society. They have learned to transfer their master-slave morality under the guise of "moral qualities" to their children through conditioning them with disciplinary education (291). These "moral qualities" are transmitted through the disciplinary mechanisms of bourgeois technicians such as Miss Stricken who "is the physical embodiment of a principle" (292). This divisive principle manifests in Matheson's statements such as "outside the comfortable and well defended borders of our phyle is a hard world that will come and hurt us" (292). Such thinking justifies her cruelty to children, to condition them to become like Nell who, by knowing "all the rules [...] could make" the system "do anything she wanted" (292).

### Motifs of Individual Life: The Mouse Army

Empowered by the Primer and knowledge of Neo-Victorian disciplinary life, Nell decides she wants to lead an army of Chinese girls into battle against the forces of the Celestial Kingdom (CK). Because the CK represents "old communist China" (Longan, "Geography's Conquest of History in *The Diamond Age*" 47), Stephenson's subversion of the death motif becomes Nell's individual aggrandisement through aligning herself

with the most efficient instrument of power (i.e., Western imperialism). The CK as China's cultural heartland is opposed to the Costal Republic, which is "a western place, a very non-Chinese place, born from free trade zones, Western individualism, investment and technology" (48). CK represents true China as "a site where an alternative to the global power of the Feed can be imagined" (48). That is, the Seed. The character Dr X dreams of establishing a China that will "return to its cultural roots" (49). Dr X's wish for Chinese authenticity represents a power struggle against Western individualism. However, in his essay "In the Kingdom of Mao Bell" (1994), Stephenson is critical of Chinese culture's self-betrayal via allegiance to the West suggesting the Chinese limit their own revolutionary potential (and that of cyberspatial hacking) by viewing cyberspace as a Western phenomenon.

Fortunately for Nell, as a Neo-Victorian educated Post-Cyberpunk heroine, she is taught by the Primer how to lead an army of Chinese girls into battle against the defenders of CK, the Fists of Righteous Harmony. Nell who "had never been a Queen before" still proves proficient in instructing the Mouse Army to battle the Fists (Diamond 407). Even though Nell uses the Mouse Army to help some refugees, Stephenson's CK characters are presented as evil antagonists, while the white Neo-Victorians are depicted as righteous. By way of using Primers, Hackworth and Nell gain loyalty from the Mouse Army who "share in Nell's virtual world by way of their own Primers" (Longan 50). In the Princess Nell story arc "all of the girls fell to their knees as one and, in a scene of riotous jubilation, proclaimed their fealty to Queen Nell" (Diamond 408). Because Nell has become a master, the Chinese have once again become slaves to a single Western authority. Nell's attempted liberation of the Coastal Republic is just a reinstatement of Western individualism. In the Princess Nell story arc, real world Nell finds out how to create more Primers, and therefore how to control more Chinese people. What she does not find out is how to create the Seed. The underground society named the Drummers are the possible source of the high level of computing power required to unlock the secrets of the Seed. However, as the Drummers require the death of Miranda (the voice of Nell's Primer and Nell's primary mother-figure) to finalise the computation necessary to create the Seed, Nell goes underground to liberate her adoptive mother, thus forfeiting the potential liberation of the Chinese from Neo-Victorian rule. Just as the conservative Republicans declared family to be the highest value in nineties Imperial America, so does Nell adopt a similarly conservative position with regards to her adoptive mother, and the Neo-Victorian status quo. It could be argued that the Seed technology is ultimately oppressive as it "requires that everyone be running on the same operating system," because "the drummers are the ultimate society of conformity [...] a vast unitary mind [...] without options or preferences" (Longan 53). However, this is not convincing. The Seed is not oppressive, it is Stephenson's conception of it that is. The oppression comes from Stephenson's philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of humanity as shown by his misuse of Jung. These classical assumptions, which go back to Aristotle, render humanity as an essentially rational, political animal. While Jung accepted that there was an animal part to humanity, he also acknowledged humanity's spiritual element.

### Conclusion

Stephenson uses satire to critique postmodern relativism using competing phyles. He subverts the political impotence of Cyberpunk using the Cyberpunk caricature Bud and attacks the genealogical formation

of the power Elite from the time of the Victorians to the present day by extrapolating it to the future. Stephenson moves beyond the boundaries of Cyberpunk by subverting McHale's Cyberpunk motifs of individual and collective death. This subversion comes through Stephenson's recourse to the Romantic myth. He subverts death by framing the material world in magical terms. However, this subversion remains limited. *The Diamond Age* is incomplete as a utopian negation of the Cyberpunkian death motif. It would therefore be more fittingly named 'pseudo-Post-Cyberpunk.' Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire* (1996), Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (2002), and Daniel Suarez's *Daemon* (2006) subvert Cyberpunk's death motif. However, they all do so by extending Cyberpunk's centrifugal self to the level of immortality through material means. Perhaps the best example of the Post-Cyberpunkian centrifugal self is Greg Egan's "Axiomatic" (1995). Here consciousness is defined as a spiritual phenomenon degraded by technology. Inverting the entropic direction of "Axiomatic" while inserting a successful catalyst for utopia would liberate the alienated Cyberpunk genre more fully than *The Diamond Age*. Based on this definition of Post-Cyberpunk, there appear to be no pure examples in the canon.

Stephenson displays the classical assumption that humans are essentially rational, political animals. There is little that is subversive about his use of Jung's collective unconscious to develop a white hyperpunk Neo-Victorian woman who enslaves her Chinese counterparts. This is centuries-old phallocentric imperialism in female guise. While Stephenson highlights the ways in which the domination of imperial capitalism has created inequality and division, he shows no sympathy for those who cannot use will-to-power to dominate. Unfortunately, Stephenson's message is 'dominate or be dominated.' The potential of the Seed technology is not fully explored, and Stephenson's assumptions regarding the nature of humanity bind him to the materialism that Post-Cyberpunk should ultimately transcend to be properly called 'Post.' An alternative form of truly Post-Cyberpunk could be imagined. Using Jung's theories as they were intended to be interpreted, spiritually, to fully explore the application of the collective unconscious to cyberspatial technology could develop Post-Cyberpunk to a truly transcendental realm. Post-Cyberpunk's evolution could perhaps be called 'Spiritpunk.' This form would adopt McHale's motifs of worldness and the centrifugal self. However, it would go much further to subvert Cyberpunk's motifs of death through the negation of the materialism upon which the Cyberpunk genre is founded. Will-to-power would be replaced with true care and concern for the other, and dystopian society would be transformed from the unconscious other side of material reality. Stephenson's The Rise and Fall of D.O.D.O. (2017) gestures towards this need for a complete redefinition of material reality. In this text the U.S. Government organisation known as the Department of Diachronic Operations attempt to change history using magic. However, Stephenson focuses more on the worldness of Quantum Mechanics than inserting a truly transcendent Post-Cyberpunkian centrifugal self with the ability to create pure utopia. Spiritpunk would insert the truly transcendent Post-Cyberpunkian centrifugal self by harnessing Jungian archetypes as cognitive manifestations of spiritual entities in the minds of protagonists. These entities would communicate the true nature of the Seed (fountain of life) through the Feed (river of consciousness) from the Source on the other side.

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### **BIONOTE**

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# UNSETTLING LANGUAGE: GROTESQUE DESCRIPTION IN THE FLAME ALPHABET

Mark Heimermann

Ben Marcus's novel *The Flame Alphabet* (2012) takes place in a world where language becomes toxic to adults. The poisonous language is first attributed solely to children because of their immunity to the disease, but eventually the plague is understood to encompass all spoken and written communication, no matter who produces it. The language plague is monstrous: it breaks down a person's body, causing an "intolerable squeezing in the chest and the hips" and an unyielding lethargy (4). Tongues harden, and faces become "slightly smaller" (22). Bodies eventually decompose into pillars of salt.

Critical reviews of the novel are mixed, but these mixed reviews all address, to a greater or lesser degree, Marcus's imaginative prose. The New York Times review (2012) calls Marcus's sentences "excessive" (Lennon n.p.); NPR's review (2012) agrees, calling entire sections "superfluous" (Diamond n.p.). These negative comments come after disclaimers that stylistic prowess is generally one of Marcus's strengths. The Guardian review (2013), on the other hand, praises the "cold beauty of [his] prose" (Lezard n.p.); and the review from the Los Angeles Times (2012) asserts "there are rich pleasures in Marcus's words" and that Marcus is "wildly inventive in his imagery" (Barton n.p.). The emphasis on Marcus's vivid prose is in line with his positioning as an experimental writer. In "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It" (2005), Marcus carves out a place for experimental fiction amid the dominance of literary realism by emphasizing experimental fiction's capacity to challenge readers and stimulate critical thinking. In this essay, I will argue that Marcus uses the grotesque to actively cause discomfort in the reader, which coincides with Kathryn Hume's argument in Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel (2012) that such fiction "offends and upsets willfully and deliberately" (8) so that readers might question their values and critically engage with a text's message. For Hume, the grotesque is one of the ways aggressive fiction achieves this.

Yet critics note the difficulty interpreting *The Flame Alphabet*. There are "so many arresting yet confounding details that the reader is left to puzzle over their meaning" (Barton n.p.). The "allegory or message [...] never becomes clear" (Diamond n.p.). The novel is "laden with metaphor; everything might mean something, but nothing is certain" (Lennon n.p.); It "both invites and strongly resists allegorical interpretation" (Lezard n.p.). I argue the reason for this interpretive quagmire is Marcus's use of the grotesque. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin argues that grotesque bodies transcend their normative limits. This is why the grotesque is often concerned with "apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots" (26). It "ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (318). *The Flame Alphabet*'s plague exemplifies this tendency, as it primarily exits the mouth and enters through the ears. Marcus's grotesque imagery, which breaks down traditional classifications between human and nonhuman, provides the diegetic space where abstract concepts are imprinted onto physical bodies,

transforming them. Marcus's application of the grotesque involves an apprehensive approach, where grotesque figures may be feared because of their disruptive potential. Yet these grotesque transformations mark both victims and victimizers. This ambiguity shows how easy it is to objectify and harm others, often while operating under the illusion we are protecting ourselves. This connects back to Hume's argument that aggressive fiction challenges readers to engage with fiction by pushing them out of their comfort zone because the argument that we might easily dehumanize and harm people forces them to confront an uncomfortable reality. It is only by recognizing the ways we may dehumanize others that we can take preventative or corrective action.

Much of the way we dehumanize others is based in language, and so this essay begins by talking about the relationship between the grotesque and metaphor. It then transitions to a discussion of the ways in which characters may transition from victims to victimizers with ease, which demonstrates the potential for anyone to exhibit the grotesque in the novel, at least metaphorically. This article thus argues that *The Flame Alphabet's* narrative functions within the realm of the grotesque, and it demonstrates how the concept of the grotesque may simultaneously illuminate both bodies and behaviour.

### The Grotesque and Metaphor

The novel's main characters are the narrator Sam, his wife Claire, and their daughter Esther. Fairly early in the novel, Sam and another man are caught outside at night when a group of children and adolescents approach:

A din rose out of the north field beyond the school, and as the sound bloomed it grew piercing, wretchedly clear, borne so quickly on the wind, we shuddered when it hit. Voice-like, childlike, a cluster of speech blaring out of the field. The sound crushed out my air. Behind the noise ran a pack of kids, so shadowed and small at that distance, they looked like animals springing across the field. Coming right toward us. In front of them came a wall of speech so foul I felt myself burning. (74)

This troubling moment continues an ongoing metaphor of children as nonhuman, as monstrous animals trampling adults underfoot. They are a pack, who spring rather than walk. While they are still "like" animals, their "cluster of speech" is also "childlike," which metaphorically positions the children as neither animals nor children, but like animals and children. They exist in something of a liminal state: familiar yet strange due to their capacity for physical harm and increasingly predatory behaviour.

This scene continues an ongoing association of the novel's youths with animality. Early in the novel, Sam recounts a time when he was with his family at a picnic before the onset of the language plague. At the picnic, "kids would devour their food" before they "formed a roving pack, moving like one of those clusters of birds that seem to share a single, frantic brain" (27). "A roving pack" connotes animals like dogs or wolves.

The image of the bird-cluster is another animal comparison, and it highlights groups that operate as a single unit (which hunting canines may also seem to do). There is, of course, a significant difference between kids moving "like" a cluster of birds and being such a cluster, a difference of comparative degree that Marcus utilizes throughout. Here, "like" is comparative, but it also simultaneously asserts children's autonomy. This simultaneous emphasis on the children's pack mentality and individual autonomy reflects the nature of metaphor itself.

In Metaphor (2007), David Punter writes,

Metaphor makes us look at the world afresh, but it often does so by challenging our notions of the similarity that exists between things; how alike they are; and in what ways, in fact, they are irreconcilably unalike. Thus metaphor represents a basic operation of language: it seeks to "fix" our understanding, but at the same time it reveals how any such fixity, any such desire for stability and certainty, is constructed on shifting sands. (9-10)

Metaphor may help us see the world anew, but it does so in part by highlighting the differences between things. Children may be behaving as part of a cluster without individual autonomy, but their individuality is still their own. They are not animals; they are just like them. The references to pack and cluster mix animal metaphors regarding biological type, but they share an emphasis on nonhuman animals acting on instinct rather than emphasizing individuality. For this reason, Sam's adolescent daughter, Esther, refuses to play with the other youths. She tells her parents, "I'm not an animal. I don't follow people around simply because their asses smell good to me" (28). Esther's rebuke encapsulates a disaffected teen's angst. Her reproach also rejects behaviour that impinges on her distinct personhood. Esther does not want to be someone who follows the crowd – especially a crowd predicated on instinct. Although Esther becomes part of the adolescent pack, and thus encapsulates the tension between similarity and dissimilarity, animal and human.

The grotesque creates an ambiguous tension. Perhaps something evokes simultaneous laughter and terror, even if not in equal measure, or straddles animal and human realms, like Esther. The ability of the grotesque to challenge classification disrupts social order, which might be emancipatory or terrifying, depending on one's perspective. Bakhtin observes that the carnivals during the Renaissance and Middle Ages were places where social hierarchies and prohibitions could be suspended, which allowed for a period of freedom and equality not known in day-to-day life (15, 9). However, the power of the grotesque to upend our conceptions of the world has potentially far-reaching consequences. In *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American literature and Culture* (1997), Leonard Cassuto writes,

A threat to established categories is an attack on the basis of comparison. The grotesque does precisely this, which makes it a phenomenon of great cultural consequence. The grotesque is felt in the form of anomalies that bridge categories and resist integration. It consequently questions the basis on which knowledge rests. (11)

This instability resonates with Punter's discussion of dissimilarity and metaphor, so it is no surprise that metaphor and the grotesque are closely related. Dieter Meindl, in *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (1996) acknowledges the relationship between the grotesque and metaphor. He writes, "The kinship between metaphor and the grotesque should be noted [...] The grotesque conflates categories and is notable for the effect of defamiliarization and estrangement it produces in the reader" (81). In *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque: Crashaw, Baudelaire, Magritte* (2010), Shun-Liang Chao argues that metaphor is what makes "the grotesque: which is primarily visual or pictorial [...] also verbal" (14) Chao situates the grotesque as "a corporeal, or flesh-made, metaphor which produces within itself (and within the reader/viewer's response) intellectual uncertainly, emotional disharmony, and hermeneutic indeterminacy" (14). Chao understands the grotesque "as a metaphor whose literalness tampers with its structural unity or totality" (14). Metaphor and the grotesque share the ability to conflate categories and estrange readers, and metaphors are ideally suited to the literary grotesque because they are predicated on the yoking together of disparate elements to provide fresh insight, even as they might foreground incongruity.

The focus on metaphor is especially appropriate in relation to the powerfully evocative imagery of *The Flame Alphabet*. While not all of its stunning images are metaphors, the effects of language on the body and the unique and sometimes horrifying images often generate their power through comparison. The novel is about grotesque transformations, both physically and psychologically. These grotesque transformations are brought on through language, and the text's unsettling description helps readers visualize this strange but familiar world.

The grotesque metaphor of children and adolescents as dangerous animals has its root in the Puritan discourse on childhood, which asserts that children require shaping and regulation because their natural instincts are animalistic and chaotic. In *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004), Daniel Cook writes "Infants were seen as a danger to both the cosmic and social orders, their crawling placing them in postural proximity to members of the animal kingdom" (28). The idea that crawling children are bestial situates some of their natural impulses as animalistic, which is the same rhetoric on which *The Flame Alphabet* draws with its depiction of animalistic children. Furthermore, Steven Mintz argues in *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004) that the Puritan legacy contains ambivalent "hope and fear" for the future that the Puritans saw embodied in children (31). The *Flame Alphabet*'s unruly youths represent fears over unrestrained impulses run amok (even as the hope for a cure is located within the bodies of children). Rather than strengthening the society of their parents, the youths actively undermine it. The parents cannot control their children, and the result is catastrophic; children discipline adults, and they do so in seemingly capricious fashion. Sam and Claire initially do their best to relate to Esther, but she will have none of it. The parents' emotional labour is lost in a void of rejection and thinly-veiled animosity. Yet they keep giving until their physical health no longer allows for it because Esther's language, and the language of all children, physically breaks them down.<sup>2</sup>

The animal comparisons eventually extend beyond children. Sam, for example, receives a package from an associate. The materials Sam receives, known as *The Proofs* (original emphasis), include drawings where "germs were people or beasts, and viruses looked like the world seen from miles away. Speech from the faces of children was rendered in ugly rushes of colour, with each colour coded to some kind of distress" (81). *The Proofs*' association of the plague's germs with "people or beasts" seems to differentiate between human

and animal. In reality, it continues the association between these two diverse groups. "Or," in this case, conjoins the terms. It can be one or the other. The drawings of both human and beasts are adequate for depicting plague bearers; they are almost interchangeable in this context. But this is not actually true. Beasts, lacking the capacity for language-based communication, do not spread this particular language-based plague. Therefore, although beasts evoke animals, they can metaphorically represent the liminal boundary crossing of humans behaving in monstrous or bestial fashion. The use of "people" encompasses more age groups than children and extends the blame for the plague's progression to all humans. The novel later admits this more specifically, as it reveals, "The toxicity had spread beyond children" (116), but The Proofs' movement from depicting germs as "people or beasts" to showing the "ugly rushes of color" coming from children resituates the plague as primarily child-based. Nonetheless, this moment starts to expand the connection of the metaphor of the chaotic other to people aside from children. It also foreshadows future events, such as when Sam and Claire's town is evacuated. Claire jumps out of the car she is riding in because she cannot leave Esther behind. There are adults with dogs monitoring the area to make sure everyone evacuates. "From the woods trotted a pack of dogs," the novel reads, "like old men in animal suits, barking with human voices. Behind them trudged a human chain of jumpsuited rescuers, arms linked so they'd miss no one" (142). The term "pack" is now directly associated with animals, as opposed to people behaving like animals, but now the animals are like humans. Or, depending on how one interprets that sentence, dogs are like old men pretending to be dogs. The comparison of dogs to men dressed as dogs is practically an ouroboros of a metaphor. It circles around on itself. The novel compares humans to animals, and then compares animals to humans behaving as animals.

Prior to the evacuation, Sam encounters a group of children while in his car. He narrates, "A pack of children tore across a yard, fled from sight. I locked my doors" (117). He feels his car lifting and revs the engines, but something blocks the car. Next,

One of them pressed his little face into the driver's side window, so close. He smiled, his lips moving, as if he were singing. With his finger he tapped on the glass, made a twirling motion for me to roll down the window. His hands formed a posture of prayer under his chin and I believe he mimed the word *please*. (117, original emphasis)

Sam lays on the gas and is able to drive over "whatever had been blocking [the car]" (117). Sam's constant refusal to use the term child or children, or to confront the fact that what is stuck underneath his car is a child – not animal road-kill or an object – marks the full-scale conversion of children to things in his mind. The animal comparisons are minimal here; just one ambiguous use of "pack," but the danger they pose is salient. This danger is predicated on the appeal to innocence from the child at the car window. His smile, pretend prayer, and miming of "please," are all things a child might do to get their way; and they manufacture an image of an innocent child that belies the danger the child represents. The child is appealing to the innocent conception of childhood to try and get Sam to roll down the window. In the novel's terms, however, this goes against the child's nature, animalistic and violent. It also highlights the danger that the child is able to deceive others by drawing upon idealized depictions of childhood to hide their true, dangerous self. To cope with this, Sam objectifies them, although he cannot maintain this. He tells himself, "It was just kids, out in the street after suppertime. That's all it was. Kids playing in the road" (118). Yet even when he thinks of the children as kids,

he still refuses to consider he ran over a child. He reaches for a sense of normalcy, as if he did not just run over a threatening child. Sam's initial dehumanization of the children and subsequent refusal to grapple with what happened allows him to avoid confronting his role in what occurred. He escapes, but he risks losing his own humanity in the process. While his actions are understandable, at some point one must question whether the ends justify the means. How much harm can a person do in the name of self-preservation before they become an abomination? This is not an easy question to answer, but Sam crosses the line somewhere in this novel. Perhaps his path towards inhumanity begins here, as he runs over a child and refuses to fully acknowledge it.

### The Grotesque Tension Between Victims and Victimizers

Exposure to language transforms adults into grotesque, pitiful creatures. This gives them a monstrous appearance. For example, Claire's face is "the weight of clay" and "a shadow had spread under her gums, a darkness inside her mouth" (98; 99). Her body is dry. She has "rank-smelling hair" and wears a mouth guard "to keep her from gnashing into the exposed nerve pulp of her teeth" (132). The "darkness" residing in Claire's mouth and her disgusting hair and exposed "nerve pulp" position her as monstrous. The decomposing mouth and the gnashing are zombie-like. Indeed, Claire is the walking dead: her lethargy and decomposition cause her to move slowly and spend much of her time in bed, uncommunicative. She exists in a state of perpetually worsening decay. Outside Forsythe, the place where experiments are taking place in the hopes of recovering some form of language and finding a cure for the plague, "hordes of people sought entrance into Forsythe. A mob of bodies swelled before the gate as if suspended in emulsion" (168). This horde is evocative of zombie imagery in contemporary narratives.

Adults become grotesque due to their monstrous appearance and the ways the novel's language positions them as both human and object. In this way, their broken bodies provide a metaphor for how, as Evan Calder Williams demonstrates in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011), "real abstractions affect real bodies" (73). Williams discusses zombie narratives and how the body of the zombie metaphorically embodies the effects of capitalism, as zombies represent capitalism's poor and needy: "the sick repetition of want let loose on a global scale" (74). In *The Flame Alphabet*, after initially situating children as grotesque, the bodies of the adults provide a metaphor for their victimhood, as well as for their monstrous actions. The grotesque runs throughout the novel, but the decomposition of the adult bodies demonstrates how objectification breaks down a person. At the same time, however, the disturbing appearance of the adults also provides a grotesque metaphor for those who victimize both adults and children. Their monstrous behaviour is written onto their features as some adults become inhuman monsters.

The bodies of the adults are horrifying, but the monstrosity of the adults is also emblematic of the way in which Marcus explores the grotesque slippage between language and meaning. For example, there are hints that the monstrous adults can be associated with vampires too.<sup>3</sup> There is Claire's bruised neck, which is not unique to vampires or their victims, but is more directly associated with them than zombies. An early description of the plague's onset compares it to a bite: "At first we thought we were bitten. Something had landed on our backs and sucked on us. Now we would perish" (14). The vector for the disease and the subsequent lethargy

Sam and Claire experience is tied up in the draining of their essence.

The vampirism metaphor resonates in other ways. Some adults, in an attempt to combat the plague, establish the testing facility called Forsythe in an abandoned school. They try to understand what is causing the plague and how to counteract it. These experiments are largely in vain because they are done in isolation and even reading written language damages people. However, there is some success. A serum that grants temporary immunity is developed at Forsythe. It involves draining the essence of children, which is similar to what the children do to the adults with their speech. When Sam first sees a demonstration of an adult person able to withstand the deleterious effects of speech, that adult is with a child, and there is "a bag of fluid" that "dangled from the little neck of the child, puckering from his skin into the tube. From this it flowed directly into the man. Allowing him to speak, one presumed. A fluid drawn directly from the child" (192, original emphasis). The withdrawal of children's fluids for the sustenance of adults (from their neck, no less) is metaphorically vampiric. The adult is even dressed in a tuxedo, "almost a gentleman" (191, original emphasis), which coincides with aristocratic depictions of vampires. The vampiric sacrifice of the children is an inversion of the first section of the book, where Esther, as a standoff-ish adolescent, metaphorically drains her parents' vitality.

Marcus's text constantly explores the changing nature of people and how they shift categories, which is what makes the grotesque such an appropriate aesthetic category for analysis. In addition to the monstrous zombie and vampire metaphors used to describe the appearance of the adults, their monstrosity also surfaces in their behaviour, as Sam shifts from victim to victimizer. In this way, the monstrous appearance of the adults becomes a grotesque metaphor with dual resonance: adults are both grotesque subjects and objects, capable of exerting agency in grotesque ways and transforming into grotesque creatures via exposure to the plague. The plague does not just transform the bodies of adults – though it certainly does that – it also causes some to engage in horrific behaviour.

The grotesque behaviour of the adults begins small before reaching its horrific crescendo. When the plague starts, Sam engages in what he calls "smallwork" (18). He constantly measures and tests what he can, hoping to find ways to discover the causes and effects of the plague, and to contain its damages. His smallwork eventually encompasses his attempts at Forsythe to create a new language, as well as his extraction of children's essence. Initially, he runs tests on Claire, but Claire stops willingly participating. Sam observes, "She stopped appearing in the kitchen for night treatments, declined the new smoke. When I served infused milk she fastened her mouth shut. If she accepted medicine from me she did so unwittingly, asleep, whimpering when the needle went in" (97). Claire whimpering is a clear message that she no longer wishes to partake in his smallwork, but Sam continues with some of the experiments anyway. Calling his concoctions "medicine" implies a palliative effect that belies the amateur and speculative nature of his smallwork. Saying Claire unwittingly accepts the medicine is euphemistic, at best. Her earlier actions indicate she clearly rejects his tests, and she cannot accept something, even unwittingly, she is unconscious of. The "whimpering" registers her discomfort with what is happening, even in sleep. Sam's penetration of an unwilling Claire with a needle metaphorically registers as rape and reinforces the vampiric quality of Sam. He is denied consent but does what he wants, regardless.

Sam's transformation into a monster continues. As Sam and Claire become increasingly sick, Esther

goes on a tirade, harming Claire and Sam with her foul language. Sam enters the room late, but imagines the tirade started with Esther "climbing up on her mother and assum[ing] a feral crouch, opening her throat for the pure injury to pour out" (132). This continues Esther's depiction as a dangerous animal. In a moment of desperation, Sam jams a needle into his own ear. The needle is supposedly capable of providing temporary immunity from language, but it works for Sam in another way. It shocks Esther into silence:

My activities with the needle had rendered her mute. She stood watching me, a mostly convincing look of fear on her face. An effective display of crying, soft crying that she seemed to want to suppress, came next. She performed her grief for my benefit. (133)

When the scene starts, Sam fears Esther and her ability to harm Claire and himself. This scene is evocative of a common parenting scenario, where an adolescent child lashes out at her parents. But Esther's pernicious language entails physical consequences for her parents. When Sam slams the needle into his own ear, power dynamics shift. 'I would literally stab my own ears out,' his actions scream, 'then be subjected to your tirade.' Sam shocks Esther into submission, causing her to become fearful and cry. Sam's distrust of Esther's actions, which he interprets as performative, reveals the widening void opening up between Sam and his daughter. Sam's distrust may be warranted, but it is also a sign of his own transformation. Esther becomes dangerous and animal-like, but she controls herself after witnessing her father's actions. Sam, however, becomes more callous and monstrous, at least in readings sympathetic to Esther.

Sam's monstrous transformation becomes even clearer when Esther approaches Sam and signals to him that she will be quiet. She tries cleaning up some of the fluid from Sam's ear. Sam rejects this help and drags Esther from the house. Marcus writes,

Esther stood outside our house with her head down, shoulders small. I rushed her again, moved my daughter yet farther into the yard, and she slumped over me, let herself be carried. At the sidewalk I dropped her and with my hands I made the most terrible gesture I could. It was the most fluent I'd ever been without speech. Stay, stay there. Do not come in this house again. You are forbidden from here. We do not know you. Esther looked up at me and nodded. With her little finger she crossed her heart. (133, emphasis original)

Esther is diminished: her "shoulders small," she slumps and is carried. She lacks the will to resist but is unwilling or unable to move away unassisted. Sam is violent and aggressive. He drops her and makes "the most terrible gesture [he] could." This gesture indicates a moment where nonverbal communication succeeds while language fails. What single gesture could be so terrible as to contain all the hurt that Sam communicates? Any actual description of the gesture would fail and render its power obsolete. A description may even lower the terrible power of the gesture to a joke, as a description may well fall so far short of communicating the precise language Sam believes it entails. Sam's terrible gesture may not evoke quite the language Sam thinks. Esther may understand without grasping his full meaning. This creates a paradox where an allusion to a thing

is more precise than a description of that thing. The reference is effective because it obscures its referent. The description remains vague because giving the gesture precise definition would neutralize it. The moment has power because it appears to reference a specific gesture that does not actually exist in any knowable way, even though it has concrete meaning for Sam. Esther's understanding of the gesture, whether approximate or exact, leads her to a heart-breaking moment of acceptance. The subtle nod is understated. The crossing of her heart is a child-like promise - cross my heart and hope to die - which reinforces the nod. This is a gesture that can be understood without explanation. Esther's gestures communicate something like, 'I understand, and I promise to honour your wishes.' A narrative description of Sam's gesture would fail because the Western world has no gesture that can encapsulate such a specific and terrible meaning as he wishes to communicate. On the other hand, Esther's gestures succeed without explanation of their content because of Western familiarity with such gestures. These gestures illustrate the difficulty in creating meaning disconnected from context. They also show a reversal between Sam and Esther. Now Sam is the metaphoric monster. One might reasonably arque that Sam is just doing what he must to survive – a common refrain used to whitewash violent, selfish, and totalitarian impulses in many post-apocalyptic narratives - but this argument does not account for Claire, who would rather not separate from Esther, despite Esther's harmful presence. Claire would sacrifice herself and forego survival. This is demonstrated when the adults evacuate the town, and Claire jumps out of the car because she would prefer to stay near Esther.

Sam's shift from victim to victimizer coincides with the language plague becoming part of everyone's language. Children are still immune, but adults also harm each other by communicating. This makes it even more difficult to find a cure. Near Forsythe, adults are tricked into coming to the compound because they are shown pictures of their missing children. It is implied that families will be reunited. Instead the adults are used as test subjects. Sam reveals,

There was a healthy supply of subjects on hand. People lined up for this work. They volunteered, fought to be first, scratched at each other without mercy, as if they'd been profoundly misled about what waited for them at Forsythe. Which of course, well, they had. (171)

The adults are misled because they would not be willing to participate of their own volition. Sam observes, "From my office the specimens were brought downstairs and readied for testing against people, people already shattered and near death, overexposed to the very thing I made more of every day" (169). Sam's description of the people as specimens is part of the process of objectification where people are dehumanized. At the same time, Sam is not able to complete this objectification in his own mind, as he subsequently uses the word "people" twice. This tension between thing and person is omnipresent in discussions of children and of test subjects. Children are referred to as "the ultimate asset" and Sam observes the people at Forysthe "struck gold in those kids," thus situating children as commodities and currency (180; 193).

In the final section, Sam abandons Forsythe and ostensibly reunites with Esther, though she looks different and they cannot effectively communicate with her, so it is unclear as to whether it is actually Esther or not. While outside of the compound, and before he finds who he thinks is Esther, Sam hunts children and experiments on them; his hope is to unlock the secrets of the immunity serum. He recounts stumbling onto the

secret by accident, "One of my subjects, strapped to an old bottled respirator, so large it dwarfed his little face, began the rapid breathing one never likes to see in a small person. Too often it foreshadows the unproductive kind of stillness" (281). It is then that Sam notices some powder in the respirator, which he distils into the serum. The image of the large machine dwarfing the small child highlights the power differential between Sam, his experiment, and the child. When Sam laments the fact that rapid breathing "too often" leads to "unproductive stillness," it is a euphemistic lament for the inconvenient loss of a test subject. Even Sam's terminology for his actions is euphemistic. Smallwork, while initially an accurate portrayal of the scale of his amateurish tests, eventually fails to encompass the harm it does to others. The serum made from children is called Child's Play, thus associating something created through a harmful and laborious process with connotations of both ease (making it was child's play) and harmless play (the play of a child).

A reasonable defence could be mustered for the experiments on behalf of the human race, but the issue of consent remains. Many are tricked and forced into the experiments. The children at Forsythe, and later the ones Sam kidnaps, are currently immune to the plague. It is what makes them valuable, but it also creates a situation where there is little to no benefit for the children to go along with what is happening, even if they had a choice. Sam deludes himself into thinking he can make a difference, but all he accomplishes is to add to the pain and misery of others.

Sam's grotesque dehumanization sometimes involves the ontological dehumanization of the children he objectifies. For example, having associated children with threatening animals or nonhuman objects for so long, it is less of a jump for him to experiment upon them. After finding "the first child" upon leaving Forsythe, he starts his "project with assets, with person-derived inhibitors" (277). In this example, the inhibitors, which temporarily suppress language's toxicity, are the assets. But the children are also assets. The inhibitors are derived from them. In this way, not only are the children valued for their status as fungible commodities used to produce more valuable commodities, they are also seen as less valuable then their parts. Sam later says, "When I need some [language serum], I pull it out of little ones. I used it first at Forsythe. The crude kind, the roughly gained immunity, drawn on the priceless account of the child's person" (278). The initial reference to "little ones" rather than children is an abstraction that is no less horrifying than simply saying "little children." Sam's behaviour has become so abhorrent that euphemisms begin losing their understated power, including the "roughly" in the subsequent sentence, which acknowledges some violence but not the full scope. Sam's observation that the serum that provides him immunity is "drawn on the priceless account of the child's person" is a direct subversion of the emotionally priceless child. In Pricing the Priceless Child (1994), Viviana Zelizer argues children are imbued with emotional value and kept separate from economic worlds (11). She reveals this conception of children is the result of a transition away from valuing them for their economic potential. This transition helps reify the figure of the innocent child, which makes it easier for many people to shelter children from work and other adult realities. A child may be "priceless" in the sense that they have unique and irreplaceable emotional value to their family and friends, but they have become literally "priceless" in Sam's world because money is worthless, whereas the child's body has immense value. And actual accounts, by their very nature, cannot be priceless because they have a finite amount to draw from, whether the account is creditbased or not. This mirrors the finite nature of the children, who seem to have a limited supply of whatever it takes to create the serum. In this way, the account is not "of a child's person" but "from a child's body." As their essence is vampirically drained, their body weakens.

The book ends with Sam abducting the young adult he thinks is Esther, who, having aged, is now susceptible to the poison of language. But it is highly likely it is not Esther. Sam grants, "It was marginally possible I'd rescued, instead of Esther, a stranger with a different name" (257). Sam's inability to know whether he has found his daughter or not speaks to the ramifications of the character's transformations. Bernard McElroy, in Fiction of the Modern Grotesque (1989), argues "The world intuited by the grotesque is one in which identity may be wholly or partially lost through transformations of the individual into something subhuman" (16). In The Grotesque in Art and Literature (1958), Wolfgang Kayser also associates "the loss of identity" with the grotesque (185). This speaks not only to Sam's inability to recognize Esther, but the monstrous transformation he has undergone himself.

Having captured Esther/not-Esther, Sam continues hunting for other children so that he can create Child's Play. He says, "What I was seeking is small and it has a face and it breathes so prettily, in little wet gusts of air. Often it comes alone willingly. It harbours a medicine inside its delicate chest" (255). The constant repetition of "it" adds to the horror by demonstrating the child stalker's objectification of his victims. Here the child is almost completely objectified, and Sam is at his most monstrous. By making Sam's appearance match his grotesque behaviour, the novel provides a visualization of how the adjective "grotesque" is often used to position heinous human behaviour as inhuman.

It is especially ironic that Sam experiments upon others because he was once placed in the position of dehumanized other by the Forsythe researchers. When he arrives at Forsythe, he is violently brought in for examination and study, disrobed and prodded, and language is tested on him (151-152). Sam is hung in a room where "mesh baggies of hair hung from the ceiling, repelling flies. Possibly the hair attracted them" during the "year of the sewn-up mouth" (153). This marks Sam's setting as grotesque. The strange containers of hair make no sense, and the uncertainty over what the bags of hair would need to repel flies from is discomforting. However, the uncertainty over their function gets at the ambiguity within the grotesque itself. Philip Thomson, in The Grotesque (1972), observes that the modern era "view[s] the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing" (11). Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund corroborate this view in Grotesque (2013) as they observe the grotesque can both attract and repulse (78). In The Flame Alphabet, the year of the sewn-up mouth provides a metaphor for the inability of the adults to communicate by depicting a form (mouth) disconnected from its function (speech). Sam's grotesque body is always a sliding signifier, shifting between a physical representation of his own objectification and the objectification he inflicts on others. That Sam can so easily experiment on others is especially upsetting, perhaps because we want to believe that people who have been mistreated would not mistreat others. Sam's transformations encapsulate the novel itself, where the grotesque shifts from child to adult, animal to thing, subject to object.

### Conclusion

The novel's simultaneous invitation to interpret and its refusal to validate interpretation is its most confounding and rewarding attribute, and it achieves this by engaging with the grotesque on multiple levels. It makes everything and everyone grotesque, and it alters these relationships as the novel progresses. The plot

is grotesque in its ambiguity and the discomfort it creates within the reader, which challenges them to consider the way in which the grotesque permeates our own world. Scholars often note the ambivalence which the grotesque inspires. Grotesque images often have the potential to inspire both attraction and repulsion, though the novel prefers repulsion. The Flame Alphabet takes the grotesque a step further, by revealing the grotesque within us all. Everyone in the novel is grotesque to varying degrees, and our sympathies shift as the novel progresses. In this light, we may be faced with a chilling reality: the grotesque, rather than being an intrusion into the natural order, may itself be the natural order. The grotesque in all its forms and functions suffuses the world. It seeps into our relationships, both familial and communal. This thought should repulse us, yet it should also engage us. Not everything or everyone will always be grotesque in their actions, but the capacity is always there, beneath the surface, festering: a rot under the skin. If there is any hope in the novel, it is that the novel's metaphoric world challenges us to reconsider our own relationships so that we might cleanse or excise that within us which threatens to transform us into monsters.

#### **NOTES**

- **1.** In The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture (1997) Leonard Cassuto observes this dual application of the grotesque in Antebellum American literature and culture (6).
- **2.** In *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978), Leslie Fiedler asserts that we initially encounter "Freaks not as creatures from elsewhere but as monstrous children born into their own families" (229). Though the children in *The Flame Alphabet* aren't coded as freaks (eventually everyone's language is toxic), the notion that parents initially encounter the monstrous other in "their own families" resonates.
- **3.** In the novel, characters that look like zombies are often positioned as victims, while the vampiric connotations are often applied to victimizers. Perhaps this is due to the intellectual passivity of zombies as compared to vampires.

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### **BIONOTE**

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# SUBURBAN GOTHIC AND NEOLIBERAL GOTHIC IN *STRANGER THINGS* (2016)

# Stuart Lindsay

The suburban sprawl, a socio-economic phenomenon originating in North America, is, for its most ardent critics, the site of stunted personal development and the self-destructive march of capitalism. Criticism of suburbia as a way of life – its apparent social homogenisation and degeneration – has been absorbed by Gothic fiction; "its cultural, psychological and historical implications can be found in Gothic and horror-themed novels, films, and television shows" (Murphy, "Identical Boxes Spreading Like Gangrene" 315). While the initial phase of hyperbolic condemnation of suburbia pioneered by mid-twentieth-century social theorists John Keats, Lewis Mumford, Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon, and Max Gunther had been superseded by the late 1960s, its warnings of hallucinating young mothers, Peeping Toms, suicidal businessmen, and delinquents-intraining were adapted by the Suburban Gothic fiction that had risen fully to prominence at that time, and have remained central to this particular expression of horror ever since (Murphy 316).

This article will analyse a recent complication of Suburban Gothic fiction, in the shape of the first season of the Netflix-produced supernatural television series *Stranger Things* (2016),<sup>2</sup> created by Matt and Ross Duffer. The series' exposure of a monstrosity that lurks behind American suburbia makes Gothic a particularly applicable category for analysing the national fears that the show addresses. Horror texts about and set in suburbia established in preceding decades, identified most strikingly by Ira Levin's novels *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and *The Stepford Wives* (1972), and by cinematic feats of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Carrie* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), and *Fright Night* (1985), represent monstrosity, hauntings, and other supernatural and psychological threats (especially towards women and children) emerging from within suburbia. The boy or girl next door, the seemingly perfect wife and mother, and the secretive neighbourhood watch group are the true (if not literal then at least metaphorical) monsters of this fiction. Although other, more recent contributions to Suburban Gothic further this notion of domestic decay, including *It Follows* (2015) and the film adaptation of Stephen King's *IT* [1986] (2017), *Stranger Things* modifies the formula, establishing a positive example of the suburban family in its endurance of supernatural home invasion. This break from the norm in Suburban Gothic may in fact be one of its defining features. Murphy writes that:

The suburb is, after all, an in-between space by definition: located beyond the heart of a town or city, yet still existing within its urban orbit. [...] Given that the Gothic so often arises from the gap between what something is and what it is not, it is also perhaps hardly surprising that from the beginnings of mass suburbanization, the milieu has proven a more than fitting venue for horror and Gothic narratives feeding off these kinds of contradictions. (Murphy 317)

Located within the circumference of Suburban Gothic's influence and yet exclusive of some of its most identifiable features, *Stranger Things'* fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, and the Byers household therein, are haunted by forces that are simultaneously beyond their limits – what they are not – and features central to their suburban construction: what they in fact are. These contradictions arise with the series' introduction of a parallel dimension premise, the Upside Down – a frightening mirror copy of the suburban space and what suburbia is not – and the ways in which this supernatural element reveals pre-existing suburban prejudices, most notably against the figure of the single mother – what suburbia is. *Stranger Things* also uses relations between Hawkins and its Upside Down opposite, and between the town and the sinister Hawkins National Laboratory at its periphery, to overlap *heimlich* and *unheimlich* versions of suburbia, by turns identifying the image of the suburban home as a restorative haven in which children and their families can communicate with and draw strength from one another, and marking its borders as sites of confusion, horror and incarceration, constituting a layer that threatens rather than protects the people within.

Firstly, this article will analyse Stranger Things' interpretation of the Suburban Gothic's focus on motherhood, through the figure of the defiant Joyce Byers, single mother to the abducted Will Byers, and her perception by the Hawkins community who do not believe her accounts of the supernatural events occurring within her house following her son's disappearance. Here, the Byers house walls as sites of supernatural manifestation articulate fears of physical and psychological entrapment, and of barriers to communication between suburban community and family members – pertinent themes of 2016, the year in which consideration of improvements to the Mexico-US border wall contributed to Donald Trump's rise to ultimate political success. Secondly, this article will explore the series' conflation of Suburban Gothic and Neoliberal Gothic to articulate concerns regarding the military-industrial complex's intervention in global affairs during the early 1980s in which Stranger Things is set - events which are analogous to contemporary political events. Developing into an established critique by the second decade of the twenty-first century, Neoliberal Gothic traces the emergence of the political ideology of neoliberalism back to the governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the US and UK respectively, articulating "the social and existential consequences of thirty years of laissez-faire capitalism," and the shifting of the role of the State "from the provision of social welfare to the facilitation of global trade" (Blake and Monnet 1; 5). The Hawkins National Laboratory's secretive military research, aimed at outcompeting the Soviets in the Cold War, disrupts the suburban family by abducting individual family members for use as test subjects, puts it in mortal danger through investigation into the supernatural parallel realm of the Upside Down, and discredits those - again, primarily single mothers - seeking answers from their government in the aftermath of tragedies resulting from this action. The Laboratory's participation in a wider Reaganite plan of capitalist domination at home and abroad reveals an alternate vision of the American suburban family: one haunted by patriarchal aggression, trauma, and social isolation.

# "About One Step from Falling Off the Edge": The Liminality of Joyce Byers and the Byers Household

The narrative of *Stranger Things* is centred largely upon the coming-of-age of four twelve-year-old friends: the boys Dustin, Lucas, Mike, and Will. Will's domestic situation is of a single-parent household, which consists of him, his older brother Jonathan, and their mother Joyce. In Suburban Gothic, those who do not

conform to the homogenised nuclear family model of suburbia are often viewed with suspicion or as a threat to neighbourhood harmony; the subgenre "consistent[ly] focus[es] on the relationship between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' and the dramatization in Gothic terms of middle-class fears about family and community safety" (Murphy, "How Will I Explain How We Live Behind A Wall?" 242). During a search party by Hawkins townspeople for the missing Will, two policemen discuss Joyce's psychological state in the aftermath of his vanishing: "about one step from falling off the edge" (*Stranger Things*, S1E2), according to Jim Hopper, Hawkins Chief of Police. "She's been a few steps for a while, hasn't she?" another officer, Calvin Powell, replies. To this, Hopper responds with: "[Her] kid's missing, man. Show a little class." This brief exchange reveals two details.

The first of these details is that authorities within the Hawkins community perceive Joyce as someone who is liminal to local society. Even before her son is reported missing, questions surrounding her mental health mark her as an outsider to the suburban public. Her identity as a single mother, before the supernatural reasons for Will's abduction are exposed to any of the townspeople, identifies her as a threat to her son's safety. When Chief Hopper tells Joyce that when a child goes missing, "ninety nine out of 100 times [...] the kid is with a parent or relative" (Stranger Things, S1E1), Jonathan goes to their father Lonnie's home in the city of Indianapolis, to check if Will is there. When it becomes apparent that this is not the case, Lonnie says to Jonathan: "I just assumed she forgot where he was. She [Joyce] even know you're here? Oh great. So one kid goes missing, the other one runs wild? Real fine parenting right there" (Stranger Things, S1E2). While the show's exchanges between Jonathan and his father reveal anxieties surrounding suburban motherhood, they tip the balance of opinion in its favour. They pose a negative portrayal of fatherhood – a violent hypermasculinity that blames the disintegration of the family unit on a suburban single mother disinterested in her children's upbringing - against Joyce. Although she is struggling to comprehend the true, supernatural nature of Will's disappearance, she cares deeply for her children. Suburban Gothic narratives explore fears concerning the mother's danger to the community by caring either too much or (in this example) too little for her children. In feminist theorisations of the Suburban Gothic: "the homemaker, with her special relationship to maternity and the home, emerges as a logical focus for the contestation of anxieties about the uncanny nature of femininity and the threats it might conceal" (Waters, "The Horrors of Home" 61-62). While Joyce is not merely a homemaker (she also works at a local general store to provide for her sons), she is the sole, female adult responsible for her children's safety and the orderly upkeep of her house. As a working single mother, then, she is therefore judged on the basis of her gender for any perceived economic and social failings. The analysis that follows will deal with the mother's struggle against patriarchal counternarratives in her claiming kinship with her family and the interposing of walls and other barriers as obstacles on the path to this achievement.

Secondly, Police Chief Hopper, who was briefly in a relationship with Joyce after her divorce from Lonnie, lost a daughter, Sara, to cancer, and is more of a father figure to the Byers boys than the mother's ex-husband, emerges as an ally of hers in her fight to regain her son. He exposes the government coverup of the supernatural forces appearing in the woods that surround some of the more peripheral Hawkins houses, including the Byers's own. His assertion during the initial search that the other police officer respect the anxious Joyce signals the origin of this supportive attitude towards her pariah situation in suburbia. However, there are conditions to this male assistance of female characters who experience the first instances of the supernatural and whose claims attesting to its existence are not taken at face value. When Joyce's concern

as to the whereabouts of her missing son develops into a witnessing in her home of echoes of Will's trapped presence from the Upside Down – after it appears the child's body has been recovered from a local, flooded quarry by State Police – Hopper mistakes her experience of the supernatural for one of grief, telling her:

"After Sara I saw her, too. And I heard her. I didn't know what was real. And then I figured out that it was in my mind. And I had to pack all that away. Otherwise, I was gonna fall down a hole that I couldn't get out of.""No, you're... you're talking about grief. This is different.""I'm just saying that you...""No, I know what you're saying, Hop. I swear to you, I know what I saw. And I'm not crazy.""I'm not saying that you're crazy.""No, you are. And I understand, but God, I ... I need you to believe me. Please. Please.""Listen, I think you should go to the morgue tomorrow and see him for yourself. It'll give you the answers that you need." (Stranger Things, S1E4)

This gentle denial of Joyce's testimony, despite her pleas, situates Will's existence in the family home as a psychological effect of her grief. Hopper's rational claim that the boy is in the morgue acts as an implicit opposition to her experience of the supernatural, dramatising male authority both in the domestic situation, and across the wider suburban community. In its uptake of this gendered conflict, *Stranger Things* again leans in support of Joyce, highlighting her determination and emotional connection to her children as crucial factors. When she follows Hopper's advice and visits the morgue to ascertain whether or not the corpse is that of her son's, she asks the coroner from behind the glass barrier through which she is permitted to view the body to reveal a birth mark on Will's right arm. This scene demonstrates Joyce's incredulity towards deceptions of patriarchal, Federal institutions of government and medical science enshrined in the Hawkins National Lab, bested as they are by her intimate knowledge of her own son. Storming out of the autopsy room, she exclaims to the coroner: "I don't know what you think that thing is in there, but that is not my son!" (*Stranger Things*, S1E4).

While Joyce sees through false hard evidence, thereby vindicating her already-established convictions regarding actual events in the town, hard evidence alone is required to convince the mostly male characters that the threat to suburbia is supernatural and being covered up by the authorities. Only when Hopper investigates the body for himself to discover its inauthenticity as a stuffed replica does he suspect that there is more to the situation than can be explained rationally, aiding a shift in perception of events from a purely psychological manifestation of the mother's personal trauma towards a corroborated world of supernatural reality in which she is no longer isolated.

As an expression of the wider delegitimisation of women's experiences that is formative of patriarchy, the extent to which mothers are positioned at the heart of a family or community is predicated on their being believed. In *Stranger Things*, Joyce's initial isolation after her son's disappearance revolves around the image of the wall, namely the walls of her suburban home into which she withdraws, and which act as the enclosure of a prison. As Murphy argues in her analysis of *La Zona* (2007), a Mexican film about the horrors occurring within a prim gated community, walls in the Suburban Gothic reveal that "in typical Gothic fashion, a placid, peaceful

exterior can never entirely conceal the rot beneath" (Murphy, "How Will I Explain How We Live Behind A Wall?" 245). In Stranger Things, the Upside Down parallel world seeps into the conventional world via its manifestation on the interior of the house's walls, which appear normal from the outside. As Charles L. Crow notes, "the suburb, so apparently fresh and new, is only a layer in a historical palimpsest; the earlier script keeps bleeding through" (Crow, American Gothic 165). Stranger Things places suburbia in a dimensional rather than historical strata, dramatising a breaking into suburbia by its repressed, contemporary darkness rather than by an obscured past. The suburban house wall as the site of this convergence reflects an inner crisis of America, Gothicising community divisions, both physical and psychological, presented by the now-prominent image of the Mexico Border Wall popularised by the Trump presidential campaign. In episode three of Stranger Things, a terrified Joyce witnesses the shape of a monster's head protruding from the Upside Down within one of the walls of her home, while in the following episode, Will, abducted into the other dimension by this creature, appears to exist behind another of these walls. Joyce frantically tears off its wallpaper to witness him face to face, yet behind a transparent, organic wall which is part of the Upside Down. She then promises him: "I swear I am gonna get to you, ok?" (Stranger Things, S1E4). It is here where the Suburban Gothic palimpsest of suburban and supernatural barriers is depicted most strikingly in Stranger Things, suggesting through this scene's use of Horror imagery that there exists behind the everyday walls of the home a horrifying power of violent separation that haunts the collective American consciousness.

While walls function ultimately as obstacles to triumph over in the location and rescuing of Will, their ability to divide the family unit both physically and psychologically, and to weaken the emotional bonds between its members, is also central to their significance in the series. In a poignant turn near the end of episode four, an episode after the convincing fake double of Will's body manufactured by the government is pulled out of the quarry to present a credible cover story for his disappearance, Jonathan and Joyce disagree over whether it is the real thing or not. The former is initially convinced, and begins mourning his brother, whereas the latter, as the only witness to Will's reflected presence from the Upside Down, steadfastly refuses to believe in the corpse's authenticity. Joyce tells Jonathan:

He talked to me! Will is calling to me! And he's out there, and he's alone, and he's scared, and I don't care if anyone believes me! I am not gonna stop looking for him until I find him and bring him home.I am going to bring him home!

To which he responds with:

Yeah, well, while you're talking to the lights, the rest of us are having a funeral for Will! I'm not letting him sit in that freezer another day! (Stranger Things, S1E4)

This difference in opinion splits the family. In a later scene, Joyce hovers momentarily outside Jonathan's closed bedroom door, undecided as to whether she should enter and comfort him or let him grieve alone. As she decides upon the latter and walks away from the door, the song "Atmosphere," by the band Joy Division plays. The track's lyrics "don't turn away in silence" narrate the family's breakdown. Here, the suburban wall's

strength lies in its mental hold over the house's occupants, preventing their reunification; the physical aspect of this barrier alone would be circumvented easily. The power of walls, particularly in the contemporary age in which *Stranger Things* is produced, operates not merely along lines of physically dividing communities, then, but also of isolating them psychologically.

### "We'll Be Ok": Joyce Byers as Light in the Darkness of the Suburban Home

Before Chief Hopper and Jonathan commit to an understanding of Will's entrapment in the Upside Down through their own investigations, their discussion of Joyce's mental health involves her obsession with the walls of her suburban home, which, for them, marks a distinct aberration in her psychological state. Ultimately, however, the love and support the Byers family members have for one another (including Hopper, the quasifather) run deep throughout the series, preserving the family unit, and enabling it to regain the territory of the home from supernatural intrusion.<sup>3</sup> Earlier on in episode four, when Hopper and Jonathan are sitting in a hospital waiting room while Joyce is ascertaining the identity of the fake corpse in the morgue, the two male characters have the following, touching exchange:

"How long's this stuff been going on? With the lights and, uh Will and the thing in the wall?" "Since the first phone call, I guess. You know, she's had anxiety problems in the past. But this I don't know. I'm worried it could be Ugh, I don't know." "She'll be okay." "We'll be okay. My mom, she's tough." "Yeah, she is." (Stranger Things, S1E4)

While their discussion points to Joyce's pre-existing psychological issues and therefore to the supernatural occurrences as hallucinated, she is positioned in the conversation as occupying a vital role in the family's wellbeing – a resilient centre point from which the other members draw strength.

Despite the assignation of this status as a beacon of hope for the family, Joyce, whose testimony is not believed by others, possesses a high degree of independence in her interaction with the interdimensional traces of her son in her house. It is not only the walls of the house and the darkness and division they cast therein that shape *Stranger Things'* depiction of the marginal suburban home and family, but also the recurrent images of light shining in this darkness. Lights in the Byers household indicate at once *unheimlich* and *heimlich* experiences.

In terms of the *unheimlich*, the electrical lights in the house flicker hauntingly, betraying an uncanny, unfamiliar presence in the town that invades the home; the power fluctuations are caused by the existence of a portal at the US Department of Energy-run Hawkins National Laboratory connecting the Upside Down dimension through which the monster gained access to the terrestrial, suburban reality, despite the laboratory staff's best efforts to contain it. This combination of threatening, supernatural power and faulty, electrical energy supplied by a compromised military-industrial entity complicates the traditional understanding of Suburban Gothic: "a place in which the most dangerous threats come from *within*" (Murphy, "Identical Boxes Spreading

Like Gangrene" 319). Instead, the Hawkins Laboratory represents a threat at once interior and exterior to the suburban home. The power grid ties the modern, domestic environment to a dominant, governmental authority, illustrating the unequal social power relations between the two. It demonstrates the ability of this authority to corrupt the suburban experience through the former's control, hubris, and mistakes. The following section will take this analysis further, exploring the ways in which American suburban life, characterised by the Wheeler family's domesticity, is predicated on the nation's industrialised military efforts, suggesting that the Hawkins Lab forms an extended realm of the suburban home. This configuration can be read through *Stranger Things'* conflation of Suburban and Neoliberal Gothic themes.

Electric lights also mark the suburban house as a place of survival and nostalgia and enable communication to take place between separated family members. While, for Melanie Waters, "in recent drama the home is rarely a safe haven to which female characters retreat to rest or recuperate; rather it is always and already a site which is eminently vulnerable to threats that are conjured within – and without – its architectural borders" (Waters 67), the Byers house is a site less of the mother's susceptibility to attacks on and in the home than it is of her resistance against such forces. Precious family memories, and their embodiment specifically in Christmas lights, are key in Joyce's desire to connect with her missing son.

The notion of the suburban home as a point of safety is echoed in Will's movements in the Upside Down. In the alternate dimension in which he is trapped, he hides from the monster at the mirror version of his mother's house. Joyce senses his presence across the barrier between the worlds, locating him within the home and explaining to a disbelieving Jonathan: "I just know that Will is here" (Stranger Things, S1E3). As Will begins to send signals attesting to this fact by flickering the lightbulbs in the house, Joyce strings up Christmas lights to help develop this communication. To Karen Wheeler, a visitor who comes in support of her and asks about these decorations, Joyce replies: "Will always loved Christmas, you know. So I thought if I put the lights up, he'd feel like he was home somehow" (Stranger Things, S1E3). The Christmas lights serve as an attempt to make the house heimlich, as an indication of his spiritual presence within the home, and, when coupled with one of the house's walls, enable further communication between mother and son. Joyce paints the alphabet onto this wall, aligning each letter with a Christmas light, allowing Will to spell out answers to her questions. Here the house's wall is transformed from an instrument of division and pacification by a proactive female occupant into an instrument that strengthens family bonds and provides hope, literally overwriting the wall's established properties within the Suburban Gothic's nightmarish entrapment of women. Such a preexisting scheme, with its psychological and economic elements, is typically presented as a Gothic "site of mass conformity and isolation where the individual is vulnerable and damningly alone, even if married and especially if female" (Davidson, "The American Dream/The American Nightmare" 491), where "DIY repair costs and the loss of social standing are often just as disturbing to the Suburban Gothic protagonist as more obviously sinister threats" (Murphy, "How Will I Explain How We Live Behind A Wall?" 249). Joyce Byers, in her determination to locate and return her son, disregards these suburban concerns in pursuit of the reunification of her family.

However, the wall's mental impact upon the suburban mother remains. In episode four, after Will's appearance in the wall when the two dimensions overlap momentarily, Joyce takes an axe to this wall in an attempt to free him, only to puncture a hole right through it, inadvertently creating a window to the outside of the house. This action is followed by a long reverse-tracking shot of the house by which she is framed, her

presence dwarfed by her diminishing size and the slowly-expanding empty space created by this camera movement. During this take, she stares blankly through the newly-forced portal in the wall in a state of confusion and disbelief at Will's location beyond the confines of conventional geography. This shot establishes that it is not the (easily breached) wall as physical barrier or its destruction in an act of property damage that represents the full force of its horror. Rather, it is the wall as psychological state of disorientation and isolation – this abstract, extra property or dimension that *Stranger Things* Gothicises via its Upside Down realm – that reveals the wall's detrimental, lasting effects on suburban communities.

### "Screw That": Resistance and Conformity to Neoliberal Suburbia

My mom was young. My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money, came from a good family. So they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac and started their nuclear family. Screw that – Nancy Wheeler, *Stranger Things*, S1E5

Throughout the series, the suburban home is both physical and ideological security against external forces. The domestic environment of Will's friend, Mike Wheeler - which Mike's elder sister Nancy denigrates with her rebellious "screw that" - is positioned in many ways as the ideal suburban life, in contrast to that of the Byers's liminal yet more real variation. The Wheeler nuclear family is surrounded by an ideological, protective apparatus of American technology and consumer goods. The distinction between the friends' homes reveals two distinctions of Suburban Gothic. On the one hand, the Byers's home is more akin to the frontier steading of earlier American Gothic, with its close physical and psychological proximity to the primal wildness of the woods - the image of the axe neatly encompassing both the pioneer or backwoods history of the nation and the more modern Gothic suggestion of psychosis and violence in domestic spaces. On the other hand, the Wheelers' home reflects a more recognisable Suburban Gothic, revealing not the threatening power of nature or the supernatural, but of the American military-industrial complex and neoliberal capitalism. Mike's house is one of plenty. Unbeknownst to the rest of his family, he provides shelter to a girl, Eleven, who possesses psychic and telekinetic powers and who escaped from Hawkins Lab (its staff were conducting experiments to find military applications for her abilities). Leading her up from her hiding place in the basement of the house when the other family members are absent, he introduces her to the comforts of his home: "You want anything to drink? We have OJ, skim milk [...] this is my living room. It's mostly just for watching TV. Nice, right? It's a twenty-two inch. That's like, ten times bigger than Dustin's" (Stranger Things, S1E2). The series draws a connection between this site of leisured, domestic consumption and American competition in capitalist and military affairs. In doing so, it merges two subgenres of the Gothic: Suburban and Neoliberal Gothic. This combination enables a focus to be placed "on the family home as the primary site of everyday life under neoliberalism" (Blake and Monnet 11), in which a seemingly-perfect domesticity betrays dark, economic foundations. Here, "the role of the State has shifted under neoliberalism from the provision of social welfare to the facilitation of global trade," with "the neoliberal subject [...] recast as agent of his or her individual destiny, repeatedly fashioning him- or herself in whatever image the market demand(s) whilst being held fully responsible for any failure to prosper" (Blake and Monnet 5; 4).

Joyce fails to meet the economic demands for personal prosperity. She chooses not to conform to this society's market demands, instead taking time off her work at the general store to attempt communication with Will and thereby bearing the accountability for her family's financial and domestic deterioration. When she returns to the shop to buy more Christmas lights and a new phone (after two previous phones were broken in the power fluctuations during Will's attempts to communicate from the Upside Down) which she cannot afford, her manager looks disapprovingly at her. Joyce's insistence on retaining open channels of communication with her absent son overrides her perception of her role as a productive worker. During an earlier trip to replace her initial phone, she convinces her manager to withhold the charge for these goods by telling him how she has never called in sick or missed a shift and has worked Christmas Eve and Thanksgiving. On this second visit, however, and in response to the manager's repeated disdain, she simply responds with an exasperated utterance of: "Just ring me up, Donald!" (Stranger Things, S1E3).

Mike and Nancy's parents, Ted and Karen Wheeler, however, have been far more willing to adapt to the economic climate of neoliberalism, successful in refashioning their identities to suit its constantly-shifting nature. Yet the framing of their lives suggests to viewers of *Stranger Things* a fakery every bit as visible as that of the deception of the artificial Will's staged death, and a decline of a different sort. In contrast to Joyce's defiance against the suburban system of normative family maintenance through steady employment and health, Jonathan portrays the Wheelers, Nancy included, as subscribing to a blind upkeep of the neoliberal self, a status quo that is degenerative of the individual human spirit. When relations between him and Nancy strain as the pair hunt for the monster, he describes her in the following way:

Nancy Wheeler, she's not just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does until that phase passes and they marry some boring one-time jock who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul-de-sac. Exactly like their parents, who they thought were so depressing, but now, hey, they get it. (*Stranger Things*, S1E5)

Jonathan's outburst points to the simultaneous shifting of identity – from jock to salesperson living in the suburbs – in line with neoliberal market demands, and the stagnation of identity: from a rejection of this lifestyle to an acceptance of it. 'Thus', as is common throughout Neoliberal Gothic:

it is not the typical gothic tropes [...] (the abandoned houses, the quasi-supernatural threats) that seem most grotesque, but the way the demands of neoliberal entrepreneurial subject-formation cannot help but create monsters or a sense of entropic decline, despite a rhetoric of continuous evolutionary improvement. (Johansen, "The Neoliberal Gothic: Gone Girl, Broken Harbour, and the Terror of Everyday Life" 31)

The supernatural forces haunting the Byers household, terrifying though they may be, reveal ultimately that family's authentic love and support for one another, and their determination to remain together. Conversely, the

less-traditionally Gothic manifestations of the Neoliberal subgenre expose a regression in progress, a collapse of youthful questioning of a capitalist-driven society into adult complicity.

The Wheeler's top-of-the-range television set reveals the political apparatus that surrounds the neoliberal suburban house. When Eleven is alone in the Wheeler's basement after Mike's earlier introduction of his home, she ascends to investigate the house for herself, approaches the television, and surfs the channels. Flicking between them reveals glimpses of the combined commercial and political climate of America in the early 1980s, which presents clear parallels to those of contemporary times. We hear an extract of the then US President Ronald Reagan's "October 1983 Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada" (1983) speech, which reported on the then-recent Beirut bombing of US and French soldiers' barracks by Islamic Jihadi-driven suicide trucks laden with explosives, aired fears of a Soviet-backed Syrian annexation of Lebanon, and defines Lebanon and the Middle East as an "area [...] key to the economic and political life of the West" ("President Reagan's 27 October 1983 Address to the Nation" n.p). The next station Eleven turns to depicts an episode excerpt from the popular cartoon series He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (1983-1985), based on a line of popular action figures, further connecting America's fantasy of dominating another region through martial strength to its popular and consumerist culture. After cycling through a couple of shopping channels, she lands on a station on which an advertisement for Coca-Cola - ultimate symbol of American consumer culture and desire - is being broadcast. Here, the linkages between commercialism and the militaryindustrial pacification of young people are at their most pronounced. Eleven's sight of the popular soft drink on the television triggers a traumatic memory: the experimentation by Hawkins Lab scientists on her telekinetic abilities - specifically, a test to ascertain if she can crush an empty Coca-Cola can with her mind.

The obvious echoes of unethical government research projects involving unwilling participants, such as MKUltra, and the exploitation of children under the auspices of global consumer brands belies a wider function of the military-industrial complex. The Hawkins Lab, situated on the limits of the town, acts as a protective military barrier and extension of Reagan's political ideology of securing energy resources and borders, both at home and abroad, against Soviet interference. It also constitutes the extended, neoliberal domain of suburbia, and the outer edges of the Suburban Gothic. Further outlying the town than the Byers household which backs onto the foreboding woods, the Hawkins Lab is fully enmeshed in Gothic darkness: a technological, profound corruption at the heart of the primal forest. References to the institution's secrecy and strange activities that take place inside the building tie it to an excessive national security which drifts into the aggressive fantasy of American foreign policy echoed by He-Man. When Chief Hopper and other officers drive to the perimeter of the Lab grounds to check if Will is inside, one of them remarks: "I heard they make space weapons in there. You know, like Reagan's Star Wars. I guess we're gonna blow the Ruskies to smithereens" (Stranger Things, S1E3). The institution and interior of the Lab act as a twisted parallel to family and home. During her incarceration, Eleven refers to Lab director Martin Brenner, who encourages and monitors her abilities during the experiments, and disciplines her physically when she refuses to participate, as 'Papa.' The quarters she is housed in, according to Hopper when he broke into the Lab, constitute "a kid's room [...] More like a prison. [...] The size of the bed, there was a drawing [...] a drawing of an adult and a child" (Stranger Things, S1E6). This scene, positioned as the core of the American domestic nightmare, exposes the exploitive and abusive character of the patriarchal family in its purest form: under the Reaganite neoliberal apparatus. Eleven's drawing of her and her 'Papa' calls to mind the drawings done by maltreated children. This patriarchy

is an extension to existing suburban social behaviour in that it also undermines the opposing narratives of mothers. When the police are stonewalled in their investigation into Hawkins Lab by its security personnel, they turn to newspaper archives on the subject in the local library and discover the origins of Eleven's confinement as an experiment at the Lab through the identification of her mother: "This lady, Terry Ives, sounds like a real nut to me. Her kid was taken for LSD mind control experiments. She's been discredited. Claim was thrown out." The institution's hostility to children and mothers, Hopper theorises, explains the Byers incident: "Maybe Will was in the wrong place at the wrong time and saw something he shouldn't have" (Stranger Things, S1E3). While the latter abduction was carried out by the Upside Down monster that escaped from the Lab rather than by Lab staff personally, this authority's breaking apart of the family unit (intended or otherwise), unravelling of single mothers' minds, and casting disrepute on their narratives to cover up its research activities are processes exterior yet complimentary to suburbia's own inner, social degeneration.

### **Conclusion: Byers Remorse**

In Stranger Things, the military-industrial complex and its neoliberal excesses of economic and territorial expansionism function in tandem with suburbia. As old, foreign borders across the Middle East come down, insofar as they enable the deregulated circulation of American capital, new, domestic borders are erected. The Cold War-oriented science of Hawkins Lab and the homogenised, suburban life secured by an American victory in this military and ideological conflict are interlinked. Where the Wheeler parents fell comfortably in line with the pacified, suburban existence of affordable home conveniences, social outsiders like Joyce and Jonathan Byers push hard against these boundaries. Their struggle exposes the suburban house under neoliberal conditions as a prison of Gothic nightmares, which must be fought against to regain the sense of family that is familiar to them.

At the close of the series, Chief Hopper and Joyce venture into the Upside Down and rescue Will, bringing him home as promised. In the final scene, Will, safely returned to his house, is about to enjoy a meal at Christmas with his family. This Seasonal setting reverts the home to a heimlich space, recalling Joyce's earlier statement that he always liked Christmas and the communication that took place between them via the Christmas lights when they were separated. This peace is disrupted, however, when Will excuses himself to the bathroom to wash his hands, and vomits up a strange larvae creature, suggesting his body has become host to a parasitic infection from the parallel dimension. The interior of the house is also similarly compromised. During this attack, the bathroom walls flash between their normal and Upside Down versions, implying that Will is not completely free from this other world, that the family is still separated by a barrier, and that the house is still in the grip of supernatural forces. The haven of the restored Byers family household cannot be fully rescued from the haunted structure of suburbia, as conditions for living in this type of housing are dependent on residents' complicity with the militarised securing of energy at home and abroad, and on outcompeting of foreign political powers; for Joyce to have her son back, she must agree to forgo all acknowledgement of Hawkins Lab's involvement in his disappearance. This governmental authority's attempts to interact in global economic and political affairs is Gothicised in the shape of the experiments conducted on Eleven and the meddling in the forces of the Upside Down, dramatising the impact of the horrors of neoliberalism on vulnerable family

members who are isolated within suburban life.

This article has articulated the notion of an ongoing struggle within suburbia between liminal families and the monstrosity that represents a socially conformist domesticity and the military-industrial power that supports it. In addition, however, I also posit further, potential research based on my analysis within the Suburban Gothic, by contributing to it the idea that suburbia might also be a positive site of survival, precious family memory, and the more ambivalent, ideological concept of nostalgia. Stranger Things trades heavily in all these things, and as the commercialisation of nostalgia in the 2010s becomes ever more apparent, a path that secures an authentic past from its resurrected, uncanny double must now be forged.

### **NOTES**

- 1. Gordon, Richard E. Katherine K. Gordon, Max Gunther. The Split-Level Trap, quoted in Murphy, "Identical Boxes Spreading Like Gangrene" 316. See also Keats, John. The Crack in the Picture Window (1956), and Mumford, Lewis. The City in History, its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects (1961). Murphy cites Herbert J. Gans's The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community (1967) and Scott Donaldson's The Suburban Myth (1969) as key instances of the tempering of sociological criticism directed at suburbia.
- **2.** Hereafter, this article will use the title *Stranger Things* to refer exclusively to the first season of the show; as of 27 October 2017, a second season has been aired on Netflix, which I do not discuss.
- 3. The notion of the American family unit, a heavily-politicised and capitalist-driven, hetero-normalising concept of patriarchy, which was pushed rigorously by the Reagan Administration in the 1980s, might at first seem at odds with the feminist inclination I am tracing throughout my argument. Nonetheless, I seek to locate a positivity in the American family on its own terms, outside the US government and economy's social construction of it, via the Byers's rejection by and of this patriarchal power. This, in contrast to the Wheeler family's acquiescence to the political authorities' restrictive definitions of the family, reveals in Joyce Byers and her sons a feminist opposition to the male-dominated institutions of health, the law, and science represented in *Stranger Things* by suburban life in the town of Hawkins.

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## **BIONOTE**

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# THE MAGICAL IS POLITICAL: DECONSTRUCTING THE GENDERED SUPERNATURAL IN *TEEN*WOLF

Tania Evans and Madeline Pettet

"The bite is a gift," explains protagonist and alpha werewolf Scott McCall<sup>1</sup> in the fourth season of MTV's *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) as he attempts to explain lycanthropy to a newly turned werewolf (S4E4). If the supernatural is a gift it is gendered, affecting masculine and feminine characters in different ways<sup>2</sup>. In the context of the contemporary cinematic werewolf, Rosalind Sibielski in "Gendering the Monster Within" (2014) observes that:

monstrosity itself is gendered, with the forms that it takes reproducing hegemonic discourses surrounding sexual difference by proposing that male and female lycanthropy – much like masculinity and femininity – are not just rooted in the body, but also in the bodily differences between women and men. (115-116)

In Teen Wolf adolescent masculine characters are empowered by the supernatural, which allows them to reproduce hegemonic norms, as Sibielski suggests. Yet lycanthropy also creates space and visibility for imagining the masculine body and violence outside of these normative constraints. Conversely, supernatural feminine characters are perpetually disempowered by magic in ways that reinforce conservative ideas about the female body, femininity, and female sexuality, rather than embracing them in an Amazon feminist narrative. This is not to say that Teen Wolf unfalteringly promotes subversive masculinities and polices femininities; the text engages in the complex ideological struggle between what Stuart Hall in "Notes on deconstructing 'the popular'" (2006) refers to as "containment" and its inevitable partner "resistance" (445). Magic arouses a complex mediation on masculine and feminine gender performativity, which Judith Butler defines in Gender Trouble (1990) as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (82). By mapping how magic repeats and/or rearranges masculine and feminine performativity, we reveal the complex and often contradictory meanings surrounding gender in Teen Wolf, as part of the paranormal romance genre.

Werewolves and adolescence have been connected in cinema and television since the 1980s (Flaherty; Kehr; McMahon-Coleman; Miller; Pulliam). Female adolescence has often been read back onto the werewolf because of the correlation between lunar cycles and menstrual cycles (Bourgault Du Coudray, Cycle; Creed, Monstrous-Feminine; Pulliam, Monstrous Bodies; Schell), a connection which has been realised in films and novels such as Ginger Snaps (2000), Blood and Chocolate (1997, 2007), and In-Human (2010). However, the vast majority of cinematic and televisual werewolves have been masculine, from The Wolf Man (1941; see

Creed, *Phallic Panic*) to more recent characters such as Jacob Black in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2009), Remus Lupin in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (1998-2007), George in *Being Human* (2008-2013 and 2011-2014), Peter in *Hemlock Grove*, and Tyler in *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017). Scholars have explicitly outlined the connection between masculinity and lycanthropy, including Barbra Creed (*Phallic Panic*), Heather Schell, Sibielski, and Chantal Bourgault Du Coudray (*Curse*). While adolescence often surfaces in these studies, there has yet to be a sustained investigation of the adolescent masculine werewolf in contemporary television. In the context of adolescent female werewolves, June Pulliam in "Blood and Bitches" (2012) argues that:

the werewolf's sudden growth of body hair and aggressive behavior link it to the changes associated with male adolescence. Although the werewolf's explosive anger and intense desires for food and sex place him outside of the boundaries of civilized humanity, they are also extreme iterations of normative masculinity. (239)

Pulliam highlights the connection between masculine adolescence and lycanthropy, although few scholars have considered it in depth. Yet such an analysis is critical considering that both werewolves and young men find themselves in a period of intense change where they must grapple with their own and their expected relationship to violence, the body, and sexuality, among other things.

These transformations are a key concern in *Teen Wolf*, which follows the story of American high school student Scott McCall as he is bitten by a werewolf and learns how to deal with his lycanthropy amid typical adolescent dramas. The series receives its premise from the 1985 film of the same name, although it expands on the Romance, Gothic, Mystery, and Horror elements where the original film was positioned as a familial comedy. The remake also makes an effort to be inclusive, featuring Tyler Posey, an actor of Mexican descent, as the lead, and introduces characters of diverse races, classes, sexualities, and abilities. The television format also allows *Teen Wolf* to extend its scope from the initial experience with lycanthropy to supernatural mysteries and murders in the town of Beacon Hills, which Scott investigates and solves with a group of human and supernatural friends. The 'monster of the week' pattern allows *Teen Wolf* to experiment with many forms of magical, gendered embodiment across its six-season run.

The body is one of the most visible sites where lycanthropic magic operates in *Teen Wolf*, allowing masculine characters to become stronger and more muscular. Sibielski contends that men's "lycanthropy is signalled through their bulging biceps and washboard abs" (121). Masculine werewolves in *Teen Wolf* are no exception, particularly when they transform into their full werewolf form and their bodies are on display. Their muscularity supports the hegemonic masculine norm, which may be loosely defined as strong, muscular, able, white, handsome, and tall (Drummond, "Reflections on the Archetypal Heterosexual Male Body"). Lycanthropy causes this change for most characters. Before Scott's lycanthropy manifests, his best friend, Stiles, tells him that joining the lacrosse team is a "pathetically unrealistic dream" (S1E1) because of his uncool social position and average body. Stiles moans that he is "a nerd by association. I've been scarlet-nerded by you" (S1E1). In this moment of jocular abuse Stiles situates Scott's lack of bodily prowess as a feminising social crime, which it is according to dominant masculine ideologies. However, as Scott's lycanthropy changes his body he becomes stronger, faster, and hypersensitive, allowing him to make the lacrosse team and woo the new

girl, Allison Argent<sup>a</sup>. Scott says, "I just made first line. I got a date with a girl who, who I can't believe wants to go out with me... Everything in my life is somehow perfect" (S1E1). Because of Scott's lycanthropy, his body undergoes a magical change that allows him to better perform hegemonic masculine acts, in this case sports and heterosexuality.

In embodying this muscular masculine physique, the werewolves are sexualised in a manner typically associated with women under Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze.' Many scenes with these 'hot' male bodies are eroticised and speak to what some scholars have referred to as the (heterosexual) "female gaze" (Goddard) and the "queer gaze" (Wood). These potentially subversive gazes are evident in episode "The Tell" (S1E5) when viewers are encouraged to sexually objectify another werewolf, Derek Hale, as he exercises. The audience sees a close up of Derek's muscular shoulders, neck, and back as he does pull ups, a sheen of sweat visible on his tanned skin. The camera reverses its angle and Derek is seen from the front doing the same exercise, his bare chest visible and his bulging biceps and pecs covered in sweat as he repeats the pulling motion. The episode continues in this vein for a full twenty-four seconds of screen time. Even when the scene's emphasis changes to a fight scene between Peter and his enemies, Derek's physique, especially his abdominal muscles, are emphasised. Derek is not the only masculine werewolf who is eroticised; in "Tattoo" (S3E1) Scott does one-handed pull ups in his bedroom while reading Call of the Wild, and in "Required Reading" (S5E6) a werewolf/werecoyote hybrid called Theo lifts weights and his muscular body is doubled by the gym's mirrors. In each of these instances, the male body is placed in view of the erotic gaze because of the way it is changed by lycanthropic magic. Hegemonic masculine discourses relating to the masculine body are reinforced by the characters' strength and muscularity, but they are also challenged when these bodies are sexualised and placed on display in a way that has traditionally been associated with women.

As masculine werewolves in *Teen Wolf* gain physical strength they also gain greater access to violence, a key trait of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, *Hegemonic*; Connell and Messerschmidt; Hatty) that is negotiated in the high school context through team sports. Lycanthropy has long been linked with aggression; Pulliam ("Blood and Bitches") claims that it is "a subject position whose single most evident marker is violence" (239). Athletics provide a useful analogy for masculine violence in *Teen Wolf* through self-control, cultural changes to masculinity and lycanthropy during adolescence, and biological essentialism. In relation to the latter, Sibielski argues that "the 'killer instinct' awoken in Scott translates into ruthless competitiveness on the athletics field" (120). For Sibielski, sport is the new arena where naturalised violence is expressed for young men and werewolves alike. The most popular sport in *Teen Wolf*, lacrosse, allows the male werewolves' physical prowess to be demonstrated. Yet the series continually shifts the relationship between lycanthropy, masculinity, adolescence, lacrosse, and violence. The sport-violence dialectic that Sibielski highlights is not as stable as she implies: throughout *Teen Wolf* it proves to be as versipellous as the lycanthropic body.

The relationship between athletics and violent lycanthropy moves from an overt connection in season one, to disavowal in season four, and outright absence as organised sport is side-lined in seasons three, five, and six. Right after Scott becomes a werewolf his lacrosse skills improve and he is invited to join the first line of the school lacrosse team (S1E1). Lycanthropy changes Scott's body and allows him to gain the aptitude for violence that manifests as sporting prowess. This link is drawn in "Second Chance at First Line" (S1E2) when Scott struggles not to go 'full wolf' on the field. Stiles explains that "It's the anger. It's your pulse rising" that

causes the change and allows Scott to access the full extent of his power (here, sporting skill). Scott argues that "that's lacrosse" (S1E2), suggesting that for him, sport and violence (and the lycanthropic skills they require) are synonymous. The dynamic between sport and violence changes in season four, in which Scott no longer uses his werewolf talents on the field. During one particularly bad game, Stiles attempts to comfort Scott by telling him "you are the alpha," but Scott says, "I'm human on the field" (S4E3). Stiles encourages him to use "a tiny bit of wolf power," but Scott views the idea as "cheating" (S4E3). Sport has been separated from violence and lycanthropy: lacrosse is still a site where the characters' muscularity and physical prowess are emphasised, but it is no longer a means of highlighting lycanthropic masculine violence. In the seasons where there is little or no organised sport – seasons three, five, and six – violence is instead expressed through self-defence as supernatural threats become more pressing than athletics. The changing dynamic between sport and violence in *Teen Wolf* demonstrates that the athletics field and its relation to lycanthropic violence are not reducible to simple reinforcement of hegemonic gender discourses.

The masculine werewolves' increased capacity for violence often becomes a barrier that hinders their attempts to perform hegemonic masculinity through sport, with heterosexuality figured as the solution. In season one, Scott has difficulty playing lacrosse because it makes him aggressive and raises his pulse, both of which trigger lycanthropic shifts. In "Second Chance at First Line" (S1E2) Scott's coach makes disparaging comments during practice and Scott begins to shift, injuring another player and almost murdering Stiles when they retreat to the locker room. After Scott calms down, Stiles warns him that lacrosse is "going to be a lot more violent if you end up killing someone on the field. You can't play Saturday, you're going to have to get out of the game" (S1E2). The frame shows a medium close up of Stiles sitting at Scott's feet during the first half of the sentence and a close up in the second half, concern visible on his face and menacing music building in the background (S1E2). The music, actor's performance, and blocking suggest that Stiles is correct, and Scott's continued involvement in lacrosse will be dangerous for everyone involved. Stiles' warning proves true: when Scott plays the game and sees his crush, Allison, holding a sign for his rival, he begins to shift in jealous anger. In this state Scott scores enough points to win the game, but afterwards he runs from the field, claws extended and eyes yellow. Lycanthropy provides Scott with increased access to violence and sporting prowess, and while these allow him to better enact his high school's version of hegemonic masculinity, they also limit his ability to receive praise from his peers following the game.

Heterosexuality emerges as the means of resolving this tension between the masculine benefits and consequences of lycanthropy. As R. W. Connell outlines in "Growing Up Masculine" (2005), sexuality is emphasised in the young adult context, as it is viewed as: "the time of sexual awakening, autoerotic experiments and first sexual relationships. Sexual experience is often a source of pride, and a claim to masculine honour, among teenage boys" (14). It is fitting that sexuality, and specifically heterosexuality, has the power to reconcile Scott's masculinity with his lycanthropy. After the game Allison follows Scott into the changing room, where he has transformed. Crouching atop a ceiling beam Scott watches Allison through red-tinted wolf vision, the colour and angle highlighting her position as a potential victim of Scott's bloodlust. Yet Scott manages to calm himself when he sees Allison and is rewarded with a long and passionate kiss. A similar scene takes place in "Pack Mentality" (S1E3) when Scott is on a bowling date with Allison and, in an attempt to improve his dismal score, she tells him to "think about me. Naked." Scott's vision turns red as he bowls a strike for the first time. Heterosexuality is the key to balancing Scott's aggression with his skills, allowing him to be violent during sports

without 'wolfing out'4.

Scott's interactions with Allison reveal that masculine werewolves in *Teen Wolf* are capable of controlling their violence: it is not a product of the 'beast within' but a practice that materialises, and can change, in social interactions. This change reacts to earlier cinematic depictions of werewolves where lycanthropy operated as biological essentialism: werewolves were created as violent beasts and as such they could not control their aggression, implying a similar argument for men's violence in the 'real' world (McMahon Coleman and Weaver 42; Schell 109). Scott's agency also reflects changes to other supernatural creatures in young adult fiction, such as the vampire, for whom the paranormal romance genre provides a means of (re)imagining dominant masculine forms (Linden 2013; Wilson 2011).

Teen Wolf uses adolescence to negotiate and reject masculine violence; growing up means forging one's own identity, particularly when young masculine werewolves take control of their aggression. After the kiss in "Second Chance at First Line" Scott tells Stiles, "I controlled it. I pulled it back" (S1E2). While Scott is expected to be violent because of the cultural discourses surrounding his lycanthropy, he makes the decision to be otherwise. Scott remains consistent in his pacifism throughout the series, even when his own friends are responsible for enacting violence. In "Lies of Omission" (S5E9) Scott learns that Stiles accidentally killed a man who was attacking him. Scott confronts his friend in a dramatic scene featuring heavy rain, low lighting, and mixed use of low angles and emotionally-laden close ups. Scott tells Stiles "we can't kill people" because "there's always a choice" (S5E9). Stiles highlights the power disparity between them, as he is one of few nonsupernatural main characters in the series and is often depicted as physically weak. Stiles suggests that Scott's lycanthropy allows him the agency to choose pacifism: "I can't do what you can, Scott. I know you wouldn't have done it. You would probably figure something out, right?" (S5E9). Stiles implies that Scott's lycanthropic powers give him an increased ability to practice nonviolence, a subversive proposition for both masculinity and the werewolf genre. Nonetheless, Scott holds Stiles to the same standard as other supernatural characters and expects him to avoid violence. In this scene, and those with Allison, Teen Wolf suggests that both human men and werewolves possess the agency to control the aggression that is expected of them.

The strongest critique against violent hegemonic masculinity in *Teen Wolf* comes from re-working the alpha convention, which decentralises aggression as the ultimate source of power. In the *Teen Wolf* universe all packs have an alpha, and any werewolf can achieve this position by murdering an existing pack leader. Far less common is a 'true alpha': a werewolf who becomes an alpha through their character and willpower and, as a consequence, becomes stronger and more powerful than other alphas (S3E7). The only true alpha in *Teen Wolf* is Scott, who gains this role in season three because he attempts to break through a supernatural mountain ash barrier to save his friend and employer, Dr Alan Deaton (S3E7). After the event Deaton tells Scott that his eyes turned red, the colour that denotes an alpha. He explains:

It's something that doesn't happen within a hundred years, but every once in a while, a beta can become an alpha without having to steal or take that power. They call it a true alpha. It's one who rises purely on the strength of character, by virtue, by sheer force of will. (S3E7)

Deaton's description glosses over the other alphas' violence, using the phrase "steal or take" rather than murder, but in doing so he highlights the true alpha as a moral method of gaining power. From this episode onwards the divergence between true alphas and violence is emphasised, suggesting that masculine violence is an inferior path to power.

In Teen Wolf, lycanthropy changes masculine characters and forces them to adopt a new relationship to violence and the body. As they gain strength and muscularity they are also eroticised, becoming sexual objects. On the other hand, supernatural strength increases masculine werewolves' access to violence, and the more successful fighters are physically the strongest but also the most prone to dangerous aggressive outbursts. The tension between masculine skills and unmasculine consequences is balanced through heterosexuality, a privileged discourse in the young adult context where sexuality is explored. As a part of this resolution, the narrative promotes physical violence and its manifestation in athletics as part of the masculine 'coming of age,' although the link between sport and violence becomes ambiguous in later seasons. Conventions such as the true alpha also indicate a changing relationship between violence and power: Scott's pacifism is indicative of changing cultural expectations of hegemonic masculinity as well as the subversive possibilities for (re)imagining gender in the paranormal romance genre.

Lycanthropy changes masculine characters in ways that comment upon hegemonic gender standards. But what happens when female bodies are transformed to encompass this masculine physique? In Monstrous Bodies (2014) Pulliam argues that: "the female werewolf is the embodiment of all that women are compelled to repress in the interest of being stereotypically feminine" (105). Pulliam is referring to the linkage between female werewolves and masculine signifiers, including increased body hair, appetite, aggression, and muscularity (Clark; Pulliam, Monstrous Bodies; Young, "Flexible"). Female characters with masculine werewolf bodies are often constructed as monstrous in an attempt to contain their feminist potential (Bourgault Du Coudray, Cycle; Clark; Pulliam, Monstrous Bodies), rather than embracing their bodies like female bodybuilders or martial artists do in regard to Amazon feminism (Castelnuovo and Guthrie). In Teen Wolf, the feminine werewolves' capacity for challenging dominant gender regimes is minimised because lycanthropy barely affects women and instead reinforces normative Western discourses about femininity as weak, passive, and sexualised.

Women's sexual objectification is reinforced through the supernatural transformation that werewolf character Erica Reyes undergoes in season two. As a human Erica is represented as unattractive through her frizzy hair, lack of make-up, and over-sized clothing, and her epilepsy causes her further distress and embarrassment in her high school milieu (S2E3). In other words, Erica's femininity challenges the expectation that women make themselves sexually attractive to men (and she is policed accordingly by her peers). Once Erica becomes a werewolf her gender performance shifts: as she walks into the cafeteria the first time after being bitten, the camera works its way up from her leopard print heels, over her tight mini skirt, pauses on her cleavage, and ends on her perfectly made-up face and hairs. Everyone stares and Erica revels in her newfound social status and sexual desirability. The magical nature of Erica's metamorphosis is noted by Kimberley McMahon-Coleman in "Dis/ability and Difference in Teen Wolf" (2014), who argues that Lydia's reaction to Erica's appearance – "What the holy hell is that?" (S2E3) –speaks to Erica's non-human status (144). Lydia's reaction highlights the incredulity of Erica's transformation from social outcast to bombshell in twenty-four hours. This reaction also condemns

Erica's newfound sexuality in a reality where high school romances are about holding hands and stolen kisses, rather than sex for female pleasure. Lydia's critique is indicative of the way in which female werewolves in modern tales are characterised by "a compulsion towards sexual gratification" (Sibielski 116), as opposed to the aggression that often – but not always – defines their masculine peers. While Erica's appearance in the lunchroom presents her as a sexual object, it also speaks to her desire for sexual pleasure as she revels in her peers' attention. Erica's transformation from human to werewolf invites viewers to admire her acceptance and conformity to Western feminine beauty standards and sexual objectification, but also to explore her sexual competence.

Erica's actions over later episodes suggest that she has absorbed dominant feminine discourses when she neglects the potential to enact an Amazon feminist change, which is, as Shirley Castelnuovo and Sharon. R. Guthrie describe in Feminism and the Female Body: Liberating the Amazon Within (1998): "to minimize, if not eliminate, the physical power imbalances between herself and the men with whom she interacts" (2). Rather than take advantage of a superhuman body and its potential for new and subversive gender possibilities, Erica continues to perform a sexualised femininity. In contrast to the masculine werewolves, Erica's sexualisation restricts her physical power, especially in combat situations where sex appeal is her only weapon. For example, when Derek is trying to prepare Erica and Isaac for physical confrontations in "Abominations" (S2E4) he says, "Does anyone want to try being not completely predictable?" Erica responds by jumping into his arms, wrapping her legs around him, and kissing him. Similarly, when Erica and Isaac drug Jackson Whittemore before he transforms into a kanima in "Raving" (S2E8), Erica distracts Jackson by dancing provocatively and kissing him. In both scenes Erica's strategy fails: Derek throws her to the floor (S2E4), and Jackson realises Erica and Isaac's plan (S2E8). Femininity does not give Erica agency but prolongs the inevitable situation in which, as Iris Mason Young describes in "Throwing Like a Girl" (1990), "the feminine body underuses its real capacity" (148). Although lycanthropy has magically gifted Erica with a strong body, she has internalised hegemonic femininity and the belief that women should be weak. Erica has no bark or bite and becoming a werewolf only integrates her further into subordination despite the power she could have claimed with her supernatural body.

Where Erica is a sexual object, Derek's younger sister Cora Hale is constructed in ways that align femininity with weakness. Cora first appears in "Chaos Rising" (S3E2) trapped in a bank vault with Boyd, where the two werewolves are experiencing a supernatural psychotic episode. Derek and Scott crash through the wall to rescue them, and as Boyd attempts to disembowel Scott, Derek subdues Cora by simply grabbing her wrists. Cora's physical weakness during fights is repeated in later episodes, including "Unleashed" (S3E4), "Frayed" (S3E5), and "The Girl Who Knew Too Much" (S3E9). By characterising Cora as an annoyance rather than a threat, *Teen Wolf* indicates that lycanthropy has not physically empowered her as it does the male werewolves. She has false confidence in her ability to protect herself and other characters must police her behaviour by reminding her she cannot compete against the male werewolves in combat. This is exemplified in "The Girl Who Knew Too Much" (S3E9), when Cora brushes off her friends' concern after a fight and then half-faints, demonstrating that she does not know her body and needs to be cared for: she is treated as an object to protect. For Cora, lycanthropy has done little more than provide the ability to grow facial hair; otherwise, she is a stereotypical seventeen-year-old girl in the sense that she is physically weak, lithe, and submissive.

In contrast to both Erica and Cora, the alpha werewolf Kali® is physically empowered by her magical

body but is policed with monstrosity because she rejects passive, weak, and sexualised feminine discourses. Kali is the main werewolf threat that Scott and his friends face in the first half of season three. She is capable in battle, as evidenced in "Currents" (S3E7) when she challenges Derek to fight her one-on-one and repeatedly knocks him to ground while he struggles to touch her. Derek and his pack begin to fear Kali in any situation: in "Alpha Pact" (S3E11), Peter asks Derek, "if you couldn't beat her as an Alpha, how do you think you're going to fare as a Beta?" (S3E11). By characterising Kali as a physical threat to other werewolves, *Teen Wolf* suggests that lycanthropy has empowered her. Physical strength allows Kali to exceed normative femininity, giving her heightened agency and power. By becoming a threat to male werewolves, Kali reverses the conventional dynamic described by Castelnuovo and Guthrie in which men control women through the threat of violence.

However, *Teen Wolf* works to normalise conservative femininities through the monstrous female werewolf by demonising women like Kali who perform gender differently (Clark; McMahon-Coleman and Weaver). Kali is characterised as "psychotic" (S3E12), and in this way *Teen Wolf* reinforces the patriarchal belief described by Sherrie A. Inness "Lady Killers: Tough Enough?" (2004) that physically strong women are incapable of reasonable thought. In "Unleashed" (S3E4) Kali describes killing her own pack as "liberating" and gleefully rams a pipe through Derek's back, twisting it to increase his pain. Even Kali's name carries these connotations: in Hindu mythology Kālī is a goddess who "is the primordial wilderness and chaos, the original form of all things and eternity, but also change—time, destruction, and death" (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 53). There are also racial issues surrounding Kali's demonization as she is played by Felisha Terrell, an actress of African American descent. Kali's violence and gender-nonconformity are likely informed by racist stereotypes described by Colette Dowling in *The Frailty Myth* (2000) that perceive black women as more physically capable than white women due to the demands of historical slavery. Like the male werewolves in *Teen Wolf*, Kali has accepted the physical empowerment lycanthropy offers her, but in doing so she challenges Western femininity by refusing to be weak or passive. However, this is not to suggest that Kali sheds all feminine "stylizations of the body" (Butler 35).

The negotiation between conservative and progressive gender discourses is displayed when Kali navigates normative feminine ideals as a female werewolf. In the series, physical appearance signals a character's status as a werewolf, with coloured eyes, claws, fangs, distorted faces, and increased facial hair denoting the lycanthropic shift. When all five elements are present, a character has gone "full wolf," embracing their lycanthropy and its power. A full wolf appearance is most often seen in battles, such as the one in "Frayed" (S3E5) where the alpha pack fights the Beacon Hills werewolves. Cora Hale goes full wolf, but Kali does not because she does not grow the instantly recognisable werewolf sideburns. For Kali, facial hair may be the line between femininity and masculinity that would render her gender performance unintelligible (Butler, 148-149). Conversely, Kali accepts her deviation from normative femininity in relation to her long, clawed toenails. Lydia mocks Kali's feet in "Total Eclipse" (S3E12) telling her she is "in desperate need of a pedicure" (S3E12). Kali has sacrificed certain feminine body styles to make the most of her lycanthropy when, for example, she regularly fights with her feet, slashing her opponents with her clawed toes. The agency she gains from accepting certain parts of her masculine werewolf body demonstrate how lycanthropy can be empowering for women. As Elizabeth M. Clark agues in "'Hairy Thuggish Women' Female Werewolves, Gender and the Hoped-for Monster" (2008): "the idea of a female werewolf is transgressive in that it acknowledges potential in a female body but also in that it shows the female body as hairy and muscled" (28). Kali's character has the agency to go

beyond normative femininity, but she does not completely reject this discourse.

Kali may cling to some feminine performative practices, yet she faces the same end that the majority of physically strong female characters (and monstrous female werewolves) do: she is killed (Inness) by Julia Baccari, a powerful druid. Julia adheres more closely to feminine gender expectations than Kali in the sense that she is physically weak and softly spoken, even if she is also a powerful villain. Julia's victory over Kali can be seen as a means of privileging normative femininity: Julia, a normatively gendered women, is able to defeat Kali, who refuses to submit to restrictive norms, even though Kali is feared by the most powerful masculine werewolves and has proven that she can defend herself.

Yet even Kali's problematic death is more satisfying than those of the other werewolf women in Teen Wolf, who fail to receive narrative closure. Erica is killed by Kali between season two and three (S3E7), although her disappearance at the beginning of season three is overshadowed by Cora's arrival and Erica is never mentioned again. Similarly, Cora's character vanishes with little explanation because she and Derek leave Beacon Hills mid-season three (S312), and while Derek returns later in the same season, Cora is forgotten. Because Erica and Cora reinforce normative ideas about femininity but still possess the potential to threaten the gender order, they are removed from the narrative and viewers are invited to forget their presence. In contrast, Kali's death is explained because of her position in the narrative as a villain. Her complete narrative can be read as a cautionary tale that directs women to avoid physical empowerment and follow accepted feminine behaviours because if they do not, they may be cast as villains and disposed of by a knight in shining armour or a clever but demure princess.

If a female werewolf embraces her magical body in ways that break from conventional gender expectations in the *Teen Wolf* universe, she risks becoming a villain or disappearing from the narrative to be replaced by a character who fits the patriarchal mould<sup>10</sup>. Lycanthropic women are vilified if they are too masculine, which is nearly impossible to avoid when magic makes werewolves strong, muscular, and hairy – traits that have traditionally been considered masculine. The only way for werewolf women to avoid monstrosity is by using feminine performative practices, such as passivity, weakness, and sexual allure (albeit without asserting female pleasure over male pleasure). In this way, the series accepts and privileges conventional and constraining feminine norms: even magic cannot help a woman escape heterosexist policing.

Teen Wolf engages in a complex negotiation between conservative and progressive Western gender discourses. For feminine characters, this struggle is contained by aligning subversive femininities with monstrosity and marginalising feminine subjects who do conform to the role of victim or sexual object. Almost all of the supernaturally powerful feminine characters in the television program are written out or killed with no effect upon the other characters or narrative. While masculine characters and non-supernatural female characters are often cited in later seasons, *Teen Wolf* is content to police magically empowered women and reinforce conservative femininities in Beacon Hills.

These same ideologies are often challenged when it comes to masculinities, especially in relation to violence and the body. At first glance *Teen Wolf* appears to reinforce hegemonic discourses about the strong, handsome, muscular male body and its capacity for gaining power through violence. Yet conservative visuals often disguise a complex (re)negotiation of masculinity. Because of their strong, muscular bodies, masculine

characters are eroticised and objectified in ways that feminise them. Their violence, too, is presented as a force that can stop them from accessing hegemonic masculinity through sports, although this tension is often resolved through heterosexuality. The dialectic between violence and masculinity is also blurred through the shifting relation between athletics and violence and through the true alpha convention, both of which challenge hegemonic masculinity as the only source of masculine power.

If lycanthropy is 'a gift,' it is a multifaceted one through which young audiences are invited to accept complex and contradictory meanings about what it means to be masculine or feminine. *Teen Wolf* invites viewers to recognise and affirm a changing relationship between masculinity, aggression, and lycanthropy, although it refuses to break free from the cycle altogether. Viewers are also encouraged to accept passive and disempowered femininities and reject strong, muscular, powerful female bodies because when women fight, kill, and dominate physically, they are portrayed as insane or become villains. Magic in *Teen Wolf* can be a gift, but it is one that remains in a state of perpetual transformation.

### **NOTES**

- 1. This phrase is also used by werewolf Derek Hale when Scott is first bitten (S1E1), revealing lycanthropy and masculinity as performative in a Butlerian sense.
- 2. In focusing on masculine and feminine werewolves we are not eliding the existence of trans\* or non-binary lycanthropes, but rather investigating the gender binaries that are present in *Teen Wolf* and the paranormal romance genre.
- 3. See McMahon-Coleman for a discussion about Scott's disappearing asthma.
- 4. There are some occasions in which heterosexuality does not serve this reparative function. In "Magic Bullet" (S1E4), for example, Scott is kissing Allison in her bed and has to end the encounter prematurely because he realises that his claws have extended. The phallic symbolism masculinises Scott as he attains hard, protruding claws, but the interruption to his sexual liaisons also effeminises him by suggesting that he cannot control himself enough to have sex. However, Scott quickly learns to control his lycanthropy in this domain; two episodes later he and Allison kiss passionately in her bedroom and Scott no longer needs to slow down (S1E6).
- **5**. Erica is routinely sexualised by the camera and a similar pattern occurs with Malia Tate in seasons four and five as Malia's lycanthropy manifests as both aggression and the desire for sexual gratification.
- **6**. When a character is bitten by a werewolf but does not possess the emotional fortitude or outward behaviour for the magic to take full effect, they become a kanima: a shapeshifting monster whose form reflects their interior world. While the kanima presents a wealth of questions about the relation between lycanthropic, feelings, and 'appropriate' behaviour, it is not within the scope of this essay to begin to answer them.
- 7. Lydia is also treated as an object requiring protection, although her paranormal powers develop to a degree

where they can provide her with protection, unlike Cora who is never able to successfully defend herself.

- **8**. Kali is a member of the 'alpha pack,' a group of alpha werewolves who have killed their original pack to gain their power and choose to work together under one mutually agreed upon leader, Deucalion.
- **9**. This is a pattern throughout the series as season five ended with Kira Yukimura, a kitsune (a Japanese-inspired fox shapeshifter) leaving Beacon Hills to learn to control her powers.
- 10. This is not strictly limited to werewolves either, as evidenced in "I.E.D." (S4E5) when Kira Yukimura achieves victory on the lacrosse field. Although Scott is routinely lauded for doing so because of his lycanthropic strength, because of her kitsune powers, Kira is quickly benched rather than celebrated.

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# CHASING CANON IN J. K. ROWLING'S WIZARDING WORLD: TOWARDS A POETICS OF RECEPTION OF TRANSMEDIA STORYWORLDS

### Katarina O'Dette

The rise of digital technology has increased the number of available storytelling media, which has encouraged the creation of a plethora of storyworlds that tell tales across media. Although these transmedia franchises are not as new as they may appear, with scholars like Colin B. Harvey in *Fantastic Transmedia* (2015) pointing out precursors as early as the nineteenth century, the success of franchises like *Star Wars* (1977-present), *Harry Potter* (1999-present), and *Star Trek* (1966-present) has brought the prevalence of transmedia stories to new heights. As they expand, these franchises can become quite large: J. K. Rowling's Wizarding World, for example, is currently made up of forty-eight texts spread across at least six different media. With so many contributing pieces, the storyworld can become more central to the franchise than any single text, and worthy of scholarly analysis in its own right. However, with franchises of such size, it is inevitable that there will be inconsistencies and conflicting information between sources, which can threaten the notion of a coherent storyworld canon. In order to analyse the storyworld as a text, scholars of transmedia franchises like Rowling's Wizarding World must develop strategies to address these canon inconsistencies.

The existence of a plethora of stories in a transmedia franchise reduces the importance of any individual story and highlights the storyworld that unites them. "Storyworld," a term popularised by David Herman in Story Logic (2002), can be understood as a fictional world conveyed to its audience through the stories set in and/or told about it (13). As Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon note in the introduction of Storyworlds Across Media (2014), in transmedia franchises, the storyworld is constructed by multiple stories across several media revealing different aspects of the world (3). In Harry Potter, the storyworld is the Wizarding World, a wainscot society of witches and wizards living in secret amongst what is otherwise presented as our Primary World.<sup>3</sup> Wainscot societies, as defined by John Clute in The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (1997), are: "invisible or undetected societies living in the interstices of the dominant world" (991). In addition to hiding the existence of their community and magic, the wizards and witches of the Wizarding World conceal both public and private buildings from Muggle view by physically hiding them or by shielding them with charms that either repel Muggles or change the buildings' appearances to Muggle viewers. The storyworld also incorporates changes that the wainscot society renders on the Primary World, from more overt changes such as wizards interfering in Muggle politics to smaller changes such as the explanation that Muggles lose their house keys as the result of Muggle-baiting charms that shrink keys. Readers accrue this knowledge about how the Wizarding World functions and how it interacts with the Primary World by reading, watching, playing, and physically visiting a variety of sources. As of the writing of this article, the Wizarding World has been created by seven Harry Potter novels, three in-world textbooks, three Pottermore ebooks, eight Harry Potter films, one Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them film (with four more planned), one film screenplay, two plays, one play script,

eleven officially licensed video games, one website, and four Universal Studios theme parks (and arguably also Rowling's Twitter, on which she releases information about the characters and storyworld). In light of the breadth of this franchise, calling it 'the *Harry Potter* franchise' seems only partially accurate.

The accumulated information about the franchise's storyworld comes from a variety of sources, some of which have only a tenuous connection to Harry's story and character. As Henry Jenkins emphasises in Convergence Culture (2006): "storytelling has become the art of world building. [...] The world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise" (114). As the Wizarding World has grown, the Potter novels and films have become less crucial to it: the world has expanded beyond the texts. For example, Pottermore, Rowling's official website for the franchise, provides exclusive writing by the author about the storyworld's characters, history, locations, and magic, not all of which appear in or connect to the original novels. This information ranges from the backstories of major novel characters like Minerva McGonagall to a detailed description of Ilvermorny, the American wizarding school never once mentioned in the Potter novels (Rowling, "Professor McGonagall" n.p.; Rowling, "Ilvermorny" n.p.). Although the name "Pottermore" links it to Harry, the website is described as the "digital heart of J. K. Rowling's Wizarding World," focusing on the entire storyworld rather than just his part of it ("About Us" n.p.). Similarly, in spite of the prominence of his name in the title of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child (2016), Harry is not the play's main protagonist, passing this role to his son Albus. The theme parks further de-emphasise Harry's importance: the parks are named The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, mentioning the storyworld first and Harry second. Harry does not even exist in the Fantastic Beasts films and script, which are set in New York City seventy years before he was born, far from the 1990s Scotland where the majority of the Potter novels take place. The only connections to Hogwarts in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (2016) are a protagonist who attended as a child, two references to the school in dialogue, and a Hufflepuff House scarf that appears briefly and without mention in two scenes. Though Harry is still a large part of the storyworld, the Wizarding World has become larger than and less dependent on his story as it has expanded into a transmedia franchise.

The term 'transmedia' is used broadly, and often confusingly, to indicate a variety of types of multimedia franchises. As Harvey describes, transmedia scholars have notoriously struggled to agree on terminology (17); this has resulted in 'transmedia' referring to "myriad kinds of narrative-making across multiple media platforms which emerge from or feed into a consistent storyworld" (201). 'Transmedia storytelling' can include any narratives set in one storyworld and conveyed to its audience through multiple media; however, when the term is used so broadly, it misleadingly fails to draw a distinction between transmedia stories in which additional media extend the storyworld and those in which they do not. This article follows in the footsteps of scholars like Jenkins and Harvey who consider such a distinction vital to the definition of transmedia storytelling, in order to argue for the broader relevance of this distinction to scholars outside of transmedia and fan studies. In "Transmedia Storytelling" (2010), Jenkins emphasises the difference between an "adaptation, which reproduces the original narrative with minimum changes into a new medium and is essentially redundant to the original work, and extension, which expands our understanding of the original by introducing new elements into the fiction" (45). Jenkins's definition perhaps unfairly reduces adaptations to redundant reproductions, but it highlights that an adaptation has a limited capacity for expanding a storyworld into a transmedia franchise because of its inability to introduce new elements. For example, in the early days of the Wizarding World when the franchise was comprised solely of the Potter novels and the films adaptations, the media did not mix: the narrative of the novels was told completely in the novels, and the narrative of the films was told in the films. As Harvey highlights, an adaptation: "necessarily implies a forgetting: an adaptation displaces the former telling of the story, choosing not to recall that the story has 'happened' before, so that to all intents and purposes this is the first telling of the story" (73). The events of the *Potter* books and *Potter* films do not coexist in the same storyworld; while the viewer who has experienced the story in one medium will doubtlessly remember it while experiencing the other, the storyworld itself does not remember and may even actively discourage remembering. Harvey refers to this displacement of story as vertical memory, highlighting the way that adaptations essentially occupy the same narrative space rather than co-existing in the same story and storyworld (73). Likewise, when the Wizarding World contained only the *Potter* films and novels, it reproduced a single story across a single medium twice, and therefore was not truly a transmedia story.

The Wizarding World became a transmedia franchise when Harry's story began to be told across multiple media, with parts of his life unfolding in theme park rides, textbooks, Pottermore writings, and plays. In order to connect these different parts of the franchise, readers must engage what Harvey refers to as "horizontal memory between elements of a transmedia network" (91). In essence, readers must remember the various parts of the story they have encountered in different media and draw connections between them. Each part should, according to Jenkins and Harvey, expand readers' understanding of the storyworld by introducing new elements. This is perhaps most obvious in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, which begins nineteen years after the main events of the *Potter* novels finished. The play continues the story of Harry's life in a new medium without being a redundant reproduction of the novels but is better understood by remembering the stories that came before, particularly as the characters in the play re-visit multiple events from the fourth *Potter* novel via an enhanced Time-Turner.

However, the effect and importance of horizontal memory in reading a transmedia franchise is often subtler than simply remembering major plot points. One example of this can be found in the Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban novel (1999) and the Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them book (2001). The print version of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is a textbook about magical creatures in the Wizarding World that has been 'unofficially' annotated by Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Next to an entry on Kappas, Harry has underlined the identification of Kappas as a Japanese water demon and written "Snape hasn't read this" (23). This refers to a moment in Prisoner of Azkaban when Severus Snape, determined to find fault with Remus Lupin's teaching, criticises a student's graded homework: "'that is incorrect, the Kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia'" (Azkaban 129). In the novel, no one corrects Snape, so it appears that Lupin was mistaken. Readers who have encountered and remembered both Prisoner of Azkaban and the Fantastic Beasts textbook interpret this moment differently. Knowing that Snape's correction is incorrect, readers can either infer that Snape is not as informed as he thinks he is, or that he would rather be incorrect than have students think that Lupin is correct. Readers who do not connect these different parts of the franchise will misunderstand the moment in the novel and likely be confused by the reference in the textbook. Transmedia readers are rewarded for their memory and may be punished for memory failures because transmedia stories are not simply stories made of multiple texts across multiple media: they are transmedia stories precisely because those texts are intended to co-exist, and to be remembered, connected, and built together by readers.

In spite of how transmedia franchises are intended to be consumed, within academic scholarship,

transmedia storyworlds are rarely treated as coherent units worthy of academic study in their own right. When performing textual analysis, scholars tend to concentrate on individual texts or series within franchises. As Ryan ("Story/Worlds/Media," 2014) and Mark J. P. Wolf (Building Imaginary Worlds, 2012) note, the fields that most often address multiple parts of transmedia franchises are comparative media studies and adaptation studies crucially, fields that are largely concerned with the ways that medium affects content. Scholars tend to examine transmedia franchises through the lens of medium-specificity, focusing on differences between media rather than treating franchises as single storyworlds composed of different media. Doing so demonstrates a lack of understanding of how transmedia franchises differ from adaptations, how the texts interact, and how transmedia is intended to be read. The franchise that was once the Harry Potter book series has quite literally become the Wizarding World; as Cassie Brummitt explores in "Pottermore: Transmedia Storytelling and Authorship in Harry Potter" (2016), in 2015 the copyright on franchise products changed from Harry Potter to "J. K. Rowling's Wizarding World" as part of a marketing strategy to emphasise the storyworld over any individual text (Brummitt 122). However, in spite of the focus that transmedia creators like Rowling and transmedia scholars like Brummitt have put on storyworlds, scholars interested in textual analysis have largely failed to reflect this focus. This necessitates a more specific call for a shift in scholarship: rather than limiting textual analysis to single texts or series within a franchise, scholars should engage with storyworlds. As Krzysztof M. Maj stresses in "Transmedial World-Building in Fictional Narratives" (2015): "a fictional world should be treated as the primal and legitimate field of reference for any kind of transmedial storytelling performed within its borders" (85). Rather than the storyworld being treated as a component of its texts, the texts should be treated as components of the storyworld, which is in and of itself a coherent text worthy of analysis. For example, though there is scholarly work on the treatment of Muggleborns in Potter as an allegory for racial oppression, a scholarly reading of the treatment of Muggleborns in the Wizarding World would further consider a line of dialogue in the Fantastic Beasts film that establishes that: "[Muggle and magical] physiologies are subtly different" (Yates, Fantastic Beasts); a footnote from The Tales of Beedle the Bard (2008) states that Muggleborns always have at least one magical ancestor (Rowling, Tales 82). These references suggest a genetic and biological component to magic that influences the reading of race and allows for a more transmedia-aware analysis. However, if the academic world embraces the transmedia storyworld as a text itself, it will necessitate, as Maj cautions, that scholars: "constitute a new poetics of reception: not only world-centred but also, and above all, world-sensitive" (93). Scholars will need to be sensitive to the unique challenges that reading a storyworld can pose, and construct methods for addressing these issues. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges with regards to the construction and analysis of a coherent storyworld is inconsistency in canon.

As Mark Duffett discusses in *Understanding Fandom* (2013), a franchise's canon is made up of the texts or parts of texts that are deemed to represent what is 'real' in that storyworld (Duffett 216). Different franchises have different priorities when it comes to constructing a canon, and part of reading a transmedia franchise requires understanding and engaging with that franchise's approach to canon. Ryan and Thon identify two main types of storyworlds: imaginative and logical (5). As Jenkins argues, imaginative storyworlds, seen most often in long-running comics, present their characters and worlds in a variety of conflicting alternate universes or realities, with no single universe privileged as being the 'real' one ("Transmedia Storytelling" 948). Their various texts do not all need to fit into one canon, because they have not all occurred in the same storyworld. Texts in a logical storyworld, on the other hand, do.<sup>6</sup> As Ryan and Thon explain: "In a *logical* conception, storyworlds admit no contradiction. [...] While a given storyworld can be presented through several different

texts, these texts must respect the facts of the original text if they are to share its logical storyworld" (5, original emphasis). Texts set in this type of storyworld cannot disagree. The Wizarding World presents itself as a logical storyworld in which the events of every unique narrative told within it have occurred. However, with forty-eight texts contributing to the Wizarding World franchise, there will inevitably be inconsistencies amongst them. In order to preserve this coherent storyworld, decisions must be made about which of competing facts are canon, and which are not.

This canon challenge is of particular importance to Fantastika genres because many of the largest and most popular transmedia franchises, from the Wizarding World to *Star Wars*, fall into one or more of these genres. Academics have debated reasons for Fantastika's disproportionately high representation among major transmedia franchises, with scholars like Harvey and Jenkins hypothesizing that the kind of reading encouraged by transmedia storytelling, such as the use of horizontal memory, is also encouraged in Fantastika texts set in intricate fictional worlds (Harvey 14; Jenkins, *Convergence* 21). Fantastika transmedia encourages the reading behaviour that fans of these genres already utilise in single medium texts and amplifies its capabilities for use across multiple media.

Issues of canon are also amplified in Fantastika because genres like Science Fiction and Fantasy often fundamentally change the basic ways the world operates in their texts. As Wolf describes:

The more invention a world contains, the more difficult it is to keep everything in that world consistent, since every Primary World default that is changed affects other aspects of the world, and those changes in turn can cause even more changes. (34)

If, as in the Wizarding World, spells can perform basic tasks, the existence and use of these spells will drastically change the behaviour of its users; instances where these differences in behaviour are ignored without explanation raise questions about the consistency of the world. The challenge of maintaining what J. R. R. Tolkien refers to in "On Fairy Stories" (1947) as the "inner consistency of reality" in a single Fantastika text is multiplied when the storyworld expands across multiple media, potentially with multiple creators at work on different parts of a franchise (140). While many instances of inconsistencies are largely cosmetic and pedantic, some can cause fundamental confusion about how a storyworld operates. This can be problematic for both readers and scholars who are attempting to comprehend a story and storyworld and may be attempting to apply textual analysis in order to further understand the franchise's artistry. It can become vital to the comprehension of a franchise for readers and scholars to determine what is canon and what is not.

Transmedia franchises' producers and fans make these decisions about canon in different ways that may be instructive to scholars interested in analysing transmedia storyworlds. As Duffett argues, the producers, which may include the author, filmmakers, distributors, etc., often assert that they, as the legal owners of the franchise, have the right to dictate which parts of it are canon (216). They usually designate entire texts rather than pieces of texts: J. K. Rowling identifies the *Potter* novels as canon but does not specify that the adapted films also count in the instances where they do not disagree with her books. For most producers, texts are either canon or they are not, and they can go to great lengths to protect that canon. For example, LucasFilm

has multiple employees, Pablo Hidalgo and Leland Chee, who, as Bruce Handy discusses in "What It's Like to Be Lucasfilm's Resident *Star Wars* Geek" (2015) and Wolf likewise details, are tasked with ensuring that *Star Wars* scripts and merchandising conform to LucasFilm's accepted idea of canon in order to avoid creating inconsistencies within the storyworld (Handy n.p.; Wolf 44). By discounting entire texts, producers avoid some of the more complex instances of canon inconsistencies, but also lose many potential sources of storyworld information.

Although producers of most franchises have tried to maintain control over designating canon, Duffett points out that: "the right to specify the canon has been wrested by fans into their own hands" (216). In an era dominated by Roland Barthes's assertion that the author is dead, scholars like Stephen Brown in "Harry Potter and the Fandom Menace" (2007) observe that fans; often reject having canon dictated to them and insist that it is their right as the consumers to decide (191). This struggle between fans and producers is so central to transmedia franchises that it dominates much of transmedia and fan studies; scholarship on the Wizarding World in particular focuses almost exclusively on the tumultuous relationship between Rowling, Warner Bros., and fans, rather than on the actual storyworld. As Jenkins explains, fans often view themselves "as loyalists, rescuing essential elements of the primary text 'misused' by those who maintain copyright control over program materials" (Fans 41). Fans believe that they understand the franchise better than producers do and, when they feel the producers are failing the texts, fans task themselves with determining and protecting the essential elements of the franchise, which form the canon. Rather than only treating entire texts as canon, fans debate which pieces of texts can also contribute. Jenkins notes that in order to "fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels" (Convergence 21). Fans chase canon across multiple media, trying to construct the biggest storyworld possible by retrieving as many pieces of the world as will logically co-exist.

In order to accomplish this, fans employ a complex system of remembering and "un-remembering," a concept suggested by Harvey to describe the deliberate forgetting of a piece of non-canonical information (201). Rather than simply forgetting adapted stories as redundant reproductions, fans allow facts from the adaptation that do not conflict with those in the urtext to be remembered in the canon, while facts that do conflict will be un-remembered. For example, in the *Potter* films, the popular confectionary Chocolate Frogs are animate, wriggling and hopping around in a frog-like manner (Columbus, *Philosopher's Stone*). In the novels, it is never stated that Chocolate Frogs move; however, because they are also never explicitly depicted as being still, it is not a clear inconsistency (*Philosopher's Stone* 77; *Order* 171). Therefore, it can be accepted as canon that the Chocolate Frogs are animate, even though this does not originate from the novels. On the other hand, in the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* novel (2000), Hogwarts's student Padma Patil is identified as a Ravenclaw, while in multiple *Potter* films, she is a Gryffindor (*Goblet* 154). These facts cannot both be true, so one of them must be un-remembered so that this inconsistency does not undermine the logical coherency of the Wizarding World. As Wolf explains:

inconsistencies are treated by these fans as though they are merely gaps in the data, unexplained phenomena that further research and speculation will sort out and clear up. In some cases they are, while other inconsistencies are too incongruous to explain and too

### damaging to be left alone. (45)

Fans try to craft explanations that justify inconsistencies in the storyworld, and only un-remember something if there is no possible explanation.

To decide which of two conflicting facts will be dismissed, fan communities construct canon tier systems where different source texts are assigned different levels of canonicity (Wolf 271). Wolf equates these tiers to circles of authorship, as the texts "that typically possess the highest degree of canonicity are those which come from the innermost circles of authorship, which surround the originator and main author of a world" (271). The texts at the top of a canon tier are usually those that come from the originator of the storyworld. In the case of the Wizarding World, the closer a text is to J. K. Rowling's direct influence or input, the higher its assigned tier. The Harry Potter Wiki, the biggest online fan encyclopedia for the Wizarding World, designates three tiers for what it calls its "canon policy": J. K. Rowling, Based on J.K. Rowling's Work, and Licensed ("Canon" n.p.). The first tier encompasses all texts written or endorsed by Rowling herself, including the seven novels, the six textbooks, the Fantastic Beasts screenplay, Pottermore, Rowling's Twitter, and Cursed Child ("Canon" n.p.). Although Rowling did not write the Cursed Child script itself, she helped write the story and has stated that she considers it canon (@jk\_rowling n.p.). The second "Based On" tier refers mainly to the various film additions, including the eight Potter films, the Fantastic Beasts film, and the theme parks, which are based on the films ("Canon" n.p.). These are texts where the specifics of Rowling's input are unclear, but where she is known to have had at least some influence. The third "Licensed" tier refers to products, such as the eleven video games, where a third-party was legally licensed to use the Wizarding World but did not have input from Rowling herself ("Canon" n.p.). When there is an unresolvable conflict between two facts from different sources, the fact assigned to a higher tier is considered canon.

This canon tier system has varying degrees of success. In the case of the Chocolate Frog, the idea that the Frogs are animate originates from the second tier of canon (the films). Because it does not conflict with any text on the first tier, it can be accepted as canon that Chocolate Frogs move, unless a new text is later added to the first tier that contradicts this. In the case of Padma Patil's Hogwarts House, she is a Ravenclaw in the first tier (the novels), but a Gryffindor in the second tier (the films). Because the tier one texts have canonical authority, Padma is a Ravenclaw in the storyworld of the Wizarding World, and fans who adhere to this system would un-remember her film presence in Gryffindor.

However, the canon tier system does not always work so neatly. In the novel Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2005), it is established that spells that are cast non-verbally are a more advanced form of magic (171). As Severus Snape describes it to his students, "'Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some [...] lack'" (170). Nonverbal magic is portrayed as more challenging than verbal magic, and mostly useful in duels as a way to surprise one's opponent (170). Even Harry, who is naturally gifted at defensive magic, is only able to successfully perform nonverbal magic twice in the novels (225). This emphasises the power and talent of wizards and witches who can perform nonverbal magic, such as when Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore duel in the fifth Potter book (Order 717). However, in the later Potter films, the majority of spells performed both in battle and outside it are cast nonverbally. Characters, regardless of age, magical skill, or 'mind power,' perform nonverbal magic both on and off the

battlefield. Therefore, in the films, there is no significance attached to a witch or wizard being able to perform nonverbal magic, particularly as the scene of Snape instructing the students on the topic is not present in the adaptation. Until 2016, this did not represent a threat to the coherency of the Wizarding World storyworld: the non-significance of nonverbal magic in the films was second tier, and the significance of it in the novels was first tier, so its film treatment could be un-remembered. The ability to use nonverbal magic in the Wizarding World remained challenging to its casters, and therefore carried significance. However, the *Potter* films' treatment of nonverbal magic was employed again in the first *Fantastic Beasts* movie, with only nine verbal spells cast in contrast to more than thirty instances of nonverbal magic. Because the film is also second tier, this would not have represented a threat to the canon; however, the published screenplay was written by Rowling and is therefore considered by the Harry Potter Wiki to be first tier.

In this case, fans can either search for an explanation for how the *Potter* novels' and the *Fantastic Beasts* screenplay's treatments of nonverbal magic could co-exist, or they can create more levels of canon within the tiers. As Wolf outlines, often these subdivisions are based on the timeline of release, with either earlier or later works being privileged as higher up in the canon hierarchy (273). This distinction frequently triggers another struggle between the producers and the fans. As Wolf expands, the producer presumably prefers the later work, hence their motivation for making the change (273); fans, on the other hand, often consider themselves loyal to the earlier work, treating it as a: "social contract with the audience; there is the tacit assumption that a work tells us something about the world in which it takes place, and that an author has committed to certain narratives, designs, and so forth" (213). Fans view canon inconsistencies created by the later work as a violation of the commitment that the originator made to the storyworld in their earlier work. While Rowling may prefer *Fantastic Beasts'* approach to nonverbal spells, fans remain committed to how nonverbal magic was represented in the *Potter* novels that preceded it. As transmedia franchises expand, canon tier systems become more complicated and can trigger further conflicts over how to resolve inconsistencies.

Even the notion of a canon tier system implies a misleading amount of agreement amongst fans as to what constitutes canon. In "Inno-tribes: Star Trek as wikimedia" (2002), Robert V. Kozinets goes so far as to say that when fans chase canon: "the settling of the ambiguity begets controversy and ideological turf wars" (202). The use of "war" is not just Kozinets's description: as John L. Sullivan identifies in Media Audiences (2013) multiple fan communities for franchises like Star Wars and The Elder Scrolls have referred to diverging opinions about canon as "canon wars" (Sullivan 201). Though the Harry Potter Wiki states that its approach to in-tier canon conflicts is to privilege the later work, this is at odds with the above noted approach of many fans preferring the earlier work. Disagreements about canon can be even more basic, extending to the inclusion or exclusion of entire texts. While the Harry Potter Wiki insists that, as per Rowling's opinion, Cursed Child is first tier canon, other fans and even some reviewers (such as Karen Coats) question this, mocking the play as fan fiction ("Canon" n.p). For them, this text represents such a departure from the rest of the franchise that they unremember the entire text from the storyworld; it might not even warrant a place in the canon tier. Harvey calls this "the oxymoronic concept of 'personal canon', i.e. an individual's subjective opinion on what constitutes the collective 'reality' of the storyworld" (4). "While fans may have some agreement about what belongs in the canon, the judgement about what does and does not constitute a transmedia franchise's canon will ultimately be, as with any responses to art, subjective and individual. The only thing that the various fans and producers of logical transmedia storyworlds seem to agree on when it comes to canon is that they want a coherent

storyworld, further asserting the importance and centrality of storyworld in transmedia franchises.

Canon inconsistencies both threaten the coherency of a logical storyworld and highlight its importance to transmedia franchises. Academia has largely absented itself from the discussion of a franchise's canon, aside from theory about canon in transmedia, worldbuilding, and fan studies. These fields focus on analyses of how inconsistencies affect worldbuilding and how franchises' fans and producers deal with inconsistencies. They rarely address single storyworlds as coherent texts that can be read as such and subjected to scholarly analysis. Scholars who intend to do so will need to specifically address and make decisions about canon inconsistencies: a discussion of power in the Wizarding World, for example, would likely need to take a stance on whether or not the ability to perform nonverbal magic reflects the power of the caster. Demonstrating a grasp of canon will not only enrich scholarship on transmedia franchises, but also establish the expertise of the scholar in question. As John Fiske argues in "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" (1992), within fan communities, understanding of and adherence to canon tiers conveys a hierarchy amongst fans (43). For example, a fan who believes that Padma Patil is a Gryffindor may be judged by other fans to be a lesser fan for not being aware that this is second tier canon. Likewise, scholars who fail to demonstrate at least an awareness of these kinds of inconsistencies may lose the trust of readers, while scholarship that is canon- and transmedia-aware will gain legitimacy in the eyes of readers.

There are benefits and challenges to both of the discussed treatments of canon – the producer selecting and rejecting entire texts versus fans piecing together a canon across multiple tiers – and canon decisions will ultimately be a personal judgement that a storyworld-centred scholar will need to explain and justify. But addressing these difficulties will move academic scholarship about transmedia storytelling toward accepting a basic fact about the fundamental nature of these franchises. The storyworld is no longer just a side effect of the texts that comprise it: it has itself become a text.

### NOTES

- 1. 'Text' in this article refers to media studies' more inclusive definition of an object of study. Texts in the Wizarding World include the books, films, and video games, as well as Rowling's tweets and even the Universal Studios theme parks.
- 2. There is no consensus on the number of media that comprise this franchise, as there is much academic debate about the boundaries between media and the difference between a medium and a genre (for more on this, see Ryan, and Waysdorf and Reijnders).
- **3**. In "On Fairy-Stories" (1947), J. R. R. Tolkien defines the Primary World as our real world, as opposed to a fictional Secondary World like *The Lord of the Ring's* Middle-earth (139).
- **4**. Harry Potter and the Cursed Child is a two-part play that tells one complete story but is split into two performances that require separate tickets.

- 5. See Stockslager, Horne, and Heilman and Gregory.
- **6.** In practice, imaginative and logical storyworlds do not always present such a stark binary. Franchises like *Doctor Who* (1963-present), which otherwise portray logical storyworlds, are notorious for their more casual relationship with canon, as Lance Parkin details in "Truths Universally Acknowledged: How the 'Rules' of *Doctor Who* Affect the Writing." These kinds of franchises may frequently "retcon," or retroactively change the continuity, to either include or exclude texts from canon (Wolf 213).
- 7. This article now begins using 'fans' over 'readers' because, as John Fiske argues in "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" (1992), fans are more likely to actively engage with issues of canon, and to contribute to compilations of canon material, such as fan encyclopedias (30).
- **8**. For examples, see Brummitt, Brown, and Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, Ch. 5, "Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the *Harry Potter* Wars."
- **9**. Harvey uses the term non-remembering to describe this concept. To emphasise fans' active choice to forget remembered information, this article suggests 'un-' as a more suitable prefix.
- 10. Personal canon differs from the fan term "headcanon," which, as Kavita Mudan Finn and Jessica McCall describe in "Exit, pursued by a fan: Shakespeare, fandom, and the lure of the alternate universe" (2016), refers to an individual's belief about an aspect of the storyworld that is not evident in the texts (27).

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### **NON-FICTION REVIEWS**

### GOTHIC DISSECTIONS IN FILM AND LITERATURE: THE BODY IN PARTS, BY IAN CONRICH AND LAURA SEDGWICK

Review by Rebecca Gibson

Conrich, Ian and Laura Sedgwick. Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature: The Body in Parts. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 296 pp.

Gothic Dissections in Film and Literature: The Body in Parts begins with the intention of shedding light on a previously neglected field of study within Gothic criticism. Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick argue that "[s]tudies of the Gothic have often focused on the revenant of hauntings and spectrality, and the buildings and ruins, the vaults, chambers and passages of castles and homes," a methodological approach which neglects "the materiality of the body, and in particular body parts" (1). Conrich and Sedgwick seek to amend this perceived disservice through extended analysis of different bodily components in Gothic film and literature, with chapters on the brain, eyes, teeth, hands, bones and various organs, to name but a few. At the heart of this text lies the understanding that the body is not a discrete entity which can or should be described as "whole": "[t]he body [...] consists of components and bits [...] that can break, be operated upon, sutured and preserved. They can also be dismembered, penetrated, transformed and transplanted" (1). Conrich and Sedgwick's microscopic focus on oft-overlooked parts of the body not only highlights how certain parts are used and abused within Gothic texts - for example, the significance of severed hands or unexpectedly discovered bones - but also how the Gothic mode is uniquely positioned to question the tacit assumption that certain bodies are healthy and whole while others are not. The many instances of bodily transformation, deconstruction and evolution in Gothic Dissections provide a substantial set of responses to this socially constructed perception, although as I will argue, the text struggles to establish and maintain a more specific line of argument.

Gothic Dissections' greatest strength is its commitment to providing an encyclopaedic account of each body part in Gothic film and literature. From the first chapter on the brain to the final chapter on the stomach, intestines and anus, Conrich and Sedgwick demonstrate an extremely wide base of knowledge, analysing dozens of examples per chapter in order to form a composite view of the role that each body part plays in the Gothic canon. What exactly constitutes this canon is made clear from the introduction, which states that "Gothic Dissections presents no hierarchy in its case studies" (7), contending that "the horror film genre and Gothic literature are substantially interconnected, culturally and historically, and that all relevant texts, irrespective of their quality, are germane" (3). Conrich and Sedgwick argue for the inclusion of writers and filmmakers who are often ignored despite the merit of their work and the extensive study of their peers: for example, John Saul, Dean R. Koontz and Graham Masterton, who have often been passed over in favour of Stephen King, James Herbert and Clive Barker. In addition to this welcome open-mindedness, there is a real breadth of detail to be found in Conrich and Sedgwick's discussion of their chosen texts, which is always

undertaken with an eye to making examples as transparent as possible for those who are not familiar with the material, and to including technical detail when appropriate. This reviewer particularly enjoyed reading that in *Poltergeist* (1982), "for the film's production, real skeletons were used by the special effects department, since plastic alternatives were too uniform in appearance" (169). The extensive nature of Conrich and Sedgwick's analysis bears fruit in their intuitive identification of patterns in Gothic texts that span numerous time periods and forms of media, such as their particularly illuminating discussion of the brain transplant subgenre in horror film and literature in "Chapter 2: The Brain." Comparison of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* (1818) with Universal's film production *Frankenstein* (1931) reveals that while Shelley never details the transfer of the brain into the creature, the film depicts him "unexpectedly receiving the abnormal brain of a criminal" (22). Conrich and Sedgwick note that this new interpretation allowed Universal to explore "questions of recidivism, degeneracy, and the unhealthy body" which were particularly topical at the time, and that further adaptations of *Frankenstein* have built on this by firmly correlating the creature's intelligence and social skill with the brain he is given (22).

Conrich and Sedgwick's particular emphasis on the importance of studying the work of underappreciated authors is admirable but is not always carried through in their analysis itself, which skews toward texts by white male creators and could have benefited from attention to Gothic texts by authors of colour. For example, they list the range of writers they examine as follows: "from Poe, Washington Irving, Victor Hugo, Gaston Leroux, Ira Levin, Robert Bloch and Curt Siodmak, to King, Barker, Marc Brandel, Roald Dahl and Neil Gaiman" (7). While this range undoubtedly includes authors of classic works of Gothic literature which require acknowledgment in a study of the Gothic body, lack of attention to authors such as Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson and filmmakers such as Park Chan-Wook only reinforces the traditionally Eurocentric nature of the genre and weakens Conrich and Sedgwick's stated intention to draw attention to a previously overlooked area. Their inclusion of recent horror films such as Get Out (2017) and A Cure for Wellness (2017) demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the trends of contemporary horror cinema, but here, too, a more nuanced approach to the problematic tropes being reinforced and deconstructed in these texts would have been appreciated. Get Out has received a lot of critical attention for its use of horror tropes in depicting issues of racism in contemporary American culture, but Conrich and Sedgwick refer only to this only in passing, mentioning that "the bodies of African Americans are used for the transplanted brains of rich white folk" before moving on (24). Referring to the film only as one example among many highlights a noticeable gap in their otherwise commendable breadth of research and knowledge of the critical field.

A greater depth of sensitivity when discussing gender and sexuality could also have been employed. In "Chapter 12: Skin," a protracted discussion of female characters being flayed, and their skins worn by serial killers in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series (1974-ongoing) and *Deranged* (1974) reads more as an extended description of mutilation without offering a fresh perspective or touching on how these texts conflate gender dysphoria with violence and suffering. This example also highlights the wider issue of repetition in the text. Perhaps an unavoidable consequence of the book's exhaustive range of examples is that at times the litany can feel repetitive, and it is difficult to identify a wider argument spanning the text as a whole. Conrich and Sedgwick assert that "a greater understanding of the materialism of the Gothic body" (8) will be reached through extended analysis of its dismembered pieces, and certainly their catalogue of the body dissected is thorough enough to recommend the text for any Gothic researcher, but

those expecting a new theory of body Gothic will be disappointed.

Conrich and Sedgwick are clear in stating the intended scope of their project, acknowledging the limitations of the medium they have chosen: they state in the introduction that "[t]his study does not aim to be complete but to give an advanced consideration to the wealth of existing examples of the Gothic body in its various parts" (2). Similarly, the lack of an overarching theoretical framework, freely admitted by the authors as they purport to engage with the theory of the uncanny, the abject and the carnivalesque where appropriate rather than privileging any one theory, is not so much a problem as a feature to be aware of when engaging with the text. As a compendium of extended analyses, *Gothic Dissections* is more valuable for its breadth of focus than for its innovation in the critical field. Its conclusions are limited to the subject of each chapter rather than offering a new perspective on contemporary Gothic as a whole, in keeping with their stated intent that "[i] n an age of body obsession, *Gothic Dissections* is a promotion of the body *part*" (261). I agree that despite its limitations, it is undoubtedly an informative and well-researched one.

### **BIONOTE**

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# **POSTHUMAN GOTHIC (2017) EDITED BY ANYA HEISE-**VON DER LIPPE

Review by Kaja Franck

### Anya Heise-von der Lippe, editor. Posthuman Gothic. University of Wales Press, 2017. 275 pp.

In her introduction to Posthuman Gothic, Anya Heise-von der Lippe states that the "posthuman Gothic makes us aware that the monstrous Other is not only lodged within, but an essential part of our (human) identity construction" (6). Here, she draws on Sean Bolton's definition of posthuman Gothic as emerging from the human subject's fear that the technological other already exists within them: the human subject has already become the Other. As well as Bolton, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work on monstrosity comes into play regarding a disavowal of hitherto concrete boundaries. Monsters, technological or otherwise, disrupt the borders of human existence, particularly, if the monsters were once human or inhabit humanoid bodies. Posthuman Gothic explores "a number of ways in which these (post)human anxieties of an internalization of the Other permeate posthuman Gothic texts" (9). In order to do so, the authors in Posthuman Gothic use the Gothic, following Catherine Spooner, as a mode rather than a discrete genre. This can be seen in the variety of texts that are analysed, many of which may not strike the reader as typically Gothic. Given the importance of technology in posthuman thought, many of the chapters deal with narratives that exist on the boundaries of Speculative Fiction (SF) and the Gothic. Whilst this is entirely understandable, it would have been pleasing to see more generic Gothic texts analysed as a way of refreshing and strengthening the argument for posthuman Gothic. This would have more strongly supported the claim, made in the introduction, that posthuman analysis lends itself to the Gothic.

Despite this, the range of narratives analysed show the various permutations of posthuman Gothic. Equally important is the decision not to shy away from analysing narratives from popular culture. Gothic literature is rooted in popular texts: from Walpole to Radcliffe to Lewis, the popularity of early Gothic novels raised, and continues to raise, questions of decency and taste. In her introduction, Heise-von der Lippe draws attention to the lack of the Gothic within posthuman criticism. She suggests this may be due to the "the genre's recalcitrant playfulness – Gothic texts are [...] often purposefully camp and over-the-top, to the point of alienating more 'serious' readers" (5); the Gothic seems to lack substance, especially theoretically, to those outside the field. Posthumanist critics demur from directly mentioning the Gothic choosing, instead, to discuss the monstrous or referring to "dark romanticism." Heise-von der Lippe acknowledges the schism between the Gothic and posthumanism in regard to temporal placement as well. Posthumanism appears forward-looking, peering into a technology-fuelled future, whereas the Gothic is haunted by the past. However, she argues that both posthumanism and the Gothic can be seen as reactions to the Enlightenment, particularly its construction of a coherent human subject. Posthumanism "confronts us with the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category – the human – and challenges the tenets of Enlightenment humanism" (3). Similarly, "born out of the immediate reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, the Gothic is no stranger to the

exploration of ontological states" (3). This argument suggests that the combination of posthumanism and the Gothic is an (un)natural progression.

The book is split into the following sections: "Organic," "Undead," "Evolving," and "Reimagined." The "Organic" section looks at the way in which the human body can be transformed through disease or genetic engineering, giving the reader an insight into a posthuman, and often post-apocalyptic, future. Bolton's opening chapter looks at the depiction of zombiism in David Wong's John Dies at the End (2009) and This Book is Full of Spiders (2012). Wong's treatment of the zombie infection challenges the clear divide between the human and the zombie as Other. Bolton argues that these novels show that if "the zombies are just ourselves post-humanity, then maybe they were always a part of us waiting to emerge" (32). Antonia Peroiku's reading of Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy is similar. The Crakers, a bio-engineered species of human-animal herbivores, embody posthuman fears. However, Peroiku shows that Atwood's narrative resists simple humanist readings. Instead, the Crakers, and their potential relationship with human survivors, dissolve the notion of the human subject. The final chapter in this section considers Frances Lawrence's I am Legend (2007) - the film based on Richard Matheson's 1954 novel – alongside Guillermo del Toro's Blade II (2002) and the Spieriq brothers' Daybreakers (2009). Lars Schmeink avers that within these films the vampire stands as a posthuman figure: these posthuman vampires embody human anxieties regarding the potential for transgression within science and technology, as well as the inherent inhumanity of hierarchies of race and class. As such, these films act as warnings to society.

Following on from Schmeink's analysis of the posthuman vampire, "Undead" looks at the twin figures of undeath: vampires and zombies. In comparison to the previous chapter, Matheson's original novella, *I am Legend*, is read as an example of posthuman Gothic by Chris Koenig-Woodyard. Building on Donna Haraway's assertion that vampires defy human-created categories, he uncovers the vampire-led narrative that haunts Neville's story, challenging the assertion that it is the vampire which is the monster. Neville imposes on the vampires' (post)humanity. In comparison, Erica McCrystal's reading of Alan Ball's *True Blood* (2008-2014) considers the potential for humans and vampires to live alongside one another. Central to this analysis is Emmanuel Levinas's consideration of social responsibility and Jacques Derrida's contrast of hospitality with hostility. Here, the vampire "transcends traditional subjection and finds a new place in a posthuman world that promotes harmony" (106).

Maria Alberto's reading of Dominic Mitchell's *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) draws attention to the importance of performance in zombie identity. In order to be accepted into human society, the "zombies" must perform "being human," forcing the viewer to consider to what extent being a human is always, already performance. Maria Marino-Faza similarly considers "what it means to be human, allowing hybridization as a new politics of representation" (127) in regard to The CW's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017). Having charted the rise of the sympathetic vampire, Marino-Faza engages with the complicated duality of this monstrous Other which, having been accepted by a popular audience, has become the alluring face of capitalism, whilst their liminality still challenges socially accepted categories. "Undeath" is the section that most closely coheres with traditional depictions of the Gothic. As such, it makes the clearest case for the importance of posthumanism in reading against the fear of the nonhuman Other. The notion of transformation and change in both monstrous identity and meaning arises in the next section, "Evolving." In their analysis of Jane Campion's *Top of the* 

Lake, Amalya Ashman and Amy Taylor use Barbara Creed's monstrous feminine to look at the figure of the young, pregnant girl, Tui. They explore the potential monstrosity of pregnancy as allowing the realisation of posthuman subjectivity through intuitive trust of the body.

Femininity and the Gothic are reconsidered in the next chapter which reflects the depiction of the female body and subjectivity in Valve's *Portal* (2007) and *Portal* 2 (2011). Dawn Stobbart compares the depiction of the two female characters in the game, Chell – the first-person protagonist – and GLaDOS, a super computer. Stobbart argues that throughout the gameplay, these characters, in particular GLaDOS, navigate the roles of Gothic heroine and monster, ultimately rejecting both in an act of posthuman feminism. Female identity is central to Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (2014), the novel considered by Donna Mitchell in the next chapter. Mitchell applies the idea of the Baudrillardian simulacrum to the man-made female bodies depicted in O'Neill's text. This reading opens up the importance of voyeurism in the construction of femininity, suggesting that that the female body is already posthuman due to the fractured subjectivity this self-regard causes.

The final section, "Reimagined," looks to the future of both posthuman Gothic and the human subject. The self-voyeurism explored in *Only Ever Yours* is expanded exponentially in Dennis Yeo's engagement with Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). Yeo's reading depicts Truman as posthuman; he is a being whose life is shaped and created through technology for the consumption of the audience. As Yeo makes apparent, however, Weir's narrative turns on the diegetic audience by showing the viewer's involvement in the contemporary "culture of spectacle, narcissism and voyeurism" (207) – through consumerism, we create the means of our own incarceration. The fragmentation of subjectivity and self-regard recurs in Evan Hayles Gledhill's discussion of the *Alien* films (1979-2012) and the *Star Trek* series. Opening with Margrit Shildrick's contention that the monstrous subject tests the boundaries of the human(ist) subject, Gledhill concludes that "the future is inescapably Gothic, when the human contemplates its own demise" (228). Yet, the destruction of the humanist project is both the promise and the threat of the posthuman monster, a recurring theme throughout these chapters.

Aspasia Stephanou's final chapter considers a particularly virulent fear in contemporary society: manmade plagues. This chapter covers a number of narratives which look at nanotechnology, biotechnology and contagion. Stephanou's discussion, like many of the chapters in this collection, is haunted by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818). Navigating the politics of accelerationists, the chapter concludes that these narratives are often nihilistic, offering speculative insight into thinking beyond the human. Posthuman Gothic, then, always indicts humanity in the creation of the monster: suggesting either that the human subject is already the Other, or that society will bring about its own demise. The posthuman monster threatens not simply to eradicate but to assimilate the human subject, reconstructing it in ways that undo humanist notions of subjectivity.

By integrating the Gothic with posthumanism, *Posthuman Gothic* gives Gothic narratives innovative and exciting new readings. The authors write in a clear and concise manner, making their subject matter pertinent. As with recent work in Gothic analysis which engages with ecocriticism and the fields of Young Adult and Children's literature, this collection acknowledges and reacts to the constantly mutating forms of the Gothic. Such an approach prevents Gothic criticism from becoming mired in traditional approaches. Instead, it suggests the future of both Gothic studies and Gothic narratives, making these germane to the

pressures of technology and an evolving sense of what it is to be a human subject, or even if the concept of the human subject is still important in this current period. Thus, this selection of essays elegantly encompasses an important new direction in the Gothic, one which celebrates the dissolution of anthropocentric humanism. In this endeavour, it builds upon the earliest foundations of Gothic literature and its reaction to the positive rationalism of the Enlightenment. The power of applying posthumanism to the Gothic is that it prevents the stagnation of approaches to this genre, often burdened by an adherence to the traditions of psychoanalysis and unnecessary need to reiterate generic parameters. This volume applies an innovative new approach to the Gothic and, in doing so, contemplates its more revolutionary aspects.

### **BIONOTE**

**Kaja Franck** (UK) was awarded her PhD in 2017. Her thesis looked at the literary werewolf as an ecoGothic monster, concentrating on the relationship between wilderness, wolves, and werewolves, and how language is used to demarcate animal alterity. She is part of the 'Open Graves, Open Minds' research project and has published on the depiction of wolves and werewolves in *Dracula* and young adult fiction. She also edited the online journal *Revenant's* special edition on werewolves.

# SCIENCE FICTION: A LITERARY HISTORY (2017) EDITED BY ROGER LUCKHURST

Review by Molly Cobb

### Luckhurst, Roger, editor. Science Fiction: A Literary History. The British Library, 2017. 224 pp.

The essays contained within Science Fiction: A Literary History demonstrate brilliantly just how much more there is to say about the history of Science Fiction despite the numerous companions, histories, and studies already published. With each subsequent chapter expertly picking up where the previous one finishes, the chronological examination of the way in which Science Fiction has evolved and expanded throughout the years makes this collection both readily accessible and easy to read without sacrificing any depth of analysis.

In his introduction, Roger Luckhurst expounds on the diversity of a genre often thought of as the exclusive remit of the Western white male. Throughout the collection, every essay further develops Luckhurst's commentary on the diversity of the genre by ensuring that, though better-known names and works are discussed due to their importance and influence on the genre, the non-white, non-male, non-Anglo-American works and authors are given their fair due. There are numerous examples of Science Fiction from authors or countries not often discussed in overviews of the field and the chapters contained within this collection endeavour to cover more than just the obvious or expected authors, countries, works, or subgenres.

Arthur B. Evans starts the collection with his examination of early SF. By including underexplored early SF texts, including non-English works, Evans is able to explore what came before more well-known authors like Mary Shelley and Jules Verne without diminishing the very clear impact these authors had on the genre. Roger Luckhurst continues this in the next chapter by exploring how subgenres often considered separate to Science Fiction informed and influenced more familiar SF works. In her chapter on utopias, Caroline Edwards makes a point of setting aside a section to discuss female and black authors, texts, and characters alongside other, perhaps more well-known, works both utopian and dystopian. Mark Bould explores the often underexamined interwar period, while Malisa Kurtz covers a breadth of female and Russian writers in her chapter. In his chapter on the New Wave, Rob Latham discusses not only the New Wave itself but the associated backlash and internal gap between proponents and opponents of this new form of writing within the genre, thereby not only tracing the evolution of SF but the opposition encountered by a new generation of authors. With modern SF inherently more varied than its predecessor, Sherryl Vint inevitably has more to say on diversity than previous chapters. By examining diversity as a basis of how SF was used as a vehicle for dissent or a tool for activism, she is able to demonstrate how such diversity helped shape and inform SF into the twenty-first century. Gerry Canavan is then able to pick up the thread and extrapolate how SF will continue throughout the rest of the twenty-first century and how internationalisation and translated publications will continue to encourage an international genre not specific to one language, one country, or one type of person. The real feat performed throughout these chapters is not just in examining the under-explored, but doing so in conjunction with better

known and more familiar works and authors, thus encouraging all aspects of SF to be examined concurrently rather than separating them by language, race, gender, etc.

Due to the chronological ordering of the collection, it is possible to trace more than just the increase and recognition of diversity throughout Science Fiction's history. Changes in methods of publication, boundaries between literary cultures, media forms, and mass/popular culture, and the revision or revitalising of previous forms of SF all informed and influenced the genre throughout the years and this can all be seen throughout the collection. A perceived increase in the respectability of, and academic interest in, SF can also be seen throughout the collection as contributors explore how works were received by the public and what impact they had on culture. Influence between SF and the real world of course goes both ways, and this is depicted through the genre's relationship with activism, as previously mentioned, but also in terms of technology and environmentalism. Canavan's chapter epitomises this, as his discussion of SF into a twenty-first century that has yet to happen is not only speculative in itself but also explores how the genre operates in a society that has already caught up with, if not surpassed, the technology, societies, and attitudes that were once the exclusive remit of Science Fiction.

Throughout its examinations of the major influences of Science Fiction, the diverse authors and works often left by the wayside, the parallels between political and environmental movements and activism within the genre, and the rise and fall of subgenres, Science Fiction: A Literary History never fails to acknowledge that Science Fiction is, if nothing else, a living, evolving genre. Never passive, it is shown to always be looking, perhaps rather obviously, to the future. By exploring where Science Fiction came from, where it has been, and where it is going, this collection ensures that the reader, whether new to SF or otherwise, does not mistakenly believe the genre to be stagnant, operating along a fixed path, or in any way the exclusive remit of one particular type of author. As Roger Luckhurst points out in his introduction, archive material is consistently being re-discovered, re-explored, and re-examined, with previously ignored or forgotten works and authors being brought back into the fold of Science Fiction to be reassessed with fresh eyes. Though there are acknowledgments both within the introduction and at various points throughout the chapters that this collection in no way has, or is able to, cover all literary works related to the genre, such caveats appear unnecessary in the face of what this collection has managed to cover despite its length. Roger Luckhurst promises Science Fiction: A Literary History to be accessible, international, and diverse without diminishing the influence and impact of familiar and traditional SF works and authors. This collection is exactly that and is both a perfect introduction to the field for new readers and an excellent reminder to veterans of the genre that there are still authors and works yet to be explored.

### **BIONOTE**

**Dr Molly Cobb** (UK) is an Associate Tutor at Edge Hill University whose research focuses on mid-20th century American Science Fiction and representations of identity and psychology. She has contributed a chapter to the forthcoming title Sideways in Time: Critical Essays on Alternate History Fictions and Counterfactual Narratives.

# DARWINIAN FEMINISM AND EARLY SCIENCE FICTION BY PATRICK B. SHARP

Review by Sarah Lohmann

Sharp, Patrick B. Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons and Women. University of Wales Press, 2018. 224 pp.

It has been a privilege to write an advance review of Patrick B. Sharp's new monograph, *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons and Women*, which is due to be published by the University of Wales Press in mid-May 2018, forming part of the series "New Dimensions in Science Fiction" under the editorship of Sharp himself and Pawel Frelik. Given my interest in feminist Science Fiction (SF) as well as in the influence of Darwinism on both SF and utopian literature, I was intrigued by the title, and I am happy to report that I was not in the least disappointed with the book itself, which is written in a clear, elegant style and structured in a straightforward chronological fashion. *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction* provides a fascinating background look at the history of women's utopian and SF writing, from Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing-World* (1666) up until the second-wave feminist utopias of the 1960s and '70s and with a particular focus on the SF magazines of the 1920s and '30s. It also fills a significant gap in scholarly criticism thus far: as Sharp rightly suggests, "it is time for the speculative dimension of Darwinian feminism to be given its rightful place in the history of SF" (174).

Darwinian feminism is presented as an approach by women SF writers that arose from the legacy of Cavendish's *The Blazing-World* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and that constitutes a unique and important tradition in forming a feminist response to the "growing power of masculinist science and the scientific megatext" (8) which emerged in particular from evolutionary discourse in the late nineteenth century. Sharp argues that SF "has long been a Darwinian genre" (1) in that, since its inception, "the plots, characterisations and framing logics of the genre were based firmly within a Darwinian paradigm" (1), while both arising from and perpetuating the ideals of scientific masculinity and "Euro-American colonial power" (173) that were reshaping the world at the time. However, Sharp notes that rather than being put off by the essentialist and straightforwardly sexist assumptions underlying Charles Darwin's account of sexual selection as part of human evolution in his *The Descent of Man* (1871), nineteenth-century feminists – such as Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Eliza Burt Gamble – in fact made use of the rational, open-ended structure of evolutionary science in order to put forward their own model of 'scientific femininity' that appealed to Darwinist thought. In doing so, Sharp argues, they made a solid scientific case for women's emancipation, for example by advocating for the complementarity of the sexes (Blackwell) or even the biological superiority of women (Gamble).

Sharp proceeds to trace how these Darwinian feminist ideas took on a fuller expression in turn-of-thecentury feminist utopian writing such as Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1880), Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889), Inez Haynes Gillmore's *Angel Island* (1914), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915),

all of which largely advocated a "white educated woman's vision of the future that was predominantly socialist in its politics" (98). Though mostly narrated from a male perspective to gain favour with scientifically-minded men, these novels generally went on to provide alternative models of evolutionary advancement that largely put women in control of sexual selection and that presented nurturing, domestically-minded utopias – while, however, also engaging in some regrettable and generally racially motivated eugenics, as Sharp is careful to note.

The following chapter, then, is where this book really comes into its own, as Sharp goes on to explain how this problematic but nevertheless ground-breaking Darwinian feminism influenced women SF writers who published stories in SF magazines in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Primarily using examples of stories by Clare Winger Harris, Minna Irving, M.F. Rupert, Leslie F. Stone, and Lilith Lorraine, Sharp paints an affectionately detailed picture of the radical expression that Darwinian feminism took in early magazine SF, in particular in presenting utopian societies that showcased striking visions of scientific femininity. Notably, Sharp points out, these authors re-imagined the role that feminist science might take in society without falling prey to their predecessors' colonialist leanings to quite the same extent – though some of their stories still harboured essentialist tendencies.

Moreover, Sharp employs the keen eye of a literary historian in pointing out how the editorial policies of certain SF magazines at the time played an important role in both the flourishing of feminist SF stories in the 1920s and 30s, particularly under Hugo Gernsback (at various magazines) and his socialist-minded managing editor David Lasser, and in their eventual near-suppression under less progressively minded editors, particularly *Astounding Stories* editor John W. Campbell, Jr. This gives the reader a pertinent reminder of the crucial role that a supporting environment can play in the proliferation of pioneering creative work, while also providing some valuable insight into the relative dearth of progressive feminist SF between the first decades of the twentieth century and the re-emergence of feminist utopia in the 1960s.

I have thus far traced the chronological lineage of Darwinian feminist SF and its offshoots that Sharp faithfully captures. However, he also presents an insightful and very helpful categorisation that gives a further structure to the linked literary history he charts, and that is by repeatedly referring to five particular storytelling techniques employed to varying degrees both by the women SF writers of early magazine stories and by their feminist Darwinian foremothers. I have already touched on most of these but will list their descriptions here briefly: firstly, "the reorganisation of sexual selection, where women gain control of their bodies through biological, social and technological developments that are represented as positive progress" (9); secondly, "the fantastic expansion of the domestic sphere," as both utopias such as Herland and women SF writers of the late 1920s and 30s imagined an expansion of "their civilised vision of home through conquering the brutal savagery of men" (10); thirdly, the reconfiguration of the colonial gaze, "so that women are seen as the carriers of civilisation who must overcome the savagery, arrogance and narrowmindedness of men" (10); fourthly, the warning against the "dangers of masculinist science," in particular with regard to the tampering with evolution, and its replacement with an alternative, nurturing scientific femininity (11); and fifthly, a trope I have not explicitly touched upon but which makes an appearance in various guises in many of these stories, which is the representation of "Amazons and angels as the apex of Darwinian feminist evolution," and which stood in contrast to the idea of (still prison-like) expanded domesticity and allowed for "alternative models of

evolutionary development freed from the restraints of masculinist Euro-American society" (11).

As Sharp attentively demonstrates, these storytelling tactics present a decades-spanning set of tools with which women SF writers managed to destabilise and re-imagine the patriarchally-informed and colonially-minded evolution-based narratives that their male colleagues employed in their own storytelling. In presenting this categorisation, however, Sharp also gives his own readers an excellent set of tools for understanding the creative intellectual links that he himself is trying to draw attention to. Moreover, in an effective parallel that is surely intended though not explicitly stated, Sharp traces the evolution of the SF genre itself in his tracking of feminist evolutionary thought within its history; in fact, he skilfully demonstrates how the concepts of Darwinian feminism and attendant scientific femininity developed into quasi-genetic material that became part of the DNA of SF and should be identified and recognised as such.

In conclusion, this fascinating monograph should appeal to anyone with an interest in utopian literature and/or early SF, but it will be of particular value to SF and utopian studies scholars as it fills a significant gap in the available critical material on the history of these fields. *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction* situates itself in the empty spot in SF scholarship right before the period examined by Lisa Yaszek in *Galactic Suburbia* (2008), which covers women's SF in the post-war years after 1945, and it provides invaluable prehistory and background to Sharp and Yaszek's (eds.) recent anthology *Sisters of Tomorrow* (2016) as well as to other anthologies that cover similar ground, such as Justine Larbalestier's (ed.) *Daughters of Earth* (2006). As such, this work plays an important role both in straightforwardly filling a hole in SF history as well as in redressing historical inaccuracies that have occurred through the erasure and oversight of significant contributions by women in the genre's formative years – as Sharp mentions in the final chapters, this erasure has already taken many forms, and he himself hereby takes vital steps in reversing it.

In fact, the only shortcoming I could possibly identify during my reading of the monograph was the chronological inclusion of certain stories by women SF authors such as Leigh Brackett, Amelia Reynolds Long, and Lucile Taylor Hansen that clearly did not embody the legacy of Darwinian feminism in the same way as those of some of their contemporaries. However, even the presence of these writers ultimately appears to serve a purpose, be it as foils in the service of the historical accuracy and completeness that is central to the monograph's raison d'être, or in order for Sharp to identify even the smallest vestiges of remaining feminist boundary-pushing, such as in the subsequent mention of Hansen's progressive and anti-colonial 'Scientific Mysteries' column in *Amazing Stories*.

As such, I would suggest that just as Darwinian feminism should indeed be 'given its rightful place in the history of SF', so should *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction* be given its rightful place on the bookshelf of any self-respecting SF and/or utopian studies scholar, as it will certainly form an invaluable and highly enlightening addition to these fields.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Sarah Lohmann** is a PhD candidate in English Literature at Durham University, UK under the supervision of Professors Patricia Waugh and Simon James. Her interdisciplinary thesis focuses on feminist utopian novels of the twentieth century and spans Science Fiction, utopian studies, systems theory, and continental and analytic philosophy.

#### **MARY SHELLEY BY ANGELA WRIGHT**

#### Review by Richard Howard

#### Wright, Angela. Mary Shelley. University of Wales Press, 2018. 192 pp.

Part of the University of Wales Press series "Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions" that includes texts on Richard Marsh, Patrick McGrath, and Bram Stoker, Angela Wright's Mary Shelley takes the opportunity to revise our understanding of Mary Shelley as a Gothic writer by connecting her most infamous examples of the genre to lesser celebrated works. Wright's main thesis, which she returns to with regularity, is that Shelley used the Gothic form for didactic purposes, that her engagement with terror and horror in her writing served as a lesson in how to handle those emotions. Also, key to Wright's analysis is Shelley's privileging of the female perspective in her work, a notion the author traces through Frankenstein (1818), Matilda (1819), Valperga (1823) and The Last Man (1826). Through a combination of close reading, historical context, and secondary theoretical sources, Wright offers us a Mary Shelley beyond the two texts that most scholars of Fantastika would be familiar.

Wright's text is structured in chronological order, so that her writing on the 1818 and 1823 versions of Frankenstein are dealt with in separate chapters. This makes sense within the structure of the book, but possibly hindered more detailed comparative textual analysis between the two versions. Wright references Fred Botting's assertion that critics of Frankenstein "assemble their own monsters from the partial and dead signifiers that make up the narrative bodies of Frankenstein" (48), but Wright's critique of a text that has been well picked over by critics is original and astute. The monster in Wright's reading represents the male appropriation of the procreative function (27), and Wright points to Shelley's critique of the male scholar in the three male figures who take what they read too seriously: Walton reading about sea voyages in Homer and Shakespeare, Frankenstein reading about alchemy in Cornelius Agrippa, and the monster overhearing Milton's Paradise Lost (1667) and mistaking it for true history (37-38). Wright's thesis about female editorship emerges in her account of the frame narrative of the novel, with Walton addressing his letter at the beginning of the novel to his sister (Mrs. Savile) giving her "silent editorship of the whole text" and rendering the novel as a piece of female testimony (49). Walton succumbing to the terror of the tale he tells is compared to the rational ordering of editorship performed by his sister. Wright concludes that with this detail Shelley effects a "subtle transformation of the female character into the source of rational judgement and authorship" (49), and that this concern with female testimony can also be traced in her later work.

It is with this concern with female testimony that Wright links Frankenstein to Shelley's 1819 novel Matilda, narrated by the titular character from her deathbed. Wright suggests that Matilda is a more explicit and biographical testimony that echoes the death of Shelley's mother, as well as the author's incestuous feelings regarding her father William Godwin (55). Like the monster in Frankenstein, Matilda is self-taught, her reading of the classics in her aunt's library providing a haphazard education that leaves her "without the crucial discernment that allows the separation of reality and dreaming" (59). It is this lack of guidance in education that leads to Matilda detecting a romantic supplement in her father's letters (59). Wright reads the reciprocity

of feeling of desire between daughter and father as the young woman claiming a position as both the subject and object of desire, a point that Wright could have left out and still made a strong case for the novel as a feminine narrative (65). Matilda's eventual ability to control strong feelings, and refusal of the temptation to give lurid details of certain aspects of her life, is compared to Walton exulting in horror in *Frankenstein*, urging his sister to experience its full impact (63). Wright reads Matilda's refusal to dwell on horror as evidence of the novel as a feminine narrative. Wright suggests that "in the denial of a tale that can curdle the blood with horror, that can make the hair stand on end, there is a legitimate agency. Knowing when not to reveal the full extent of horror, of depravity, of desire, *Matilda* suggests, is a vital lesson that teaches us how to curb the excesses of our imagination" (64-65). Wright proposes that it is with the refusal of the visceral excesses of the Gothic that Shelley defines her own feminine version of the form.

Shelley's historical novel Valperga is appraised by Wright for its interrogation of the form's "ability to sustain the values of moderation and legitimacy" (68), concerns that Wright has detected across Shelley's work. The author suggests that Shelley drew from Godwin's perspective in "On History and Romance" (1797) that whereas history exists as a "mere skeleton of facts," the historical romance can give a fuller depiction and "analyse the materials of which society is composed" (72). For Wright, Valperga is part of the tradition of Gothic writing by women that, in the words of Margaret Anne Doody, challenges "the falsehood and disorder of the world" (71). Countess Euthansia's account of the rational governing of the castle Valperga and Castruccio's machinations driven by greed suggests an alternative historical record written by women. Wright points to the death of Wilhelmina at the hands of the Inquisition as a depiction of the ways in which this alternative version of history is suppressed (83). Wright also notes the character Beatrice as a strong independent female character with agency who, like Matilda, gives an edited version of her misfortunes to Euthanasia, to not "tell that which would chill your warm blood with horror" (85). For Wright, the friendship between Beatrice and Euthanasia is Shelley's acknowledgement of uncelebrated women, their "alternative testimonies" that "diminish the terrors invoked by absolutist figures like Castruccio" (88). This is a subtle feminine reordering of the Gothic, a celebration of "benevolent female friendship" (86), and a subversion of the concern to wallow in lurid detail in Gothic texts such as Matthew Lewis' The Monk (1796).

In the case of *The Last Man*, Wright concentrates on the biographical aspect of the novel, reading the text as cathartic, a means for Shelley to deal with the grief of losing her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and her friend Lord Byron. Again, Wright's thesis that Shelley's novels are instructional comes into play, she suggests that *The Last Man* is an attempt to teach the reader "how to experience horror, and then move beyond it" (93). Throughout the novel, it is Lionel's reaction to death, rather than his quest for survival that propels the narrative (95), a proposal that makes sense when we consider that there are no plans for procreation and the repopulation of the Earth, unlike other post-apocalyptic narratives. *The Last Man*, for Wright, is Shelley's demonstration of how the Romantic imagination offers temporary respite from grief. Again, the author points to the implication of female authorship in the framing narrative, with Shelley professing to have found the story of the last man in a cave in Naples, editing the account in order to present it as a work of fiction. The latter might be considered, not only in relation to the familiar Gothic conceit of the found text that increases the historical gravitas of the fiction, but also in relation to female authorship more generally. After all, *Frankenstein* was initially published anonymously, which might place Shelley within a tradition of female writers who attribute their works to pseudonyms, such as Emily Brontë, or those who seek to deconstruct the notion of authorship

entirely, such as Kathy Acker.

Fantastika scholars might be disappointed with Wright's appraisal of *The Last Man*, the study of which has grown in recent years in relation to Science Fiction and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction. Wright makes no mention of the balloon technology with which these denizens of the late twenty-first century traverse the globe, demonstrating "the power of man over the elements; a power long sought and lately won" (*The Last Man* 55). Raymond's plans for Republican England before the plague arrives also contain a utopian charge that Wright passes over without comment. This England where "men were to be transported from place with the same facility as Princes Housain, Ali, and Ahmed in the Arabian nights" and "the arts of life, and the discoveries of science had augmented in a ration which left all calculation behind; food sprang up [...] spontaneously – machines existed to supply with facility every want of the population" (*The Last Man* 84), surely deserves a mention in connection with *Frankenstein*'s depiction of the hubris of science.

This is a minor criticism regarding a fine piece of scholarship on Mary Shelley, but possibly points to the problem with attempting to integrate the whole of any particular author's work. Demonstrating continuity between the texts in this way can easily fall into the trap of ignoring the multivalent nature of the works themselves. As Roger Luckhurst points out, as well as writing Science Fiction, H. G. Wells wrote Gothic, social comedy, fantasies about angels, and essays (Luckhurst 31). To reduce Wells down to simply a writer of scientifically rigorous fictions would be to miss the whole picture. In a similar way, there is a danger of losing something when attempting to integrate the rest of Shelley's *oeuvre* with her most famous texts, not least the particularities of the texts themselves. In the transition, we might also lose sight of what has made *Frankenstein* so durable in the years since its publication, or minimise the significance of the increasing visibility and relevance of a novel like *The Last Man*.

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#### **BIO-NOTE**

**Richard Howard** is an early career researcher pursuing postdoctoral work at Maynooth University, Ireland. His PhD thesis "Estrange Conflict: Fragments of the Irish Troubles in the Science Fiction of Bob Shaw and James White" was completed in April 2016 at Trinity College, Dublin. His research interests include Irish Science Fiction, Weird Fiction, critical theory, science and technology studies, and postcolonial theory. He also writes fiction and has had work published in *Weird Tales*, *Electric Velocipede* and most recently in Jeff and Ann Vander/Meer's *The Bestiary* anthology.

# ORGANIC SYSTEMS: ENVIRONMENTS, BODIES AND CULTURES IN SCIENCE FICTION CONFERENCE

Conference Report by Chris Hussey

Organic Systems: Environments, Bodies and Cultures in Science Fiction Conference. Birkbeck College, University of London, UK, 16 September 2017.

On Saturday 16 September 2017, the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC) hosted "Organic Systems: Environments, Bodies and Cultures in Science Fiction," a conference drawing together scholars and fans from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of study for a day of critical engagement with works of the genre. Convened by Aren Roukema, Francis Gene-Rowe, and Rhodri Davies, and funded in collaboration by Birkbeck and Royal Holloway, the conference took the community's recent reading group subject as its theme and focus for the day. Gathering for an early start at Birkbeck College, University of London, we were reassured that this was the right venue, and that those looking for the Los Santos First Responders Conference were regrettably in the wrong location. In framing the day, it was suggested that the theme involved anticipating the future of the environment, and what this might hold for humanity.

The conference opened with a keynote from Chris Pak (King's Digital Lab, UK) chaired by Paul March-Russell (University of Kent, UK), entitled "'Old Genotypes in New Bodies': Intimations of Posthumanity in Science Fiction." Chris took a trans-historical approach to exploring aspects of Science Fiction and society, drawing on Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), J. G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964, a.k.a. *The Drought*, 1965), and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), amongst others. By focusing on the conference's themes and their relationship to culture, he posited the value placed on what it means to be human and non-human, what these categories may denote or subsequently exclude, and how this might need to be reconsidered in the future. Taking the example of the alien — as a potential evolution of humanity as typified through portrayals of 'the Martian' with enlarged craniums and emaciated bodies — Pak left us to consider whether these harbingers of the future typified what it was to be post (or indeed beyond) human, implying that change is inevitable.

After the keynote, we were treated to a selection of parallel panel sessions. The first I attended was entitled "Nature in the Anthropocene," featuring papers by Andrew M. Butler (Canterbury Christ Church University, UK) and Amy Cutler (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK). Butler's paper, "Taming Death: The Construction of Human/Alien Nature in Avatar," started by introducing the different '-cenes' that could conceptually be applied to the exploration of nature, such a 'Plantocene' and 'Capitalocene.' Of particular interest was his evocation of the terra nullus, the blank space of landscape in which we move – and how we might frame space or the countryside, socially and culturally, in terms of thinking about our relationship with place and the world around us. Cutler's paper, entitled "In Space, No One Can Hear the Forest Scream: Reinventing Sylvan Survival," focused on nature's future, specifically forests, and addressing certain misconceptions. It was fascinating to learn that forests do not require trees, as the term refers to a legally demarcated entity, rather

than what might be traditionally expected. Similarly, Cutler noted that 'vegetation' is really an active word and process, highlighting the irony of the term's typical usage, and suggesting that such misunderstandings about our world need to be addressed, as they may shape our actions and interactions.

This flowed nicely into the panel entitled "Eco-Critical Speculations," featuring papers from Rhys Williams (Glasgow University, UK), Gayathri Goel (Tufts University, UK) and Esther Andreu Martinez (Ritsumeikan University, Japan). Williams' paper, "Solarpunks Or Sunken Poles: Visions of Alternative Energy Futures," considered aspects of climate change, as well as the challenges of energy transition, in moving towards sustainable and renewable energy sources, contemplating the social, cultural, and technological shifts that would be required to make such changes for the future. Williams conceptualised the notion of humanity as being a force - one capable of causing change and impacting the planet, in ways both positive and negative, and therefore as something to be consciously aware of. Goel considered the moral responsibility within Science Fiction between humans, aliens and objects in her paper, "What Do We Do With 'It?' Science Fiction's Role in Taking Responsibility for Things." She posited the ethical dilemma of what it means to be alive or human, and how discomfort over things that are not considered to be human or rather alien, may lead to forms of objectification and subsequent divisions. Goel emphasised how the pronoun 'it' and its indiscriminate usage, had a dehumanising effect of stripping away aspects of character, which is inherently problematic when considering when 'things' become 'beings.' Bodies and repression were the focus of Martinez's paper within this panel, considering the body as the 'last redoubt of freedom,' and an outlet for liberation. Within Unno Juza's work "The Music Bath At 1800 Hours" (1937), music is used for control, playing non-stop to repress the citizenry. Confined to uniformity and essential slavery, this paper contemplated what it means to be human, and the value placed upon that concept, when your humanity is all you have left.

The next panel considered liminal spaces, titled "The Map is Not the Territory," featuring presentations by Michelle Clarke (SOAS University of London, UK) and Kerry Dodd (Lancaster University, UK). Clarke's paper, entitled "Ecology, Resistance, Scale: Ecocritical Reading in African Speculative Fiction," looked at environmental criticism from the perspective of African speculative fiction, to provide more than just a 'Western' approach to this discourse. The current challenges to ecology and eco-systems can be felt the world over, and considers the implications for their local contexts, as independent nations, and as part of the wider world. Dodd's paper, called "In the Zone: Demarcated Spaces and the Archaeology of Alien Detritus," contemplated the importance of the 'Zone,' defined as topographies that defy the physical and metaphysical laws of human convention. He marked that the human element of interaction with such spaces often influences these environments in irreparable ways, so much so that they become non-human, or indeed alien, and therefore represent a useful medium for exploring this separation from humanity.

The final parallel panel session took "Palimpsestic Landscapes" as its subject, with papers by Chris Hussey (University of Cambridge, UK), Richard Johnston (Keele University, UK), and Paul Fisher Davies (University of Sussex, UK) grouped under the title of: "Every Street A Document, Every Field A Text." Hussey's paper looked at the essential nature of place in texts, presenting "'More Than a City and A City': Exploring the Intersections and Interactions of Place in China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* and *The City & The City.*" He suggested that the interplay between the linked cities in Miéville's novels, and how they 'seep' into and 'breach' one another, provides a liminal space for the consideration of challenging topics, when removed from the confines

of a realist setting – and serves to demonstrate the benefits of the genre. Johnston looked at the work of Philip K. Dick and the American West within his paper, "'Plough the Topsoil Until It Blows to The Ocean,'" noting that Dick's engagement with other cultures was a way of viewing, seeing, and reflecting American society within his writing. The idioms used to characterise his work within specific places, particularly references to California and regional history, rather than being insular and parochial, instead offer a more reflective commentary and indeed critique, on matters both local and global in scale. Fisher Davies looked at the work of Simon Stålenhag, in his paper entitled "Like A Kite Bigger Than the Suburb," showcasing the natural landscape of Stockholm in the 1980s occupied by robots, dinosaurs, vehicles, and machines in an envisioning of the impact of a particle accelerator called "The Loop" upon the environment. Stålenhag weaves these images into what was described as a haunted landscape, where human constructions feature as domineering presences in amongst the beauty of the natural world, with the landscape around them persisting over time, and in some cases reclaiming these spaces from the human structures that are starting to rust and decay. Fisher Davies has also brilliantly illustrated some key parts of the conference, providing a fantastic snapshot of presenters and their key messages which are worth looking at and can be viewed here.

To finish the day, we gathered for a roundtable discussion featuring Paul McAuley (Stroud, UK), Gwyneth Jones (Brighton, UK), and Adam Roberts (Royal Holloway, UK), with the session chaired by Caroline Edwards (Birkbeck University of London, UK). It was an engaging and lively conclusion, drawing together some of the strands explored within the various parts of the conference, and involved thinking more broadly about Science Fiction and the environment, their intersections, and interactions. Discussion of how nature might invade a city, but that cities are typically excluded from nature, drew on the complex interplay between the natural and the artificially constructed, that often features within texts and our lives. Where we design places and control nature, we are left wondering whether we can truly be separated from nature, or if our mediated interactions leave us indelibly linked to the environment.

The thought that Science Fiction is not purely about the future, but that it can be entirely of the present, is interesting too – and there was much discussion over the notion of a 'utopia', often described as something we lack, rather than being a more concrete opportunity for social improvement. In any case, McAuley sagely noted that there is a "fine line between a utopia and a terrible death cult," and it is perhaps a line we would not want to find ourselves having to ponder.

With the theme for the year ahead (starting October 2017) being "Sublime Cognition: Science Fiction and Religion," and culminating in a conference on this topic, on the basis of this event, it will be one well worth attending.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Chris Hussey** is a part-time PhD Candidate studying Children's Literature at the University of Cambridge, UK. His doctoral research explores relationships with real and literary place, examining London as a site of place-identity. For his Master's thesis, he focused on the concepts of space, place, and identity in China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* (2007), and his research interests include engaging with these aspects in Miéville's wider corpus, as well as within the works of other authors across a range of genres.

# GOTHIC STYLE(S), GOTHIC SUBSTANCE: GOTHIC MANCHESTER FESTIVAL 2017 CONFERENCE

Conference Report by Tuğçe Bıçakçı Syed

Gothic Style(s), Gothic Substance Conference. Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, 28 October 2017.

During the week leading up to last year's Halloween, Manchester became the UK's most Gothic city for the fifth year running. Organised by an amazing team from Manchester Metropolitan University's (MMU) Centre for Gothic Studies, 2017's Gothic Manchester Festival took place between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> October and brought together enthusiasts of Gothic culture from various sectors such as fashion, music, cinema, literature, art, and academia. This year, the festival's theme was "Gothic Style(s)," a topic which addressed issues of diversity and difference through assorted public events. The festival opened with a double bill film screening of one of the most iconic examples of the notion of difference, Frankenstein (1931) and Frankenstein's Bride (1935), and ended with a street fashion show celebrating goths, punks, and other styles often considered unconventional by mainstream culture. In keeping with this celebratory spirit, the Gothic Style(s), Gothic Substance Conference explored the journey of the Gothic style from the Enlightenment to the neoliberal present, its constantly evolving cultural function and its diverse components in various forms of art, media, and culture. The conference consisted of three parallel panels followed by a plenary session and a book launch. It was an illuminating and thought-provoking day for delegates from various backgrounds, some of whom were introduced to the world of England-based Gothic academia for the first time.

Sue Chaplin (Leeds Beckett University, UK) opened the first parallel panel by foregrounding the shifting depictions of zombies in political and cultural contexts of the twenty-first century. Drawing on the use of the zombie walk as a form of political activism, Chaplin's paper pointed out the evolution of the zombie figure as the metaphorical embodiment of the masses who feel like the living-dead under the strain of neoliberal capitalism. A similar approach was taken by Jonathan Greenaway (MMU) who discussed the works of Blumhouse Productions with regards to political allusions covering issues such as race, class, and economy in the neoliberal age. Focusing on one the most thought-provoking horror films of 2017, Get Out, alongside numerous others, Greenaway argued that contemporary Gothic horror films featuring home invasion plots reveal the house as a site of cultural anxiety in relation to the post-recession perception of ownership and possession. Eleanor Beal (MMU) shifted the audience's attention to another intersection between neoliberalism and Gothic style, raising questions about Left Behind (1995-2007), a series of religious novels linked to an Evangelist movement in the US spearheaded by the Scum of the Earth Church (founded 2000) which, unlike traditional Christian churches, welcomes those who are considered as outcasts by the society, including Goths and punks.

The second set of panels focused on the contemporary Gothic in film & television and video

games. In the "Film & Television" panel, Stephanie Reid's (MMU) opening paper on physical wounds and their representation in dressing the spectral body in contemporary Gothic film & television looked into popular works such as Del Toro's interpretation of female Gothic *Crimson Peak* (2015), *American Horror Story*'s most feminine season *Coven* (2013), and fashion designer Alexander McQueen's 1998 Joan of Arc collection. Next, the globalisation of Gothic aesthetics in Polish and Bulgarian contexts was discussed by Magdalena Grabias (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland) and Margarita Georgieva (Université de Nice Sophia, France). Gothic aesthetics were the centre of interest in the "Gothic Gaming" panel as well. Jon Garrad (Independent Researcher), Ash Darrow (MMU), and Rick Hudson (Academic & Writer) provided an intriguing overview of the popular use of the gothic aesthetics, architecture, and stock tropes in video games since the 1990s. Darrow's paper was particularly engaging as it established a dialogue between the Gothic Revival of the eighteenth century and the digital Gothic architecture in video games of the last two decades.

The conference venue was very lively throughout the day. Various antique oddities were showcased in "The Hungry Dog Emporium of Curiosities" shop. Bookstalls offered discounted Gothic monographs and collections including the latest addition to The International Gothic series *Neoliberal Gothic* (2017), edited by Linnie Blake (MMU) and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (University of Lausanne, Switzerland), and Xavier Aldana Reyes's (MMU) long-awaited monograph *Spanish Gothic* (2017), amongst many others. Thus, apart from being a site of academic networking, the conference was a Gothicist's heaven filled with freakish wonders, old and new.

The last two panels of the conference were dedicated to Gothic styles. The "Gendering Gothic Styles" panellists covered fiction, film & television, and fashion in their discussions of female body and femininity while the "Varieties of Gothic Style" panel explored a broad range of representations of the Gothic in literature and visual media. While Rachael Taylor (Teeside University, UK) focused on the beautiful monsters of the nineteenth century British fiction, Yvette Harvey (RMIT University, Australia) looked into the female body and white dress in contemporary Australian Gothic. After Harvey's talk concluded, Chloé Germaine Buckley (MMU) drew attention to the relationship between class and style in the female costumes in the *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) television series. In one of the highlights of the last panel, Jenevieve Van-Veda (Model, Performer & Aesthete), offered a thorough investigation of the style known as 'Geisha Goth.' Van-Veda, who was beautifully dressed in Geisha Goth style, addressed common features of Goth and Geisha styles by exploring the significant historical links between the ghosts of the Western Gothic tradition and Japanese folklore.

The plenary session included talks by Sam George (University of Hertfordshire, UK), Kate Harvey (Stirling University, UK), and John Nicholls (University of Hull, UK). Sam George's moving tribute to Sophie Lancaster in her plenary struck me in such a way that I found myself thinking about Gothic academia's non-academic role within contemporary society for the rest of the day. Sophie Lancaster and her boyfriend Robert Maltby were brutally attacked in August 11, 2007 in Stubbylee Park in Bacup, Lancashire. The police reported that the couple were attacked because they were dressed as goths. After the incident, Sophie remained critically in coma for thirteen days before she passed away in August 24, 2007. Since then, her story became one of the symbols in the fight against hate crime and social violence in Britain. Having examined Simon Armitage's poetic sequence written in Sophie's voice Black Roses (2012) and Nick Leather's BBC3 drama based on Sophie and Robert's story Murdered for Being Different (2017), George discussed how these issues are

being handled in Britain in the current Brexit atmosphere. She also elaborated on the strong connection that British Goth culture has with Sophie and why that connection matters.

Gothic Style(s), Gothic Substance came to an end with a wine reception in which four new Gothic books were launched and a Gothic skull cake was devoured by the delegates. At the same time, George's plenary resonated with everyone that night, her reminder that as academics, our attitude towards the society and our rendering of the socio-political events in our academic research are extremely significant. Particularly in this Gothic present, difference and diversity are timely issues to address. This is why Gothic academia in Britain is a special network, always welcoming those who might feel out of place, celebrating differences at both academic and public level, and calling for equality, tolerance, and awareness through analyses of fictional or real-life monstrosities.

This summer, MMU Centre for Gothic Studies will be hosting the 14<sup>th</sup> International Gothic Association (IGA) Conference between 31 July and 3 August 2018. The conference is dedicated to the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's immortal novel *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and will be an outstanding opportunity for those who are curious to witness Gothic academia at its best.

MMU's Centre for Gothic Studies: <a href="https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/english/gothic-studies/">https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/english/gothic-studies/</a>. The 14th IGA Conference: <a href="https://igamanchester2018.wordpress.com">https://igamanchester2018.wordpress.com</a>

\* Special thanks to Rebecca Gibson (Lancaster University, UK) for sharing her notes from the morning sessions.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Tugge Biçakçi Syed** is a PhD candidate at Lancaster University, UK. Her research aims to theorise the term Turkish Gothic in relation to Globalgothic studies with a particular focus on the representations of national identity, collective memory, and social anxiety in Turkish Gothic narratives from 1923 to present, as well as the image of the Turkish and/or Oriental identity as barbaric and evil in Western Gothic narratives. Her other research interests include Gothic and ideology, Islamic Gothic, folklore, Gothic Sci-Fi, contemporary Gothic in film, television, and media.

# 2017: A CLARKE ODYSSEY – A CONFERENCE MARKING THE CENTENARY OF SIR ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Conference Report by Rhodri Davies

#### 2017: A Clarke Odyssey. Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK, 9 December 2017

For me, the enduring image of this conference was a photograph displayed by Professor Charlotte Sleigh (University of Kent, UK) during her keynote address: "Science and the Ancient Geeks: Fiction and Fandom in Interwar Britain." Taken in 1937 in Leeds at the first ever UK Science Fiction convention, this showed a small group of rather serious young men, clad mostly in three-piece suits and overcoats. Of the fourteen who attended, eleven appear in this picture, all still known to us today for their influential roles in the development of SF and fandom. To the left, peering bashfully between Maurice K. Hanson (founder of Novae Terrae) and Walter Gillings (editor of Tales of Wonder), is Arthur C. Clarke. What struck me was Clarke's diffidence amongst these luminaries of British fandom, whose unquestionable successes his own were to eclipse. This impression of modesty was borne out during the conference by recollections of Clarke shared by those present who had known him personally. In particular, Stephen Baxter's (UK) closing talk revealed a man whose keen advocacy of science and impact on Science Fiction was surpassed only by a humility and generosity that led him to maintain numerous correspondences with fans and aspiring writers. Baxter's own began when he was welcomed into Clarke's Minehead hotel room twenty-five years ago after a Clarke Award ceremony - the overcoat had been supplanted by a white Sri Lankan robe, a customary mode of dress in Clarke's later years, but his modesty and willingness to share his time remained. Attendance at the conference also mirrored the photograph. Many delegates were likewise luminaries of SF, a fact highlighted during Nick Hubble's (Brunel University London, UK) talk "The Clarke Award, 'Literary SF' and the Role of Criticism: Cultural Value in the 21st Century," which resulted in some vigorous discussion as most members of the audience, it seemed, had at one time or another served on the jury panel. That so many leading figures in SF criticism had travelled to the conference stood as a fitting tribute to Clarke's enduring legacy.

Sleigh's opening keynote considered how the first self-identified Science Fiction fans in the UK can be understood as "lay participants in scientific culture," encountering their science in books and regarding it as a species of writing. Determined to participate, they published zines and articles on popular topics of the day. SF, they felt, facilitated the development of a unique perspective on society and world affairs, whilst reading it and writing about it became a form of identity making, as fans reflected on fandom and its purpose, building a community through producing and distributing their writing. Fans were thus able to "interleave themselves into this story about science." Sleigh wondered what this might tell us about popular engagement with science today, about citizen science and hacker science, and the use of 'science' as a banner on marches and social media. In an age where the specialist scientist knows no more about most science than the informed lay person, perhaps, Sleigh suggested, we should regard both alike as 'science fans.'

Andy Sawyer (University of Liverpool, UK) began the first panel of the day – "Science Fiction Contexts" – with "'It's just my job five days a week': 'Rocket-Men' of the 1950s," exploring how as rocketry gained increased public attention throughout the 1950's, SF and mainstream publications collided in a passion for space. Clarke himself published *Prelude to Space* (1951), a piece of visionary propaganda that argued for space exploration in pursuit of human betterment, rather than as a nationalist component of the Cold War. Whilst children's SF celebrated action heroes, Clarke himself was suspicious of such figures and his characters instead privileged social goals and camaraderie. Boyarkina Iren (University of Rome Tor Vergata, Italy) discussed "The Destiny of Life and Mind in the Universe in the Works by Arthur Clarke and Olaf Stapledon," focusing on *Star Maker* (1937) and *Childhood's End* (1953). These were read as vituperations on the anthropocentrism of Christianity united by their grandeur of vision and hunger for insight into the role that life and minds (of any species) play in the universe. Iren proposed that for both authors, the goal of mind is to reach sufficient spiritual heights to join higher spiritualities, observing, however, that whilst spirits meet and travel together by choice in *Star Maker*, in *Childhood's End* they are selected and assisted in their development by the Overlords in service to the Overmind.

When the conference split into parallel streams, I attended "Clarke's influence on Liu Cixin." Lyu Guangzhao (University College London, UK) opened with "The Acceptance of Arthur Clarke in the Trilogy of Remembrance of Earth's Past by Liu Cixin." Guangzhao considered The Three Body Problem to draw parallels with Clarke, showing how Cixin's work both builds upon and challenges the paradigms of earlier SF, combining rigorous extrapolation with poetic prose to examine the internal conflicts of humanity and its place in an unforgiving universe. Stephen Dougherty (Agder University, Norway) argued in "Liu Cixin, Arthur C. Clarke and 'Repositioning'" that both authors' work reflects the geopolitical repositioning of their respective nations – post-war Britain's declining and contemporary China's growing influence on the world stage – as well as the repositioning of SF itself as a global literature in an era of increasing understanding of the impact of manmade climate change. Through close readings of extracts from 2001 (1968) and Rendezvous with Rama (1973), Dougherty showed how the comparisons of the alien environments and phenomena they encounter made by Clarke's astronauts de-centre the Earth, rendering the alien eerily familiar and the Earth itself alien, whilst a passage from The Three Body Problem illustrated a similar commonality between the terrestrial and cosmic, highlighting the vulnerability of our planet and suggesting an ambivalence concerning our relationship to it.

The second parallel panel I saw, "Religion(s), Transcendence and the Transhuman," began with Thore Bjørnvig's (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) "Leaving the Cradle: Transcendence and Childhood's End," which proposed that a grand narrative of evolutionary progression is reiterated throughout Clarke's novels. Bjørnvig compared the religious themes and motifs through which this is articulated to Christian apocalyptic writing, with man's development in Clarke being characterised in terms of prelapsarian sinlessness, Fall, mundane existence, and eventual ascension, figured in Childhood's End as union with the Overmind, but elsewhere through becoming machines. Jim Clarke (Coventry University, UK) traced a very different influence in his paper, "A Space Bodhi Tree: The 'Crypto-Buddhism' of Arthur C. Clarke." Evaluating Arthur C.'s claim in a 1999 interview to be a "crypto-Buddhist," Clarke identified a number of Buddhist or Buddhist mediated influences throughout his work, concluding that whilst he appeared not to subscribe wholly to Buddhism, he was clearly aware of and drew upon Buddhist concepts in his writing. Despite maintaining that "civilisation and religion are incompatible," Clarke exempted Buddhism from some of his criticisms for requiring no belief

in a god and because of his great affection for Sri Lankan people and culture. Andrew M. Butler (Canterbury Christ Church University, UK) delivered the third of this panel's papers, "2001: A Space Prosthesis." Moving from the famous jump cut at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's 2001 (1968), Butler took his audience through the range of tools and prostheses portrayed in the film, showing how through these, after Freud, man as Dave Bowman "has almost become a god himself." The ultimate tool, responsible for Bowman's attainment of godlike powers, is the Monolith, which, when rotated 90 degrees, Butler noted, becomes the cinema screen, a tool for extending the viewer's consciousness, potentially uplifting us beyond our current state of mind.

The final panel of the day was "Clarke's Legacies." Nick Hubble's opening paper, mentioned earlier, was followed by Joe Norman's (Brunel University, UK) "'call me highway call me conduit call me lightning rod': 'Big Dumb Objects' in Selected Works by Arthur C. Clarke and Iain M. Banks." Norman proposed that the true BDO - one evoking the famed 'sense of wonder' - is more than a simple macro-structure. That sense inheres in the promise of the transcendental rather than mere size and is signalled by both authors through perfect simplicity of shape: the rectangular Monolith; the cylindrical Rama; and the sphere of the "outside context problem" of Banks's Excession (1996). Whilst such artefacts offer the potential for a conceptual breakthrough or paradigm shift, in Excession and Rendezvous with Rama, the anticipated breakthrough fails to materialise, though the texts close with the suggestion that they have provided a necessary impetus for humanity to resolve its own problems, a note of cautious optimism that Norman suggested SF needs now more than ever. Patrick Parrinder (University of Reading, UK) ended the panel with "Clarkaeology: Arthur C. Clarke's Time Capsules," an examination of the role of archaeology in Clarke's work. Many of Clarke's characters are at least amateur archaeologists, and Parrinder proposed as components of a 'Clarkaeology': the diffusion theory of extraterrestrial culture; 'humane' aliens; and the 'time capsule' – a preserved or restored relic from the past. Clarke's characters frequently exhibit a strong, melancholy sense of their own belatedness after encountering such evidence of their alien predecessors, and this belatedness is key to our reading of his work.

After being reminded of the breadth and scope of his work, I reflected that this sense of belatedness must attend the readings of many contemporary SF authors when encountering Clarke's *oeuvre* for the first time, as it did my recollections of that 1937 photograph on my journey back to London following our post-conference meal. I'd like to offer my thanks to Andrew M. Butler and Paul March-Russell for the opportunity to join such an illustrious gathering.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Rhodri Davies** is a doctoral candidate at Birkbeck College, University of London, UK. His research focuses on 'Golden Age' Science Fiction and New Religious Movements. He co-directs the London Science Fiction Research Community.

### **FICTION REVIEWS**

#### "NO ESCAPE FROM THESE WORDS"

#### Review by Paul March-Russell

#### Barker, Nicola. H(a)ppy. William Heinemann, 2017. Novel.

Despite winning the 2017 Goldsmiths' Prize for experimental fiction, Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* has, apart from brief praise by Nina Allan in *Strange Horizons*, received little or no recognition from the Science Fiction (SF) community. This is a pity, sparking off echoes of Jonathan Lethem's lament in 'The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction' (1998) for a lost experimental SF that (in his alt-history scenario) saw Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* triumph at the 1973 Nebula Awards over the real-world winner, Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973).

Echoes only though.

For Lethem's essay relies upon the simplistic binary opposition between a nebulous 'mainstream' literary culture defined in relation to – and serving to cement the otherwise porous boundaries of – a supposed ghetto of genre fictions. As I have argued in *Modernism and Science Fiction* (2015), there was always datableed between these two constituencies. One of the most important of such instances was the experimental fiction of Christine Brooke-Rose, to whom *H(A)PPY* is most of all indebted.

Echoes also since the linguistically innovative tradition in which Barker's novel operates was itself marginalised by the New Wave SF that Lethem praises. Although he mentions a handful of women writers from within the SF genre, the only text that Lethem cites that was actually published in *New Worlds* is Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967). The fact that this story is so often cited by critics as the archetypal *New Worlds* text, and the point at which the SF avant-garde met feminist politics, only emphasises how little else published in the magazine in the late 1960s actually achieved these ambitions. Although the magazine was read by female avant-gardists from outside the community, most notably Angela Carter, Michael Moorcock's editorship failed to significantly increase the number of women writers who wrote for *New Worlds*. Instead, experimental women's fiction largely existed on the peripheries of genre SF, often combating the more bullish members of the male avant-garde, such as the novelist and polemicist B. S. Johnson.

For contemporary SF readers to glance over H(A)PPY and its reclamation of an entire tradition of women's writing is therefore to leave unchecked the misogyny and hypocrisy that silenced such writers in the first place.

Nevertheless, channels between *New Worlds* and the female avant-garde can be charted. The novelist, Ann Quin, worked as a secretary at the I.C.A., bringing her into the orbit of J.G. Ballard, Eduardo Paolozzi and the then-Director of the I.C.A., Mike Kustow. (Famously, she won a short story competition organised by Ballard and Martin Bax at *Ambit* in which she described the hallucinatory effects of the contraceptive pill.) Both

Ballard and Quin admired the work of Anna Kavan, whose 1967 novel, *Ice*, was subsequently marketed as Science Fiction by Brian Aldiss. At the same time, Aldiss was publishing his own Science-Fictional foray into the *nouveau roman*, *Report on Probability A* (1968). Such experiments were not only influenced by the ideas of Alain Robbe-Grillet but also by the translations of his novels; Brooke-Rose's translation of *In the Labyrinth* appeared in the same year as Aldiss's novel.

In Constructing Postmodernism (1992), Brooke-Rose is viewed by Brian McHale as a key figure within, what he terms, the feedback loop between SF and experimental fiction. The sheen of postmodernism, however, glosses over Brooke-Rose's deeper indebtedness not only to the high modernism of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf but also to the interfaces between myth and history, technology, and culture, to be found within their work. As the titles of novels such as Amalgamemnon (1984), Verbivore (1990) and Textermination (1991) indicate, Brooke-Rose is not only committed to language as experiment but to the word as the means by which we make the world. A similar inventiveness is also to be found in H(A)PPY although, in terms of setting, Barker looks back to an earlier novel by Brooke-Rose, and her first foray into recognisable SF tropes, the post-apocalyptic Out (1964). Barker's utopia arises from a millenarian end-time that she summarises as "the Floods and the Fires and the Plagues and the Death Cults" (1).

In many respects, Barker's utopia is familiar territory to seasoned readers. After the descent into barbarism, a technological society is reborn in which the inhabitants, the Young, must keep their emotions in check, aided either by algorithms (the Graph), surveillance (the Sensor), therapy (the reassurance of a Neuro-Mechanical pet), educational workshops (the Kora Group that the protagonist, Mira A, attends), or the administration of drugs. Little of this is foreign to readers of Huxley, Orwell, or Zamyatin, but Barker immediately pulls a couple of tricks. First, Mira A is not only content with her society, she actively blames herself for not being happy enough. Unlike the protagonists of Brave New World (1932), Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) or We (1924), who awaken to a new-found - although brief - consciousness, the agony that Mira A experiences come not from her new self-awareness but from her perceived failure to fit in. In actively seeking to re-harmonise herself with her society, she only succeeds in falling further and further away. This lends her story an ironic, rather than a tragic, arc. Second, as indicated in the quotation above, Barker colour-codes certain words dependent upon their emotional content. These act as trigger warnings for the Young: words and thoughts that have to be approached carefully or expunged altogether. Language, then, is the medium through which the social order conducts itself, and it is through the re-routing of language that Barker's novel not only deconstructs itself but also the social structures of her utopia. In this respect, Barker's novel most resembles We in that, as with Zamyatin's use of mathematical discourse, the form of her novel most perfectly integrates with the content of her society. The word both makes and un-makes the world of Barker's imaginings.

The glitch arises, however, not from some insurgent like Julia, the Savage or I-330 but from Mira A's own researches into the history of the South American guitarist Augustin Barríos. Whereas the Folk music of other cultures, such as the kora, is appropriated and instrumentalised by the System, so as to temper the emotions of the Young, the music of Barríos – a supposed primitive who was inspired by J. S. Bach – opens-up for Mira a range of feeling and technical expression that, in the discourse of her society, represents an 'EOE' (Excess of Emotion). Not only, then, are the individual pages of the novel active and dynamic, constantly pushing at the boundaries of their instrumentality through the playfulness of Barker's language and the extraordinary

range of typographical devices, but her narrative is also deeply musical, sometimes literally becoming a score.

Whilst, on the one hand, Barker's novel aspires to a Paterian emphasis upon musicality that also inspired Joyce (the 'Sirens' chapter of *Ulysses* (1922)), on the other hand, Barker attunes this emphasis to a feminist perspective. As an explicit reference to Jacques Lacan in the penultimate chapter indicates, Barker, like Brooke-Rose before her, is well-versed in French post-structural theory. It is therefore not too much of a leap to suggest that the kora can also be read as the *chora* which, for Julia Kristeva, represents the mobile and undefined source of semiotic pulsations that seep up from the realm of the Imaginary into the Symbolic Order. As Mira A burrows further into the musical history of Paraguay, not as a dissident act but as a good and happy purpose to fulfil, so she uncovers a range of expression that inadvertently 'declare[s] war on the System' (250) by introducing 'random information' (245) into its operation. Like other contemporary writers, such as Sarah Hall and Eimear McBride, who have been drawn back to the avant-garde theories and practice of the 1960s and '70s, Barker's novel represents a newly-inscribed *écriture feminine*, an outburst of *jouissance* that deliriously destabilizes the patriarchal encoding of her utopia.

And yet, despite this all-too-happy affinity for post-structural discourse, what gives Barker's critique its full gravitas is Mira A's rediscovery of Paraguayan culture. In particular, her uncovering of a colonial past that sought to silence the indigenous population just as the System now seeks to restrict the emotional and intellectual expression of its citizenry. Barríos's example represents an instinctive détournement, a reversal not only of the Western classical model of Bach but also of the Western tendency to exalt and exoticise the primitive. But it also represents the coming-into-being of a hybrid identity that speaks both from and to the effects of colonialism upon the subaltern class. The disambiguation with which Barker's novel commences heralds the translation of the master discourse into its subaltern other; the gaps and silences not only within the narrative but the visible ruptures and blank spaces within the text articulating the very suppression of the colonial subject. It too, like Barríos's music, is the entry into a new literary identity.

To say, then, that H(A)PPY is a major achievement is an understatement. In the expanding world of Fantastika, it demands our attention.

#### **BIONOTE**

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# "BECAUSE YOU ARE ALL DIFFERENT": ISOLATION AND IDENTITY IN THE ERSTWHILE

Review by Beatrice Ashton-Lelliott

#### Catling, Brian. The Erstwhile. Coronet, 2017. Novel

Following up a debut novel as outstanding as *The Vorth* (2012) was always going to be a challenge. Largely, however, Brian Catling continues the same beguiling atmosphere which made the first novel in this sequence such a "masterpiece," to quote Alan Moore on the book's cover. The planned trilogy of books explores the Vorrh, a dense, conscious, untamed forest situated in an alternative vision of Africa, and its nearby Germanic commercial hub of Essenwald. The primary time setting, without being explicit, takes place in an often Steampunk-esque reimagining of the nineteenth-century. Aside from the many innovative aspects of the novels' content, it is Catling's vivid and poetic language which makes these books so enthralling. While defying any easy comparison, to my mind Catling is one of the most innovative Fantasy writers of the twenty-first century; a view shared by Michael Moorcock, who described *The Vorth* as "one of the most original works of visionary fiction since Peake or Carpentier" (*The Guardian*, 2015).

Although suffering slightly from 'middle book syndrome' as the second in a trilogy, *The Ertswhile* features many of the same successful techniques as its predecessor, such as Catling's inclusion of historical figures. Whereas *The Vorrh*'s lodestone to reality was Eadweard Muybridge, the pioneer of motion photography, *The Erstwhile* opens with William Blake. His companion is one of the titular Erstwhile, who serve as fallen angel figures in the lore of Catling's world. The novel, through the figure of its central Erstwhile who takes on the name 'Nicholas Parson,' depicts the mental health issues and identity crises suffered by these creatures who are doomed to walk the earth in perpetuity. Parson's inability to engage with or differentiate between time periods across his life leads him to spend much of the early twentieth-century in asylums and hospitals, where he is studied by Dr Hector Schumann. Parson is obsessed with wireless radio and his quest to be reunited with his "ol' man" (208): Blake. The unique crisis of identity suffered by the Erstwhile is eventually revealed to manifest, disturbingly, in a compulsive need to bury themselves alive. *The Erstwhile*'s key themes include ideas of selfhood, identity and how disabilities or differences can become inextricably linked to both. Catling engages with these themes primarily through a blend of the reinterpretation of traditional Fantasy tropes, such as his dismissal of the traditional good vs evil dichotomy, and unique conceptualisations, with the central question at the narrative's core being whether one should embrace or seek to change a disability.

Arguably the novel features no central protagonist, but many of its characters are linked in some way to Ishmael, whose adolescence is one of the focuses of the first novel. In *The Erstwhile*, Ishmael is suffering from the same concerns as Nicholas Parson, struggling to situate himself as the only apparent cyclops in the world. *The Vorth* presents an example of the identity struggles which Ishmael faces, in which his two friends and lovers, Ghertrude and Cyrena, employ the help of trappers to find him following his disappearance into the Vorth. The

monster they return with shares Ishmael's physical cyclopean face, but is abhorrent, cannibalistic and entirely bestial. The novel highlights the idea that this creature could be seen by outsiders as in any way comparable to Ishmael is repulsive to both women, who then begin to consider the discrimination and violence which he could face from wider society throughout the narrative. This incident continues to haunt the three of them throughout *The Ertswhile*, with Ishmael's confusion over his own identity often reminiscent of similar 'monster' narratives, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

Ishmael's journey to self-acceptance is one of the focuses of *The Ertswhile*, as it follows the changes to his life brought about following the surgery he underwent at the hands of a Vorrh witchdoctor, Nebsuel, in the first novel. In an effort to appear conventional and acceptable to outside society, the surgery gave him two eyes. In *The Erstwhile*, Ishmael spends the latter half of the novel regarding Sholeh, another patient of Nebsuel's, as his only equal in the world, often using her as a crutch to mask his own fears of standing "alone in this shivering uncertain world" (28). Sholeh's characterisation is a problematic aspect of the novel, as she ultimately falls into the stereotype of the exotic male fantasy, her only purpose being to sexually satisfy Ishmael and further his own development. Ishmael's continued isolation, very much the focal point of this novel, is mirrored in the narratives of Tsungali, a hunter who is the last of his tribe and is benignly haunted by the ghost of his grandfather, and of Modesta, a mysterious child with black and white skin.

Physical disabilities are also explored throughout Catling's series, such as in the case of Cyrena Lohr's blindness, which she is cured of in *The Vorrh*, but only, as she discovers, by passing it on to others. The moral issues surrounding this develop throughout the narrative, asking the reader to consider how perceived disabilities can become intertwined with identity. While all the characters in the series have their moments of repulsiveness, in *The Erstwhile* a disillusioned Ishmael drives his former friends away in a particularly spiteful manner, using Cyrena's blindness against her. In one of their final arguments before he returns to the Vorrh, Ishmael wounds Cyrena with: "I can see everything, I have never been blind" (201). The narrative poses compelling questions regarding how a threatened sense of selfhood and identity can affect relationships, which Cyrena herself identifies, noting Ishmael's immature inability to consider problems outside of his "ridiculous ego or [his] insecurity" (201). Eyes are a motif of the series in their own right, from Ishmael's transformation to two eyes by stealing the eye of another creature, to a particularly poignant conversation between Dr Schumann and Nicholas in *The Erstwhile*. Nicholas describes how the Erstwhile see with "different eyes" (311) which only detect the brains and spinal cords of humans, leading Schumann to ask how the angels can tell humans apart from one another. Nicholas replies, cheerfully, "because you are all different" (311).

Whilst Catling's characters spent much of *The Vorth* grappling with their individual battles with identity, disability, and isolation, the narrative of *The Ertswhile* shows some development in their attitudes towards an acceptance of their uniqueness, for good or ill. The plot often follows individual characters and highlights their seclusion, with self-imposed isolation acting as a recurring theme, seen in Tsungali, Cyrena, Ghertrude, Ishmael, and Sidrus, a deranged hunter of the forest. Group mentalities, on the other hand, are not endorsed as a solution to loneliness. A side effect of too much time spent in the Vorrh is that a person becomes a "hollow human" (46) in a collective hive mind known as the Limboia, who are used as somnambulist labour to power Essenwald's railway. While many of the central characters are alone, the Limboia are the other extreme, having no individual identity. Through the Limboia, we are reminded that Catling's series is not for the faint-

hearted and contains often-brutal and disturbing elements of Horror. The level of brutality, particularly in regard to this captive group, can be read as a commentary on colonialism and the human cost of industrial empires. It also helps to ground Catling's work in a sense of reality: he does not shy away from the more sinister aspects of the human psyche. The Limboia are stirred into action at one point in the narrative by the corpse of a baby and return to the Vorrh in *The Erstwhile*, reanimating the cadaver into an avatar of the forest's consciousness. One of the strengths of Catling's writing is his ability to present often abhorrent events, characters, and beliefs without authorial intervention or comment, presenting the reader with only the alternatingly bleak and phantasmagorical reality of this world.

Overall, The Erstwhile arguably acts more as a scene-setting exercise for the final novel of the trilogy, rather than as a self-contained epic as The Vorrh was, but still offers a welcome return to Catling's extraordinary world and prose style. In considering the author's written work in relation to his principal career as an artist, parallels can be drawn with a fixation on conjuring in his artwork. Catling's 2009 piece, Notes & Bones from a Conjuror's Table, visualizes the blend of the archaic and industrial seen throughout his Vorrh trilogy and reminds us that magic is a topic which is at the centre of his creative output. If viewed through the lens of the three-stage magic trick structure set out by Christopher Priest (1995), in which The Erstwhile acts as the secondary performance, only time will tell whether the prestige of Catling's sequence will reach the same high bar that was established with his original setup.

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# "WHAT YOU SEEK IS SEEKING YOU": A JOURNEY INTO ISLAMIC MYTHOLOGY

Review by Meriem Rayen Lamara

#### Chakraborty, S. A. The City of Brass. Harper Voyager, 2017. Novel.

The discussion of the importance of diversity in literature has been on-going for decades. In light of recent political discussions regarding race and religion, there is, now more than ever, an urgent need for diversity in representation not only in literature but in all cultural mediums. Influenced by what has now come to be known as the '#OwnVoices' movement which encourages authors to craft stories that reflect the everchanging reality of many of us today and following the rising focus on Muslim communities and culture, a number of Muslim authors took up the challenge to represent characters and stories that resonate with Muslim readers, as well as non-Muslim readers who are willing to read beyond deeply-rooted stereotypes. I started reading *The City of Brass* with such high expectations and hopes; after all, it is not often that a story about Muslims is published, and I was certainly not disappointed.

This Middle Eastern inspired fantasy takes its name from one of Scheherazade's many tales in *One Thousand and One Nights* (date unknown) which follows Caliph Abd al-Malik bin Marwan's quest to acquire special copper bottles containing Jinn (also Djinn and Genie) imprisoned by Prophet Suleiman as a punishment for their rebellion. Chakraborty's tale opens in eighteenth century Cairo during the Napoleonic occupation. The first couple of chapters of the novel introduce us to Nahri, a twenty-year-old con artist, and we follow her as she hustles for a living, giving fake palm readings. In a society where the belief in the supernatural is anchored in the everyday life, Nahri has no trouble finding "easy marks" (12), as she often refers to her victims. She, on the other hand, and regardless of her ability to perform acts out of the ordinary, does not believe in either magic or Jinn.

In addition to her 'street acts,' Nahri often gets hired to perform Zar ceremonies where she acts as a 'Kodia' leading dances, prayers and sacrifices to expel ifrits and heal the possessed. Although strictly prohibited by Islam, the practice of Zar persists in some parts of Egypt, offering women in particular a space where they can express themselves far from the constraints of patriarchy. It is during a ceremonial night where Nahri performs one of her cons on a little girl believed to be possessed by a malicious ifrit that she accidentally conjures Dara, a powerful and ancient Jinn warrior. Soon, she finds herself on a journey through the desert towards Daevabad, the mystical city of the Jinn where she seeks refuge from the very beings she believed existed only in stories.

Chakraborty's vivid imagery and writing opens a gate to Islamic mythology and Middle Eastern folklore and invites an exciting exploration into the sinister and mystical world of the Jinn, who feature in the culture and belief of various civilisations. It is mentioned in the Quran that God created man from clay, angels from light, and Jinns from a smokeless fire. They are also described as intelligent, reasoning and living in a

parallel world invisible to the human eye. The Jinn are among the most fascinating supernatural beings, and yet, it is nearly impossible to find stories about them in Young Adult (YA) or adult Fantasy or Horror Fiction, with the exception of a few examples that utilise the Jinn but have them relegated to the sidelines in stories, or they become the wish granting spirits one summons by rubbing a magical lamp, as in perhaps the most famous example of Jinns in Western popular culture: 'Genie' in Disney's Aladdin (1992), the animated adaption of "The Story of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" from One Thousand and One Nights. So, from ghouls and marids to ifrits and rukh, Chakraborty in The City of Brass triumphs in truly capturing their complex nature with all their beauty and perils.

Growing up as an orphan in Cairo and living most of her life alone, Nahri got used to distancing herself from the people who care for her. Nonetheless, in a society built on family and community, Nahri's life style marks her as a pariah. She refuses, for instance, to find a husband and settle down regardless of the persistent advice of her entourage who believe that marriage would secure her a safe and quiet existence away from the dangers of her profession. Although Nahri does not believe her cons to be real, the people around her do, which often generates prejudices against her. Yet she does not allow it to define her; instead she uses her otherness to her advantage, deceiving those around her in the human world. She finds solace in her abilities and plans her future on the promise of becoming a healer once she has enough money to learn the craft. However, as she journeys to Daevabad and discovers her true identity as the last of the Banu Nahida, the greatest healers in Daevabad's history and the once ruling family, her "abilities that had once kept a roof over her head had become a curse, this connection with long-dead relatives she'd never known a plague on her life" (400).

Nahri breaks with the tradition of the feisty, stubborn, female character who most often ends up complicating her situation through her actions, instead of solving it. While Nahri is outspoken, fearless and does stand up for herself throughout the story, she is very conscious of her surroundings and the implications of her actions. As the story progresses, we see her constantly trying her best to survive all while helping those she grew to care for. She transforms from "the con artist after the biggest score" (402) to the Nahid who would do anything to help her people.

The book switches perspectives between Nahri and a Jinn Prince, Alizayd Qahtani. Prince Ali is the second son of the ruler of Daevabad and his character is a sharp contrast to Nahri's. Living most of his life away from his people and training to become whatever his brother and heir to the throne, Muntadhir, would need him to be when he ascends the throne, he is oblivious to the truth and the situation of Daevabad. Where Nahri's ways can be morally questionable, Ali in his so far sheltered existence places a strong focus on his standards and moral convictions, all fuelled by his unshakable religious devotion. However, as the story progresses and Ali is confronted by the reality of his world, his layered and complex nature is revealed. We witness his torment as he tries to reconcile his loyalty to his ruling family with his duty to the people of Daevabad, especially to the Shafits, or mixed-bloods, whose cruel treatment at the hands of the elite goes against the teachings of his religion.

The City of Brass does not shy away from the uncomfortable, making several statements on issues relevant to our current time. Indeed, issues of otherness, prejudice, racism, feminism, and agency are a major

focus in the story. In addition, through the dual narrative, Chakraborty allows for the experience of two rather different visions of the city and its politics: Ali's vision of the perfect city and the city as Nahri sees it; one divided along racial lines with those with human blood being largely oppressed and marginalised. Ultimately, *The City of Brass* is a story that will resonate with Muslim readers as well as non-Muslim readers for that is where the beauty of this tale lies.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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# **#BURYYOURTREKKIES: A DISCOVERY OF THE FINAL FRONTIER 51 YEARS LATER**

Review by Danielle Girard

Fuller, Bryan, Alex Kurtzman, and Gene Roddenberry, creators. *Star Trek: Discovery.* Performance by Sonequa Martin-Green, Doug Jones, Shazad Latif, Anthony Rapp, Mary Wiseman, and Jason Isaacs, CBS Television Distribution, 2017. TV.

\*This review contains a minor spoiler for a character death\*

In 1964 Gene Roddenberry developed a pilot episode for a new Science Fiction (SF) television show called *Star Trek*. This pilot was distinctly different from the show that would begin its official run in 1966, as although a white (presumably) heterosexual male would still captain the starship Enterprise, his second in command (referred to as 'Number One') was a woman clad – not in the skimpy uniforms that *Trek* women would come to be known by – but in a duty uniform that very much resembled those of her male counterparts. This original pilot would later be appropriated as the *Trek* that was Meant To Be in 2017's *Star Trek: Discovery* wherein male and female uniforms are the same, and the leading protagonist Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green) would be awarded the title of "Number One."

The use of Roddenberry's original pilot in the construction of *Star Trek: Discovery* offers a unique early insight into the way the show would ultimately unfold, because while these distinctions may appear minimal in hindsight, they were aspects of Roddenberry's pilot that contributed to its failure in 1964 and ones which the studio demanded were cut before they were willing to buy the series for a run in 1966 (Nimoy, *I Am Spock*). This would become a precursor to the studio's interference and the perpetual five-decade struggle that would follow.

As Star Trek grew older with every passing decade and new iterations of narratives and characters took up the mantle from the original crew, the fundamental social liberalism of the show began to stagnate. The twenty-first century ushered in an era wherein Trek visual stories became a retrogressive image of the 1960s that sought to undermine the show's true nature by instead presenting an entitled and sexually aggressive Captain Kirk. This version of the character was a stereotypical caricature who, rather than presenting a challenge to the innate social power structure, conformed to and benefited from work place standards that turn a blind eye to sexual harassment. Perhaps, if you listen closely, you might just hear the reboot's version of Christine Chapel saying #MeToo.

Understanding *Trek's* complicated history on a surface level is an important preface in approaching the sixth television series with the *Star Trek* label. *Star Trek: Discovery* was announced near the end of 2015 and due to a number of production hiccups did not begin its first season until September 2017. These delays did

not inspire confidence in the show's fanbase, nor did the announcement that it would air (in the United States) on an exclusive streaming service (CBS All Access) that inadvertently ostracized any number of the show's fans who would not be able to access it. Considering this alongside the diversity of *Discovery*'s casting being seemingly undermined by the casting of a white, heterosexual, cisgendered man (Jason Isaacs) to play the captain of the show's titular ship, and it is safe to say that *Discovery* was off to a rocky start.

However, despite this fear that the show was creating a cover of diversity for itself that would package more of the same misogyny that has become *Trek*'s defining characteristic within the cultural mindset, *Star Trek*: *Discovery* surprised by doing exactly the opposite and uses Isaacs' Captain Lorca to comment on the toxicity of such a narrative. It ultimately crafts a fifteen-episode story arc that is politically conscious, enjoyable, and the first *Trek* iteration since Roddenberry's 1966-68 series that truly embodies exactly what it is that *Trek* was always meant to be: namely a diverse, risk taking piece of television designed to challenge social structures in the midst of a politically divisive era. Yet, it does not get lost in its message or politics, instead crafting a narrative that is fun in its call-backs and enhanced by its own self-awareness.

Long-time fans of the show will, of course, recognize the return of Roger C. Carmel's Harcourt Fenton (Harry) Mudd – portrayed in *Discovery* by Rainn Wilson – in the character's two-episode arc in "Choose Your Pain" and "Magic To Make The Sanest Man Go Mad." The latter of which is one of *Discovery*'s strongest episodes of the season. Harry Mudd isn't the only TOS character to make an appearance in *Discovery*, the inclusion of Mr. Spock's Vulcan father, Sarek (James Frain), is a welcome surprise that enhances the show and characterization of Michael Burnham.

Indeed, Martin-Green positively shines as Michael Burnham – a Starfleet officer striped of her titles and imprisoned for causing the death of her captain in the opening prologue of the season that takes place over the first two episodes. Despite a more than capable cast full of strong personalities and characters, it is fair to say that *Discovery's* success lives and dies for Michael Burnham, who offers a fascinating image of the struggle between Vulcan/human values that Spock inhabited in the original series – made more interesting by her relationship to him as adopted sister. While Spock makes no appearance in *Discovery*, he is mentioned on several occasions as a juxtaposition to the human Burnham who was raised by Sarek and Amanda (Spock's parents) following the murder of her own parents.

However, the most notable change that *Discovery* makes is its decision to include homosexual people within the *Trek* universe for the first time in its fifty-one-year lifespan. *Trek*'s history of resistance, bordering on hostility, toward the idea including queer people within the *Trek* universe is well documented. Consider the Voyager Visibility Project – which campaigned to introduce an openly gay character into the series – that stretched through most of the 1990s, garnering support from Roddenberry, Leonard Nimoy (the actor who played Spock), and SF legend Arthur C. Clarke. The Voyager Visibility Project was unsuccessful. In 2016, *Trek* made a thin attempt to include a queer character in *Star Trek Beyond* (2016), yet the choice to queer Hikaru Sulu simply because the actor who originally portrayed Sulu is gay is more than a little problematic. It is not unsupported to say, then, that *Discovery's* inclusion of characters written to be gay was a big step for the *Trek* universe.

The series presents Paul Stamets (Anthony Rapp) and Hugh Culber (Wilson Cruz) as a happily married couple who are acknowledged and accepted in their marriage – most notably by the living quarters they share on the ship that is never challenged and is a mere fact of the plot. They love each other. They are together. And there is nothing more to say on the matter within the narrative. It is a simple, yet effective way to include queer people within a universe that has historically degraded them.

Yet this strong beginning to representation within the *Trek* universe is undercut in the latter half of the season when Hugh is killed in cold blood and the hashtag trope #BuryYourGays takes yet another victim. As a queer fan, it seems to me that this singular moment of loss is perhaps the most disappointing choice that the *Discovery* writers make during this fifteen-episode season, not only because it is clichéd and harmful, but because Hugh's death offered no substantial progression of the plot. It was a misstep, a failure of *Discovery* that leaves a sour taste on the palates of all those queer fans who have waited fifty-one years to see themselves represented in this universe.

That is not to say there is no hope for *Star Trek: Discovery*. Quite contrarily, despite falling victim to an old yet somehow contemporary trope, *Discovery* is a strong contender for the best series of *Star Trek* since the original. Its final act – which occurs in the Mirror!verse – is both engaging and exciting as it twists audience expectations and handles Isaacs' Captain Lorca in a truly nuanced and remarkable way. The closing moments of the final episode are a beautiful call home to generations of *Star Trek* fans who grew up with the adventures of the starship Enterprise, and production hiccups aside, *Discovery* has gone above and beyond expectation and will boldly go into season two with the hard-earned trust of its fans – which is no unremarkable feat.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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#### "HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN OUT?"

Review by John Sharples

Lynch, David, and Mark Frost. "Part 8" or "Gotta Light?" Twin Peaks: The Return, directed by David Lynch, performance by Kyle MacLachlan, Sheryl Lee, Showtime Networks, 2017. Television.

To return is to come or to go back, to turn around, to give back, or restore. A return is an act of coming back, or a thing sent back. There is an implication of repetition. But can something really come back? Is it possible to restore a previous state? Do all things remain unchanged? Do superficially similar situations not contain underlying differences? Stepping into this etymological and philosophical whirlpool, the recent television event *Twin Peaks: The Return* demonstrates the difficulty of *return*, the illusion of progress, and the tensions between surface appearance and inner life.

Principally, *The Return* concerns Agent Dale Cooper's odyssey back to the small town of Twin Peaks after confinement in the Black Lodge and the imitation and/or bifurcation of his self. Written by Mark Frost and David Lynch, and following on from two television seasons (1990-1991) and the film *Fire Walk with Me* (1992), the show follows Agent Cooper's investigation of the murder of teenager Laura Palmer in the small town of Twin Peaks, Washington State. This case reveals the hidden life of both the victim and the town's inhabitants; indeed, it even takes a supernatural turn as, within the woods surrounding Twin Peaks, Cooper uncovers a parallel dimension as well as the White and Black Lodges, which roughly correspond to Heaven and Hell. The interplay between these two morally-defined places generates conflict within the inhabitants of the town. In the main instance, Palmer's death is attributed to the evil spirit BOB who possesses Laura's father Leland Palmer. Investigating, Agent Cooper cracks the case, but is later trapped in the shadow world of the Black Lodge and is replaced by a nefarious doppelganger controlled by BOB who assumes and exploits his identity. Within this tale, Lynch and Frost play with traditional narrative structure, the fixity of genre, and the conventions of the television format, creating a kaleidoscopic, always surreal, experience.

Rather than attempt to tackle the multivalence of the entire series, this review focuses on a fragment in connection with the above themes, namely the appearance of the atomic bomb in "Part 8." Tools such as the atomic bomb, as philosopher Michel Serres contended, are "tools with a dimension that is commensurable with one of the dimensions of the world" (Dunlop 222). Within *The Return*, the atomic bomb illuminates one of the most striking points of the show, namely, its Gothic concern with the passage of time and its convoluted course. Critical commentary on 'Part 8' seemed taken aback by its ambition, imagery, and use of sound. Noel Murray, in the *New York Times*, wrote: "There's nothing to point to in the history of television that helps describe exactly what this episode attempts." Murray's focus is invariably on the cinematic qualities, yet this episode is equally an ambitious presentation of the creation of Evil and the infection of the atomic blast upon society, all confined within the hour-long, small-screen format. The symbol of the atomic bomb compelled Tim Burrows of the *Guardian* to describe *The Return* more generally as "the only show that chimes with our times." Certainly, *The Return* does point to concerning contemporary issues as the artistic qualities of the show clearly emerge

from this sensitivity and attunement with the world. As Burrows implies, our times are problematic. The atomic bomb has made its own return within the spectacles of North Korean and US politics. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists records that the Doomsday Clock has ticked closer to the point of maximum tension. As in *The Return*, a past scenario has itself returned. The show asks whether timeless actors are merely playing with new masks. Or are current events mere mechanical repetition catalysed by greater forces?

In contrast to other contemporary Horror and Fantasy shows, including Supernatural (2005-present) and American Horror Story (2011-present), The Return foregrounds a principally domestic scenario. Compared to the obvious tropes of AHS, with its kitschy locations of witch house, covens, freak shows, strange hotels, and insane asylums which distance any profound impact, or the meme-factory of Supernatural, The Return emphasises, more in common with The Twilight Zone, how the familiar can become destabilised, absent of distancing or superficial gestures. This uncanny effect occurs most strikingly at the centre of "Part 8" which depicts, in an extended scene through CGI imagery, an atomic bomb explosion - observed from above representing the Trinity Test or the first successful test of an atomic bomb in White Sands, New Mexico, on 16 July 1945, at 5:29:45 A.M. The familiar symbol of the bomb draws together a number of generic influences. It is, of course, a symbol of Horror, of Science Fiction, and of the modern Gothic. It is also a recognisably historic image. But, as in Lynch's work more generally, the technology itself is disregarded in favour of foregrounding consequences and setting events in motion through fundamental forces and forms. Rather than a moment past, the bomb is recognised as the "nuclear Sun-King" (Assad 59). The bomb is absolutism from which all follows. The Return's sensitive use of musical accompaniment is also at work here, accompanied by Krzysztof Penderecki's Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima (1960) as well as more contemporary electronic sound effects combining various forms. Penderecki's piece has been used in several, usually Horror, contexts, including Stanley Kubrick's The Shining (1980) and The Exorcist (1973). A principal feature of the work is its extended use of tone clusters or groups of adjacent tones which suggest catastrophe. The piece's dissonance is exaggerated through use of microtonality, or tones between notes traditionally used in Western music. The diagrammatic score, encouraging improvisation adds to the unstable nature of the work. Made into a hybrid composition by addition of electronic effects, the effect is of looming dread, but one which is not simply familiar or historicallyoriented.

The use of the atomic bomb in *The Return* is intriguing since it appears in two forms: as a link with historical time and as a disjunction or break in the flow of history. Firstly, it appears as a critical historical moment. Nevertheless, the use of black-and-white for the initial portrayal (followed by vivid explosions of colour in the rainbow space of the cloud) and in the black-and-white wall-mounted picture of the mushroom cloud in FBI Deputy Director Gordon Coles's office suggests a temporal form which has passed. The latter particularly seems like atomic kitsch, a reminder of the bomb's status as hero and villain in US popular culture. More relevantly, secondly, the bomb acts as a catalyst, as a form of creative energy and framing device. The bomb's spectacular cultural power traditionally extends from its grotesque capacity for violence. *The Return's* portrayal of the test, however, does have domestic consequences, travelling in from the periphery. Detonation leads to the emergence of evil in the form of BOB and the counter-weight of Laura Palmer. This reframes the wall-mounted image as crime-scene evidence and the entire series as the consequence of the atomic test. Through the bomb, an expression of our destructive creativity, humankind becomes an object in a larger conflict, a plaything of the Gods. This slow unfolding of consequences is itself a theme of the whole series which largely resists

dramatic 'twists' in favour of more natural time-scales. The conjunction of a cinematic language, particularly a fragmented narrative form, within the television format and an acknowledgment of the perpetual flow of time is the most striking success of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, one which sidesteps straightforward narrative drive across the eighteen parts of its broadcast. Its evasion of definitive closure represents a structural choice. This was not accomplished in the manner of *Lost* (2004-2010) or *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) where the end marked, to some extent, a betrayal of the narrative form of the shows, but as a logical outgrowth of the series' story. Yet, also, the time elapsed since the original show is on display. Perpetual youth is discarded. Repetitions spring up. Time passes, and events recur.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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### HORROR BEFORE HORROR: ARTHUR MACHEN'S COLLECTED NIGHTMARES

Review by Aren Roukema

### Machen, A. The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories, edited by Aaron Worth, Oxford University Press, 2018.

The title on the front cover of *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* is set sideways, an inversion that represents perfectly the upside-down weirdness of the Arthur Machen stories collected within. All of the titles in the OUP's World Classics Hardback Collection are presented this way, but in the case of Machen's uncanny fiction the design is a fortunate synchronicity, capturing the aesthetic and ethos of his bizarre supernatural pageantry, his intrusive invocations of the unnameable and the unknown. This serendipitous title placement is augmented by a mustard yellow cover that references Machen's debt to the "yellow nineties" of literary Decadence (xv), as well as an evocative symbol that seems intended to represent the horns of Pan but could also be viewed as severed tentacles of the Lovecraftian Weird, to which Machen's surreal textual landscapes were a seminal contributor.

To an extent, therefore, this book can be judged by its cover. The faery permeability of Machen's fiction, however, must be encountered directly: the sudden opening of gothic sinkholes in the forest floor of the imagination, the falling into kaleidoscopic abysses that the reader viscerally experiences but only fragmentarily perceives. The collection consists of a diverse sampling of Machen's oeuvre. Some of his best-known works, including *The Great God Pan* (1890–94), *The Inmost Light* (1894) and *The White People* (1904), buttress a number of less well-known selections, including six short fragments: "The Turanians," "The Idealist," "Witchcraft," "The Ceremony," "Psychology," and "Midsummer" (written in 1897 but not published until 1924). Lesser known stories also include two written in the context of WWI, "The Bowmen" (1914) and "The Monstrance" (1915), and four from Machen's late period: "N," "The Tree of Life," "Change" (all 1936), and "Ritual" (1937). The collection additionally reproduces the complete text of Machen's 1895 novel, *The Three Imposters*, more often printed for spare parts, but here presented in its entirety in conjunction with the collection's primary aim: to assemble texts that connect to Machen's (largely posthumous) identity as a seminal figure in the development of genre Horror. Each story is elucidated by a wealth of explanatory notes offering valuable insight and context, translating Machen's liberal sprinklings of Latin and Welsh phrases, or locating obscure geographical, cultural or scientific references.

The collection is preceded by an introduction by the volume's editor, Aaron Worth, who smoothly avoids getting lost in biography. The bulk of the introduction deftly situates author, text and theme in relation to particular cultural and generic currents, especially the importance of 1890s Decadence to Machen's early stories (despite his protestations to the contrary), and the similarly vital context of the *fin de siècle* surge of interest in Pagan ritual and occultism. Worth concludes with similarly well-crafted analyses of two currents in Machen's fiction that have contributed to his important place in the pre-history of genre Horror. The first argues

that Machen pioneered a "deep Gothic" sensibility of time (xxxi), following nineteenth-century discoveries that the Earth and human culture were older than previously believed. In response to this vast shift in chronoperspective, Machen's landscapes became "charged with deep time" (xxiv), populated with faery races such as the "Little People," a race of sub-Neolithic troglodytes who have, unlike H.G. Wells's Morlocks, fallen outside of time, enduring in "changeless evil, coeval with the geologic timescale itself" (xxv). Worth concludes with discussion of a second important aspect of the author's fiction: the awful infinities that structure the hieratic spaces in which Machen utters invocations of ritual terror. This is "the Machen of labyrinthine urban spaces, of uncanny repetition, of bounded infinities [...] of the alternate, the parallel, the counterfactual, the lost" (xxvii). Here Worth comes closest to connecting the inchoate madness and fear that creep into many of Machen's stories with the horror texts that his work would come to influence, either directly or via a web of twentieth-century generic influences.

Yet, Worth does not come close enough. The one significant absence in his introduction is a clear statement of what exactly is meant by 'horror' in Machen's case, and what methodology was used to select the included stories. Worth situates Machen as a vital influence for later artists working more consciously within the Horror genre, including Clive Barker, Guillermo del Toro and Stephen King (xi). He also makes clear that it is only through the posthumous construction of genre theorists from H.P. Lovecraft to Brian Stableford that Machen has "become something very like 'the H.G. Wells of horror'" (x), and quite clearly understands the fluidity of genre boundaries in Machen's time. Given this understanding, it would ordinarily be unproblematic to proceed with a collection identified as 'horror stories' without giving much space to clarification of genre. However, both Worth's introduction and the OUP's marketing material depict Machen as "a foundational figure - for some the foundational figure - in the development of modern horror fiction" (original emphasis, x), an author who "embodies the transition from the Gothic tradition to modern horror" (front matter). These claims seem to be the raison d'être of the collection itself; thus, it would seem imperative to include at least a brief definition of what, in Worth's eyes, might constitute Horror as opposed to Gothic or Weird fiction - particularly as Machen's stories much more clearly orbit around these loci, as admittedly ill-defined as they are. Even more importantly, the generic identity claimed by this volume calls for a much clearer explanation of Worth's selection process. This is particularly salient given that not all the stories seem to unambiguously prefigure genre Horror. While stories like "The Great God Pan" and "The Inmost Light" certainly contain flashes of imagery and reader experience that connect directly to the development of Horror fiction, a significant number of others do not, including "The Bowmen," "The Tree of Life," and all six of the 1897 fragments.

What the six fragments do very clearly connect to, however, is Machen's fascination with ritual, the occult, and a landscape-oriented Paganism that continually returned him to the standing stones and faery folk of his native Welsh countryside. In "The Idealist," a clerk constructs a being halfway between a succubus and a golem in "occult and private" researches (246); "Change" revolves around the discovery of a cypher for "an initiation rite into some mystery" (345); in "The Ceremony" a young woman takes up witchcraft at a mysterious Celtic stone. There are hints in Worth's introduction and annotations of a connection between such phenomena and genre Horror. For example, at one point he notes that of the ten prose fragments produced in 1897, six have been chosen "in part for their greater proximity to the 'satanic' rather than the 'celestial'" (xx; terms quoted from Mark Valentine). Worth does not expand on these vague terms and, consistent with the volume's methodological indeterminacy, he does not say why the satanic was preferred to the celestial. It

seems relatively clear, however, that the occult ritual milieu of these stories is what has generated their inclusion, and that there exists an unstated connection between this esoteric context and genre Horror. A second area of further clarity surrounding methodology thus enters the picture: Worth mentions Machen's involvement with occult ritual magic, notes his reading of esoteric texts for a bookseller's catalogue in the 1880s, and includes annotations that point to his interest in traditions from Freemasonry to Paganism. However, the analysis applied to cultural influences such as Decadence is absent from discussion of Machen's occult interests. This is not problematic in itself, but Machen's "obsession with ritual" (xx) – with the 'deep gothic' of antique esoteric wisdom – seems to have formed part of Worth's rationale for including particular texts as Horror stories. This suggests that analysis of the relationship between esoteric phenomena and Machen's fiction is required, along with, more pertinently, a connection between this relationship and the production of a horror mode. What is it, in other words, that makes us conflate the aura of ritual, gatherings of witches in the wood, the acausal magical act, with terror and the macabre?

These theoretical and methodological concerns aside, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* is an excellent collection. The inner aesthetic of Machen's stories is captured by the appealing cover design, and with his annotations, introduction and critical analysis, Worth provides context and elaboration that will prove helpful for casual reader and professional researcher alike. The lack of genre clarification certainly does no harm to the stories themselves, which continue to saturate the mind with dissolving alleyways, crumbling psyches, magisterial altars, and "the Great God Pan."

#### **BIONOTE**

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### CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE RETURN FROM WONDERLAND?

Review by Alison Baker

#### McGuire, Seanan. Every Heart a Doorway. Tor, 2016. Novella

Nancy Whitman arrives at Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children dressed in black but pulling a pink-wheeled suitcase patterned with white cartoon daisies. Little does she know that the suitcase has been packed with a rainbow of clothes, a memorial of her time before she was a servant of the Lord of the Dead. While Eleanor West's Home appears to be a therapeutic centre for children with delusions about travelling to other worlds, it is in fact a supportive community for young people who have been forced to leave a fantastical land. Eleanor herself, and the school's psychologist, Lundy, both have returned from fantastical lands themselves. Nancy's parents cannot come to terms with the changes in their daughter; they interpret her behaviour, dark clothing, and white and black hair as an unfortunate depressive/Goth phase that she will recover from with support and therapy available at Eleanor West's.

Nancy starts to learn more about Eleanor West's and her fellow students: in particular, her roommate, Sumi, who found the way to Confection, a nonsense candy-land; Kade, who went to a warlike fairy-world; and Jack and Jill, twins who went to a land ruled by a vampire lord. Jack was the apprentice of a scientist and Jill was the adopted daughter of the lord. On her first night there, Nancy is awoken by screams. On leaving her bedroom, Nancy discovers Sumi dead, with her hands cut off. Initially, as the new girl, Nancy comes under suspicion, but soon the spotlight is on the macabre Jack, who has previously dissected a pet guinea pig (McGuire 77).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that there is a murderer at work in the school, who is taking body parts of the victims that are symbolic of the relationships they have with their worlds as grisly trophies, namely their eyes, brain, and their beauty. Nancy, Jack and a boy, Christopher, who went to a country of animated skeletons, join forces with Sumi's friend Kade, to catch the killer.

McGuire makes full use of the novella form within this work, and it is perhaps no surprise therefore that she won both the Nebula (2016) and Hugo (2017) awards. She utilises spare but lyrical, rhythmic prose: "The body lay in the front yard, covered in a thin sheen of dew, face turned up to the uncaring sky" (McGuire 100). Describing a skeleton Christopher animates; "Her scapulae were delicate wings; her skull was a psalm to the elegant dancer waiting beneath the flesh [...] There was a pearlescent sheen to her, like opal" (McGuire 139). These balanced sentences add richness to a linear, sparse plot.

Nancy is largely the point of view character; we learn more about her visit to the Halls of the Dead than we do about the other characters' other worlds. Her viewpoint is shaped by her time in her country; she values quiet, requires little food, and can keep herself entirely still when needed. She is asexual, but not

aromantic. Gender identity and sexuality are discussed naturally as a part of a character and how they see the mimetic world of Eleanor West's home, but also how they lived in their world. It is clear that not everyone in the Halls of the Dead was asexual, but Nancy fitted in there because of the stillness and quiet. She explains: "I can appreciate how beautiful someone is, and I can be attracted to them romantically, but that's as far as it goes with me" (McGuire 43). Sumi's openness and lack of judgement about Nancy's sexuality is delightful; she simply wishes to know whether her sexual expression will be uncomfortable for Nancy.

Gender is also openly discussed in the novella. Kade is expelled from his world when the Goblin King of Prism, his Fairyland, realises that he is "a little boy who just *looked* like a little girl" (McGuire 39). Jack and Jill's experiences on the Moors affected their gender presentation: Jack, who had been considered the feminine daughter by their parents, now dresses in jeans, a button-down shirt, and a bow-tie, with her hair tied back. Jill, her sister, considered the smart one by their parents (McGuire 78) wears pale coloured, lace dresses because her vampire Master liked the way blood showed up on them (McGuire 66). Jack and Jill's parents' desire to both decide on their gender expressions, their binary expectations of them to be either pretty or clever, and to name them after a nursery rhyme are all damaging to the twins, and also made Jill more susceptible to the vampire Master.

Seanan McGuire's novella may be seen as a typical representation of a portal fantasy. Farah Mendlesohn (*Rhetorics of Fantasy* 2008) describes a portal fantasy as a narrative in which "a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place" (Mendlesohn 1). Mendlesohn goes on to reference John Clute's definition of portals, that they "litter the world of the fantastic" (ibid) and are discovered by characters from youth to childhood. Alice's rabbit hole and looking glass are portals, as is the door in Coraline's bedroom, the moving bricks in the wall behind the Leaky Cauldron leading to Diagon Alley, and the wardrobe leading to Narnia.

There is humour in the intertextual nature of the novella, too; when Eleanor is offering a way to her nonsense land as a way of keeping some students safe, Christopher asks why her door is still there while others have vanished. Lundy explains that temporary portals are more common than stable ones, and he asks about Namia. Another student replies: "That's because Namia was a Christian allegory pretending to be a fantasy series, you asshole" (McGuire 99), demonstrating a metaficitonal self-awareness of the Fantasy genre, and the tropes that may pervade it. Nancy states that she never wondered what it was like for Alice to return from Wonderland. She used to assume that she would just "shrug and get over it" (McGuire 51), but discovers that she no longer feels at home back in the mimetic world, away from the Halls of the Dead. Further intertextuality is demonstrated in references to the Goblin Market (McGuire 54) and the myth of Persephone (McGuire 51). This intertextuality serves to enrich the reader's understanding of portal fantasies; to reflect upon the child protagonist's experiences and alienation from their home.

John Clute's 2006 book *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* reprinted in 2014 as part of *Stay* provides a useful consideration of Horror as a genre, which Clute argues is a mode, or genre, of the Fantastic (Clute 331). The title of the 2006 book comes from Cyril Connolly's 1949 discussion of what he considered the darkening tone of secret garden narratives: that portals no longer led to paradise, but to a waste land (Clute 271). *Every Heart a Doorway* describes both paradises and wastelands, and although it does

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contain some descriptions of the aftermaths of violence, but I would suggest that this is not "affect horror" (Clute 275); the bodies are described through the eyes of Nancy, Jack, and Christopher, who do not fear the dead. Instead, as in the description of the skeleton above, they are described with love, admiration, and respect. For that reason, *Every Heart a Doorway* could be considered a "dark fantasy" (Clute 290) rather than affect horror. This distinction is significant, since the novella's tone is elegiac rather than terror-laden, due to the beauty of the descriptions of corpses and corporeal matter. The reader is left with regret for the loss of the dead characters rather than revulsion or horror at the means of their deaths.

The category of 'dark fantasy' rather than 'affect horror' may also be relevant to the readership. At the time of writing, there are two sequels: *Down among the Sticks and Bones* (2017), telling the story of Jack and Jill's time on the Moors living with Dr Bleak the mad scientist and the Dark Lord, and *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018). They have been described as Young Adult, and since the protagonists in all three books are teenagers, this is reasonable. However, these are sophisticated, complex narratives with big ideas about the Fantasy genre, particularly portal fantasies, gender expression, and sexuality, although it is notable that there is no depiction of sex, despite discussions about sexual expression. Their length and the age of their protagonists should not prevent those with reductive ideas about Young Adult novels from reading them. I am looking forward to exploring more of Seanan McGuire's work.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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# OUT FROM THE EDGE OF DUSK, THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED: JEFF NOON'S A MAN OF SHADOWS

Review by Thomas Kewin

## Noon, Jeff. A Man of Shadows. Angry Robot, 2017. A Nyquist Mystery. Novel.

If Jeff Noon's prevailing interest with labyrinthine structures and self-referential systems was not evident from his earlier Vurt series (1993-1997) and their hallucinogenic glee in eschewing the conventions of realist narrative, then Will Staehle's cover of *A Man of Shadows* sets the tone for this latest work. Suffice to say, *Shadows* further encapsulates Noon's indebtedness to figures like M.C. Escher, Douglas Hofstadter, and Lewis Carroll, presiding forces over his work whose influence inflects his novels with a playful, almost irrational, sense of reality. That is, if there is a single level of reality to speak of in a Noon novel. After all, the author's work is less about a governing concept than a recurring set of concerns which tend to 'cross-pollinate', with the metaphor of pollination being taken from Noon's sophomore novel *Pollen* (1994), or – as Jonathan Thornton has it – a "recombination" of ideas across levels of species, reality, and text itself (Thornton, "Jeff Noon Interview – A Man of Shadows"). What distinguishes *Shadows* from Noon's prior work is the focus on time, the insistent relationship between the temporal and the spatial, and the anxiety in what becomes of a person when those two axes deviate from each other – to be "adrift in the crosscurrents" of one's personal chronology (*A Man of Shadows*, 32).

Enter John Henry Nyquist: Noon's titular 'man of shadows' who is the proto-typical, Noonian protagonist: the "poor burnt-out, no-good, junked-up failure," otherwise identifiable as the figure of the loner (A Man of Shadows, 258). Working Noon's fantastical city-scape for his latest missing person's case, Nyquist spends the majority of the novel pursuing Eleanor Bale, the daughter of Patrick Bale, arch-capitalist and CEO of Dayzone's most prominent timeline management company. Nyquist's case follows an eerie journey across timelines, across the borderlines of time, in which space is figured as time: symptomatic of Noon's endless creativity is a city subdivided into three different spatial-temporal zones. Dayzone is a region of perpetual day – wherein time has acquired an agency of its own – Nocturna is an area of eternal darkness – in which cult-like figures seek solace in the night – and Dusk is altogether more surrealist as the liminal space between Noon's Day and Night.

Dusk is as Ballardian a premise as a person can imagine, a landscape conjured out of one's interiority, and in many ways feels eerily similar to the surrealist tone of J.G. Ballard's own *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) and Noon's earlier work like *Vurt* (1993). If Dusk purports to represent a space of repressed memory and collapsed timelines, then Italian painter Giorgio de Chiricio's referential appearance in the novel points towards landscapes of metaphysical uncertainty. As much of Chirico's painting concerns "dream world[s]" (Hughes 6), and those estranged encounters with the familiar – people and objects – there isn't an entirely unprecedented link to Noon's vision of Manchester in *Vurt* and beyond, the trafficking between levels of species and reality,

as well as the self-same "dream world[s]" imbibed through Vurt feathers. As for *Shadows*, Nyquist's frequent allusions to his father's disappearance into Dusk, as well as the dangers implied in frequent visits to the dusklands via Mrs Bale, are suggestive of the fact that this space possesses an almost spectral hold on the characters – in as much as this liminal zone is itself populated by the spectral; so much so that repressed memories return from lost timelines in order to reclaim their mortality, to manifest in their materiality.

As Noon acknowledges, in an interview with Barnes & Noble, the central story structure for his novels tend to follow from Carrollian themes: "the lonely child, the difficult family life, the descent into a fantasy land, the trial and rigors of a journey through a strange and barely understandable region" (Noon, "How Lewis Carroll Inspired the Mad Genius of Jeff Noon"). In the case of Shadows, Nyquist's descent into the fantasy land of Dayzone, Nocturna and Dusk, with its unfamiliar customs and practices, provides a useful platform for the cross-pollination of Science Fiction and detective genres, with the 'lone[r]' Nyquist being thoroughly reminiscent of 'qumshoe' detectives in the vein of crime writers like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross MacDonald. Arriving in Burn Out, one of the precincts in Dayzone, Noon's initial description of Nyquist follows the 'tough-guy' archetype of the noir-hero with flashes of distinctly Noonian characterisation: "He was a big man, tough looking [...] Until you got up close that is, too close [...] then you saw something different in his eyes, a giving away, a loneliness" (A Man of Shadows 17). The familiar trappings of the hardboiled detective genre pervade the text: the detective having a moral weakness, the fragrant consumption of drugs and alcohol, and the implication that the classic detective/criminal relationship is untenable. If Nyquist occupies the role of detective, then his criminal counterpart is arguably Quicksilver, a murderer capable of travelling through time undetected; although, Noon's frequent use of doubling or doppelgangers plays with the capacity to draw such clear distinctions, with Nyquist's role in the novel made indeterminate through the first of many genre subversions.

Given that the presence of drugs is hardly unfamiliar territory for a Noon novel, here, the fictional drug 'kia' – short for chiaroscuro, another nod towards the novel's noir credentials – allows for a "way of inducing alteration" onto levels of reality, in this case what lies between temporal coordinates (Noon, "Top 10 imaginary drugs in fiction"). As has already been implied, time possesses a significant agential force in the novel and the consumption of kia does not necessarily predict future affairs, but instead predicts a "future compulsion of the user" (A Man of Shadows 277). Rather than being a mere commodity for consumer consumption – a dystopian reading of his work which Noon actively resists, in breaking with the 'universal clock' (or universal history) time splits into multiple pathways, each evolving in unique ways. This anxiety surrounding the break with the 'universal clock' anticipates Nyquist's tumultuous relationship with the competing chronologies across the novel, figured in Shadows as a disease called "chronostasis" in which the user becomes incapable of reconciling these timelines until reaching a final form of inertia (A Man of Shadows 31). The latter portion of the novel concludes Nyquist's case by focusing on the consequences of this unmoored sense of existence, in which the cross-pollination of Science Fiction and detective genres not only threatens to expose the efficacy of Nyquist's detective skills, but his capacity to maintain a coherent grasp on his sense of reality: as Nyquist despairs: "the hours [have been] broken down into fragments, into dust" (A Man of Shadows 240).

Ultimately, Noon's *Shadows* wrestles with many of the prevailing concepts which have come to define his earlier work, once more pollinated with Carrollian themes – fantastical lands, bewildering customs, and

discussions of time – but furnished with a narrative power which is expressive of the author alone. Consistency is made into a virtue with Noon's work as it performs a delicate balance between two established genres, somehow breathing life into yet another hybrid entity in the trafficking of the pulp and fantastic. If it disappoints me to hear that Noon's second Nyquist novel – *The Body Library* (2018) – won't be returning to this fictional city of Day, Night and Dusk, it is to impress my desire to return to a city of repressed memories and dynamic timelines as found in *Shadows*. Ultimately, *A Man of Shadows* is a novel which reflects on concerns, timely and untimely alike: the commodification of time in the current stage of late capitalism (as useful as such a term is), the transformation of the city space according to new processes of technological development, and the enigmatic nature of matters of memory and mortality.

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## **BIONOTE**

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## **MICRO NARRATIVES: IN SPACE!**

# Review by Samuel Valentine

#### Prey. Arkane Studios, Bethesda Softworks. 2017. Video Game.

System Shock came out in 1994, inspired by the cyberpunk movement of science fiction from the '60s through to the '80s. It can be called one of the first true cyberpunk games, influenced heavily by titles such as Neuromancer (1984) and Blade Runner (1982). It was a genre-defining game: a first-person shooter, explorer, and environmental puzzler. Whilst this genre's legacy was built upon the likes of Deus Ex (2000) and Half Life (1998), which focus on the macro of their science fiction, aiming to create a vast world of lore and backstory, this contrasts with System Shock (1994), which takes a relatively small area, in the form of a space station, and builds a detailed and intricate narrative within it. System Shock found a true successor in the Bioshock series (2007-2013) with the original game being regarded as a classic of this genre, upholding strong links to science fiction, dystopian fiction, and even a dose of capitalist satire. It paints a vivid setting within the confines of an underwater city, akin to the space station in System Shock. Both games fuel their narrative by weaving a hundred or more miniature stories through their worlds. Audio Logs, notes, and computer terminals provide in-depth lore to their worlds, which whilst are completely optional to the main story, help to build their fiction, and engross the gamer.

Prey is the latest game to really build upon this concept of micro-stories; hailing from the same genre as both Bioshock and System Shock. It takes the clean-cut gunplay and movement of Bioshock whilst drawing more heavily from its predecessor System Shock by filling its own space station with hundreds of computer terminals, which contain emails that link and connect every member of the station. It is almost voyeuristic: every character no matter how small a part they play in the narrative feels fleshed out because they have recorded interactions with each other. You peer into their lives and past by reading their emails, listening to their recorded conversations, and even reading love notes left to each other.

It could be considered that *Prey* starts in a clichéd manner, as your character is a scientist who has lost their memory. There is an alien threat on the space station, and you must figure out what is happening, fight to survive, and to escape. However, that is where the cliché ends: the story unfolds, and questions arise, the alien menace becomes more ambiguous, and moral choices are presented to the player. This is second main story device used in the game, as the micronarratives draw you into its past and the moral choices push you forward in to the present. Whilst some of these are mechanically A or B questions as to whom should live or die, others are more involved. You question whether you should escape the space station, or whether should others escape; you question your own characters motivations. It is rare that a game makes you doubt the lead character, yourself, to such a degree as this one. This doubt drives the player to look for answers within those emails and logs, searching for their characters past interactions with others to figure out their character's perspective on the situation, but also to gather evidence and find out where they as a player stand.

The gameplay is not innovative, but it does not need to be, as the innovation comes in the presentation of the story and in other smaller ways. Mechanically the game is very tight, gunplay handles well, and the introduction of the GLOO cannon might be one of gaming's most fun weapons or tools. The crafting system is unique, allowing you to recycle junk and other items found to their concentrated elements, then making new items in fabricators situated through the game, which may be somewhat reminiscent of the replicators from Star Trek. There is an in-depth skill tree that allows you to feel like your character develops, although depending on your playstyle you may feel it is too easy to unlock everything you might need. The gameplay is solid but it's far from what makes *Prey* a good game.

What Prey does so well is that it strives to give the player choices, mostly moral ones, but in general choices of direction. The story branches and you feel somewhat in control of the narrative. At the smallest level, the game encourages you to try different options to tackle the obstacles it presents. My favourite example of this is simply opening a locked door, which presents a number of possibilities as to how to get through: you can simply hack the console and force the door open; you can wait until you're further into the game and are given a key; you can look through the tiny window near the door and shoot the door release from the other side; you can use the alien powers to turn yourself into a much smaller object and roll through the tiny window; you can even occasionally simply wait for fifteen real-world minutes and a patrolling janitor robot will come by and open the door for you.

Perhaps to the game's detriment, the option to run and gun your way through obstacles, enemies, and puzzles is there. You might find yourself falling back on this during the final sections of the game, rather than slowing down the story. However, if the player does explore then they are consistently rewarded with upgrades or materials, or more commonly with additional chunks of stories. These choices affect everything through the game, from which direction to take, to how to tackle the enemies the game throws at you. By far the most common enemy is the most terrifying, and it is impressive that the game keeps up the same trick throughout the game without it feeling stale. Any object in the game world could be a Mimic, a small black alien crab-like monster that can turn itself into any object and hide. Then as you come by, it changes back and jumps out at you. It is fitting that in a game where you doubt your own character's motivation, you doubt every object you come across.

Prey is not without its flaws: the moral choices can potentially feel two-dimensional. You are sometimes left wondering whether they matter. This can bring a sense of cynicism into the more involved moral choices. This is a shame because those involved choices are where the player gains the most answers to Prey's story. This concludes in the final scene of the game which may leave the player feeling very unsatisfied indeed. The reveal is cut to a few short minutes and one final decision that may have players searching to figure out what just happened.

Overall while the story is in intriguing, the ending aside, it is a game that might overstay its welcome just slightly. The third act has side quests that revisit older areas and although the main quest has a sense of urgency, the side quests feel somewhat relaxed in contrast. In revisiting areas for the second time there is a sense of emptiness as a diligent player may have already experienced most things within them. This sadly plays against most of what *Prey* attempts, while before the space station felt alive, with potential discoveries around

every corner. Now, the atmosphere is suddenly oppressive and more reminiscent of its predecessors. This may be intentional on the game's part but combined with long journeys around the space station through areas already explored, that oppressiveness can lead to frustration.

That is not to say the side quests are bad however: my personal favourite is the in-depth treasure hunt made by members of a Dungeons & Dragons game that took place on board the station. The story of the players is given to you, as most of the story pieces are within the game, through emails, chat logs and recordings found scattered around the space station. You find yourself wanting to know the fates of the players and their relationships with each other. Every character's fate is yours to discover and while the material reward might not live up expectations, again the true reward is this small story within a story.

This is one example of the micro-narratives within *Prey*, but the game is made up of so many that add a vast amount of content. From futile last stands to short emails from employees. *Prey* is rich with details that fill out the narrative and create a sense of immersion. Overall, *Prey* represents an excellent addition to a sequence of games that started with *System Shock*. Fans of the genre will certainly enjoy it, and I would encourage anyone who wishes to see how a small world can feel alive through the intricate weaving of stories to explore and enjoy.

## **BIONOTE**

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## AND TO DUST YOU WILL RETURN

# Review by Rhianon Jones

#### Pullman, Philip. La Belle Sauvage. David Fickling Books, 2017. Novel.

Once upon a time - about the late seventies - literary theorists confronted us with the 'impossibility' of children's fiction. Western society, they claimed, was preoccupied by a concept of child that did not exist – a construct that revealed far more about its creators than about children or childhood. In the world of children's literature, adults acted as the gatekeepers who determined what children should read and enjoy, and why. One attribute of work labelled as 'good' writing for children was that it should be perceived to be addressing both adults and children: that it articulated and spoke to the inner child which 'grown-ups' hoped lingered inside them. Another was that it was in some way instructive or improving, providing guidance or moralistic teaching. With his new trilogy, *The Book of Dust*, as with *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), Pullman has produced an epic tale dense with literary allusion, didacticism, and fantastical allegory. The first in the series, *La Belle Sauvage*, is rich and multi-layered, and consequently capable of appealing to both children and adults, whilst its questioning of inequality and oppression fulfil the 'instructive' element we so often require from children's fiction. Needless to say, both the adult and the illusory child-construct within me were thrilled with the novel, and I'm certain I would have enjoyed it as a child.

Envisioned as neither a prequel nor sequel but 'equel' if you like, and set ten years before the events of Northern Lights (1995), La Belle Sauvage gracefully folds you back into world of Brytain, and specifically Oxfordshire. It is certainly a prequel in the sense that it narrates the events leading up to Lyra's residence in Jordan College, and whilst the plucky heroine is present only as a new born baby, we are given a likeable and sympathetic protagonist in the figure of Malcolm - a bright and intelligent adolescent who becomes entangled in the world of gyptians, alethiometers, and the resistance against the increasingly powerful Magisterium. Several characters make a return including Farder Coram, Lord Asriel, and Marisa Coulter. The first half of the novel is marked by a straightforward style of narration that establishes character, plot, and setting. It is engrossing, and adeptly re-establishes the familiarity of this world whilst delicately extending and developing its boundaries. The second half of the novel is a quite different affair that combines a dream-like, hallucinatory quality with multiple chase sequences as the characters attempt to flee in the eponymous canoe, pursued by multiple factions who want to either help or harm them. Lost in a preternatural flood of biblical proportions, the children experience a series of trials and encounters with strange otherworldly figures that establishes a distinctly 'mythological' overtone and directly evokes Homer's Odyssey (circa 700 BCE), and Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queen (1590). These are alternated by more earthly threats in the form of abusive nuns, the CCD (Consistorial Court of Discipline: a church organisation who punish 'heresy' and non-believers), rape, looting, and murder.

Pullman's characters are as richly woven as ever, with their daemons signalling the very essence of their character. A stand out character is Gerard Bonneville, whose charming and captivating persona is

undermined by his menacing and malevolent hyena. Bonneville is a character that mesmerises at the same time as instilling fear. An experimental theologian by occupation, we learn that his career has been ruined by a criminal conviction for child abuse, and he will now go to any means necessary to ensure his research continues. Yet, although his daemon's form hints at an intrinsic malignancy, there is mystery and potential doubt surrounding his conviction due to Marisa Coulter's role as chief witness at the trial. Given what we know about Coulter from the first trilogy, one cannot help wondering if the allegations were true or a means of discrediting him due to a rivalry between them. Bonneville's actions throughout the novel suggest he is now mentally unstable, if he was ever sane. A scene in which he beats and maims his own daemon is deeply bewildering and distressing and reveals flashes of his own self-loathing.

Less well realised, and potentially more problematic, is the character of 16-year-old Alice, who works alongside Malcolm at his parent's inn. In contrast to Malcolm, who is a kindly, sensible, bright boy, Alice is a bitter, sarcastic girl who reveals her own potential trauma in her extreme, and at times inappropriate, responses to events. When a customer pinches her bottom at the inn, she breaks a glass and threatens them with it. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, although we're not provided with a strong sense of why Alice is so hostile. Rather, her character seems to exist as much to support and aide Malcolm's development than for her own right. Much like His Dark Materials, burgeoning adolescent sexuality forms a backdrop to this novel, and is potentially more realistically portrayed than Lyra and Will's somewhat idealistic romance. Still, whilst Malcolm's confusion at these unfamiliar emotions are so realistically rendered that they may stir memories of similar discomfort in the reader, one can't help but feel that Alice exists as a device for these feelings. It's a small point, but it's disappointing that Pullman, who has previously written such engaging female characters, misses the mark with this one.

Throughout the first half of the novel there is a hint of 'yesteryear' to Pullman's milieu. This is a certain presentation of England – one that maybe avoids the cosiness of Rowling (1997-2007) but is still steeped in the imagery of *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) – with an almost-nostalgia for a world that blends the inter-war/1950s period. It seems a well-ordered and white Brytain, where simple, happy innkeepers work hard serving good food and ale to all who want it; where eccentric, educated, and upper-class people run around playing spies; where nuns, somewhat surprisingly in this case, are kindly, moral, and guileless or stern depending on their position. There is a gruff, elderly odd job man who speaks with a broad accent. In fact, all the lower classes speak with a broad accent, while the educated and upper classes speak correctly. Most people seem, by and large, happy with their lot in life, and no one seems to challenge it. It is a solidly white and middle-class rendering of an alternative Oxford and there are no people of colour or other races in the narrative, aside from the Gyptians (who seem a thoroughly decent lot who have little in common with Cillian Murphy's *Peaky Blinders*, 2013-present).

No, the only blot on this landscape is the Magisterium, who have not yet consolidated their power in the way they have in *Northern Lights*. This is Pullman after all, and the church and all its abuses loom large. In this narrative they are most clearly epitomised by the League of St Alexander, who also represent fascism. A scene in which they visit Malcolm's school and encourage all the children to enlist as spies against adults who commit 'acts of treason' against the church is reminiscent of Morton Rhue's *The Wave* (1981), likewise demonstrating how easily fascism can spread. In this era of Big Data and growing fears around terrorism and

the counter surveillances that are implemented to fight it, it's a reminder of how something innocent may one day be used against each other. For, whilst Pullman evokes this familiar and comforting setting, he must also upset it in some way and attack privilege and power. Climate change and global warming are potentially alluded to by the flood and rising water levels. Meanwhile, during their journey, Malcolm and Alice stumble upon a beautiful and bountiful garden party, whose inhabitants celebrate and enjoy themselves whilst being incapable of perceiving the suffering of others, serving as a reminder of society's inequalities and people's tendency to turn a blind eye to them. Yet, one can't help feeling that Pullman's Britain is one that no longer exists, if it ever did except in the hallowed corridors of Oxford, and the failure to challenge the white privilege that this chosen setting inherently evokes is troubling.

Ultimately it is curious that we consider Pullman's works, dense with such a staggering number of literary allusions that it can make one feel like an intellectual fraud, as writing for children. The author himself has stated that the books were written with no specific target audience in mind, so it must be we, the gatekeepers, who market and categorise them as such. Is it because they centre on child protagonists? Is it because they contain witches and faeries and talking animals? Maybe it's because of edifying qualities that, despite its fantastical elements, leave traces of an aversion to fantasy that suggest a dislike for 'low' culture. Maybe we identify Pullman's books as children's literature because they reach out to our inner child – or whatever it is we believe is our inner child. Either way, this is a deeply engaging novel that shouldn't disappoint.

## **BIONOTE**

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## A GHOST OF ITSELF

# Review by Charlotte Gislam

Sanders, Rupert, director. *Ghost in the Shell*. Performance by Scarlett Johansson, Pilou Asbæk, Takeshi Kitano, Michael Pitt, DreamWorks, 2017. Film.

Rupert Sanders' Ghost in the Shell (2017) is the first Western imagining of the classic Japanese Cyberpunk series; one which started life as a manga in 1989, garnered popularity and subsequently adapted for film in 1995, leading to a seguel in 2004 and a recent animated film in 2015. Its adaptation for TV has encompassed two series produced in 2002 and 2004 (Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex), establishing its existence outside of both the manga and films' narrative timeline, alongside the recent prequel series Arise (2013) which detailed the creation of The Major's team, Section Nine. With such an abundance of iterations Ghost in the Shell has become an icon of Japanese animation, influencing not only other animation series within Japan such as Psycho-Pass (2012) and Texhnoloyze (2003), but Hollywood films like The Matrix (1999) and even Avatar (2009). Its large and established universe is a perfect resource for a film studio to create a cinematic universe comparable to those currently seen with Marvel and DC. No doubt this was the aim of Paramount Pictures in their recent adaptation of Ghost in the Shell (2017). This latest version seeks to provide a definitive origin story for The Major, a character whose provenance has so far been a source of mystery to the audience, by swapping its Cyberpunk thriller roots for the Superhero format. As a result, it loses the essence of what made the previous Ghost in the Shell iterations so popular. The creative decision to structure Ghost in the Shell (2017) around the origins of the protagonist, the cyborg Major Kusanagi, is clearly an attempt to create an entry point for a Western audience that is unfamiliar with the series. Although previous entries have been both subtitled and dubbed for Western audiences, the centre of its production and popularity has always been its Japanese locale. As such, Ghost in the Shell has never had the same mainstream success in the West as the media it has influenced. Through choosing one narrative thread of the series, Sanders attempts to balance the depth wanted by fans and the accessibility needed for newer audiences.

However, it is in this attempt to mediate between two very different audiences that the flaws appear, the most critical being its inability to decide whether it is a shot by shot replica or a complete reimagining of the original. This creates an awkward internal tension which is often to the film's detriment. There are multiple points where scenes from the 1995 film are lifted and transposed directly into this new narrative. Going beyond a simple nod to the original, the inclusion of these moments may confuse those who are familiar with the previous film and thus raises the question: where does this film fit in the overall narrative, is it a remake, an original, or a collage of all previous iterations? One particular example of this can be found in the famous garbage man sequence from the 1995 original. The antagonist of that film, the Puppetmaster, controls a garbage collector, rewrites his memories, and manipulates him into placing explosives to bring himself to the attention of The Major. This immediately highlights questions of agency, the creation of identity through memories, and the ethics of what the Puppetmaster is willing to do – which all become vitally important in the conclusion of the story. In the 2017 version this character is merely a transitionary device – his existence is not

cared for by the narrative other than to force an important character off the road and lead to the 'cool' water fight scene well-known from the original. Invariably, the film is unable to remove its extreme focus on The Major to look at other significant aspects of the series' success. Rather than appearing like a member of the city also wrestling with his own identity issues, much like The Major, the garbage man is simply there for the advancement of the plot and to reference an iconic scene.

Reusing aspects of the *Ghost in the Shell* universe is not unusual for a series which continually reinvents itself, producing narratives which offer alternative character histories without invalidating previous iterations. However, Sanders' use of the original 1995 film's visuals feels hollow, placed there as both proof of the film's ties to the series and because of its iconic visual aesthetic. As a result, Sanders' iteration feels like a film with nothing to contribute. Yet there is more to the film than these issues, there are ghosts of sparkling creativity buried deep within the camera reel. These are found in the moments the film feels safe enough to update the original to a contemporary audience, which serve as moments of visual delight for those with knowledge of the original as well as newer audiences. This is shown to dazzling effect in the film's representations of cyberspace. In the original media, exploring cyberspace meant observing an avatar of The Major 'surfing' what looked like the internal files of a computer. Cyberspace was structured in a way reminiscent of accessing a computer and logging onto the web, mediated by a screen. This makes sense to an audience of the 90s where computer aesthetics could be a new and exciting visual mode. However, for contemporary audiences this design runs the risk of looking dated, like an example of retro-futurism, not in keeping with the film's contemporary visuals.

Instead of staying with the original look, the team behind *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) created an entirely new vision. Inspired by *The Matrix*'s overlay of code onto the world, cyberspace in this adaptation seeks to combine the physical and cyber self; the result: an advanced version of current augmented reality games which incorporates the physical space as a structure to overlay the digital. This is perfect for a contemporary audience who are accustomed to the integrated nature of the modern internet with our environment, and the forever represented connectivity of contemporary life. Rather than cyberspace being something which can be bundled into technology and safely cordoned off into a box which we consent to access, we see it overlaid onto reality: it has become a fundamental part of the experience of real space. There is a physicality to this version of cyberspace which never existed in the original but feels perfectly appropriate in the *Ghost in the Shell* universe.

However, it is these moments of brilliance that make the failings of the film more egregious. In terms of the narrative, The Major's teammates who make up Section Nine are reduced to a few scenes, except for her right-hand man: Batou. This has the unfortunate effect of reducing these characters to two-dimensional representations of their original counterparts, turning Ishikawa from a fully fleshed out character to nothing more than an alcoholic hacker. The addition of the black female character Ladriya could have been a refreshing departure from a series which, excepting The Major herself, is incredibly male dominated. However, as her defining aspect is her strong London accent and her role is kept to a minimum, the film misses the opportunity to challenge this aspect of the original.

To discuss the 2017 film's cast is to inevitably touch upon the most debated topic both pre and post release, the white washing of Major Kusanagi. Scarlet Johansson was chosen to play The Major, an actor who is on one hand well known for roles in which her character struggles to fully relate to humanity in a similar, if

not colder, manner to The Major, for example: *Under the Skin* (2013), *Lucy* (2014), and even *Lost in Translation* (2003), but whose choice caused criticism due to its inherent whitewashing. In an industry which already has so few prominent roles for non-white female actors, the whitewashing of media which already contains these opportunities within them is emblematic of the diversity problem which Hollywood and Western film in general face. This becomes increasingly problematic in the 2017 film as it attempts to rationalize The Major's change of ethnicity in a manner which makes for uncomfortable viewing.

Many of these weaknesses can be explained by the film's limited run time, as it would not be possible to compress the entire history of *Ghost in the Shell* into two hours. Instead it settles for visual short-hand and a focus on The Major at the cost of her team. These interactions with her team in previous iterations allow for a greater understanding of her mentality and the viewpoints of the world around her. Without these the 2017 Major feels disconnected from the city and the people that she works to protect.

As a result, Ghost in the Shell (2017) is a film invariably haunted by the ghosts of its predecessors. Those who have not seen the original will perhaps find more enjoyment in the film as its uncanny hauntings are revealed only through knowledge of the series' narrative and visual style. The film concentrates on a facet of the series to streamline the narrative, but in so doing inevitably loses all the context that has been built by the original. Ghost in the Shell (2017) works therefore as an initial entry for somebody looking to experience the series, but fans of the original will feel disappointed as it fails to utilise its potential to bring a Cyberpunk classic to a contemporary audience.

#### **BIONOTE**

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## NO JUSTICE FOR THE LEAGUE

Reviewed by Daniel Huw Bowen

Snyder, Zack, director. *Justice League*, performance by Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Gal Gadot, Ezra Miller, Jason Momoa, Ray Fisher, Warner Bros. Pictures. 2017. Film.

The DC Extended Universe's (DCEU) attempt to form their own Avengers franchise culminates in the unsubstantial and messy Justice League. The villainous extra-terrestrial Steppenwolf (Ciaran Hinds) returns to Earth in search of the Mother Boxes, three cinematic MacGuffins with the ability to terraform worlds with catastrophic events. This spurs Batman (Ben Affleck) and Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) to form a small team, compromising of the Flash (Ezra Miller), Aquaman (Jason Momoa), Cyborg (Ray Fischer) and the eventually resurrected Superman (Henry Cavill) to inevitably stop his apocalyptic plan. The conflicting visual styles (likely a result of production issues), unoriginal script, with an over-reliance on computer generated imagery and effects within this overambitious project however struggles to tell a cohesive and substantial story that, ironically, could do justice to the legacy of these iconic characters.

The minuscule amount of screen time dedicated to character development fails to make any of their arcs or relationships particularly compelling. Much of the film sees the cast bemoaning the loss of Superman, however the sudden bereavement and admiration, particularly by Batman, feels supremely hollow and unwarranted. The two only met in the surreptitiously named Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016), where the titular DC titans go from duelling to forming a brief truce – due to a hilariously minor convenience – for the Man of Steel to eventually fall in battle against Doomsday. Despite their unbelievably brief camaraderie after a hate-fuelled slugfest, Batman now feels comfortable claiming that Superman was "more human than I." Later, Batman launches into technobabble-filled paean regarding the fallen superhero as he tries to persuade his teammates to resurrect the Man of Steel; at this point, he is doing anything short of masturbating over his corpse. His position is underwhelming, lacking any depth, history, or emotional clout. This failing is indicative of contemporary superhero blockbusters: a strict adherence to marketable character essentialism. Tony Stark's Iron Man is the same one introduced to the world a decade ago; it's possible he wouldn't be as appealing or profitable if he were any different, therefore, why take that risk. The inflexibility sacrifices capacity to foster intimate relationships (we're all still perplexed as to why Bruce Banner and Natasha Romanoff were romantically paired in Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)), more palpable in the DCEU too in part due to their accelerated production schedule in their conspicuous attempt to compete with their rivals, Marvel Studios.

DCEU's reluctance to allow its characters to flourish is hampered further by the restricted and underdeveloped performance of the cast. Ben Affleck's tame performance does nothing to aid this situation, who is only able to concentrate on maintaining his husky growl and a consistent demeanour of indifference, spliced with the odd side-grimace. His persistent apathy only heightens the uncomfortable viewing of the forced flirtation between Batman and Wonder Woman, another connection of little substance. By contrast, Gadot's performance alleviates some of this pain and proves to be one of the few redemptive features of the

production. Her wry smiles and tender voice lend some personality to the otherwise dull, machismo exchanges of the team. In battle, as de facto team leader, she leads the charge, often mutedly, speaking little and maintaining a steely gaze as she smoothly evades attacks before leaping into battle with a roar. Unfortunately, her co-stars are not always so mesmerising. While Jason Momoa's bull-headed Arthur Curry is endearing (though his contact lenses are incredibly distracting) and Ray Fisher does his best to make Cyborg live up to the duality of his hero's name, neither are given much material or time to leave more than a fleeting impression. The latter's sweetest interaction comes at the behest of scene-stealer, Ezra Miller, whose Flash declares "We're the accidents!" (referring to the manner in which they obtained their enhancements) before they fist bump. Barry Allen's unconfident mannerisms, endearing self-deprecating comments and timely comedic interjections are a welcome contrast to the otherwise sullen and hyper-masculine cast. Such characters have plagued the DCEU since Christopher Nolan's foundational 'dark superhero' Batman trilogy (2005-2012) and from Man of Steel (2013) to Suicide Squad (2016) – a tradition producers do not seem keen to forgo anytime soon.

The attempts at humour and levity, clearly an influence of reshoots director Joss Whedon, however arrived far too late to this sombre universe. As chief architect of the DCEU, Zach Snyder's grunge aesthetic continues to dominate with minimalist dialogue, grayscale, and hyperreal imagery. The action is cartoonish, often bordering on full blown animation; Affleck's more physical feats of action were evidently generated by an effects team to rather feeble results. Certain sequences, such as the Amazonians fleeing with a Motherbox from Steppenwolf, though greatly tense, are marred by the failure to blend real time performances with their altered backgrounds, making it more difficult to suspend one's disbelief. The choreography in this and many of the action scenes is muddled and repetitive. There are long pauses between hits, blurs of blades, and an excessive amount of throat-grabbing that makes a lot of the battles feel rather stagnant. Henry Cavill's noticeably unnerving digitised upper lip (fitted in post-production since he had a moustache during reshoots), should be thrown back into the uncanny valley where it belongs.

Behind the camera, with Patty Jenkins tragically no longer at the helm of a film starring Wonder Woman, the values of the production have markedly shifted as Diana Prince is consistently objectified and demeaned. The numerous shots of Gadot's backside would lead you to believe that of a straight teenage boy was in charge of production. Her character, the multi-faceted Wonder Woman, has been reduced to a collage of unflattering tropes. She is the emotional ex-girlfriend, constantly bemoaning the loss of her boyfriend from over ninety years ago; the nagging sitcom mother, chiding the men on the team for their immature behaviour, claiming "I work with children." Her fellow heroes sexualise her from Aquaman to Flash, who accidentally and supposedly comically jump over her fallen body in between regular shots of her backside, often in her noticeably skin-baring costume. In the climactic team photo, it is only Wonder Woman who has her hands on her hips, accentuating her conventionally feminine figure. There is no escape for the minor female characters either. Lois Lane (Amy Adams) too, who like Diana, sports a thick mane of tussled hair (it seems the hair department believes that there is only one heterogeneous hairstyle possible for women possible), is reduced to the figure of a grieving widow. Despite this, there is one tasteless joke regarding her libido to remind the audience she is still a sexual being.

The disappointing representation of gender is unsurprising considering *Justice League's* script insensitive approach to issues of discrimination and inequality. Montages at the beginning are designed

to elicit emotional reactions: Islamophobic attacks on the streets, a homeless person laying on the street, implying that such inequality is so pervasive following the death of Superman. Batman discovers Aquaman aiding victims of globalisation, a remote village in need of help "because no one else does." Nor does he, as these townsfolk disappear from the film when they are no longer serve as a visible demonstration of the hero's benevolence. Since neither issues are raised again and, in prior films, Superman was far too preoccupied with causing immeasurable infrastructure damage to help with day-to-day issues, it seems wildly exploitative to include portrayals of prejudice as a backdrop: no more than a gimmick to elicit a superficial emotional reaction.

Justice League clearly lacks the intellectual and filmic space to mediate on the topics it raises and fails to escape the critical failures that hampered the majority of its predecessors. The DCEU's adamance to adhere to the Nolan/Snyder architecture is hampering the innovative potential of its source material. The mismanaged themes, conflicting artistic styles, the horrendous treatment of discrimination, and ultimate messiness of the film are only proving Liz Lemon, protagonist of the critically acclaimed 30 Rock, correct: "dark superhero movies - these are things that suck."

## **BIONOTE**

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# **GOD OF THUNDER, LORD OF LAUGHS**

Review by Stuart Spear

Waititi, Taika, director. *Thor: Ragnarok*, performance by Chris Hemsworth, Cate Blanchett, Tom Hiddleston, Tessa Thompson, Mark Ruffalo, Jeff Goldblum, and Anthony Hopkins, Marvel Entertainment. 2017. Film.

Positioned in the UK release schedule between the serious, existential musings of Denis Villeneuve's Blade Runner 2049 (2017) and the revamped yet ultimately flat Justice League (2017) sits Thor: Ragnarok: a colourful, daft, and immensely enjoyable superhero film. Following on from the dire Thor: Dark World (2013) this is easily the best in the trilogy and reaches absurdly comic and slapstick heights DC can only dream of at the moment.

The film begins with Thor (Chris Hemsworth) seemingly nipping Ragnarok in the bud by defeating the fire demon Surtur. Upon his return to Asgard he discovers Loki (Tom Hiddleston) alive and impersonating Odin (Anthony Hopkins), whom Loki has left on Earth. When the brothers reunite with him, Odin informs them that he is fading, and they should therefore await the soon arrival of their sister Hela (Cate Blanchett), the Goddess of Death. Hela and Odin once conquered the celestial kingdoms with their combined power before Odin had a change of heart and wished to be viewed as a more benign ruler. Now free from her imprisonment, Hela wishes to resume her crusade of destruction which Thor and Loki must stop in order to save Asgard. But before they can begin they find themselves stranded on the planet Sakaar – a colourful, trash-strewn world ruled by The Grandmaster (Jeff Goldblum). Thor is captured by Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) and forced to compete in an arena fight against the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) before any attempt at an escape can be made.

Though the film credits three screenwriters, Taika Waititi's fingerprints are all over it. In fact, he has been allowed to imprint his style and humour – a dead pan mixture of the absurd and the quotidian - much more than expected. Chris Hemsworth steers Thor into a much sillier hero; he has always had good comic timing but here he is allowed to showcase his comedic chops only hinted at in the previous films (as well as the 2016 *Ghostbuster* reboot). Hemsworth cracks far more jokes (many at Thor's expense) than any previous outing, but it never feels out of place. Everyone involved knows Thor as a franchise is one-step away from overly-theatrical, fanciful ridiculousness, so it becomes a point of intent to repeatedly poke fun at both the characters and the whole superhero universe in general. Jeff Goldblum is fantastic as the eccentric, twitchy, oddly-affectionate despot ruling Sakaar; dressed in gleaming robes and adorned with thin lines of face paint, he brilliantly undermines and skewers the pomposity and po-facedness that could emerge in a narrative centred around Gods and superheroes – à la Zack Snyder's *Batman Vs. Superman* (2016). Similarly, Korg – an alien made of stones voiced by Waititi – steals each scene he features in: his heavy New Zealand accent and unruffled, jovial nature toward the ensuing events punctures any leanings the film makes toward 'seriousness': in his introduction he tells Thor how he became imprisoned – his revolution failed because he didn't print enough pamphlets.

Perhaps Marvel learnt from the Ant-Man (2015) / Edgar Wright episode in which the director left the project part-way through filming because of clashes with the studio; this led to a compromised result that worked, but only just. Or maybe Waititi's experience was largely helped by the huge and unexpected success of James Gun's irreverent *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). Either way *Thor: Ragnarok* is easily the most enjoyably comic Marvel film so far. But there's more to it than just gags.

The film flits between Fantasy and Science Fiction as the narrative jumps between Asgard and Sakaar. Asgard has been beautifully realised in Thor's previous outings, but Sakaar is the real gem of this sequel with its brilliantly vibrant set design – a planet of shanty favelas surrounding a combat arena bedecked with huge grotesques – and populated by Cyberpunk scavengers who wouldn't be out of place in a New Romantic music video. Added to this dual-genre is the excellent score from Devo mainstay Mark Mothersbaugh, with sweeping orchestral pieces for Asgard and synthesiser-heavy tracks for Sakaar which suits the film perfectly. The visuals are solid, as to be expected in a Marvel blockbuster, but there is a fabulous shot of the Valkyries descending to fight Hela which is reminiscent of an immense Baroque painting – though it has to be said that the scenes set in 'Norway' look jarringly unconvincing; it was filmed in Australia, and these scenes are almost more artificial than Asgard.

Sadly, the humour and dazzling aesthetic can't quite cover all the cracks as the film suffers slightly from the usual Marvel tropes and pitfalls: most notably, an underwritten villain and an inevitable battle in the third act between the heroes and a horde of anonymous CGI fodder.

Hela, played with scene-chomping relish by Blanchett and looking like Galadriel's emo sister, is given far too little to do. Being the Goddess of Death and an integral player in the foundation of Asgard as we know it, there is so much potential for her character to problematise notions of sovereignty and heroism. Her and Odin's imperialist past, and the wealth and power it afforded Asgard, is briefly touched upon but could have been explored more with Thor present, introducing the notion of historical revisionism. Or the fact that she should, as Odin's first-born, be the rightful heir to Asgard, and be a powerful, female ruler in a vastly male-dominated universe gets dealt with fleetingly. Instead we mainly see her throw sharp things at people and reanimate corpses.

This leaves the film dramatically split: we have the moments where the film soars when it follows Thor, Loki, and company on Sakarr, and then the moments where it sags when we return to Hela on Asgard – though this is also in part due to Heimdall's rather dull storyline playing a fantasy Pied Piper. The film, like many superhero blockbusters, mistakes the action scenes to be the source of the drama when it in fact resides in the intimate; it is in the power dynamic between the siblings, and in their varying philosophical approaches to leadership: Hela wishes to oversee a continuation of interstellar Asgardian hegemony; while Thor will end up choosing a more significant and destructive fate for Asgard, but for the good of his people. Asgard becomes a community in transit; abandoning their near-utopian home-world (for surely the afterlife kingdom of Valhalla would be their 'true' utopia) in order to survive, the Asgardians now inhabit a heterotopic ship – for if we recall Michel Foucault's idea of the ship being the greatest heterotopia as it exists by itself and is a place without a place then the Asgardians' spaceship mirrors this, floating through the infinity of space in a *no*-where place searching for a new land to situate their people (though the fate of this traveling Asgard is thrown into

doubt during the mid-credits scene). The film demonstrates the possibility of 'home' as an abstraction, that community and place reside within the populace rather than geography: "Asgard is not a place, it's a people." Something Hela would have considered further had she been written more effectively.

And while he has some great moments in the film, Marvel appear to still struggle with what to do with Loki: he is the god of mischief, slippery and calculating; he is dangerous owing to his total disinterestedness; and yet he is repeatedly wasted by Marvel. It would have benefitted the film had they played up more strongly the idea that Loki always knew what Odin's passing and Hela's arrival meant for Asgard's future. But what we have is a millennia-old sorcerer out-manoeuvred by Dr Strange (in an admittedly comic cameo) and then later outfoxed by his brawn-over-brains brother Thor because he keeps playing the same tricks. Thor's arc has incorporated his appreciation for, but also observations of, Loki's abilities and behaviour, while Tom Hiddleston has (so far) been asked to repeat the same routine with little growth (save for perhaps the third act of *Dark World*). Marvel want him there, and audiences want him there, but the studio has yet to figure out how to make him more *interestingly* be there - maybe *Infinity War* (2018) will change that.

These may sound like big flaws – and in regard to Marvel's continued output they perhaps could be – but they wither in the shade of just how fun this film is. Its character and narrative shortcomings in no way threaten to derail it from its core objective. It is an irreverent blockbuster that successfully marries the competing forces of humour and spectacle, and hopefully now demonstrates a Marvel studio comfortable with the idea of allowing distinctive voices control over their iconic and lucrative property. We'll never get to see Wright's Ant-Man, but now that we've seen what Waititi achieved with Thor: Ragnarok – and Ryan Coogler with Black Panther (2018) – here's to more collaborations between auteurs and superheroes.

Kathryn Bigelow's Black Widow, anyone? ...

#### BIONOTE

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## THE MACHINERY OF PROGRESS

## Review by Thomas Knowles

## Whitehead, Colson. The Underground Railroad. Little Brown, 2016. Novel.

The brutal depiction of the nineteenth-century slave economy of the Southern American States in this multiple prize-winning novel owes much to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), earlier slave narratives as well as memoirs such as Northrop Fry's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and in particular to Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Reflecting these literary, genre, and non-fiction influences, *The Underground Railroad* made Oprah's Book Club, President Barak Obama's summer reading list, won the (US) National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction (SF), too. It is rare for a novel to attract such accolades from both mainstream and genre bodies.

Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999) saw rival elevator inspectors in conflict over the metaphysical nature of elevator technology, with one group aiming to design an elevator that dispenses with the empirical past and which would take its people (black Americans) into the future. The protagonist, Lila Mae, is trebly other in her world of blue-collar elevator inspection: she is black, female, and an 'intuitionist' – the novum or fantastic element in the novel. An intuitionist relies upon psychic readings of an elevator's functionality, rather than the physical signs of wear and tear that an 'empiricist' would diagnose faults by. The vertical transport of an elevator is a rich source of metaphor for ascent and decline, particularly between the hoped-for and violently resisted changes necessary in a pre-civil rights New York.

It is another nineteenth-century technology that drives the plot of The Underground Railroad, that of the steam locomotive and the engineering of underground railways – a horizontal transport to The Intuitionist's vertical, though the journeys undertaken are no less metaphysical. The Underground Railway is a historical metaphor for the network of safe houses, sympathisers, abolitionists, and freemen that risked their lives to help slaves flee from bondage in the south to relative freedom in the north. Whitehead's brilliant and thoroughly Science Fiction (SF) twist in this narrative is to make the underground railway a material reality, with branches and stations maintained by the secretive network. With the weight of historical description and indeed responsibility of such a story, one could argue that such a novel is only glancingly or superficially SF, but while the surface texture is in the realist mode, its deep structures are the genre at its best. Notions of racial 'passing' and genre hybridity here make fabula and syuzhet mutually interrogative, with journeys on the railroad shuttling passengers backwards and forwards in America's troubled history. The novel's realistic style, though, makes it difficult to detect anachronism in any given scene or chapter; thus, Lila Mae 'passes' in each iteration or American history, but taken as a whole we appreciate the fantastic nature of these passes through history. It is the deep - even hidden, like the titular Underground Railroad - nature of the SF and Fantasy elements that require the reader to think through such generic categories, as well as the boundary-policing of criticism, just as the plot viscerally interrogates racial categories, stereotypes, and simplistic notions of 'good' and 'bad.' A key example of this occurs when Lila Mae is employed as a living exhibit in a museum to act out racial stereotypes

of African village life. Returning the gaze of the white spectators at the museum, she also returns the readerly gaze and problematizes our literary enjoyment of her story.

The novel begins with seventeen-year-old Cora, a third-generation plantation slave who has been offered, by her fellow slave Caesar, the possibility of escape on the underground railroad. When she at first declines, we are told that "This was her Grandmother [Ajarry] speaking" (3). We are then given an account of Ajarry's kidnap and transportation from Africa, her subsequent sale and resale across the Southern states of America, and her long suffering at the hands of the Randalls - the brutal owners of the Georgia cotton plantation where she will spend the rest of her life. Three weeks later when Cora accepts Caesar's offer, "it was her mother [Mabel] talking" (9). Cora's mother fled the plantation six years before, abandoning her eleven-yearold daughter, and creating a split in Cora's personality – between acting like her mother and acting like her grandmother - which is played out over the course of the novel. As Andy Duncan has written of the affective power of alternative histories: "we, too, create and destroy alternate versions of ourselves through our actions everyday" ("Alternate History," The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction, 217). Cora follows her mother's example, escaping the plantation, but she is unable to forgive Mabel for abandoning her as a child. What Cora will never discover, and what we are privy to as readers, is that her mother had intended to return to the plantation but in fact died alone out in the marshes. Cora is unable to see that she constructs the mother that she needed, and that without her seemingly selfish example of escape, she may never have left the plantation herself. Whitehead demonstrates here that abstract actions forgivable as human responses to atrocity are sites of deep wounding in strife between the victimised.

Cora's flight on the Underground Railroad takes her to South Carolina, North Carolina, Indiana, and finally to the north - where each locale seems to exist in a different time and possible reality. These journeys are as much about linking past and future selves as they are about geographical movement. Indeed, her final underground journey begins on a hand-powered cart and is completed on foot; the emergence from the darkness of the tunnel, leaving a bleeding pursuer behind her in the darkness, is figured as a rebirth into a historical period in which she is able for the first time to choose her next steps. Each station stop reveals a possible configuration of race relations in America. In South Carolina, a seemingly benevolent regime masks a Eugenics programme and system of exploitation that would eradicate the perceived menace of black population explosion by stealth. In North Carolina, an apocalyptic landscape is the backdrop to an avowedly genocidal regime, and Cora must spend months holed-up in the tiny attic crawl space of some extremely reluctant collaborators. Whitehead's invocation of Anne Frank here is characteristic of his tendency to align the struggles of black Americans with those of oppressed and displaced peoples, including Jews and Native Americans. This struggle is understood as predating the slave trade, incorporating the decimation of the indigenous peoples of America, and the continued struggles of black Americans in the twentieth and (by alltoo-easy extension) twenty-first centuries. In Indiana, Cora joins a black community that represents a utopian pocket, a short-lived respite from the encroaching threat of the southern slave states that surround it.

The stops on the railroad give us the grand sweep of alternative history: sometimes we appear to be in the eighteenth, the nineteenth, and at other times the twentieth century, but Whitehead's SF-coding works on the minute and personal level, too. We see this in the branching options before Cora in which she behaves more like her mother, or more like her grandmother, and in the incomplete history of her mother that drives

her desperate flight beneath America. Lila Mae's internal dialogues with her heritage mark this an important aspect of Whitehead's project, as it was for Butler and Morrison before him. It is the combination of SF and Fantasy tropes, with the visceral horrors of slavery, that gives this novel its terrible power, lending to it an angry utopian dreaming of possibilities snuffed out. The terrible way in which solidarity seems impossible under such conditions is painfully well-realised; when there is so little to fight over, nonetheless small parcels of ownership and jealous possessiveness cause the enslaved to make life on the plantation, and in other social configurations worse than it could possibly be. This internalisation of slavery's structures and ideology has its corrosive effect on all of the characters in the novel, and the violence, progress, and setbacks of the sweep across history are seen in miniature at the Georgia plantation: Cora's tiny vegetable patch, under constant threat; the brief respite of a birthday party that ends in bloodshed; and the "Hob" house – an enclave of rejected women to which the orphaned Cora is banished.

The origins of the Underground Railroad itself remains obscure. Cora's questions regarding its construction, timetabling, and maintenance are answered enigmatically. This could leave the door open to divine provenance, or to some other supernatural element. However, I read this miraculous construct as a material edifice representing the wasted, backbreaking labour of slaves over the centuries – an unforgivable brake on human progress. Whitehead's impossible Underground Railroad seems possible when all of that alienated labour is taken into account. What, it seems to ask, if those resented years, months, weeks, days, and hours were directed towards a labour of love? *The Underground Railroad* shows us that it is not enough, though necessary, to represent; that a greater purchase is gained through something to compare horror to, and that such horrors are rendered so much more terrifying by beautifully-imagined, maybe impossible, examples of how things might and could be otherwise. Whitehead understands that the languages and stories of possibility that enable them are both our only hope and the source of all human strife. Through its SF machinery, this novel makes a compelling case for speculative pasts and futures.

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#### **BIONOTE**

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## **CLOSING THE GENERATION GAP**

## Review by Richard Mooney

## Wilson, G. Willow. Generations: Ms. Marvel & Ms. Marvel. Marvel Universe, 2017. Comic.

Like Neil Gaiman with Sandman (1988-1996) and Garth Ennis with Preacher (1996-2001), whose comics respectively pushed the boundaries of storytelling and what is achievable in comics, G. Willow Wilson has done so similarly with Ms. Marvel Generations. Wilson shows that a quirky Pakistani-American girl can be the subject of an interesting, heartfelt and action-packed story.

Ms Marvel & Ms Marvel is a standalone issue contained within the ten-issue series called Marvel's *Generations*. A series built on the concept that in each issue a standalone story matches up young and current superheroes with either their earlier counterparts or spiritual predecessors in order to examine the relationship both characters had with their shared identity and thus explore social issues more deeply.

Prior to *Generations*, the first issues of Khan's outing as Ms Marvel, entitled *No Normal*, earned a Hugo award and received high praise from the wider comic reading community that showed someone other than a white male taking the spotlight. This deviation from the norm has brought with it a serious debate on how the comic industry relies and focusses on a certain 'type' of character and whether this is due to business practices or a deep-seated disregard of diversity.

But unlike the praise deservedly heaped upon *No Normal*, Marvel's *Generations* series deserves far less fanfare.

Despite the interesting concept of the series and potential depth it could achieve, *Generations* place within the Marvel cannon is the literary equivalent of a foot-note. It is a side narrative that accompanies Marvel's Secret Empire storyline, which in itself is a limited series event designed to address the aftermath of the crossover event *Avengers: Standoff!* and the ongoing series *Captain America: Steve Rogers*. But because it neither moves any of those series forward in terms of story, nor does it provide any depth to them that might enhance those stories.

This decision effectively set up the series to fail and understandably resulted in lower sales than expected. Unforgivably, Marvel's Vice President of Sales, David Gabriel, used these poor sales figures to blame female and diversity characters such as Kamala Khan or Riri Williams as the reason for the slump in sales.

In the most recent issue, Generations #7, the Marvels, Kamala Khan meets the previous Ms Marvel, Carol Danvers and the two work together to stop an evil threatening the city. Coming into this issue with no prior knowledge starts the reader off on the back foot, as we see Ms Marvel getting sent back in time. She returns to her own time at the end, but no extra information as to how or why this is all happening. The same

can be said about the story in general, as much of it will go right over the head of non-dedicated Marvel readers.

Kamala Khan, the main character/protagonist, is sent back in time where she becomes an intern working at the magazine WOMAN, a spin off publication invented by J. Jonah Jamieson. This same magazine is run by the original Ms Marvel's alter ego Carol Danvers (a sort of Clarke Kent type scenario). This brings the two characters together at a tumultuous time in the publication's history, where as a mysterious buyer is trying to try and buy out the struggling publication. The identity of the buyer is soon revealed to be Nightscream, an otherworldly villain created solely to provide the opposition for this issue. Danvers sets out as Ms Marvel to defeat her. Khan, the current Ms Marvel, who is aware of her and Danvers' shared identity as Ms Marvel, weighs in to help out her idol. The fight scenes are slick, fluid, and balanced with action and Khan's sense of humour. But the relationship between the publication and Nightscream's intentions are vague and murky. Even after reading it three times, I am still not 100% sure about the story. Perhaps this was intentional to push a feminist ideology, but that ideology was not brought to the forefront enough to justify a poor plot.

The single comic issue is more focussed on pushing a feminist ideology and Marxist ideology (which I actually welcome). It's an ideology that the magazine within the comic is also trying to do, and possibly why the WOMAN magazine is suffering from poor sales in the story. Danvers herself admits: "We tried an experiment. We asked ourselves what women today want from this magazine. And we thought we knew the answer. But apparently we were wrong. The question is... what now?" (11). This look at female attitudes from the perspective of women themselves shows the forward thinking attitude this magazine has, even if it has fallen short of the mark on this occasion. But it is also pertinent to note that it is also a sad reflection of the current state of the comics industry itself. Several of the women on her editorial team (which is a subtly diverse range of people far removed from the all-white male board rooms that make up most high-end publications) offer opinions, none of which offer a credible way of moving forward. One suggests they go straight to the target audience; another person picks up on this and asks: "What are their interests? What are their pursuits?" (11). It is at this point that Khan, as the unassuming intern, makes her presence known by saying: "Ummm... protesting stuff? Unicorns" (11).

The failing industry is thus combined with the plot of defeating the villain. After Nightscream is defeated and the publication is safe, Danvers remarks: "Let this be a lesson to us all... progress will always take a backseat to profits" (22). It is here that Khan presents a piece she wrote about women's liberation that might still feel progressive today but in the 70's would definitely be seen as radical. As she hands her piece over she explains it by saying:

Resisting the status quo 24/7 is exhausting. Sometimes you need to give yourself permission to watch smoky eye tutorials and make DIY facemasks from cucumber slices and stuff. Let people have their smoothie recipes and their beauty advice. Make that part of the struggle for women's rights. (24)

Khan finishes up by saying, "It's about not having to ask permission to be who you already are" (24).

Not only is this a cross over between two iterations of Ms Marvel, but of gender ideologies of two different decades. It is of course this very article written by Khan that skyrockets sales and saves the publication from having to look for a potential buyer. Khan's modern understanding of women and gender is relevant and accessible to women even of the by gone era of the '70s.

As wonderful as this aspect of the comic is, I feel it is all let down by the shaky narrative of Nightscream trying to buy out the publication. Like a beautiful painting held in a cheap frame, the inner beauty seems lessen by the thing holding it up. I just cannot shake the feeling that the something is missing from the issue; a key piece of the story that was cut out at the last minute before Wilson had the chance to alter the script to accommodate the change. Nightscream was created solely for this issue and has no prior appearances anywhere in the Marvel Universe before or since. Any scraps of motivation we can glean from her dialogue, technology, or her history can barely factor into what might motivate her to purchase a failing women's magazine on earth. A more established Marvel villain, or a more nuanced Nightscream (one that had divulged at least a sliver of her plans) would have went a long way in allowing the reader to at least speculate on what might be going on behind the scenes.

Wilson's attempt to bring a female-centric story regarding woman's status to the fore is let down by the thin and seemingly incomplete plot. It packs a "women's lib" punch and some excellent art but lacks a cohesiveness to effectively hold it all together. But, while the single issue is ultimately flawed, Wilson has made a commendable effort working within the frame that she was presented with in the form of *Generations*.

#### **BIONOTE**

**Richard Mooney** is a comic book writer from Glasgow, Scotland. He is best known for his work on *Uptown Chronicles* and *Daughter of Titan*.

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