FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Volume 6 • Issue 1 • February 2022
ISSN: 2514-8915


FANTASTIKA

EDITOR'S NOTE

"Fantastika" - a term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute – 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.

This special issue was inspired by the "Embodying Fantastika" conference that took place at Lancaster University between 8th and 10th August 2019. The event itself sought to bring together a range of productive discussions to define, challenge, and debate conceptualisations of embodiment. This topic has become even more critically urgent given the multifaceted ways in which what it means to be 'embodied' has been disrupted in the last couple of years, particularly given questions around the accessibility of developing academic debates in terms of who is included or excluded from participating.

The conference itself sough to investigate how various bodily form are addressed or ruptured across a myriad of canvases, whether this was represented in terms of (re)construction, transposition, or destabilisation. We are particularly grateful to both the conference's keynotes, Sherryl Vint and Sara Wasson, for their rigorous and compelling presentations which catalysed a multitude of dialogues that developed throughout the event. Vint argued that the concept of 'life itself' is undergoing a philosophical reinvention in terms of biotechnology, alongside the widespread commodification of biological entities and processes, theorising that new posthuman strategies are required to conceptualise embodiment that resists contemporary neoliberal trajectories. Wasson meanwhile focused on the temporality of tissue transplantation and considered how Fantastika genres can assist in excavating the myriad of subjective experiences from such transfers and the inequalities within the systems that process such harvests. These themes, as well as many others, were explored across the three days of the conference and included such vibrant and wonderful discussions that it would be impossible to do them all justice within the limited scope of this editorial note. We hope this special issue helps to capture an essence of the conversations from the event and includes both articles that originated as papers at the conference and original submissions that reflect developing debates, as well as a range of non-fiction and fiction reviews.

We are very grateful for the support of our colleagues in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University who have continually supported both the conference and the journal itself. We would like to particularly thank Brian Baker, Liz Oakley-Brown, Catherine Spooner, Andrew Tate, and Sara Wasson for supporting the Fantastika community. Our thanks are extended to Mike Ryder in particular, who helped co-organise the Embodying Fantastika conference and was a huge influence on both the smooth running of the event as well as its critical inception and development. The conference was supported by funding from the Humanities Research Council who helped fund the event through the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Programme.

An archived programme of presentations, abstracts, and biographical notes for each of the speakers is available on our website.

We hope you enjoy what this issue 'embodies' both for the Fantastika field and wider critical discussions.

Kerry Dodd and C. Palmer-Patel
Co-Head Editors

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CO-HEAD EDITORS
Charul (Chuckie) Palmer-Patel and Kerry Dodd

GENERAL EDITORS
Molly Cobb, Derek Johnston, Chris Hussey, Ciarán Kavanagh

REVIEWS EDITOR
Ruth-Anne Walbank

DESIGN EDITOR
Samuel Valentine

COVER ART
Tom Farrow - 'Lemmonscape'

Tom is a mortuary archaeologist and occasional painter. 'Lemmonscape' was produced in response to the panoptic digital story environments of Dirk Lemmons.

We would also like to thank our peer reviewers for their kind consideration and efforts with this issue. This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada.

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

'SCEPTICAL SCRIPTOTHERAPY AND FANTASTICAL METAPHORS': TRAUMA IN BRIT MARLING AND ZAL BATMANGLIJ'S *THE OA* (2016-2019)
By Sean Travers 12

This article examines the representation of trauma in Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's Science Fiction television series *The OA* (2016-2019). Canonical trauma representations tend to be phallocentric, featuring white male protagonists and presenting traumatic experiences from their perspectives. While numerous popular works also centre on white male characters, in popular culture since the early 2000s we nevertheless find an increased number of texts concerned with the trauma of marginalised groups including women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community. This is in part due to popular culture's wider array of genres, particularly ones which incorporate the fantastic including Fantasy, Science Fiction and Horror. These genres can enable texts to generate more suitable representations for the traumatic experiences of minorities. For example, superpowers in superhero narratives can be employed as metaphors for symptoms specific to the types of trauma largely experienced by women, such as mind-control as a metaphor for domestic abuse in Melissa Rosenberg's *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019). However, it is important to also note that in canonical trauma fiction, there is a long-standing and problematic tradition to repress marginalised experiences including rape and domestic abuse by representing them in supernatural terms, as a means of excusing the actions of trauma perpetrators.

This article explores how *The OA* uniquely employs the supernatural to explore rather than repress the trauma of marginalised groups. I illustrate how *The OA* does this in two ways: first, by reading the series through a technique that I term sceptical scriptotherapy and, second, by analysing *The OA*'s depiction of the "Movements."

"IDENTITY ARISES IN CRISIS": MULTIPLICITY, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY IN ANN LECKIE'S *IMPERIAL RADCH TRILOGY*
By Iuliia Ibragimova 27

The article dwells on the posthuman identity building in the characters of Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch Trilogy*. The highly-technologized setting of the trilogy introduces posthuman entities, with a single mind controlling multiple proxy bodies, and the process of their identity transformation becomes crucial for plot development. The protagonist, an AI sentient spaceship with a mechanical body and human proxy-bodies is almost destroyed and left with

CONTENTS

one body implanted with the ship's AI. This trauma initiates the transformation of its identity, challenging its worldview and design-imposed functional identities of the servant and the soldier, traditionally associated with the technological other. The identity transformation is a healing process associated with overcoming the limitations imposed by its designers and the biases absorbed through functioning in its social environment, as well as the formulation of an independent ethical stance. The protagonist's transformation is contrasted to a similar experience of multiplicity in a human-centred posthuman entity – the Lord of the Radch. The theoretical framework of the article relies on critical posthumanism, putting the trilogy in conversation with works by Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad. The article employs literary trauma theory as represented in works by Roger Luckhurst and Robert Eaglestone to discuss the traumatic experience of both posthuman entities.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE WHOLE: INVERTING CORPOREAL MORALITY IN YE YONGLIE'S "CORROSION"
By Virginia L. Conn 42

Science Fiction (SF) from China imagined a new type of idealized human that would be shaped by communism, embodying all the best physical and mental attributes humanity had to offer. Simultaneously, state literary regulations required that this idealized individual be imbued with health, beauty, and nationalistic zeal. In this humanistic construction, physical perfection represented ideological perfection, and thus the perfect citizen became co-constitutive with the perfect state. Yet by depicting an inverted relationship between beauty and morality, SF author Ye Yonglie's 1981 short story, "Corrosion," undercuts the idea of physical perfection and beauty as representative of moral perfection, with material embodiment and physical appearance posited as the inverse of ideological integrity. Working against socialist literary expectations, the story ultimately posits individual destruction and physical decay as prerequisites for national progress, holding up the ugliest individuals as the most capable of patriotic devotion. By stripping the image of the ideal socialist citizen from its reliance on individual physical perfection, "Corrosion" creates the potential for a more egalitarian social participation only possible within the estranging boundaries of SF.

A TENTACULAR TERATOLOGY: THE ABCANNY MONSTROUS
By Rob O'Connor 56

The tentacular monster is a recognisable staple in Fantastika as a metaphor and motif for an invading 'otherness' upon our established status quo. They simultaneously remind us of the wonders of our natural world but also defamiliarise it as something which is still significantly incomprehensible to us. Whether it is the real-life aquatic specimens of the Spirit Collection

CONTENTS

in the British Natural History Museum, the Weird Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft or more recent examples in popular culture, the tentacled monster is an alluring mystery, symbol of revulsion, and social metaphor, inviting us to consider our own physical bodies and materiality in our ever-shifting, incomprehensible, anthropocentric contemporary moment.

China Miéville describes such tentacular monsters as "abcanny," referring not only to Sigmund Freud's theory of uncanny repression being brought back to the fore but also using the prefix *ab-* to refer to a sense of abnormality. The choice of prefix also invites consideration of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the repulsive disruption of physical boundaries. Gelatinous and tentacular monsters are the perfect encapsulation of this abcanny ideal, a formless mass of writhing biology at times eerily familiar but, more commonly, uncategorisable. Playfully mirroring Miéville's essay defining the term, this article explores how theorisations of the abcanny body are developed through representations of tentacular monsters, demonstrating how a variety of texts apply fantastical teratology as a methodology for examining how we survive, negotiate, and engage various aspects of a contemporary culture which constantly shift and evade comprehension, as well as inviting communication of interspecies narratives which challenge anthropocentric values.

SOMETIMES; OTHER TIMES*: UNSTITCHING GOTHIC AMBIGUITY IN SOFIA CARRILLO'S *PRITA NOIRE/BLACK DOLL
By Helena Bacon & Luis Daniel Martinez Alvarez 73

Dani Cavallaro suggests that '[n]arratives of darkness give shape to […] disorientating sensations […] by intensifying their power and frequency through an emphasis on the irreducible hold of the inexplicable' (*The Gothic Vision,* 14); ambiguity and instability firmly have become firmly entrenched as apparatus of the Gothic, suggestive of an unsettling absence of meaning and a refusal to adhere to expectations. Sofia Carrillo's *Prita Noire/Black Doll* (2011) is one such Gothic text, balancing the intense short form of experimental animation with immense narratorial and thematic uncertainty. In blending the human with the material. the corporeal with the psychological, and presence with absence, Carrillo's film creates troubling composites that should create layers of meaning but, when examined through relevant critical frameworks, seem to resist such standard homogenerative constructions. Set in a fantastical location with minimal contextual or thematic referentials available to orientate the viewer, the film's formal elements become key to understanding what such an animation is doing, or avoiding. We intend to explore how the film's stop-motion animation and its recognisably Gothic traces work in symbiosis to construct a platform through which this process of disintegration and destabilisation can be observed, and how uncertainty becomes certainty and embodiment becomes disembodiment within the unusual confines of Carrillo's heterogenous world.

CONTENTS

"SHE LUSTED AFTER BUILDINGS, AND THEY LUSTED AFTER HER": OBJECTOPHILIA AND COMMODITY ANIMISM IN JUNJI ITO'S "WOODEN SPIRIT" AND "FUTON"
By Leonie Rowland 87

This paper views the social ramifications of Japanese capitalism in a Gothic framework, focusing specifically on the symbolic animation of inanimate objects, which are treated as substitutes for human connection. It uses Junji Ito's manga short stories "Wooden Spirit" (2014) and "Futon" (2014) to demonstrate that objectophilia and commodity animism manifest as sources of horror because they facilitate a departure from conservative notions of wealth and gender, whilst also implying that transgression from social norms is only acceptable if it is carried out within the capitalist system. In "Wooden Spirit," a woman seduces a cultural heritage site, which responds to her advances by transforming into a monster. In "Futon," a man hides from malicious spirits under a trusted futon, only to discover that it is filled with hallucinogenic mould. Both stories privilege object obsession over human connection, framing the fetishisation of private property as a source of personal loneliness and cultural destruction.

However, for Ito, commodity animism is an ambiguous force. On one hand, it asserts itself as the protector of women who are reluctantly bound to their husbands. On the other, their liberation is dependent on purchasable objects and the possession of private property, suggesting that one system of governance (patriarchy) has been traded for another (capitalism). Thus, in "Wooden Spirit," conservative ideologies are reinstated because objectophilia is framed as the only means of escape from domestic horror. Conversely, in "Futon," conservative ideologies are reinstated because upholding the nuclear family is presented as the only escape from neoliberalism's crippling physical and financial demands. As such, horror in these texts is derived from the assertion that liberation from gendered social constraints can only take place within the capitalist system. In this sense, the market dictates not only what it means to be alive but what it means to be human.

THE GREEN KNIGHT'S TOOL-BEING AND MAGICAL BODY-AS-THING: INVESTIGATING MATERIALITY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*
By Zita Hüsing 102

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight tells a marvellous adventure within the realm of the Arthurian courtly romance. This renowned, anonymous poetic narrative introduces the mysterious Green Knight (GK) who reveals himself as Bertilak of Hautdesert and as an envoy for the enchantress Morgan Le Fay. Through encounters with the Arthurian court and the knight Sir Gawain, the presence of the Green Knight/Bertilak evokes questions about his agency within the narrative as the Green Knight appears entangled in a mesh of materiality surrounding his body and

CONTENTS

knighthood. An investigation into the materiality of the knight through a close examination of the human and non-human objects associated with him, such as his holly-branch, his axe, and his own head, demonstrates the function of the GK's body as a tool. Indeed, I argue that the GK's body becomes a magical *body-as-thing* while evaluating Morgan Le Fay's role as his puppeteer where the Green Knight becomes both object and objectified. An exploration of this *thingification* of the Green Knight permits an investigation of the bodily ecologies in the poem and how bodies-as-things become agents in a mesh of materiality that combines the human and non-human, as well as magical and non-magical things. This inspection of the Green Knight's body-as-thing positions itself in contrast to notions of anthropocentric ideas while considering the theoretical insights of New Materialist theorists Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, and Graham Harman.

NON-FICTION REVIEWS

***GOTHIC CINEMA* (2020) BY XAVIER ALDANA REYES**
Review by Joana Rita Ramalho 117

***MONSTERS: A COMPANION (2020)* EDITED BY SIMON BACON**
Review by Jack Fennell 121

***EXPLORING THE HORROR OF SUPERNATURAL FICTION: RAY BRADBURY'S ELLIOTT FAMILY* (2020) EDITED BY MIRANDA CORCORAN AND STEVE GRONERT ELLERHOFF**
Review by Amy Bride 125

***THE BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW* (2021) BY DAVID EVANS-POWELL**
Review by Marita Arvaniti 129

***UNCANNY BODIES* (2020) EDITED BY PIPPA GOLDSCHMIDT, GILL HADDOW AND FADHILA MAZANDERANI**
Review by Miranda Corcoran 133

***ABSENT REBELS: CRITICISM AND NETWORK POWER IN 21ST CENTURY DYSTOPIAN FICTION* (2021) BY ANNIKA GONNERMANN**
Review by Laura Winter 137

***PHASES OF THE MOON: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE WEREWOLF FILM* (2020) BY CRAIG IAN MANN**
Review by Thomas E. Simmons 142

CONTENTS

***THE SHAPE OF FANTASY: INVESTIGATING THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN HEROIC EPIC FANTASY* (2020) BY C. PALMER-PATEL**
Review by Janet Brennan Croft 146

***POSSIBLE WORLDS THEORY AND COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORICAL FICTION* (2020) BY RIYUKTA RAGHUNATH**
Review by Alexander Popov 149

***TRANSPLANTATION GOTHIC: TISSUE TRANSFER IN LITERATURE, FILM AND MEDICINE* (2020) BY SARA WASSON**
Review by Rebecca Gibson 154

FICTION REVIEWS

ABSTRACTED EMBODIMENT AND IMMERSION IN MIHOYO'S *GENSHIN IMPACT*
Review of *Genshin Impact*
By Padraig Lee 159

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF RAISING CHILDREN?
Review of *Raised by Wolves*
By Lobke Minter 162

NAVIGATING THE ACADEMY
Review of *The Curie Society*
By Anna McFarlane 165

"WHAT'S SO PRECIOUS ABOUT DYING IN THE SAME FORM YOU WERE BORN INTO?"
Review of *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories*
By Charlotte Gislam 168

ON 'CONTAINING MULTITUDES': EMBODYING GRIEF IN TAMSYN MUIR'S *HARROW THE NINTH*
Review of *Harrow the Ninth*
By Kimberlee Anne Bartle 172

POSTHUMANISM COME HOME
Review of *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends*
By Thomas Connolly 175

ARTICLES

'"SCEPTICAL SCRIPTOTHERAPY AND FANTASTICAL METAPHORS": TRAUMA IN BRIT MARLING AND ZAL BATMANGLIJ'S *THE OA* (2016-2019)

Sean Travers

Introduction

This article examines the representation of trauma in Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's Science Fiction (SF) television series *The OA* (2016-2019). Specifically, I explore how the series uniquely employs the supernatural to explore rather than repress the trauma of marginalised groups. I illustrate how *The OA* does this in two ways: first, by reading the series through a technique that I term sceptical scriptotherapy and, second, by analysing *The OA*'s depiction of the "Movements." The Movements are the interconnectivity abilities developed by *The OA*'s diverse cast of characters, which I argue formulate fantastical metaphors to depict marginalised trauma specifically. To demonstrate this, I apply a number of prominent trauma theories and concepts to *The OA*, including narrative fragmentation, dissociation, communal healing, secondary trauma, and transmission. Ultimately, this analysis examines how *The OA* both challenges and contributes to cultural trauma criticism (particularly how the series adds to feminist trauma theory) and uncovers new ways to represent trauma experienced by marginalised groups. Before conducting this study, it is necessary to address the following: my definition of sceptical scriptotherapy and how this concept differs to traditional notions of scriptotherapy; why sceptical scriptotherapy is an important and relevant framework through which to read the trauma of marginalised characters; and the theories I draw upon in formulating my concept of sceptical scriptotherapy (primarily Suzette Henke's concept of sceptical scriptotherapy and the work of such feminist trauma theorists as Laura S. Brown).

A dominant critical conception regarding trauma recovery is that healing can only take place when survivors tell what Judith Herman calls "the story of the trauma" (175). That is, sharing and narrating traumatic events exactly as they happened are essential for recovery. Laurie Vickroy advocates the "healing function of literature" (8), while Shoshana Felman insists that the act of writing about trauma is "an essential element of working through [the] experience" (54). Most significantly, Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (2000) has coined the term "scriptotherapy," which refers to writing about a traumatic experience for the purposes of healing "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment" (xii-xiii). Sceptical scriptotherapy, then, is a type of writing that features characters consciously reworking traumatic events into fantastical alternatives rather

than relaying them exactly as they happened. Sceptical scriptotherapy differs from more traditional methods of scriptotherapy in a number of ways. First, unlike traditional methods of sceptical scriptotherapy, these fantastical narratives are represented as therapeutic and successful means of healing rather than being futile, as per convention in trauma fiction. In stereotypical trauma fiction, characters' imaginings of alternate and supernatural scenarios are conventionally represented and read as unhelpful responses to trauma and as a way of denying agency for perpetrator protagonists. Second, sceptical scriptotherapy uniquely employs a dual narrative structure and is ambiguous in terms of the veracity of its supernatural content. Third, sceptical scriptotherapy is suitable for analysing marginalised groups in particular, those for whom trauma is structural and beyond individuals' control. For marginalised groups, imagination is presented as the only means at their disposal that is not subject to such traumas.

Conversely, the concept of sharing and narrating traumatic events has been disputed, with Alan Gibbs in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014) noting that testimony is not always shown to heal trauma in fiction; that in specific texts characters are represented as either further traumatised having narrated past events – Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) – or as preferring to forget traumatic events over therapeutic remembering – Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009). Certain psychological studies of trauma take a similar approach, specifically by incorporating Fredrick Nietzsche's concept of 'active forgetting' whereby an individual, society, or culture heals by forgetting a traumatic memory (Aydin 125; Ramadanovic n.p.). Gibbs also highlights works of traumatic metafiction (*House of Leaves*) whereby a text "interrogates the possibility about writing trauma" and dramatises the "difficulties of constructing" a trauma narrative and thus challenges "accepted theories regarding the representation of trauma" (87, 89, 90). It is important to note that trauma narratives are generally defined as texts which incorporate trauma as a theme, usually featuring a traumatised protagonist or centring on a traumatic event (such as natural disaster). While not all trauma narratives are necessarily about dealing with trauma and trauma recovery, this is a frequent focus of such texts. Trauma texts which incorporate Henke's concept of scriptotherapy, then, will feature a character who experiences a trauma, narrates the traumatic event and shares it with others, and heals as a result. Sceptical scriptotherapy therefore straddles these two approaches: representations of therapeutic remembering and representations that interrogate this practice.

Stereotypical trauma texts are frequently phallocentric and centre on straight white male protagonists (Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Rebecca Roanhorse's *Black Sun* (2020)). For example, in post-World War Two American war literature, the primary focus frequently lies on the trauma experienced by the veterans and invading US forces instead of the trauma suffered by the civilians resulting from military action. The traumatic symptoms of the soldiers, such as guilt stemming from their committed atrocities and their nightmares and flashbacks of these events, are foregrounded. By contrast, the traumatic experiences of the civilians such as the daily threat of rape and murder are either briefly referred to in asides or reduced almost to the level of statistics, described along the lines of 'x number of burnt or decomposing bodies.' *Slaughterhouse-Five* describes in detail the nightmares and hallucinations suffered by the novel's

traumatised soldier protagonist Billy Pilgrim, such as his imaginings of alien abduction. Conversely, there are brief references to the digging up of rotting bodies from "hundreds of corpse mines" (204). While traditional methods of sceptical scriptotherapy and a negative view of escapism (whereby it is considered futile and a means of denying agency for trauma perpetrators) is pertinent for reading more traditional, phallocentric trauma fiction then, I argue that sceptical scriptotherapy is more suitable for analysing contemporary, popular trauma representations that feature marginalised characters. By marginalised or minority groups, I refer to those individuals normally left behind by stereotypical trauma narratives including women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community. In works of sceptical scriptotherapy, escapist fantasies are significantly depicted as the only way victim-protagonists can take agency over their recovery and are particularly pertinent to marginalised groups as the types of trauma experienced by such individuals are often structurally beyond their control, primarily involving 'everyday' insidious experiences of inequality and oppression.

Trauma culture's phallocentricism in part stems from cultural trauma theory. Since the early 1980s, trauma has become a central paradigm for reading contemporary American culture, with an extensive range of novels increasingly featuring traumatised protagonists and centring on traumatic events. In terms of cultural trauma theory, Cathy Caruth's criticism has been very influential. Drawing upon Holocaust Studies, post-structuralism, Sigmund Freud, and the roots of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a concept in the experience of Vietnam veterans, Caruth defines trauma as comprising the experience of a sudden, overwhelming event that is "outside the range of usual human experience" (3). This definition has come under criticism by feminist trauma scholars because it is applicable mainly to white, middle-class men and does not account for the types of traumas frequently experienced by minorities, which tend to be the more insidious, 'everyday' traumas resulting from ongoing situations of distress such as domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, and as Michael Rothberg notes "repeated forms of traumatising violence such as sexism, racism and colonialism" (89). Laura S. Brown notes:

> the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is that which disrupts these particular lives, but no other. (104)

Sceptical scriptotherapy, then, provides a new framework for reading these marginalised experiences in contemporary popular culture. Whereas numerous popular works also centre on white male characters, in American popular culture since the early 2000s there has been an increased number of texts concerned with the traumatic experiences of marginalised groups, in addition to trauma texts written by women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ writers.[1] A number of these more recent, diverse texts also diverge from the aesthetic models and themes found in canonical trauma fiction, generating innovative trauma representations and narratives that are more suitable for the representation of marginalised trauma. For example, superpowers in superhero narratives can be employed as metaphors for symptoms specific to the types of trauma largely experienced by women

– such as mind-control as a metaphor for date rape in *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), and Yon-Rogg's (Jude Law) suppression of Carol Danvers' (Brie Larson) superpowers as a metaphor for gaslighting in *Captain Marvel* (2019), both underexplored topics in superhero narratives. Due to the increase in diversity and unique trauma representation in popular culture, new, more feminist trauma paradigms such as sceptical scriptotherapy are vital in our reconsideration of the paradigms thought which trauma narratives have traditionally been understood and read.

Sceptical scriptotherapy equally uncovers how texts uniquely employ the supernatural, and is significant to wider feminist trauma theory. Regarding the supernatural, there is a long-standing and problematic tradition in American culture to repress ostensibly 'taboo' topics by representing them in supernatural terms as a means of repression. According to Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question* (2008), family violence in American culture is usually presented as "an external evil" and either takes the form of a "marginal figure," or "safely relegated to the supernatural" (117). For Luckhurst "[t]his device means that intra-familial violence is half-acknowledged but at once covered over by exteriorising it in an abjected, monstrous figure defined as the very opposite of the family" (104). He further notes that "[t]his also matches the model of trauma as something done to individuals, an event that breaches the subject from outside, turning them from agents to victims," that is, the idea of escapism as a means of denying agency for perpetrator trauma protagonists noted above (104). Further, when characters displace traumatic events onto the supernatural in conventional trauma literature, the protagonists' otherworldly encounters are frequently products of their imagination, as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In popular culture, by contrast, the supernatural depictions of minorities' trauma are generally represented as literally true (*Jessica Jones*, *Captain Marvel*). Works of sceptical scriptotherapy do not conform to either of these approaches. Victim-protagonists are strongly implied to imagine alternate scenarios, but there is more of a hesitation between the realist and supernatural explanations of events than we would normally see in trauma narratives, and the supernatural is presented in a more ambiguous manner. Viewers are presented with two versions of events, which can take the form of a duel narrative: a realist, tragic version of events and a more palatable, supernatural alternative. The idea of taking agency over one's recovery via escapism is significant in relation to female trauma protagonists. This is important to *The OA* because Marling and Batmanglij, the writers of *The OA*, claimed that they aimed to base the series on an 'active' attempt at trauma recovery. Marling and Batmanglij describe the protagonists' actions as "a victim taking agency and ownership over her recovery, with a sense of a mission," rather than keeping her in what they call "the realm of passive victimhood" (Birnbaum n.p.). Marling adds that this is because in stories about abductions and captivity, the focus is usually on the "team of white male law enforcement officers, once again tasked with saving the day," rather than the survivor (n.p.). While traumas including rape and sexual violence are often represented obliquely in supernatural terms, rape scenes nevertheless tend to be depicted graphically and glorify the visuals of sexual violence. Instead, sceptical scriptotherapy is used to explore the traumatic *effects* of such experiences (specifically escapism), which is a focus of more recent, diverse trauma representations in popular culture. My concept of sceptical scriptotherapy, then, provides an original, critical challenge to dominant conceptions of trauma recovery, and a new feminist framework for analysing more innovative and diverse trauma representations found in contemporary popular culture, contributing to feminist trauma criticism.

The OA

The OA is a particularly relevant case study of sceptical scriptotherapy due to its representation of marginalised groups and their experience of trauma. The series centres on a formerly blind woman, Prairie Johnson (Brit Marling), who returns home having been kidnapped for seven years with her sight restored. Now calling herself The OA (the Original Angel), Prairie assembles a group of five locals, four high school boys and their teacher, to whom she reveals her story to recruit their help in rescuing her fellow captives. Prairie was abducted by a scientist named Hap (Jason Issacs) who locked her in an underground glass cage with four other individuals and experimented upon them to research near death experiences (NDEs). These experiments involved repeatedly killing and reviving the inmates via drowning, during which they travelled to alternate dimensions. In these dimensions, the inmates attained knowledge of a dance called the Movements. When executed by five people in unison, the Movements can heal illness, reanimate the dead, and open portals to other dimensions. Having been abandoned by Hap at a country road when Prairie later refuses to work with him, Hap informs her that he will jump dimensions with the remaining four captives. Prairie thus aims to teach the Movements to the five locals (referred to in this article as 'the new five') to transport her to another dimension. Due to the scope of this article, I will only focus on the first season of *The OA*, particularly as it more effectively demonstrates my argument towards sceptical scriptotherapy than the arguably denser second season.[2]

The OA presents the viewer with two versions of events: a realist, tragic version in which Prairie is delusional or lying, using a SF narrative as a coping mechanism for a more plausible kind of sexual abuse she may have suffered in captivity, or a more palatable, supernatural alternative whereby Prairie is an interdimensional traveller. *The OA* contains both scenes that suggest Prairie is lying and telling the truth; the series presents both scenarios as 'real' and 'false' at different points in the narrative and it is up to the viewer to decide. *The OA* lends credence to Prairie's narrative in a number of ways, including Prairie legitimately regaining her sight with her parents confirming that Prairie was blind as a child. This suggests that Prairie did jump dimensions when she died during Hap's experiments and regained her sight via otherworldly means. Conversely, Prairie's story can be taken as a fabrication and, as Batmanglij notes: "I believe the trauma in [Prairie's] story is true. Maybe she couldn't tell her story as it actually happened" (Birnbaum, n.p.). For instance, the flashback scenes contrast to the sequences set in the present day. Lol Crawley, *The OA*'s director of photography, says that the present-day scenes were shot to look more real, recognisable and "rough-around-the-edge," similar to a documentary or found footage film, and that natural light was employed as much as possible, in addition to a "responsive" handheld camera style (n.p.). Crawley notes that the flashback sequences, conversely, have a more cinematic style, employing classical "slow, tracking and Steadicam" camera movements (n.p.).

Certain scenes also suggest that the inmates are being abused by Hap rather than undergoing experiments. The inmate Scott Wilson (Will Brill) ponders if Prairie had been raped when she attempted to escape, while Hap is frequently shown to leer at Prairie and exhibit jealousy over Prairie and the inmate Homer Robert's closeness (Emory Cohen). Sexual assault is also suggested

in the scene where Hap drags Prairie out of his car, pins her to the ground, cuts parts of her clothes and holds a knife to her neck. This part of the story appears the most difficult for Prairie to relay, as she describes it in a fragmentary manner: "I'm lying there on the grass and I can't move. And then I feel the cold metal of the blade pressed against my throat […] Skies so big. Trees. And a road. Going somewhere" ("Invisible Self"). Narrative fragmentation is conventionally used to narrate trauma in fiction. Caruth notes that trauma is "unspeakable" which dictates it being represented in experimental forms, in a language that defies our understanding because the dreams and thoughts stemming from traumatic events are "absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning" (5). This approach is termed transmission, and the aim is to make the reader feel as close as possible the symptoms of the text's protagonist. However, as with the employment of the supernatural, when this approach "reaches its extremes," when "the traumatic experience becomes equated solely with the 'unrepresentable'," this results in "a silencing of both experience and representation" (Lowenstein 5). What Gibbs calls an "exclusive valuing of experimental forms" marginalises minority groups in particular, where there is, Gibbs notes, an "urgent political imperative to narrate their traumas in order to educate" readers (26).

The OA arguably subverts this convention but can be read instead in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy, as a marginalised trauma survivor reworking their experience. Prairie appears to revise the incident with Hap as she narrates it. The flashback sequence that plays out for the viewer and that of Prairie's retelling of it almost merge into one another as the scene interchanges rapidly between them, and while there is reference to sexual assault it is not explicitly shown. The scene cuts back to that of Prairie with the new five when Hap pins Prairie to the ground in the flashback. Applying my concept of sceptical scriptotherapy and reading Prairie as revising a traumatic event into a more palatable, supernatural narrative, this scene is significant to feminist trauma theory on 'active' trauma recovery. The dual narratives and the ambiguity of the supernatural align with Janet Walker's trauma theory in relation to film. Walker in *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005) argues that the realistic mode of representation leaves cinematic texts "within the binaristic paradigm," that is, that memory is either true or false (59). For Walker, formally experimental texts demonstrate that traumatic memory "eludes binaristic 'it happened or it didn't' approaches" and instead straddles the categories of "'fantasy' and 'memory'" ("False Memories" 212). Walker says that trauma representation should acknowledge the "vicissitudes of memory," particularly in regard to experiences such as sexual abuse, and "confront the possibility that some memory claims or aspects of memory claims may indeed be mistaken" (212). She stresses that fantasy does "not belie the truth" of the traumatic event but is "connected to and produced" by it (212).

This approach appears to be taken throughout the series. For instance, the real-life case of Elizabeth Smart's kidnapping plays on Hap's radio, a survivor who famously likened rape to dying (*NBC News* n.p.). Prairie informs the new five that she and the inmates "all died more times than I can count" ("Homecoming"). A further inspiration for the series' SF premise is Raymond Moody's concept of NDEs (Grow n.p.). Marling says that Moody noticed a convergence in near-death experiences: "everybody talks about leaving the body and having this bird's eye point of view and

[…] and then maybe facing the choice of whether or not to return to the body" (Lopez n.p.). Moody's description of NDEs as an out-of-body experience draws strong parallels with dissociative symptoms of sexual abuse and aligns with Walker's theory on active traumatic memory, incorporating further feminist trauma theory on dissociation by Judith Herman. Herman describes rape survivors as feeling "as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing it from outside her body" (43). Similarly, the inmate Rachel DeGrasso (Sharon Van Etten) says her NDE in a car accident was like "floating above the car" ("Champion").

In contrast to the conventional employment of the supernatural in trauma representations, the otherworldly metaphor of interdimensional travel is used to explore the psychological effects of abuse, specifically the need for victims to attain a feeling of agency. Hap's inmates imagine an alternative version of events as a means of coping with their abuse and captivity, regaining control over the narrative. Prairie convinces herself that she is not powerless, that the group "aren't captives […] we aren't lab rats […] or unlucky. We're angels" ("Away"). The unique concept of angels in the series points to related themes of victimhood including guilt, forgiveness, redemption, and transcendence. A common symptom of abuse-related trauma is that the victim feels responsible for their abuse. Indeed, the wing-like scars on the inmates' backs (Prairie and the group carve symbols representative of the Movements into their skin in case they forget them when they jump dimensions) are indicative of self-harm. Furthermore, rather than having Prairie transcribe her experience in a realistic or supernatural manner that transforms Hap into a monstrous figure, Prairie reworks the narrative and represents the victims into empowered, supernatural beings with the capacity to retaliate. The inmates' imaginations are presented as the only means at their disposal that is not subject to Hap's control. For instance, on Prairie's first night in captivity, Homer reassures her: "You'll find your freedom in sleep, in your dreams. It's how we stay sane" ("New Colossus"). This concept is also evoked via the premise of other dimensions, that Prairie conjures 'new worlds' where alternate versions of events take place. Prairie says that "there are all these dimensions, worlds, alternate realities […] The NDEs were like a way to travel through them, but temporarily" ("Forking Paths"). Prairie's use of the word 'temporarily' suggests interdimensional travel while flatlining to be fantasies of the inmates that provide brief escapism during Hap's abuse. Prairie travels to a dimension located on the rings of Saturn, where a woman, Khatun (Hiam Abbass), asks if Prairie will remain in this realm or return to the original world with the knowledge of one of the Movements. That each of the inmates travel to a different universe further evokes this idea; Homer's alternate world appears like an institution and Scott's is described as a filmset. However, regardless of whether interdimensional travel is real or fabricated, Prairie asserts these probable fantasies to be a means of liberation for the captives: "We *wanted choices*, chances […] A new life in a new world. *To us* that was freedom" ("Forking Paths," emphasis mine). Escapist fantasies are therefore therapeutic for Prairie and the other inmates. Further pointing to themes of victimhood and guilt, this emphasis on imagination can also be read along the lines of a Cartesian split between mind and body, one which emphasises the former over the latter. According to Suzannah Weiss, sexual abuse victims sometimes feel unclean and shameful despite having been subject to a force beyond their control and want to escape their bodies, that "many survivors feel as if their bodies have betrayed them for responding to unwelcome stimulation" (n.p.).

The group's quest to uncover all of the Movements to "allow [them] to travel to a dimension permanently" serves a similar therapeutic function, whereby the inmates retreat into fantasy as a means of regaining agency ("Forking Paths"). Prairie imagines Hap informing his colleague that he "can't help feeling outside of it all" when his inmates practice the Movements ("Forking Paths"). This type of recovery is especially significant in relation to marginalised trauma, particularly women. While Prairie eventually enlists male students to help her rescue Hap's remaining inmates, and a number of these inmates are also male, it is Prairie who orchestrates and leads the group's the mission to acquire the Movements. As noted, Marling aimed to depict a female character taking agency over her recovery. This approach is referred to when a journalist advises Prairie to document her experiences, describing it as healing and empowering: "The process can sometimes help people to heal. Storytelling is cleansing. But I also want to make sure you control the narrative. That you profit from it" ("Champion"). *The OA* also critiques traditional, graphic depictions of women's trauma and sexual violence. Having returned home, a woman approaches Prairie and muses: "you're so inspirational, being beaten and raped like that," after which Prairie's mother demands to know if Prairie was "abused, beaten, hurt," despite believing she already knows this to be true ("Empire of Light"). Such responses arguably act as a commentary on the type of stories the public demands from female trauma survivors, specifically how audiences crave conventionally violent trauma narratives with almost pornographic details of the survivor's suffering.

Prairie's listeners, the 'new five,' likewise consciously choose to believe her narrative as a means to heal the trauma they were subjected to. The new five are largely made up of marginalised individuals. The group is diverse in terms of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and age. Steve Winchell (Patrick Gibson) is a bully whose parents plan to send to military school; Buck Vu (Ian Alexander) is a trans-man of American-Asian descent whose father refuses to acknowledge his gender; Alfonso 'French' Sosa (Brandon Perea) is a Filipino-American who cares for his siblings in place of his alcoholic mother; Jesse Mills (Brendan Meyer) is essentially orphaned; and the boys' teacher, Betty Broderick-Allen (Phyllis Smith), is an older woman whose brother has died. Indeed, when the school principal observes the group, he comments: "I can't imagine what the five of you have in common" ("Paradise").

The group are continually torn between doubt and a desire to believe Prairie's implausible yet uplifting narrative in a manner that is prime for a sceptical scriptotherapical reading. The viewer is presented with two different versions of narrative events as the new five encounter what they consider conflicting evidence that Prairie is lying and telling the truth. They appear to share the perspectives of Hap's captives and supernaturally experience their traumas, such as Buck witnessing a car accident that parallels Rachel's NDE. Such moments suggest that the new five are projecting their own interpretations onto Prairie's narrative as it plays out for the viewer, the flashback scenes being a combination of Prairie's memories and what the new five are imagining as they listen. The new five appear to similarly rework Prairie's narrative in their imaginations. When beginning the narrative, Prairie says "imagine everything I tell you as if you're there yourself […] As if you are me" ("Homecoming"). Peter Debruge remarks, "the narrative is constantly evolving before our eyes,

it's almost impossible to get a grasp on what it is we're watching […] Are the flashbacks we see real, or do they represent [Prairie's] listeners' vivid imaginations?" (n.p.). Certainly, unusual details in Prairie's story imply a degree of interpretation, such as Prairie's eye colour being brown rather than blue in certain flashback scenes and Hap's archaic-looking technology. The latter is possibly Betty visualising a type of 'mad scientist's' equipment akin to 1970s SF that she grew up watching. At the same time, the flashbacks can be interpreted as Prairie reworking into her story the incidents that occur to the new five. Prairie may have fabricated Hap's other captives, basing them on the new five. French cannot find evidence of Homer's existence online, while his subsequent 'transformation' into Homer when he looks in the mirror can be read as French suspecting that Prairie based Homer on him. Just before his reflection morphs into that of Homer, French examines the cut on his forehead, which is similar to that of Hap. This lucidity aligns with the scriptotheripical dual narrative form, as the narrative not only shifts between verifying and discrediting Prairie's narrative, but also between the different characters' perspectives as they too rework a trauma narrative in their imagination. Moreover, French discovers books beneath Prairie's bed that prompts the group and viewer to question the veracity of her story, as this then appears to be based on the contents of the book. Here, Prairie's FBI psychiatrist Elias Rahim (Riz Ahmed) informs French that Prairie's story is untrue. Yet, there are simultaneous suggestions that Elias planted these books, possibly under the instruction of Hap to discredit Prairie and keep Hap from prison.

However, reading these scenes in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy, the legitimacy of the narrative is ultimately irrelevant as it grants the group escapism from trauma. As with Hap's captives, Prairie's story gives the traumatised new five a sense of agency as choosing to believe and rework it to incorporate their own interpretations is amongst the only aspect of their lives over which they have control and transforms them into empowered beings, whether literally or psychologically. Marling asserts, "if you're going to have faith in something, you have to have it in the face of incredible doubt" but "nobody can take your [faith] away" (Birnbaum, n.p.). In the season finale, the group performs the Movements at their school when a shooter breaks into the cafeteria. Beforehand, the group appear in a more stable, mentally healthy condition. Prairie, too, transitions from an anxious, somewhat anti-social individual who refuses to be touched, to a more outgoing person unafraid of human contact. Marling says that "the literal truth" and details of Prairie's story "matter less" than the fact that telling it helped Prairie and the group to deal with their respective traumas (Birnbaum, n.p.). For instance, when presented with apparent evidence that Prairie is lying via the books, Buck grasps the study on angels and says "I'm keeping this one" ("Invisible Self"). The group's passionate performance of the Movements is also an apt metaphor for this approach to trauma recovery, visually establishing the concept of sceptical scriptotherapy – of rewriting traumatic events beyond individuals' control, in this instance gun violence – into empowering supernatural stories.

As to whether the Movements magically defeated the assailant or distracted him long enough for a school staff member to tackle him is dependent upon whether the viewer interprets Prairie's narrative as true or false. This lucidity likewise has unique implications for the viewer's engagement with the trauma narrative. Similar to *The OA*'s characters, the viewer is presented with an overtly escapist narrative whereby they too can gain temporary comfort by consciously

suspending disbelief and deciding the more positive, supernatural interpretation of events to be canon. Indeed, Marling confirms that storytelling rather than testimony as a means of healing is a central theme of the series and a comforting notion to instil in the viewer: "We need storytellers now more than ever […] to find a light […] when things get […] overwhelming […]" (Bonner n.p.). For instance, Prairie is shot and taken to hospital, but it is unclear if the new five have transported her to another dimension. The final scene shows Prairie waking in a white room calling for Homer, which can be taken as either a hospital or Homer's NDE location. Further, the cafeteria dance scene is obviously outlandish, but *The OA* appears to encourage viewers to buy into it for the purposes of escapism. While the scene runs the risk of being humorous, its serious tone, poignant music, and the actors' earnest portrayal of the new five's belief in Prairie's narrative all appear part of an attempt to garner an emotional reaction and investment from viewers. Thus, my specific sceptical scriptotherapical approach demonstrates a new way to read such narratives which is vital because stories, such as *The OA*, are not just about representing trauma in nuanced ways but also allowing the audience to visualise and engage with their own traumatic experience.

New Trauma Metaphors

In addition to a sceptical scriptotherapical approach, I argue that the Movements provide new fantastical metaphors for representing marginalised trauma specifically. The Movements enable the group to telepathically share traumas, evident in the new five taking on the perspectives of Hap's captives, the possibility that Prairie and the new five's consciousnesses are blending as she tells her story, and French's transformation into Homer. The group's abilities of interconnectivity not only reflects testimony as a means of healing but also relate to engaging with trauma in a secondary capacity, including communal healing, secondary trauma, and transmission. In particular, the Movements evoke contemporary interpretations of these concepts in relation to marginalised trauma and the Internet.

For instance, testimony, the act of exploring narratives through writing, has strong links with communal healing, as testimony and narrating traumatic experiences implies a listener or reader, while communal healing likewise involves sharing a trauma narrative with others. In addition to testimony, Herman says that recovery is possible "within the context of relationships" (133). Analogously, when asked by Steve: "[h]ow did you survive so long" in captivity, Prairie refers to the support she received from the original group: "I survived because I wasn't alone" ("Empire of Light"). Marling notes that Prairie's story not only healed Prairie and the group via storytelling but also "end[ed] up stitching a community and a sense of tribe where there wasn't one before" (Leon n.p). The Movements reflect newer methods of this type of healing, the act of not only narrating trauma but sharing it amongst others. How Prairie recruits the new five to save Hap's captives, to "help people that [they] will never meet" across vast distances, can be read in terms of the therapeutic re-enactment of traumatic events related to sharing and reading about trauma in online forums amongst a diverse range of fellow survivors ("Homecoming"). This mode of recovery is significant because the Internet is a platform that can enable a range of individual voices to be heard, in contrast to conventional trauma theory and fiction in which the marginalised are often overlooked. While this platform still has its

own inbuilt biases and barriers – such as who decides what we see on social media platforms, who gets to speak freely on the Internet, and who can access it – the Internet does in some ways level the field and break down barriers to the presentation and reception of narratives.[3] That the new five are diverse but perform the same Movements further reflects this type of healing, as does the lucidity of the narrative as it shifts between the diverse characters' perspectives. According to Martin Tanis, the ease of access to a large number of people, unrestricted by time, place or barriers, provides a sense of "universality and communality in online groups" (148). Despite the fact that members of online communities differ in dimensions including race, gender, sexuality, and class, they possess the same mental or physical condition, or have gone through similar traumatic experiences (Tanis 147). The anonymity that the Internet affords increases the perceived similarity amongst members by erasing cues that may signal individual differences and focusing solely on the issues of the members, thereby drawing increased attention to what all members of the group share, which in turn generates feelings of belonging and social identification.

Further, the new five's powers parallel secondary trauma, which can result from testimony, as secondary trauma is when an individual is traumatised from listening to, reading about, or learning of another's experience. Dominick LaCapra describes secondary trauma as the listener, reader, or viewer appropriating the victim's experience, "to confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions" between them (21). This is similar to how the group's identities and consciousness are blended and sometimes confused in *The OA* and is evoked in how the new five experience the past traumas of Prairie and her captives; Prairie likewise takes on the new five's trauma when she takes the bullet in the cafeteria. The series references secondary trauma when Prairie's therapist informs French that the group is experiencing this having listened to Prairie's story: "Second-hand trauma is when you take somebody else's pain, so they can survive" ("Invisible Self"). The characters' shared consciousness evokes how individuals may experience secondary trauma having read about others' experiences online. Conversely, Claire Diaz-Oritz says that engaging with social media builds empathy in individuals because "we are more informed about each other's struggles" (n.p.). Through social media different groups of people are becoming more aware and supportive of the specific issues faced by various marginalised groups. Emily VanDerWerff likewise notes, "I can't know what it's like to be a wrongly imprisoned Korean woman, but if she has access to Twitter, I can read about her travails and get a sort of second-hand feel for what it's like to be in her situation" (n.p.).[4]

It is important to note that the Internet also has the capacity to elide empathy when people do not think of the human writing the content, and that there is an additional danger of social media bubbles whereby one surrounds themselves with like-minded people and do not come into contact with different views. However, *The OA*'s representation of trauma aligns with the former, more positive view of the Internet relating to marginalised individuals. The Wachowski's *Sense8* (2015-2018) has garnered similar readings, with VanDer Werff also calling *Sense8*'s perspective "hopelessly naïve" (n.p.). The diverse new five not only share the trauma of Hap's captives as they learn the Movements, then, but the comradery of Prairie's mission allows the group to grow closer. Each of them eventually attempts to solve the problems of their fellow members. Marling says of the Movements that she aimed to "create a language of movement" for inarticulable traumas, those

that are difficult to talk about, "a profound ritual and a language for communicating" (Leon, n.p.). As noted, similar to the employment of the supernatural, transmission often has the effect of silencing trauma victims, particularly marginalised individuals. The diverse new five gain the abilities that enable them to more easily communicate their traumas to one another, the series reworking another prominent trauma concept to explore rather than repress the ostensibly 'taboo' experiences of the marginalised such as: for example: Prairie's abuse; Buck's transition; and Betty's feelings of invisibility as an older woman. In addition to *The OA*'s unique depiction of testimony, then, the Movements evoke related concepts of engaging with trauma in a secondary capacity which are relevant to marginalised trauma. To conclude, this article demonstrated how *The OA* employs the supernatural to explore the trauma of marginalised groups, through specific fantastical metaphors and sceptical scriptotherapy. Ultimately, sceptical scriptotherapy provides a new feminist framework for examining trauma in recent popular culture and representations of marginalised groups, contributes to wider feminist trauma theory on active memory and recovery, and offers a critical challenge to dominant trauma concepts regarding testimony and healing.

NOTES

1. This is due to a number of factors, including: the increasing demand for diverse representation in contemporary popular culture and its production; the more immediate feedback on popular texts enabled by social media; and the increased creative freedom enabled by media-service providers in comparison to more traditional networks.

2. There are a number of further contemporary American popular texts that can be read in terms of sceptical scriptotherapy. These include Marling and Batmanglij's film *Sound of My Voice* (2012), the protagonist of which can be interpreted either as a time traveller or a traumatised con artist attempting to gain custody of her daughter. Sceptical scriptotherapy can also be found in Joran Peele's *Us* (2019) and Sam Esmail's *Mr Robot* (2015-2019), in which American-ethnic protagonists take on new identities and displace their traumatic experiences to more palatable, supernatural alternatives.

3. For example, topics such as intersectional feminism, what Kimberle Crenshaw describes as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other," such as the distinct forms of oppression faced by women of colour and trans people, are frequently omitted from trauma criticism but are explored in depth online (n.p.).

4. Also relevant is the concept of disaster or 'doom scrolling' and the impact this has upon second-hand trauma. The flow of negative content may cause people to believe that they must act as a witness and cannot look away.

WORKS CITED

Aydin, Ciano. "How to Forget the Unforgettable? On Collective Trauma, Cultural Identity, and Mnemotechnologies." *An International Journal of Theory and Research*, vol. 17, no. 3, August 2017, pp. 125-137.

Brown, Laura S. "Outside the Range." *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Ed. by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. pp. 3-12.

Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Ed. by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 3-12.

Crawley, Lol. "Other Worlds." *British Cinematographer*, 2016. <https://britishcinematographer.co.uk/lol-crawley-bsc-oa/>.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, July 1991, pp. 1241-1299.

Debruge, Peter. "Why The OA Is One of the Year's Most Important Films." *Variety*. 24 December 2016.<https://variety.com/2016/tv/columns/the-oa-netflix-brit-marling-film-critic-appreciation-1201948242/>.

Diaz-Oritz, Claire. "The Digital World is Warmer than You Think. Here's How Social Media Builds Empathy." Conducted by Elizabeth Tenety. *The Washington Post*. 24 February 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/02/24/the-digital-world-is-warmer-than-you-think-heres-how-social-media-builds-empathy/>.

Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Ed. by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 13-60.

Gibbs, Alan. *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Grow, Kory. "*The OA*: Behind the Scenes of Netflix's Mysterious New Hit Series." *The Mary Sue*. 23 December 2016. <https://www.themarysue.com/the-oa-the-sound-of-my-voice-and-believing-women/>.

Henke, Suzette. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. St. Martin's, 2000.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. BasicBooks, 1997.

Jung, E. Alex. "The Gentle Queerness of Netflix's *The OA*." *Vulture*. 6 January 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/01/oa-netflix-gentle-queerness.html>.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. Columbia University Press, 2005.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.

Marling, Brit. "Brit Marling Mediates on Life and (Near) Death in *The OA*." Conducted by Kristina Lopez. *WUNC 91.5: North Carolina Public Radio*. 20 January 2017. <https://www.kcbx.org/post/brit-marling-meditates-life-and-near-death-oa#stream/0>.

---. "Brit Marling Spills on Her Mysterious New Netflix Show *The OA*." Conducted by Maria Bonner. *Marie Claire*. 16 December 2016. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/interviews/a24243/brit-marling-the-oa-interview/>.

Marling, Brit and Zal Batmanglij, creators. *The OA*, season 1, Netflix, 2016-2019.

---. "Secrets of *The OA* Co-Creator Brit Marling Explains What the Hell is Happening in the Netflix Sci-Fi Mystery." Conducted by Melissa Leon. *Daily Beast*. 21 December 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/secrets-of-the-oa-co-creator-brit-marling-explains-what-the-hell-is-happening-in-the-netflix-sci-fi-mystery>.

---. "*The OA* Creators Explain Netflix's Mysterious New Drama." Conducted by Debra Birnbaum. *Variety*. 16 December 2016. <https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/the-oa-producers-netflix-brit-marling-zal-batmanglij-1201942744/>

Moody, Raymond. *Life After Life*. Rider, 2001.

Ramadanovic, Petar. "From Haunting to Trauma: Nietzsche's Active Forgetting and Blanchot's Writing of the Disaster." *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 11, no. 2, January 2001.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Smart, Elizabeth. "'I was broken beyond repair': Elizabeth Smart recalls kidnapping ordeal." *NBC News*. Tracy Jarrett. 5 October 2013. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/i-was-broken-beyond-repair-elizabeth-smart-recalls-kidnapping-ordeal-flna8C11336267>.

Tanis, Martin. "Online Social Support Groups." *Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*. Ed. by Adam Joinson et al. Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 139-154.

VanDerWerff, Emily. "Netflix's Sense8 is Complete Nonsense, but Deeply Lovable." *Vox*. 7 May 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/7/15563788/sense8-season-2-review-netflix>.

Vickroy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. University of Virginia Press, 2002.
Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Dial Press, 2005.

Walker, Janet. *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*. University of California Press, 2005.

---. "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2001 pp. 211-216.

Weiss, Suzannah. "I Didn't Want To Be Aroused By My Sexual Assault, But I Was." *The Establishment*. 29 Aug, 2018. <https://medium.com/the-establishment/i-didnt-want-to-be-aroused-by-my-sexual-assault-but-i-was-ec5b9e9c04c1>.

BIONOTE

Sean Travers has a PhD in trauma in late twentieth- and twenty-first century American popular culture. She graduated from University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, in June 2020. Her research interests include: trauma, popular culture, American fiction and culture, and postmodernism. Sean Travers has a previous publication in the *Irish Journal of American Studies*, and two forthcoming publications in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* (2022).

"IDENTITY ARISES IN CRISIS": MULTIPLICITY, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY IN ANN LECKIE'S *IMPERIAL RADCH TRILOGY*[1]

Iuliia Ibragimova

Contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti, while contemplating identity in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011), suggests refusing dialectical oppositions, including "human and animal or machine," and turning them "into allies in a process of becoming," thereby dismantling the "unitarian – and dualistically opposed – identity" (31). Deconstructing these oppositions both challenges traditional hierarchical structures, centred on the human, and opens the possibility to explore identities that do not fit into the habitual outlines of Cartesian duality, such as the identity of an enhanced human or an artificial intelligence (AI). Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch Trilogy* (2013-2015) features an AI protagonist – the sentient spaceship *Justice of Toren*/Breq – and an enhanced human antagonist – Anaander Mianaai – between whom the main conflict of the series unfolds.[2] Their complex embodiments – one mind connected to multiple bodies – and the traumatic events that happen to them contribute to shifts in their identities. For Mianaai, this involves a traumatic split, and for Breq a significant transformation, revealing the process of "asymmetrical becoming" that overflows the boundaries of gender, class, and race (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 30).

The framework for analysing the identity transformations of these posthuman entities is provided by posthuman literary criticism that, as Carolyn Lau defines in "Posthuman Literature and Criticism" (2018), "activates, de-territorializes stable identities, and forms affirmative and alternative subjects" (347). Mianaai, ruler of the enormous space empire the Radch, has multiple cloned bodies and his digitally stored mind and memories are accessible throughout the Radch. His physical presence is thus ensured in different locations simultaneously, preserving a seemingly consistent personality. When Mianaai encounters the Presger – an alien species with superior technology that can annihilate both his empire and the entire human species – he is conflicted over how to address the threat. The conflict, exposing his vulnerability and comparable to a traumatic experience, entails a split in his personality. This split affects the whole Radch as different factions of his personality introduce clashing policies, resulting in conspiracies, abduction practices, and massacres.

Mianaai's identity construction centres on his human component rather than on superhuman enhancements, which differs him from *Justice of Toren*/Breq.[3] *Justice of Toren*/Breq is a complex human-machine combination, and its/her identity is eclectic by design. Its/her machine intelligence runs multiple processes and information flows and develops further complexity by the addition of ancillaries – human proxy bodies with different gender and race characteristics, turned into living appendages of the sentient spaceship through technological enhancement.[4] *Justice of Toren* and

its whole crew are destroyed through the schemes of Mianaai's competing factions. Having only one human body left to house the spaceship's AI triggers its identity transformation and liberates it from its programmed limitations. The tragic consequences of the split in Mianaai's human-centred identity, striving to regain its unity, is contrasted with the productive flux of *Justice of Toren*/Breq's identity. This flux reveals its/her intentionality and blossoms in its/her leading role in the creation of a new political entity to counter the Radch and its imperial ambitions.

After *Justice of Toren's* destruction, its sole surviving ancillary, One Esk Nineteen,[5] embarks on a transformational journey from Mianaai's soldier and servant to a rebel opposing him and his policies. As an ancillary, One Esk Nineteen is a human body that was forcefully taken from a colonised planet, deprived of its memories and personality, and connected to the spaceship's AI with implants. Confined to one human body after the destruction of the ship, having lost its unlimited lifespan and access to the knowledge of *Justice of Toren*, it calls itself Breq, hides outside the Radch, and plans on assassinating Mianaai. When her revenge partially succeeds, she finds herself assigned to run Athoek system, where she manages to break the remaining limitations of her conditioning and declares a provisional independent republic, potentially protected by the treaty between humanity and the Presger.

The tension between Mianaai's struggling unitarian identity and *Justice of Toren*/Breq's innate multiplicity resonates with critical posthumanism. Critical posthumanism, as Braidotti notes in an eponymous entry to *Posthuman Glossary* (2018), dwells on the place of the human and nonhuman others in the context of digitalisation, globalisation, and technoscientific change (95). The posthuman nature of complex entities, as discussed by the series, invokes the issue of non-human agency, which this article analyses by employing the critical thinking of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad. The tragic events framing the main plot of the trilogy take place in an environment of imperial expansion and its forced termination, drawing upon real-life examples of colonial practices and their consequences. For this reason, literary trauma theory becomes a useful framework with which to examine these texts and consider the psychological, social, and political consequences of the characters' traumas. Robert Eaglestone's "'You Would Not Add to My Suffering If You Knew What I Have Seen'" (2008) helps underpin this framework through his application of literary trauma theory to the analysis of the Holocaust and African postcolonial contexts. As well, the works of Roger Luckhurst further demonstrate the relevance of literary trauma theory to an analysis of the trilogy. Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008) dwells on the history of the concept of trauma and analyses the representation of trauma in literature and art, while "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm" (2014) argues for the applicability of literary trauma theory to Science Fiction (SF). Considering the trilogy through the lenses of critical posthumanism and literary trauma theory enables this article to trace the transformations of complex posthuman identities, their multiplicity, and the fluidity of their asymmetrical becomings, as well as their implications on the political rhetoric of posthuman identity in a technologised environment.

I argue that *Justice of Toren*/Breq's posthuman identity, emerging out of its/her transformation, and undermining Mianaai's tyrannical regime, subverts the anthropocentric perception of agency and

challenges traditional hierarchical structures of human-centred perception of the world. To contrast *Justice of Toren's* and Mianaai's identity transformation, this article starts with an analysis of their initial identities. As an AI, the protagonist is originally programmed to follow orders from its captain and lieutenants – independent humans who directly control it – and to unquestioningly obey Mianaai personally. A programmed self-learning algorithm ensures that *Justice of Toren's* ethical choices are based on the ethical judgement of the Radch, and consequently reflect Radchaai prejudices and biases, including attitudes towards colonised populations and opinions on non-human subjects, especially the alien and technological other. The article proceeds to analyse Mianaai's and *Justice of Toren*/Breq's responses to traumatic experiences, triggering the transformations. Miannai's struggle to preserve his 'unitarian' identity incites social unrest and violence. The trauma of almost total destruction by Mianaai's ruthless actions exposes *Justice of Toren*'s multiplicity and also reveals the potential for asymmetrical becoming, arising out of its complex posthuman embodiment. The clash between *Justice of Toren*/Breq's programmed responses and empirical evidence disrupts the programmed algorithm of learning ethical behaviour from the society it/she interacts with. This existential crisis triggers the building of a new fluid identity, not limited by programmed behaviours, but capable of formulating independent ethical judgements. Finally, the article discusses *Justice of Toren*/Breq's posthuman identity, its/her ethical stance, and actions resulting in political changes in the Radch. Interacting with non-Radchaai cultures outside the colonisation paradigm – not as a colonisation tool, but as a free agent – commences a shift in Breq's ethical and political views towards respect to diversity and otherness. Breq's new understanding of her place in society and an awareness of her agency enables her to transcend the boundaries of her previous functional identities of an AI spaceship and embrace its/her fluid posthuman identity.

Soldier, Servant, and Master: Identities Before the Trauma

Justice of Toren's initial identity combines two symbolic images of SF: the technological other and the cyborg. As a sentient spaceship run by an AI, it is a technological other, created by Radchaai engineers to be a formidable instrument of colonisation, capable of destroying or annexing planets (Leckie, *Justice* 338). In certain aspects of operation, it relies on ancillaries who fit the classical definition of the cyborg as proposed by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in "Cyborgs and Space" (1960). The crucial difference between the classical cyborg and an ancillary lies in the position of the human. In the classical cyborg, the human forms the centre and technology serves to push the limits of flesh, while an ancillary is a human enhancement of an AI, expanding the technological other's functionality and emotional experience. By decentring the human, ancillaries question the anthropocentric premise behind the classical cyborg and invoke the cyborg metaphor of Haraway's influential essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). The Harawayan cyborg challenges traditional Western dichotomies by transgressing the strict boundaries between flesh and metal, organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, human and machine.

As appendages of the AI spaceship, ancillaries are initially seen as enacting the identities of the servant and the soldier that are traditionally imposed on the cyborg and the technological other and which lack agency. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway refers to the cyborg as an "illegitimate

offspring of […] patriarchal capitalism," implying its connection with labour structures and emphasising the original role of technology in creating oppressive production systems (*Reader* 10, 12). Continuing the discussion of technology and labour in "Class and Its Close Relations" (1995), Alexandra Chasin considers identities as a product of actions rather than an entity's intrinsic characteristic. Thus, she argues the role of the servant performed by the technological other is constitutive of its identity (74).[6] *Justice of Toren's* Radch designers intended it to provide for the comfort of independent humans assigned to control it, and its performance of menial tasks actualises the identity of the servant, pertaining both to the cyborg and the technological other. The low skilled tasks spaceships and their ancillaries carry out, including washing, dressing their officers, and mending their clothes, accentuate the servitude of spaceships and their ancillaries and strike a discordant note with the spaceships' high intelligence and knowledge, as well as with the complex technology involved both in the creation of an AI spaceship and in ancillary production.

Contemplating the tasks performed by the technological other, Chasin connects them with race aspects, as the role of house servants in the contemporary US is generally taken by females of non-white descent (74). Haraway, analysing the influence of technological development on a global working class, states that it is not "race-neutral" (*Reader* 29). The racial implications of the identity of the servant are actualised in Radchaai AI spaceships; ancillaries are made from human bodies abducted during colonisation, which exposes a deep racial bias. This bias is reflected in the Radchaai language, showing the permeation of racist presumptions in the Radch society. "Radchaai" is translated to mean simultaneously "civilized" and "citizen," positioning the non-Radchaai as uncivilised and "barely even human" (Leckie, *Justice* 85). The view of non-citizens as less human underlies the moral acceptability of ancillary-making and allows the Radchaai to forcefully take a substantial part of a new colony's population, erase their personalities, and turn them into ancillaries before citizenship is granted. As a programmed instrument of colonisation, *Justice of Toren*/Breq both shares this bias and becomes a victim of it, as its/her initial identity of the house servant entails a racial component and conditions racially discriminative attitudes towards it/her in the Radch society.

Another identity arising out of the cyborg's and the technological other's functionality is the soldier. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway traces the cyborg's origin to militarism (*Reader* 10), while Chasin places an emphasis on the actualisation of the links between the defence sector in the US and the image of the technological other (90). The identity of the soldier is predetermined by the military potential of the Radchaai AI spaceships. Their weapons can "vaporis[e] planets" (Leckie, *Justice* 338), while their ancillaries' skeletal and muscular augmentation makes them suitable for invasion practices and law enforcement. Ancillaries had constituted the main troops during annexations before the treaty with the Presger was signed and ancillary production was made illegal (16). The intimidating power of the Radch spaceships makes them efficient killing machines, prompting techno-anxious images. But the portrayal of technological hybrids in the trilogy goes beyond the tight framework of negative implications, which Braidotti refers to in *The Posthuman* (2013) as a "narrow and negative social imaginary," casting the technological other as a source of violence and oppression (64). As a part of the colonisation machine, Radchaai AI spaceships and their ancillaries may follow orders precisely and without qualms, but they do not revel in the

supposed superiority of the coloniser. The comparison of ancillaries with independent human soldiers in *Ancillary Justice* (2013) exposes the human soldiers' cruel and oppressive attitudes – something that Leckie's technological hybrids do not share: "[…] One Esk would never beat me or humiliate me, or rape me, for no purpose but to show its power over me, or to satisfy some sick amusement" (Leckie, *Justice* 18). This characterisation of *Justice of Toren* is voiced by the spiritual leader of a territory subjugated by the Radch, suggesting another parallel between the colonised human population and the technological other, both oppressed by the Radchaai imperial drive. Hence, though the identity of the soldier is attributed to the protagonist, Leckie refuses to depict technological hybrids as inherently evil, instead portraying them in a complex way, thereby resisting simplistic and superficial judgements.

This nuanced depiction of technology does not alleviate its ethical implications. As Melvin Kranzberg states in "Technology and History: Kranzberg's Laws" (1986), "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor it is neutral," and this lack of neutrality is especially prominent in ancillary production (545). Ancillaries can be seen as an AI spaceship's body parts, thus, "depriv[ing] a ship of its ancillaries" is "a terrible thing" that can be equated to an amputation of a healthy organ (Leckie, *Sword* 139). However, turning people into ancillaries, effectively killing them with "identities gone, bodies appendages to a Radchaai warship," is intrinsically atrocious and imbued with negative ethical connotations, regardless of who does it and to what purpose (Leckie, *Justice* 67). The racist selection of ancillary bodies from colonised populations and, later in the trilogy, lower-class Radchaai citizens accentuates that the wide implementation of appalling technological decisions is rooted in immoral political practices, such as the colonial expansion of the Radch or the black market of migrant workers' bodies, sold to be ancillaries.

The unethical nature of the ancillary making process remains problematic throughout the trilogy. Ancillary bodies, coming both from colonisation and from abduction of citizens, drive both the main and secondary plots in the trilogy. In *Ancillary Sword,* Leckie introduces Lieutenant Tisarwat, a young officer assigned to Breq's crew, whose plotline is contrasted to that of One Esk Nineteen/ Breq's. Tisarwat's body is abducted and implanted with Mianaai's personality and memories, using the ancillary-making technology in order to spy on Breq in Athoek System. However, her body rejects the transformation, and her health steadily worsens until the implants are surgically removed. Yet, instead of returning to her previous self or retaining Mianaai's identity after the surgery, Tisarwat is a blank slate, unable to associate with either personality, or their desires and memories. Hence, severing the link between the body and the implants does not enable ancillaries to regain their previous personality: "Tisarwat was dead from the moment they put those implants in" (Leckie, *Sword* 54).

The irreversibility of ancillary production makes its atrocity irredeemable. Within the trilogy, only Breq's own existence receives a symbolic exoneration when she gets the Presger gun (designed to kill Radchaai spaceships) from its current owner, Dr Strigan. The gun is invisible to the Radchaai surveillance systems, so Breq can use it to assassinate one of Mianaai's bodies, attracting the attention of all factions and exposing Mianaai's split identity. Strigan, a vocal opponent of the

Radch, guesses that Breq is an ancillary and initially tries to convince her to remove her implants. After their conversation, Strigan changes her mind. As Tisarwat's example shows, the process of returning to independent functioning entails a deep depression, internal conflict, and psychological suffering. Unlike Tisarwat's, Breq's body is not degraded by ancillary implants, meaning the surgery would cause psychological suffering without providing health benefits. Strigan admits the absence of medical reasons for the surgery and understands that the surgery would destroy *Justice of Toren's* millennia-long experience and distinct individuality without restoring the original person. Thus, by giving it/her the gun, Strigan recognises *Justice of Toren*/Breq's right to life and individuality in their current body that lacks any other connections with the world. However, this token redemption neither attempts to justify the atrocity nor offers a comprehensive solution to the ethical dilemma of ancillary bodies.

In contrast to the subjugated identities of the technological other and cyborg, Mianaai's initial position is of unquestioned dominance. As the highest authority in the empire, he drives colonial expansion and uses his multiple cloned bodies to ensure the work of imperial mechanisms throughout the Radch. Connected by one technologically augmented consciousness, shared memories, and digitally transmitted experience, these cloned bodies provide Mianaai with practical immortality and near-omnipresence. Mianaai's superhuman enhancement invokes ideas of the transhumanist transcendence of the human condition. Francesca Ferrando notes in "Transhumanism/Posthumanism" (2018) that transhumanism is derived from the Humanist paradigm, emphasising its focus on technological improvement of the human (439). The acutely anthropocentric vision of transhumanism renders technology as an obedient tool devoid of agency and shapes master-slave relations between the human and technology, thus repeating the Humanist hierarchical vision of the human/machine dichotomy (439). Thus, the conflict between Breq and Mianaai exceeds the limits of the personal to become a political and philosophical confrontation between the coloniser – "Man," the "Humanist ideal"– and the subaltern – the colonised, marginalised, and subjugated other – whose voice remains unheard and whose rights are habitually disregarded (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 13). Breq's rebellion and possible success in establishing a new republic shows that the world can be changed and shifted by the agency of these others.

Multiplicity, Fluidity, and Trauma

As posthuman entities, Mianaai and *Justice of Toren*/Breq, though opposed to each other, share a similar structure. Their single mind, ensuring consistency of personality, processes data from technologically enhanced and interconnected bodies, making them capable of being present in many places simultaneously. Eleonor Gold refers to this in "Mindclones, Ancillaries and Cyborgs" (2019) as "polyproprioperception" – a simultaneous awareness of several bodies as one's own (152). Polyproprioperception presents a seeming reversal of multiplicity – the psychological condition of multiple identities with diverse thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and memories inhabiting the same body, as defined by Gergő Ribáry et al. in "Multiplicity: An Explorative Interview Study" (2017). However, technologically connected multiple bodies harbour a predisposition to forming separate identities, caused by a possible lag in memory synchronisation when bodies are physically

separated by long distances or through imposed disconnection. Both *Justice of Toren* and Mianaai are subjected to a delayed synchronisation of memories, as Mianaai's bodies are scattered across the Radch territory, and *Justice of Toren*'s ancillaries are separated from its spaceship body when deployed on planets during "annexations" (Leckie, *Justice* 11). Each body, acting as a part of a whole but separated by cosmic distances, can develop in its own way, with differences emerging every time they separate. This implies that the experiences of the core entities are not identical or equal to the experience of their proxy parts, and the difference in experiences, however miniscule, causes divergence in emotional reactions and decisions, opening a possibility of "*be[ing] of two minds*" (Leckie, *Justice* 213, original emphasis).

The technological complexity of Leckie's posthuman entities mirrors the increasing complexity of contemporary technology that influences identity building. The one mind – multiple body structure becomes not only a means of investigating the potential multiplicity of an AI mind, but also of the multiple human identities that emerge in digital, online environments. This is discussed by Gold when she compares the impact of embodiment on the experience described in *The Imperial Radch Trilogy* with *Virtually Human* (2014), a non-fiction work by Martine Rothblatt, and argues for the potential for the emergence of differences in multiple material or virtual bodies, even if they share one mind (155). However, having lost the bodily multiplicity of *Justice of Toren,* Breq still casts doubt on the existence of a monolithic identity, wondering if "*anyone's* identity [is] a matter of fragments held together by convenient or useful narrative" (Leckie, *Justice* 207, emphasis original). Breq's comment pertains to posthuman entities, with complex embodiments, as well as a wide range of both human and non-human entities whose multiplicity is promoted by an advanced technological environment. Likewise, Braidotti argues that an advanced technological setting entails a "radical estrangement" from "unitary identity" and actualisation of a "privileged bond with multiple others" (*The Posthuman* 92). Leckie depicts the posthumanist vision of identity building through posthuman entities but challenges the idea of a consistent identity for all agents, contributing to the discussion of the influence of technology and exposing the irrelevance of the dualistic framework of identity in a world where the nature/culture divide is radically deconstructed by the aliveness of technology.

Multiplicity, predetermined by the form embodiment takes in the series, becomes apparent after traumatic experiences. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, an academic theorist and a co-founder of transgender studies, draws attention to the correlation between multiplicity and trauma in "Identity in Oshkosh" (1995): "multiple personality […] is the site of a massive exercise of power and its aftermath," emphasising the violence involved in the emergence of a split in personality (35). The complex embodiments of Leckie's posthuman entities have an intrinsic proclivity to the fracturing of identity through the experiential and memory delay, even if in "ordinary circumstances" they preserve a seeming unity (Leckie, *Justice* 207). However, trauma brings differences to the surface, exposing not only fractures but pronounced identities, triggered by the experiences of separation and reactions of each body, either mechanical or organic, to circumstances threatening their lives and integrity. Luckhurst draws attention to the connection between technology and multiplicity, contending that "the wired-in, webbed and networked computerized present of the third industrial

revolution transforms subjectivity, [as] narratives of the potential impact of these technologies on the meaning of 'the human' multiply" ("Future Shock" 158). Complex embodiments within the *Imperial Radch Trilogy* afforded by technology present a new type of subjectivity that challenges the boundary between the human and the machine and displays itself under the stress of "adaptational breakdown" (158).

In the series, Mianaai and *Justice of Toren*/Breq are compared not only in terms of embodiment, but also in the events they perceive as traumatic. For Mianaai, the exposure of multiplicity is caused by an encounter with the Presger technology and its potential to annihilate the Radch. This technology appalled him so much that he ordered the destruction of an entire solar system, and the civilisation inhabiting it, after the weapon was used there. The threat from the Presger also forces him to sign a treaty with them, protecting not only the Radch, but the whole of humanity, as the treaty stopped the Radchaai colonial expansion and compelled him to inflict no harm on alien species. The atrocity of his actions and impelled change in policy cause an internal conflict that aggravates Mianaai's physical predisposition to multiplicity. Overlapped with the technical impossibility of full real-time synchronisation of memories, it results in a formation of separate personality factions that secretly fight each other, using the time lag to conceal their actions. *Justice of Toren* falls victim to Miannai's scheming twice. Firstly, Mianaai uses jamming equipment on One Esk, temporarily severing the connection between the ancillaries and the spaceship. Secondly, he executes One Esk's favourite, forcing the decade to act against him, and eradicates the AI spaceship, its independent crew, and its ancillaries, understanding that it has been recruited by a different faction.

However, his actions also inadvertently help *Justice of Toren* survive. After the jamming equipment turns it into disconnected parts, the spaceship becomes aware of its multiplicity: "The first I noticed even the bare possibility that I-*Justice of Toren* might not be I-One Esk, was that moment that *Justice of Toren* edited One Esk's memory of the slaughter in the temple of Ikkt" (Leckie, *Justice* 207). The order to kill the person One Esk loves triggers the first violation of its programmed obedience, allowing Breq to build her independent identity based on One Esk's. Thus, both Breq's and Mianaai's identities bear traces of the violent traumatic events, though different in scale and physical exposure. These events not only reveal the fractures in their seemingly monolithic personalities but also inherently different correlations between their parts and manners of handling the ensuing internal conflicts.

Trauma not only constitutes a vital plot element of the series, but also influences its narrative structure. In *The Trauma Question,* Luckhurst considers cultural connections between notions of the "traumatic 'flashback'," "multiple personality," and trauma (80). Luckhurst also considers aesthetic means used to create a traumatic narrative, including "play[ing] around with narrative time," "disrupting linearity," "suspending logical causation," and "running out of temporal sequence" (80). Eaglestone, analysing trauma literature in postcolonial contexts, also defines "confused time schemes" as one of its features, artistically expressed in flashback and fragmented structure, which reflects that "events are not expressed as they happen, but only afterwards, in fragmentary and

broken ways" (84). Reflective of these critical considerations, Leckie, in *Ancillary Justice,* employs multiple flashbacks to recount the traumatic events the characters went through. The novel starts with two temporal strands: the main timeline happening nineteen years after *Justice of Toren's* destruction, and the secondary timeline recounting the events right before *Justice of Toren*'s destruction. Thus, the secondary timeline is a prolonged flashback; the narrative structure is further complicated by an interruption of the secondary timeline by another flashback, explaining that one of Mianaai's identities reprograms *Justice of Toren*, inducing its internal conflict.

The narrative strands converge when Breq explains her motivation to Strigan in order to get the Presger gun. Sharing her story becomes a "means of productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma," mending the structural split in the narrative and symbolising her acceptance of the tragedy, the transformation, and a new understanding of her identity (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 82). Conversely, Mianaai effectively prevents his own 'final resolution'. By concealing the truth about the Presger technology and preventing its discussion not only in the Radch society but also in his own internal dialogue, he makes the recovery impossible, exacerbating not only his internal conflict but also the emerging split in the Radch society.

Breq's and Mianaai's similar embodiment structure and the exposure to their multiple identities through traumatic experiences does not translate into the same consequences for them. Mianaai sees his split as a catastrophe, while *Justice of Toren* accepts multiplicity as an inherent feature of its personality. Their contrasting perceptions are rooted in the distinctive essence of these posthuman entities. Mianaai is a human, fulfilling a transhumanist, anthropocentric dream, dominating his empire and striving to preserve his authority. Multiplicity threatens his lifetime endeavour of building an intersystem empire. To preserve both personal and political unity, each of his factions aims to eliminate the others, launching opposing policies, corrupting power structures, and sparking collusions within local governments. These actions entail injustice and violence towards human and non-human agents in the empire. In contrast, *Justice of Toren* is an AI that is connected to random abducted human bodies from colonised planets, differing in race and gender, which presupposes intrinsic diversity. This diversity enhances the post-anthropocentric decentring of the human, challenging the gender and race dichotomies. *Justice of Toren's* multiplicity comes naturally as each decade has individual preferences, interests, and hobbies, like One Esk collecting music and singing as a choir (Leckie, *Justice* 23). After losing most of itself, the potential for individuality in each segment and a capacity to act on its own becomes a source of empowerment, a platform to form a new individual who inherits *Justice of Toren's* traits and memories but grows into somebody new and different. For *Justice of Toren,* its multiplicity, and its identity that "arises […] in crises" (Stone 35), is a path to freedom from the limitations imposed on it both by her conditioning and the environment, enabling it to challenge the anthropocentric and racist views of the Radch. Thus, the difference in how the characters handle the trauma and the consequences of multiplicity reveals the opposition between the anthropocentric drive of transhumanism, represented by Mianaai's vehement attempts to eliminate his multiplicity, and the posthumanist paradigm that decentres the human, represented by *Justice of Toren's* fluid and multiple identity that does not yield to the dualistic perceptions and limits of unitary identity.

The Posthuman Identity

By uniting technology and the organic body, the complex embodiments of *Justice of Toren,* other AI sentient spaceships, and Mianaai challenge the border between the human and the machine, the born and the manufactured. The complexity of their entities questions the essence of the human in a highly technological environment. When his humanity is challenged, Mianaai resorts to traditional dichotomies, defining AIs as machines that lack personhood and, consequently, agency, while he, as a human, is entitled to both (Leckie, *Ancillary Mercy* 310). Mianaai's position exposes his anthropocentric perspective; for him, humans – at least certain groups of them – have value, while non-humans and non-Radchaai – "uncivilised" – do not. Blurring these distinctions would threaten the underpinnings of his worldview. In contrast, *Justice of Toren/*Breq, in running Athoek system, recognises the rights and voices of all species and groups, and its/her views are not limited by traditional dualisms. In addition to the human/nonhuman boundary, its/her embodiment blurs the boundaries of sex and gender, with both male and female bodies used as ancillaries. Its/her embodiment further amplifies the union of the mechanical and the organic, effectively undoing the traditional dichotomies and engaging in an "asymmetrical becoming" (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 30). Hence, accepting the fluidity and lack of centrality in her identity allows *Justice of Toren/*Breq to recognise the importance of different voices in establishing a welcoming environment for all species.

The complex process of Breq's asymmetrical becoming, through which the human and the non-human, the male and the female, the Radchaai and the non-Radchaai are united in a productive fluidity, unwinds throughout the trilogy. In the first novel, multiplicity rooted in the structure of the posthuman entities' embodiment comes to the fore in the traumatic circumstances triggering internal conflicts. As mentioned, the union of the two main spatial and temporal narrative strands in *Ancillary Justice* indicates the recognition of Breq's agency and her independent ethical stance and identity, which is accompanied by a gradual liberation from programmed behaviour and identities. Breaking the programme starts during *Justice of Toren's* destruction, but, even after a partial success of her attempted assassination of Mianaai, Breq is still under the control of one of his factions. Revealing the insidious nature of the mechanisms of subjugation, she is bound to obey even when it contradicts her personal beliefs and desires. Her conscious choice not to support any of Mianaai's identities – asserting that all of them are essentially the same person, capable of atrocities, violence, and tyranny – cannot be finalised without shedding these limitations. The asymmetrical becoming of Breq's fluid identity paves the way to oppose the tyrant, seen when she declares an independent republic in Athoek system in *Ancillary Sword* (2015). She justifies the declaration by asserting that AIs are a separate non-human species, which prevents the Radch from attacking them under the conditions of the treaty with the Presger. The provisional republic is a culmination of the trilogy and the final touch to the liberation process, emancipating the protagonist from the compulsion to obey the tyrant and from the limits of the servant and the soldier identities.

The formulation of an independent political stance as part of the liberation process is reflected in Breq's shift from the biases of the Radch colonial paradigm to an anti-racist and anti-colonial position. Before its destruction, *Justice of Toren* shares the views of the liberally oriented

part of the Radch society: the ship's preferences in relation to humans are based on their ethical judgements, rather than on their position in the strict hierarchy of the Radch society, which is based on the arrogance and corruption of the old Radch families who tend to hold positions of power. *Justice of Toren's* respect for human life is displayed in its treatment of citizens and non-citizens: it aspires to limit its violence towards people in the colonised territories and learn their language and culture to assist in their integration into the Radch society. But these views do not go beyond the Radch colonisation paradigm, stipulating that the Radch brings prosperity and civilisation. Arguing about the Radch with Strigan, Breq defends the Radchaai approach to civilisation and the position of the Radch as the metropole bringing progress to the periphery: "But at the end, after all the blood and grief, all those benighted souls who without us would have suffered in darkness are happy citizens" (Leckie, *Mercy* 156). Breq's claim exposes *Justice of Toren's* absorption of the biases of its colonisation paradigm, much like a real-life self-learning algorithm, which invites consideration of the bias that a self-learning AI assimilates from the data it uses.

Several studies of AI, algorithms, and ethics, including Seth D. Baum's "Social Choice Ethics in Artificial Intelligence" (2017), Megan Garcia's "Racist in the Machine: The Disturbing Implications of Algorithmic Bias" (2016-2017), and Kirsten Martin's "Ethical Implications and Accountability of Algorithms" (2018) show how decisions taken by AIs and algorithms are influenced by their design or the data they use, exposing the prejudice and unfairness of the originating society and raising questions of fairness and accountability in their application. Having been initially programmed by the Radch as a self-learning AI, *Justice of Toren* continues to learn from other actors in society and adopts their views. Baum describes it a bottom-up approach to learning ethical behaviour, where AI learns ethics from other agents (166). In doing so, *Justice of Toren* inherits and exposes the racial prejudice of the Radch society. This follows the patterns of real-life algorithms as Garcia and Martin show in their analyses of the implications of utilising contemporary algorithms and consequential exposure of racial prejudice embedded in the data (Garcia 112, Martin 839). Unlike these real-life algorithms, Breq can make ethical judgements of her own, which is initiated by Mianaai's destruction of *Justice of Toren* and its existential crisis. The years she spends functioning within other cultural frameworks changes Breq's attitudes: she learns to appreciate differences, which eventually eliminates the bias of the coloniser's point of view on "uncivilized" systems (Leckie, *Justice* 235). Correcting this bias, Breq opposes the Radch worldview, thus affirming Haraway's idea from "A Cyborg Manifesto" that cyborgs "are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (*Reader* 10). Thus, her transformation includes not only overcoming the limitations of her programmed functionality, but also the biases of the Radch society, allowing Breq to formulate her own stance and promoting her agential power.

Conclusion

Non-human agency deserves a lot of attention in posthumanist theory. In *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), Braidotti emphasises that agency is not a human's prerogative in an interconnected world (45). Haraway, in *When Species Meet: 03 (Posthumanities)* (2008), defines technology as one of companion species and allocates it the place of "full partner," mediating the relations of the human and the world and possessing its own agential power (249). Breq's communication with

other human and non-human agents shows how the technological other can be in a productive partnership, resulting in the establishment of a new political entity. Breq becomes an independent agent participating in a network of interactions with other agents, which resonates with Barad's theory of agential realism, as presented in "Posthumanist Performativity" (2003). Barad sets forth agency as originating from "intra-actions" of matter rather than from individual entities and embracing both the human and the non-human (817). "Intra-actions" imply temporary coupling within the continuous flow of matter, where objective borders are momentarily revealed only to become indistinct again with the end of an intra-action (815). Breq's identity, with its proneness to multiplicity and its asymmetrical becoming, resembles the flow of matter, with its boundaries made momentarily definite in the intra-actions with other human and non-human entities. Forming ties with humans, AIs, and aliens, Breq is involved in a network of intra-actions, through which her agency becomes palpable and influences the world. The recognition of her agency is a crucial part of its/her transformation and establishes her as an agent in a complex world where the human and nonhuman interact and make connections with each other.

After her trauma and due to subsequent identity transformations, Breq, an AI in a colonised body, becomes a subversive voice, appreciating diversity and speaking against colonisation and the inherent injustice of the hierarchical Radch society. An AI overstepping the limitations of her creators' prejudice and becoming capable of seeing injustice and oppression, and acting to counter it, undermines the centrality of the Humanist subject and blurs dichotomic boundaries. In the trilogy, this posthumanist subversion of anthropocentric ideals and the discussion of non-human agency fosters the vision of the AI identity as "something other than a master, a slave or a self" (Gold 157). Leckie portrays Breq as a fully independent entity with indisputable agency, countering the Radch vision of her as "the non-person, the piece of equipment" (Leckie, *Justice* 370). Breq defines AIs as a separate sentient species, expanding the notion of agency to non-human subjects and asserting a move towards Barad's understanding of agency. Thus, an AI protagonist with agency blossoming in "intra-action" and asymmetrical fluid identity challenges the anthropocentric paradigm and mechanisms of oppression in the politics of the Radch empire and consequently sheds light on the potential of a posthuman identity in the real contemporary world.

NOTES

1. This article is partially based on the second chapter of my MA thesis, titled "Singing Your Own Song: The Role of Posthuman Bodies in the Creation of a Posthuman Protagonist in *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) and *Ancillary Justice* (2013)."

2. *The Imperial Radch Trilogy* consists of *Ancillary Justice* (2013), *Ancillary Sword* (2014), and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015).

3. Leckie uses italics for the spaceships' names in the trilogy.

4. The Radchaai language and culture do not have gender identification and a female pronoun is used for all humans; the issue of gender is discussed by Marcia Texler Segal and Vasilkie Demos in "Gender Panic, Gender Policy: An Introduction" (2017). I use masculine/feminine pronouns for the characters who are gendered by the characters from other civilisations. The Radchaai characters whose gender is not identified are referred to as "she." The Radch ships and stations are referred to as "it," but Breq is a "she," following her new social status and functioning.

5. Due to the complexity of the protagonist's body structure and identity transformation, I use different names to indicate different configurations within the entity of the sentient spaceship and its transformation: "*Justice of Toren*" denotes the whole ship; the twenty-bodied unit – decade – functioning before Mianaai's sabotage is referred to as "One Esk"; "One Esk Nineteen" is used to speak about the segment surviving after *Justice of Toren*'s destruction; and "Breq" indicates the transformed identity.

6. The concept of identity as a product of actions, rather than inherent properties of an individual, is developed by Judith Butler in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Theory" (1998).

WORKS CITED

Baum, Seth D. "Social Choice Ethics in Artificial Intelligence." *AI and Society,* vol. 35, 2017, pp. 165-176.

Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801-831.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti.* Columbia University Press, 2011.

--. *The Posthuman.* Polity, 2013.

--. "Critical Posthumanism." Braidotti and Hlavajova, pp. 94-96.

--. *Posthuman Knowledge.* Polity, 2019.

Braidotti, Rosi, and Maria Hlavajova, editors. *Posthuman Glossary.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Chasin, Alexandra. "Class and Its Close Relations: Identities among Women, Servants, and Machines." *Posthuman Bodies.* Edited by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 73-96.

Clynes, Manfred E., and Nathan S. Kline. "Cyborgs and Space." *Astronautics,* September 1960, pp. 26-27, 74-76.

Eaglestone, Robert. "'You Would Not Add to My Suffering If You Knew What I Have Seen': Holocaust Testimony and Contemporary African Trauma Literature." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 72-85.

Ferrando, Francesca. "Transhumanism/Posthumanism." Braidotti and Hlavajova, pp. 438-439.

Garcia, Megan. "Racist in the Machine: The Disturbing Implications of Algorithmic Bias." *World Policy Journal,* vol. 33, no. 4, Winter 2016/2017, pp. 111-117.

Gold, Eleanor. "Mindclones, Ancillaries and Cyborgs: Technologies of the Split Self in Transhumanism and Other Science Fictions." *Future Humans in Fiction and Films.* Edited by Louise MacKay Demerjian and Karen F. Stein, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2019, pp. 144-158.

Haraway, Donna J. *The Haraway Reader.* Routledge, 2004.

--. *When Species Meet: 03 (Posthumanities).* University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Kranzberg, Melvin. "Technology and History: Kranzberg's Laws." *Technology and Culture,* vol. 27, no. 3, Jul 1986, pp. 544-560.

Lau, Carolyn. "Posthuman Literature and Criticism." Braidotti and Hlavajova, pp. 347-349.

Leckie, Ann. *Ancillary Justice.* Orbit, 2013.

--. *Ancillary Sword.* Orbit, 2014.

--. *Ancillary Mercy.* Orbit, 2015.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question.* Routledge, 2008.

--. "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm." *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism.* Edited by Gert Buelens, et al., Routledge, 2014, pp. 157-168.

Martin, Kirsten. "Ethical Implications and Accountability of Algorithms." *Journal of Business Ethics,* vol. 160, no.1, 2019, pp. 835-850.

Ribáry Gergő, László Lajtai, Zsolt Demetrovics, and Aniko Maraz. "Multiplicity: An Explorative Interview Study on Personal Experiences of People with Multiple Selves." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, 2017, article 938.

Stone, Alucquere Rosanne. "Identity in Oshkosh." *Posthuman Bodies.* Edited by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston. Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 23-37.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is a part of the PhD research project sponsored by Dublin City University in 2019-2021, and the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship from September 2021. I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr Ailise Bulfin and Dr Paula Murphy for their guidance and comments that greatly contributed to the development of this idea. I am also grateful to the reviewers and editors, whose suggestions significantly improved this article.

BIONOTE

Iuliia Ibragimova, a PhD student at Dublin City University, Ireland, is currently a holder of the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, and studies the sentient spaceship trope in popular culture (1940-2020) through the posthumanist theoretical perspective. She obtained an MA degree in Modern and Contemporary Literature from University College Dublin in 2019. She worked as a staff interpreter and translator for Astrakhan State University (Astrakhan, Russia) and taught English to BA students (English major) in 2009-2018. She holds a Specialist degree in Interpreting and Translation (English and German languages) from Astrakhan State University in 2009.

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE WHOLE: INVERTING CORPOREAL MORALITY IN YE YONGLIE'S "CORROSION"

Virginia L. Conn

Science Fiction produced in the years immediately following the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was shaped not only by strict and constantly shifting literary regulations, but also the political desire to enfold numerous demographic populations into a single unified front. Far from a homogenising erasure of identity, Maoist populism recognised ethnic, racial, and religious diversity while simultaneously subordinating such heterogeneity to an ideology that invested individual bodies with national attributes endorsed by the state. In doing so, the body became a symbolic representation of the values of the nation, such that an individual's morals, physical attributes, and even willingness to work reflected on the party and state as a whole.

The imagined individual that developed out of this national investiture was a collective hero that evinced a standardised set of lauded attributes. Theodore Hsi-en Chen identifies the following seven qualities as characteristic of the Chinese communist hero: absolute selflessness, obedience to the Communist party, class consciousness, ideological study, labour and production, versatility, and being a "red expert" (92). Among these qualities, ideological and material transformation are co-constitutive, with the special recognition that, in China, "reactionary people 'shall be compelled to reform themselves through labor so as to become new men'" (92). Beyond even the psychological dimensions of this humanistic remoulding was a concerted effort to reimagine an embodied population that was fundamentally informed by communist ideology, literally becoming new humans. The collective hero was therefore the natural end point of centuries of revolutionary ideology and corporeal language in which ideal individuals were remade in the light of a new society. As the Chinese Cultural Revolution intended to make the world anew, so too did they intend to remake humanity – and it was through Science Fiction (SF) that this new, idealised new hero could be projected.

As such, SF being produced at this time was uniquely positioned to describe the ideal embodied citizen as an inevitable product of existing social and developmental policies, one in which potential future bodies developed as material products of the same communist revolution that had also created a new cultural and literary landscape. At the same time, 'the body' as it was classified by the state was very much an imaginary – particularly in the case of SF, it was a projection of a continuously redefined ideal. 'The body' became a stand-in for 'the state' precisely because it *could* be regulated and controlled in a way that the nation as a cohesive whole could not. 'Bodies' were defined, planned, projected, and controlled in ways that may have had no basis in extant

circumstances, but which nevertheless impacted the idea of what individuals *should* be – and what they should be was whole, healthy, and beautiful.

By playing off the conflation of morality and beauty, the SF short story "Corrosion" ("腐蚀", 1981, translated 1989) by Ye Yonglie (叶永烈) grapples with the difficulty of normative national inclusion for non-ideal bodies and the challenges this posed for a literature attempting to create a model world peopled with ideal citizens, one where acknowledging bodily infirmity, the potential for illness, or even ugliness was subject to censure. In doing so, the story undercuts the idea of physical perfection and beauty as representative of moral perfection, with material embodiment and physical appearance posited as the inverse of ideological integrity: as characters appear more prosperous, successful, and physically attractive, they actually become increasingly morally degraded; as characters physically decay, their moral quality increases. In many ways a cynical story of the value placed on form over substance – though one that supports and ultimately reaffirms the nationalist commitment to future-oriented human progress – "Corrosion" forcefully grounds its final political conclusion in a revolutionary enrolment of physically degraded bodies within the sphere of national unity from which they were historically denied, while rejecting the beautiful and whole as performative superficiality.

"Corrosion" is, primarily, a story about the academic repercussions of the arrival of a strain of ultra-corrosive space bacteria on Earth. From the outset, however, an assumption of beauty as representative of morality is fundamental to what will later be its radical reconceptualization of civic participation and virtue. The handsome protagonist, Wang Chong,[1] spends the five years following the bacteria's arrival safely ensconced in a university setting, comfortably working his way up the ranks, while both his mentor and colleague/rival quarantine themselves in the desert to study the bacteria. When they eventually make a breakthrough, Wang Chong seizes the opportunity to attach himself to their work and promote his own scientific standing. The crux of the problem is not in conquering the bacteria and the threat it represents, but rather, who gets the credit – when the unattractive Fan Shuan (Wang Chong's rival) writes the final report, he lists not only himself, Du Wei (their mentor), and Wang Chong as the authors, but also Li Li, the scientist who initially discovered the bacteria and died in the attempt to categorise it.[2] Her inclusion represents a problem for Wang Chong, who has aspirations of receiving the Nobel Prize for his involvement in the project and believes (correctly) that only three laureates may share it. By becoming the public face of the project, Wang Chong has positioned himself as the arbiter of knowledge and saviour of the nation, but after seeing the sacrifices everyone except himself has made (in addition to Li Li, who died of bacterial exposure during the initial expedition, the elderly Du Wei eventually succumbs to the hardships of isolation in the desert and Fan Shuan works himself to death), Wang Chong realises that his own soul is ugly and corroded despite his outward appearance of success, and asks that the other three authors be honoured, with his own name left off the final report.[3]

Addressing the development of an idealised embodied figure during China's mid-twentieth century, Hung-Yok Ip notes the "historical backdrop of a culture known for its critical stance toward the individual pursuit of self-beautification" while simultaneously recognising the mobilisation of

"self-beautification practices and images […] for political purposes" as part of the broader conflation of beauty and morality (330). Individual beauty is thereby mobilised as a marker of personal morality in Mao- and immediate post-Mao-era literature at the same time as depictions of the individual came to represent collective traits. Given the conflation of beauty and morality and of the individual and the nation – or as Eva Kit-wah Man claims, the integration of "the imagination of [ideal bodies] with the imaginary future of the state" (140) – the kinds of science fictional depictions of beauty shown in "Corrosion" became the ideal medium for imagining a collective corporeal morality.

Masking and Performativity

I argue in this essay that, rather than simply depicting visibly imperfect bodies or an attempt by the state to incorporate such individuals into an acceptable narrative of national progress, the representation of the human body as a combination of interior and exterior are troubled in "Corrosion." A shared point of reference for the unification of beauty and morality is necessary to understand the depiction of Wang Chong: by having other characters comment on his goodness while the author describes his idealised physical characteristics, it is trivially easy to eisegetically combine the two characteristics. By aligning the text itself with a performative visibility that self-consciously promotes physical beauty as an outgrowth of internal goodness only to invert that conclusion at the end, the story sets up the expectation of physical perfection as a prerequisite for moral goodness only to knock it down. This is most apparent in the early descriptions of Wang Chong and his rival, Fan Shuan. The two are described in-text using oppositional physical terms that, for much of the story, seem to be reflective of their actual roles: Wang Chong, the handsome, intellectual protagonist, is well-liked and held in high regard by everyone from his mentor to his mentor's wife to Li Li, the heroic scientist who perished in the opening scene. Fan Shuan, on the other hand, is consistently described as second-best, a swarthy and rough pretender to Wang Chong's inevitable and well-deserved place in the spotlight.

Wang Chong is described in Ye Yonglie's text, translated by Pei Minxin, as:

> […] a youth of about thirty. His figure was like a bean sprout, tall and thin. His face was white, and his cheeks hollow. His eyeballs were like the black pieces [of Go] they were playing, big and sparkling. A mere glance at the young man and one would say, "he must be extremely intelligent." Dressed in his pants and shirt, he slowly waved the foldable fan in his hand. He was Wang Chong, nicknamed "Small White Face." He was one of Professor Du Wei's best students. (138)

Even without his exceptional studiousness being explicated, each of these characteristics marks Wang Chong as a well-groomed intellectual, from his wiry frame that has never laboured to the gauntness of his cheeks bespeaking a life of asceticism. His sharpness of dress and fan usage while playing one of the traditional cultivated arts of the Chinese scholar-gentleman frames him as both

cultured and rarefied, while even his nickname refers to traditional operatic practices. Small and white with large black eyes, he cuts a striking figure that enfolds an awareness of class situatedness. At the intersection of class as it is encoded in representation embodiment, Louisa Schein describes an ongoing national rejection of the politics of white skin in post-Mao China that posited a "masculinized and unitary Chinese national subject" (142). Though she, like most scholars of Chinese bodily aesthetics, theorises a specifically female-gendered body, Wang Chong's pale beauty accords him the corporeal characterisation typically reserved for female characters. Characteristics of beauty such as big eyes, frailty, and pale skin were associated not with women as a biological class, but rather, as Eddy U notes in his analysis of the development of the intellectual as a distinct class under Chinese communism (*Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification* 2019), with intellectuals as a socioeconomic class removed from physical labour.

On the other hand, Wang Chong's competition, Fan Shuan, against whom most of his efforts are expended, is described in this way:

> The man was of medium stature, about thirty years old. He had a big square face, thick eyebrows and big eyes. His lips were rather full. He was wearing a shirt and shorts, his muscles looking strong and well-developed. He was Fan Shuan, another of Professor Du Wei's assistants. As he would smile before speaking and would unwittingly show his white teeth, which looked like the white pieces the other two were playing, people had nicknamed him "Blacks' toothpaste." (138)

It is important to note that the description of Fan Shuan's teeth and their relevance to his nickname is actually not in the original text; it was added after the fact by the translator. "Blacks' toothpaste" refers to Darlie toothpaste (黑人牙膏: lit. "black person toothpaste," originally called Darkie toothpaste), a brand inspired by Al Jolson's blackface act that showed off his white teeth and immediately conjured an image of buffoonishness. As a result, in addition to the thickness ascribed to his physique in the original text – thick jaw, thick eyebrows, full lips, bulging muscles – his association with stupidity is compounded by the translator, who draws a connection between Fan Shuan's appearance and minstrelsy. Much like the overlaid identity of blackface, Fan Shuan's interiority is obscured by descriptions of his body that frame him as crude and simple: the body as a symbolic representation of his second-class intellect and social position.

The characters in "Corrosion" are thus initially introduced as if both their moral character and social standing are reflected in their external, physical appearances. The dichotomy set up here is between, on one hand, an intelligent, sensitive, well-bred, and well-educated young Wang Chong; one whose intelligence and grace is immediately apparent in his outward appearance, and on the other hand, the rough-hewn, coarse, ungainly Fan Shuan, who is so ill-bred that he cannot even control his facial expressions enough to refrain from unconscious displays of emotion. Fan Shuan's physical description is carefully constructed so as to bring to mind the uncivilised peasantry upon whose broad shoulders the country could be built and rarefied by intelligentsia such as Wang Chong

but who would, unfortunately, always be second-rate to him. Their initial introduction is designed so as to mobilise existing literary assumptions predicated on the association of aesthetics with ethics that was so central to Chinese socialist realism. By having other characters – Du Wei's wife, Wang Chong's colleagues, and visiting scholars, among others – comment on both Wang Chong's and Fan Shuan's character and physical attributes as they are perceived in-text, the audience is invited to appreciate those qualities and imbue them with moral attributes.

Here at the outset of the story, however, there is already a hint of subversion. Just as Fan Shuan's association with blackface obscures his interiority, implying that there is more to him than the surface-level descriptions of his physique, so too does Wang Chong's nickname, "Small White Face," reduce him to the synecdoche of a face alone. Similar to the ways in which blackface symbolised a certain image of behaviour associated with an established style of performance, in Chinese traditional opera, different character types wear different colours of mask in order to broadly indicate what "type" they are: red for bravery and loyalty, yellow for ambition, green for impulsivity and violence, and white for treachery and subversion.[4] To wear a white mask is to immediately identify oneself as the villain. Here, then, though having a pale complexion and hollow cheeks initially suggests a life of ascetic commitment to knowledge and pursuit of rarefied intellectual care, Wang Chong being reducible to a white face also identifies him as a source of treachery and a focal point for suspicion, no matter how many characters like and look up to him.

Fan Shuan, on the other hand, is described using terms that clearly paint him as a peasant labourer, from his body to his dress. Tina Mai Chen writes that "in Mao's China, dress and body discourses constituted fundamental components of a political-aesthetic ideal in which proletarian subjectivity became aestheticised, and identificatory signifiers were internalized, desired, and displayed" (363). The complex intersection of political practices and sartorial messaging resulted in a socially embedded concept of beauty that was central to the ability to contribute to society. It was also in line with the aesthetic prescriptions of proletarian realism that turned bodies into symbols for national progress.

Scientism, Socialism, Aestheticism

Just as the allusion to masks serves to describe Fan Shuan and Wang Chong's supposed inner characteristics, the impression of scientific progress was more important to projecting national progress during the immediate post-Mao years in which this story was written than any achievement itself. Recognition of this projection is paramount for characters such as Wang Chong, resulting in the inextricable intertwining of appearance and achievement. As Ban Wang notes, socialist realism (or what would be identified as the "combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism"[5] in China) is more expansive than simply a style of fiction or art. Rather, "the term marks the fundamental principle of the aesthetic conception of revolutionary politics" (101). Not limited to prescriptions on how individuals were portrayed, the visual rhetoric of embodiment was charged with proletarian discourse related to scientific progress. Unlike during the later years of the Cultural Revolution, when scientists as a class were reviled as the "stinking old ninth" (臭老九)

within the black category of social dysphemisms, a peasant such as Fan Shuan filling the role of an intellectual would not necessarily at this point have been coded as class betrayal. In fact, with the Deng era's repudiation of the worst excesses of the Gang of Four and the preceding Cultural Revolution, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, in the late 1970s/early 1980s, once again opening up towards an internationalist version of science and, to some degree, abandoning the idea of science as an inherently ideological apparatus, instead shifting towards a paradigm of widescale proletarian scientific participation as a nation-building process.[6]

This nationalist mobilisation of science and scientific literature is apparent in the broader aggregate of texts being translated into Chinese during the later years of the Cultural Revolution and leading up to the publication of "Corrosion." Nicolai Volland notes, for example, that "an approximate break-down of translated titles [of Soviet literature into Chinese] between 1949 and 1954 finds about 40 percent total in the category 'sciences and technology,' 25 percent in the humanities and social sciences, and about 30 percent in literature and arts" (61). Yet by the 1960s:

> the CCP [Chinese Communist Party of China] defined a set of theories in literature and art that challenged those imported from the Soviet Union and rejected Moscow's claim to the central position. In the process, however, the inequality involved in the original Sino-Soviet relationship was not so much disbanded as redefined: when the PRC tried to reinvent itself as the new centre of Third World cultural diplomacy, it built ties with the recently de-colonised nations of Africa and Asia that closely resembled the framework in which the PRC had found itself only a decade earlier. (72).

This shift towards reconceptualising scientific progress as a barometer of international influence with China and Chinese people at the centre is echoed in Wang Chong's singular goal of being recognised with the Nobel Prize and achieving international acclaim. He wants to be at the centre of the scientific world, and the Chinese scientific community, at this time, wanted to be at the centre of international glory. The desire for international recognition is also evident in Du Wei and Fan Shuan's description of the bacteria's potentially useful applications for their own nation alone. Where these two nationalist goals differ, however, is in their emphasis on substance versus appearance: Wang Chong wants to appear intelligent and successful on the international stage, while Du Wei and Fan Shuan care nothing for personal appearance and seek only to strengthen their national infrastructure for its own benefit, not for acclaim.

The desire for a beautiful physical standard is a reproductive mode common to socialist realist art and depictions of beauty, with the beautiful as something to be emulated and replicated – an aspirational state of being that inspires reverence for physical perfection as a mode of self-modelling. Wang Chong's performance of a national commitment to the pursuit of science is predicated on an attenuation to appearance. In the pursuit of international scientific and political

recognition, Wang Chong allows the actual work being done by his less-attractive counterpart to continue invisibly, while he presents himself as the visible face of progress. His beauty emerges as a result of Fan Shuan's, Du Wei's, and Li Li's erasure from the public eye, such that the more his appearance is foregrounded, the more those around him are dismissed as unimportant to the cause. The aspirational reproductivity of physical beauty as a marker of moral goodness becomes coterminous with the performativity of scientific recognition as a marker of nationalist dedication. That is, a complicated line of conflation emerges between beauty and nationalist ideals, where beauty leads to goodness and goodness is the primary definition of a national hero. As previously noted, Theodore Hsi-en Chen has identified this with his ideological and physical descriptions of China's 'new socialist men,' and in "Corrosion" the trope of an ideal physical exterior representing an ideal ideological interior is masterfully subverted in a way that actually better upholds the Maoist emphasis on total social participation in the political process.

While explicating the national emphasis on beauty and its implications for the state, Mao Zedong himself stated that what the Chinese Communist Party wanted was the unity of political thought and artistic vision. As Mao asserts in the *Yan'an Talks*, which established the foundations for aesthetic modes in the country, art and culture served as tools for shaping the country politically and socially, and were, in turn, shaped by politics and ideology: "In literary and art criticism there are two criteria, the political and the artistic. [...] What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form" (Mao, *Yan'an Talks*, n.p.). Cultural processes of artistic assimilation meant that scientific theories and scenarios were transformed into influential cultural resources, which were then appropriated by authors working under the dominant literary regime to disseminate acceptable forms of and approaches to knowledge. Ye Yonglie, a stalwart biographer of party leaders in his later years, masterfully managed in "Corrosion" to undercut the socialist realist aesthetics that had calcified over the course of the Cultural Revolution with a more expansive understanding of national inclusion. Without directly rejecting party aesthetics, he engaged the 'struggle on two fronts' to demonstrate that beauty results from a core of nationalist commitment that bypasses the physical form, rather than vice versa. The beautiful and the whole, in Ye's expanded vision, do not represent ideological perfectibility through their beauty, but rather ideological uprightness is beautiful enough to transform even the ugliest and most degraded bodies.

Those ultimately lauded as heroes all find the apotheosis of their valour at the moment of their ugliest and least idealised embodiment. Retroactively, the aged and exhausted Du Wei, desiccated to the point of having a stroke[7] is recognised as beautiful in his death alongside the overworked Fan Shuan, his hair long and unkempt and his eyes sunken into his face.[8] With even more intervening years between his death and eventual national recognition is the original astronaut who first brought the bacteria back to Earth, whose body breaks apart and crumbles at the touch of a hand, his suit and command chair "loose like tofu and cracked into many pieces."[9] As for Li Li, whose memory has haunted Wang Chong's entire rise to power, her death—curled up "like a shrimp"[10] and shaking—is inextricable from the service she has rendered the nation. Recognising their contribution to scientific and national progress necessitates a disavowal of embodied beauty and a dispersal of the physical-moral correlation that Wang Chong has so long exploited.

As the only character to be consistently described as handsome and superficially successful, Wang Chong ultimately takes on the role of the subversive element in an otherwise 'pure' system of scientific nationalism, wherein Du Wei, Fan Shuan, and the unfortunate Li Li typify correct ethical behaviour through their dreadful sacrifice. While Wang Chong refrains from volunteering to put himself on the front lines and, in doing so, only grows in stature and beauty, Du Wei and Fan Shuan spend five years together in the desert working on the ultra-corrosive bacteria, becoming increasingly haggard and worn. The research that takes such a toll on their bodies is fruitful and leads them to wonder if they can utilise the bacteria in the interests of the nation, instead of treating it only as a danger. They are able to isolate the corrosive fluid (which harms only objects) from the bacteria (which harms biological life), with the intention of using it to dispose of urban garbage,[11] simplify mining, and contribute to national development. In building the nation, they are sacrificing themselves, while in preserving his own person, Wang Chong has put the good of the national collective second to his own self-interests.

An excerpt that is not included in the English translation is also important to a more situated reading of this story within the ongoing ideological development of a utopian socialism still proceeding from Maoist rhetoric, even if the moment of Mao himself was over. In the original text, but not, notably, in the 1981 English translation, the description of Du Wei and Fan Shuan's vision of future development is immediately followed by the lines"地球不断地打滚，日子一天天有一天，我站在了科学与幻想的分界线上，突然一阵颤动，分界线消失了，科与幻合为一体……" ("The earth is constantly rolling, and day by day, I stand on the dividing line between science and fantasy. Suddenly there is a tremor, the dividing line disappears, and the division is united with the illusion..."). As a science fictional text that is simultaneously committed to the tenets of socialist realism, "Corrosion" has already imagined the future as a *fait accompli*, positing the arrival of a deadly space bacteria as best addressed through an ideological commitment to the nation. By emphasising that the universe is open and that history is unending, Mao himself, in his lecture on dialectical materialism (Mao, *Dialectical Materialism*, 109), conceptualised revolution as an ongoing process that shaped a future characterised by unending choices to recommit to communist practices (Mao, "Work Methods," 349). The above quote from the text highlights the apocalyptic vision of a past that is superseded by a future that is continually being revised while already being assured. In "Corrosion," the inevitability of a future in which China has already gone to space many times[12] is merged with the present – an active recognition within the text of the way scientific and ideological practices worked together to create a vision of the future predicated on work in the present.

Physical Patriotism

By remaining focused on the illusion of achievement—both personal and national—the major point of contention in the story is the question of who would be doing the work to bring about the aforementioned beautiful national future, and who would be getting the credit for it. "Corrosion" actually undercuts the earlier socialist realist vision of the ideal human by evacuating the physical body of any underlying moral structure. In doing so, it dismisses the idea of a standard form symbolising an ideological tenet by recognising that devotion to revolutionary and state-building

ideals was – or could be – divorced from embodiment. Pang Laikwan notes that in justifying socialist revolution aimed towards a communist utopia, "Mao stresses the revolutionary subject, evading incapable people and marginal events. Along with his emphasis on the 'mass line,' he also tends to treat the masses as a single hero, not a plurality of differences" (120). We see this in the final recognition of heroism being given to the collective group of three and Wang Chong refusing the mantle of individual heroism, his only nationalist choice in the story and one that is cast as being, ultimately, the only correct option for his homeland.

Such self-aggrandising individualism is notable particularly because it has a long history of association with the corrupting influence of Western ideals in Chinese literature, including SF. There is a curious level of deferment that occurs outside of the national borders wherein the impetus for Wang Chong to begin seriously considering the Nobel Prize and its ramifications comes from, first, a tour of visiting American scientists, and, later, a direct comment from an American at a dinner party, both of which serve to drive home his sense of nationalism. This is a trope typical of socialist SF, which tended to focus closely on home and the negative influence of capitalist societies on good socialist citizens. Alexander Beliaev's famous novelette, *Professor Dowell's Head* (1925), for example, is well-known for displacing the setting to America and making the greedy, immoral antagonist primarily motivated by capitalist and international scientific approval. This trend continues through the present, with contemporary Chinese authors in ostensibly 'communist' literary milieus setting stories with potentially-objectionable characters or plots – such as the amoral narrator of Wang Jinkang's "The Reincarnated Giant" (2005, translated 2012) who helps the world's richest industrialist circumvent inheritance laws through the transplantation of a brain into a grossly-deformed body – in countries that have historically been at odds with China. The implication of such types of nationalist orientations is that the West is still portrayed as explicitly aligned with an ideological form of imperialist science with which even brief contact could be as corrosive to the national character as "Corrosion's" interstellar bacteria on individual characters.

While the deferment of both social and physical degradation to a location outside the boundaries of the socialist state is a common trope of those socialist literatures[13] that attempt to shore up the boundaries of their own sociopolitical identity within a normatising framework for embodiment, it uniquely takes a back seat here to texts that are attempting to grapple with the notion of belonging within their own physical borders. To ask 'what is outside as a foil to the national and physical standards of those inside' allows for a deferment of criticism that can be valuable for the author writing literature that is potentially interpretable as a problematic critique of state policies and values. "Corrosion," however, primarily emphasises the internal moral corrosion that has already gripped Wang Chong and threatens the cohesive nation project as a whole. His interest in *appearing* good to an international scientific audience, as opposed to *doing* good for his country is his ultimate downfall.

At the end, the rejection of physical appearance as a marker of internal goodness (and, as such, appropriate national zeal) comes together with an unqualified acceptance of the state as the highest ideal in Wang Chong's final words. On the same day that he learns that he and 'his' team

have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology,[14] he also learns that both Du Wei and Fan Shuan have died in their pursuit of the actual scientific ideals this prize purports to honour. He is so moved by their dedication to improving the lives of their national comrades, as opposed to his own selfish self-promotion, that he isolates himself in their old desert laboratory, writing:

> Though I'm physically strong and healthy, my soul has already been corroded by a kind of invisible ultra-bacteria, which cannot be seen even by an electron microscope! I've long been contaminated, but I didn't feel it. Though Li Li, Du Wei, and Fan Shuan have all passed away, their souls remain uncontaminated and pure. Their scientific ethics are the noblest. They are the people made of special material – the metal titanium. They are really the "Titans," the true heroes. (585)

With Wang Chong's ultimate abdication of his personal goals in the form of decrying any special international recognition for work he did not perform, both he as a character and the text as a meta-critical comment on personal ethics recognise the subjugation of the individual to the national good. He must commit the ultimate in self-effacement: not only has he eliminated his name from any form of recognition, he has also committed his body and his life to inevitable destruction. The text recognizes this as a titanic move of nobility, a sacrifice that is not only indifferent to physical perfection but actually demands its destruction. We find the text exulting in the corroded bodies and decayed forms of its most heroic characters, their wizened corpses and destroyed visages representing the ultimate in national devotion.

Far from shying away from deformity and physical deviation, "Corrosion" lauds the most grotesque bodily choice as those that are most worthy of honour. The ill, the ugly, the deformed, and even the dead are held up above the handsome and healthy Wang Chong, who rehabilitates himself only through a recognition of their ethical superiority and by subsequently consigning himself to the same fate. This represents a radical reconceptualisation of the body politic. By stripping the image of the ideal socialist citizen from its reliance on individual physical perfection, "Corrosion" creates the potential for a more egalitarian social participation only possible in the estranging boundaries of SF.

The depiction of ugly, ill, deformed, or non-idealized figures was risky in that it allowed for the insinuation that deviation from the collective norm was possible at all, even if not desirable. That Ye Yonglie was willing to grapple with such possibilities at all highlights the importance of SF as a literary genre for explicitly defining the boundaries and future developmental possibilities of social progress. In its patriotic reassessment of bodies outside of an imaginary standard of beauty, "Corrosion" foregrounded some of the concerns surrounding the development of national physical standards that were effectively invisible, if not actively erased, under most forms of socialist realist art and literature. To be legible to the state and understood as a body capable of incorporation into the body politic necessitated being visible within literary and political forms in the first place. By

projecting a quotidian vision of Chinese futurity in which appearances – both individual and on the international stage – are rejected in favour of a nationalist reaffirmation, the patriotic body is freed from expectations of performative perfectibility. Just as the ultra-corrosive bacteria is divided into a harmful and a helpful substance, the beautiful are condemned, the ugly are lauded, and the state is strengthened through its citizens' lowliest contributions.

NOTES

1. All names and excerpts, except where otherwise noted, are drawn from the 1981 English translation by Pei Minxin.

2. 总指挥部，请立即转告杜微老师，我在"银星"号内查出来自太空的烈性腐蚀菌，鲜黄色，X形，从未见过。全队受感染，无法返回。请不要组织营救，以防烈性腐蚀菌扩散。[…] 李丽写毕，像虾似的蜷曲着身体，即使用双手紧抱脑袋，依然冷得全身直打寒颤。
(translation mine) "Headquarters, from the sample I collected from the 'Silver Star,' I've discovered a hitherto unknown ultra-corrosive bacteria from outer space. Its color is bright yellow, and it's shaped like an X. Everyone on our team has been contaminated and cannot return. In order to prevent further contamination, please do not organize a rescue mission." […] Li Li finished writing and curled her body up like a shrimp, holding her head tightly in both her hands. She was so cold that she shivered." 叶永烈。"腐蚀。"人民文学。北京中国，11月1981.

3. Ironically, though Wang Chong is obsessed throughout the text with the rule stating that only three laureates may be recognized, Nobel regulations also prohibit posthumous awards, meaning that at the end of the story Wang Chong would have actually been the only member of the team eligible for recognition after all.

4. Chinese traditional opera has a several-thousand-year history, with its contemporary form established around roughly 1000 CE. Character types are fixed and established by visual markers largely associated with coloured masks. The meaning of these masks is invariable; a performer wearing a white mask to symbolise villainy will never be the hero or subvert expectations, resulting in an immutable conflation of symbol and behaviour. Additionally, colour symbolism is integrated into common sayings and phrases that enforce the association of behaviour and colour. Authors Yang Nan, Wang Xiaoling, Li Haili give the following example: "In China people call the people of low intelligence "白痴" [moron]. Therefore, "low intelligence" is the associative meaning of white. White also can symbolise a corrupted and evil person, because in Chinese traditional opera, people call the performer who performs the bad man "唱白脸," [lit. "sing the white face;" figuratively "play the villain"]." See: 杨楠, 王晓玲,李海丽. "Associative Meanings of Colors in Chinese and English Cultures."海外英语(中旬刊), no. 3, 2011, pp. 165. The word "moron" is composed of two characters: 白 (which means white) and 痴 (which means foolish), thereby utilizing "white" to reinforce "foolishness." Similarly, in their other example of "singing the white face" meaning to "play the villain," whiteness of the face represents evil in the heart. Despite white skin being a marker of beauty, it also implies such beauty being only skin-deep, masking villainous or stupid intentions.

5. A discussion of the debates that contributed to this term is most extensively addressed in Fudan daxue zhongwenxi ziliao shi. *Xin shiqi wenyi xuelunzheng ziliao 1976-1985 [Materials on Debates in Literary History During the New Period 1976-1985*]. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chuban she, 1988 (in Chinese).

6. See further discussion in Baum, Richard, ed. *China's Four Modernizations: The New Technological Revolution*. Routledge, 2019.

7. "我从记录本上获知，杜微教授一年多以前—去年夏天，因年老体衰，在天气奇热的一天里突然中暑而死。" (translation mine)

8. "他是谁呢？我几乎不认识他了。他的头发又乱又长，已经夹杂着许多白发。他的脸像紫铜般颜色，满腮胡子。如果不是前额左上方有一块明显的疤，我几乎无法相信他就是方爽同志！在我的印象中，他如犍牛般壮实，一副运动员的派头，眼下竟皮包骨头，双眼深凹！"(translation mine)

9. "舱里零乱不堪。队长随手拿起宇航椅的座垫，谁知就像豆腐似的松散，裂成许多碎屑从手中掉了下去。队长走向宇航员，他的手一碰宇航服，竟然马上碰破一个大洞。要知道，宇航服是用十多层坚牢的合成纤维做成的，如今却变得像草纸做成似的！"(translation mine)

10. "李丽写毕，像虾似的蜷曲着身体，即使用双手紧抱脑袋，依然冷得全身直打寒颤" (translation mine)

11. Echoing more contemporary Chinese Science Fiction, from Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" to Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* to Han Song's "Regenerated Bricks," all of which deal explicitly with other attempts to dispose of China's urban garbage problem utilising human labor (and even incorporate Chinese bodies as building materials).

12. "是啊，自从一九五七年十月四日人类第一次征服太空以来，从未发生过这样的事情！是啊，中国的宇宙飞船曾多次访问各个星球，也从未发生过这样的事情." "Yes, since the first time humans conquered space on October 4, 1957, nothing like this had ever happened! Indeed, China's spaceships had visited various planets many times, and this was completely unprecedented."(translation mine)

13. Zhao Suisheng argues specifically that shoring up national borders is an ideological practice for establishing moral and national purity in socialist China, noting that "Socialist patriotism has three levels. At the first level, individuals should subordinate their personal interests to the interests of the state. At the second level, individuals should subordinate their personal destiny to the destiny of our socialist system. At the third level, individuals should subordinate their personal future to the future of our communist cause." See: Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 28.

14. A feat that China wouldn't achieve outside of Science Fiction until Tu Youyou's 2005 win for the discovery of artemisinin/青蒿素, work that grew out of her appointment by Mao to head of the secret drug discovery project, Project 523 (523 项目).

WORKS CITED

Baum, Richard, editor. *China's Four Modernizations: The New Technological Revolution*. Routledge, 2019.

Chen, Tina Mai. "Proletarian White and Working Bodies in Mao's China." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 11 no. 2, 2003.

Chen, Theodore Hsi-en. "The New Socialist Man." *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, Feb. 1969.

Fudan daxue zhongwenxi ziliao shi (ed.) *Xin shiqi wenyi xuelunzheng ziliao 1976-1985 [Materials on Debates in Literary History During the New Period 1976-1985*]. Shanghai: Fudan daxuechubanshe, 1988.

Ip, Hung-Yok. "Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture." *Modern China*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2003, pp. 329–361.

Man, Eva Kit-wah. *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*. The Chinese University Press, 2016.

Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art." *Selected Works*, vol. III, May 1942, p. 88-90.

---. *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism: Writings on Philosophy*. Edited by N. Knight, 1937. M E Sharpe, 1990a.

---. "Gongzuo fangfa liushitiao (cao'an)" ["Sixty Articles of Work Methods (Draft)"]. *Mao Zedong wenji* [*Mao Zedong collections*]. Edited by CCP Central Archival Research Centre. Beijing: ReminChubanshe, no. 7, 1999, pp. 344–64.

Pang, Laikwan. "Mao's Dialectical Materialism: Possibilities for the Future." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 28, no. 1, Routledge, pp. 108–23.

Schein, Louisa. "The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China." *Social Text*, no. 41, 1994, pp. 141–164.

U, Eddy. *Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification*. University of California Press, 2019.

Volland, Nicolai. "Translating the Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC." *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 33, no. 2, April 2008.

Wang, Ban. "Socialist Realism." *Words and Their Stories*. Brill, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004188600.i-342.24

Wang Jinkang. "The Reincarnated Giant." Translated by Carlos Rojas. *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine*, vol. 77/78, Spring & Autumn 2012.

Yang Nan, Wang Xiaoling, Li Haili (杨楠, 王晓玲, 李海丽). "Associative Meanings of Colors in Chinese and English Cultures."海外英语 (中旬刊), no. 3, 2011.

Ye Yonglie. "Corrosion." 1981. Translated by Pei Minxin. *Science Fiction from China*, edited by Wu Dingbo and Patrick D. Murphy. Praeger, 1989.

叶永烈。"腐蚀。"人民文学。北京中国，11月1981.

Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

BIONOTE

Virginia L. Conn is a lecturer at Stevens Institute of Technology, USA. She studies visions of the future in socialist Science Fiction, with a particular focus on the development of the "new socialist human" and associated population planning policies.

A TENTACULAR TERATOLOGY: THE ABCANNY MONSTROUS

Rob O'Connor

I

In 2011, British writer China Miéville was the guest of honour at the International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts. His speech – entitled "On Monsters: Or, Nine or More (Monstrous) Not Cannies" – explored Miéville's ideas of the monstrous body through an interconnected series of critical flash-observations. Miéville explores the recognisable, psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny present in the contemporary monster motif before intertwining the canny with several imaginative prefixes to demonstrate the creativity of the monster as an exploration of corporeality and metaphorical expression for contemporary concerns. One of those critical ideas is the *ab*canny monstrous. In this article I investigate why the abcanny monster is a useful metaphorical tool to interrogate socio-political structures and concepts of the body from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Embracing Miéville's structure of critical vignettes, this article analyses the nature of the abcanny monster and its expression through a variety of tentacular forms. In so doing, I demonstrate how the tentacular is an effective motif for challenging twenty-first century, capitalist, anthropocentric values.

To highlight the kind of body to which he was referring, Miéville defines the abcanny monster in very clear terms as a Weird Fiction creation deliberately devoid of definition, mirroring the sense of indescribable cosmic awe associated with the Weird Fiction materiality of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and the tentacled monsters which are present within some of those narratives. For Miéville, the abcanny monstrous actively utilises elements of physicality and the corporeal which are devoid of understanding:

> The monsters of the abcanny are teratological expressions of that unrepresentable and unknowable, the evasive of meaning. Hence the enormous preponderance of shapeless, oozing gloopiness in the abcanny monstrous, the stress on formlessness, shapes that ostentatiously evade symbolic decoding by being all shapes and no shapes. (381)

The abcanny monster suggests a freedom from binary oppositions, an alternative physicality which can be utilised as a metaphorical canvas to illustrate and explore an inexplicable contemporary world and the ever-shifting state of our contemporary society on a variety of levels - whether it is the destabilising effects of capitalism, the chaos of revolutionary action, the intrusion of a pandemic which fractures all aspects of society, or the realisation that growing environmental disintegration

must force us to move away from anthropocentric thinking. Even though the abcanny body is devoid of binary associations, it is simultaneously suffused with symbolic power as it defies a socio-political system which is built on normalised capitalist parameters. Miéville embraces this metaphorical power of the abcanny monstrous: "These monsters mean, while they meta un-mean" (382).

This depiction of abcanny monsters is not a new thing. The Weird Fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include monsters of this formless type. In *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin-de-Siècle* (2020), Emily Alder explores how Weird Fiction at the turn of the twentieth century reacted to the increasing ontological categorisation of scientific practice. Alder pinpoints the power of Weird Fiction to "offer radical new forms of knowledge—ecological, philosophical, and spiritual, for example—and model new sets of relations between selves and others" (3). Alder comments on the ability of Weird Fiction (and its associated teratology) to offer new ways of politically comprehending the world as both human and non-human; that "some explore alternative, enweirded, epistemological terrains that validate abcanny realities" (27). In other words, the formlessness of abcanny monsters encourages alternative versions of the world, for us to "imagine the world differently" (32).

Miéville refers to Weird Fiction as being "suffused with abness" following the renowned Weird Fiction writer William Hope Hodgson's use of the prefix *ab-* in many of his stories to help describe the nonhuman characters and his monstrous creations (381). In another essay "Weird Fiction" (2009), Miéville clearly understands this relationship between "revolutionary teratology" and Weird fiction's detachment from the return of the repressed witnessed in the uncanny:

> Paradigmatic is Weird fiction's obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic, and one which, after early proto-Weird iterations by Victor Hugo, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, viralled suddenly in Haute Weird fiction until it is now, in the post-Weird debris of fantastic horror, the default monstrous limb-type [...] the awe that Weird fiction attempts to invoke is a function of *lack* of recognition, rather than an uncanny resurgence, guilt-function, the return of a repressed. It is thus as much a break from as an heir to traditional Gothic. (512, original emphasis)

For Miéville, the monsters of Weird Fiction represent a break from Anglophonic folkloric (and Gothic) traditions, as represented by the indescribable biomass of the tentacle, which has a more recognisable historic association with Non-European and Asian folklore traditions.[1] The tentacle has shifted beyond being a symbol of Weird fiction's exploration of the greater cosmos. The growing re-interpretation of Lovecraftian weird fiction in recent decades has resulted in the tentacle saturating cultural media, making it a more knowable phenomenon of creative expression.[2] The tentacular has become the physical manifestation of a "*lack* of recognition." What is meant by *recognition* here is the ability to place the object into a contextual framework. If an object feels uncanny to the

observer, such a sensation is created through an acknowledgement that the object is simultaneously familiar, yet unfamiliar. Even though it is strange, it exists within a framework which we are able to comprehend – it is a human face, or body, or a recognisable surrounding or location. In contrast, the abcanny revels in the fact that it exists *outside* of our comprehension, either through being indescribable – completely uncategorisable in its construction – or explicit, violent rejection and repulsion.

The tentacular – due to its nature to be gloopy, to seemingly shapeshift and evade meaning – is imbued with abcanny qualities and effectively demonstrates this state of abcanny 'awe' due to its incomprehensible physiology, intrinsically connected with manifestations of body horror. Miéville posits in his essay "M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire" (2008) that the "spread of the tentacle" signals an "epochal shift" from the Gothic monster to the alterity of Weird culture (105). Just as Weird Fiction occupies the liminal space between mythological and realist interpretation of the world (in other words between science and fantastical horror), so too does the tentacular monster exist on the same theoretical spectrum, simultaneously representing the body of the 'other' (being different from our perception of 'self') and the body of the 'alien' (being unfamiliar and disturbing, from another world). The tentacle becomes a useful, metaphorical manifestation for a world where socio-political structures are constantly shifting, and can encourage the exposure of new ways of viewing, or even imagining a utopian end, or recrafting, of the capitalist, anthropocentric world in which we exist. However, this abcanny tentacular practice is not *confined* to physical tentacle-limbs. Other abcanny, tentacular functions include body horror hybridity, the actions of fungi and lichens (especially those of monstrous size and tenacity), and the creative interpretations of what we can call 'primordial blob monsters.' Such forms can also be interpreted as *tentacular*.

II

The tentacular leads us to consider the motif of the monster. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) the monster is an ideal vessel for examining the facets, fears, worries, and concerns of the society which created them: "The monstrous body is pure culture […] the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals', 'that which warns'" (4, original emphasis). As Bennet and Royle state in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2009): "Literature is, above all, about the human, about what it means to be human, and therefore about the non-human, about what it might mean not to be human" (254). The monster, therefore, is an effective figure for challenging anthropocentric viewpoints.

The effectiveness of the monster motif lies in its presentation of contradictory states of being, critically challenging the socially-perceived boundaries between 'self' and 'other,' as Margrit Shildrick claims in *Embodying the Monster* (2002):

> If we know what we are by what we are not, then the other, in its apparent separation and distinction, serves a positive function of securing the boundaries of the self. And yet time and again the monstrous cannot be confined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but arouses always the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification. (17, original emphasis)

Monsters reflect all aspects of the human condition: not only do their physiological construction remind us of the repulsion we have towards our biological state, repressed or not, but they can also reflect the monstrous nature of our mentality and social structures. Noel Carroll describes the physicality of monsters in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) as "fantastic biologies" which result from the linking of "different and opposed cultural categories" (50). Monsters are essentially dichotomous constructions exploring and pushing at the boundaries between conflicting distinctions, which in turn makes them appealing motifs. As Cohen states: "Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at a time of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes - as 'that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis'" (6). Monsters force the observer to reimagine their perception of the world by challenging our ontological ideals. In a time of drastic social, economic, political, and environmental crisis, the monster can metaphorically manifest these points of crisis whilst simultaneously presenting alternatives to the current dominance of anthropocentrism. The hybrid fusion we witness in monsters is a useful methodology for exploring, reassessing, and reconfiguring the Anthropocene, allowing us to imagine a shared existence between the human and the non-human which reflects the need to shift away from anthropocentric thought.

III

This is, therefore, a role the tentacular monstrous can occupy. The tentacle is biological, yes, but its writhing nature and gloopy shape-shifting form is on the edges of our recognition and challenges our ontological understanding, inviting alternative perceptions of the world – particularly the non-human – to be considered alongside more common anthropocentric values.

This aligns with Donna Haraway's definition of the Chthulucene posited in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Haraway offers the Chthulucene as a means of expressing a possible new epoch, one focused on the importance of multispecies perspectives as a counterpoint to narratives of impending climatic and environmental collapse: "Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet. We are at stake to each other" (55). Haraway is quick to discuss the connotations with Lovecraft's Cthulhu in the naming of her new epoch. She insists on her etymological grounding, referring to the "chthonic ones" – beings on earth, taken from the Greek root *khthōn*, meaning 'beneath the earth,' or subterranean. She stresses that her terminology is not derived from Lovecraft's monstrous creation but is equally playful with this association, recognising the role that the monster may inhabit in such narratives:

> Chthonic ones are beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute. I imagine chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair. Chthonic ones romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with the sky-gazing Homo. Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters. They also demonstrate and perform consequences (2).

Haraway refers to both the octopus and the Greek goddess Medusa as avatars of this Chthulucene moment, showing that both the tentacular, abcanny bodies of the natural world and the monsters of our imagination are effective motifs to encourage non-anthropocentric, interspecies narratives. The tentacle invites us to re-evaluate the physical, to re-assess what we mean by 'body' and 'self.' It invites humankind to construct a new narrative, to gain a new understanding of our natural world and the earth on which we live. As Haraway highlights: "Myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene" (31).

For Haraway, the tentacular – and its representation in speculative fictions – are the clearest metaphorical presentation of the core values of the Chthulucene. The tentacular expresses a movement away from anthropocentrism and towards a representation of existence in a world dealing with environmental and social uncertainty:

> The tentacular ones wrangle me in SF […] The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others. (31)

In these times of environmental concern, it is vital that we begin to understand how humans are intertwined with other species and non-human entities, to make "attachments" and "detachments" and form new pathways of connectedness. The hybridity of interspecies connectiveness is explicitly portrayed through the tentacular monstrous, the tentacle-limb providing an alternative methodology for perceiving the bodily form which moves away from traditional acceptance of the human form as dominant. The tentacular practices of abcanny monsters allows this inter-species exploration to be metaphorically expressed.

IV

Miéville (in "On Monsters") states that Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is *not* the source of his use of the prefix *ab-* in his naming of the abcanny monstrous, that it is "not a *sine qua non* of the abcanny" and, instead, refers to "abnormal" (381). However, it is interesting to analyse the ontological deconstruction witnessed in Miéville's evaluation of the abcanny monster alongside the similar dissolving of boundaries witnessed through the theoretical spectrum of abjection put forward by Kristeva.

In *The Power of Horror* (1982) Kristeva jumps immediately into succinct and powerful definition, where the abject body is in direct opposition with the 'I.' Whereas the uncanny does bear some familiarity to the observer (its power lying in the familiar simultaneously being unfamiliar), the abject body is a much more violent interjection, "elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (5). Therefore, the abject is a failure of recognition from the perspective of the observer and, as a result, it is banished and repressed, our conscious mind unwilling to accept its existence. The abject is a disruption of physical boundaries, Kristeva's famous example of 'skin on milk' – "the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2) – representing an *unnatural* disruption in *our* expectations of what the physical form of the milk should be. Both the physical normality (the rules and laws) of the milk and the psychological reaction of the drinker falls outside of our ontological worldview, forming the abject effect. This image becomes about the boundary that exists - a boundary which is fragile and easily broken, consumable, and dissolvable.

In *Abjection and Representation* (2019), Rina Arya articulates further on Kristeva's definition, describing the abject as being neither object nor subject:

> It exists in between these two states, where it cannot be discretely separated from the subject (as the object would be able to) and where it lurks object-like but without becoming an object. The non-object impresses on the subject's stability, causing the subject to feel vulnerable because its boundaries are under threat. (4)

Arya touches upon the theoretical concept of object-oriented ontology here and the importance of the boundary between human existence and non-human objects. Object-oriented ontology posits that objects exist independent of human perception; that they experience their existence away from our own species-centric definition of identity. While this article is not conducting an object-oriented analysis, it is worth noting that the abject body engages with this different orientation of perception.

Arya confirms that "fear of the other is central to abjection [...] we learn that the *object of the* other may be an external force, but that *the fear of this* other stems from within and is a deep-rooted fear of the other-in-the-self that we want to expel" (7, original emphasis). Our internal alienation is projected outwards onto the external world; or, to call on Kristeva's 'skin on milk' again, our internal fear of alienation is projected outwards onto the milk, it is not the 'I' which is abject, but the milk itself. The breakdown of boundaries seen within abjection taps into deep-rooted fears about internalised 'othering' of the self. Therefore, the theory of abjection runs parallel with Miéville's definition of the abcanny, both sharing an ability to shift ontological boundaries which creates a sense of 'otherness' ripe for metaphorical consideration; wherein lies the political power of the abject – that 'othering' is often associated and promoted through exclusionary political viewpoints.[3]

The existence of both weird and abcanny monsters is a deviation from our ideal conceptions of what a body actually *is*, forcing us to question and reconceptualise our own lived experience. The repulsion of body horror, achieved through graphic descriptions, pushes the perceptions of our physical bodies into the sphere of the abject. The most common examples involve incomprehensible body horror attachments or manifestations crafted from bodily fluids which are usually internalised, such as blood, semen, faeces, urine, menstrual blood *etcetera*. The abcanny monster is gloopy, slippery, shapeshifting – writhing, tentacular biomasses which clearly highlight our narrow ontological viewpoint. Abjection can have a role to play here: Mieville's description of the "oozing gloopiness" and "formlessness" of abcanny monsters aligns itself with the failure of recognition and the defying of ontological boundaries present in the abject.

V

If one adopts Miéville's description of the abcanny then the motif of the squid or cephalopod (represented by the tentacle) quickly establishes itself as an 'avatar of abcanniness,' its unique physiological ability to change form, colour, and shape reflecting most effectively this gloopy formlessness associated with abcanny teratology. However, the very nature of the tentacle causes us to question conventional narrative structures regarding teratological and ontological understanding. They exist on the limits of our recognition; they are *abcanny* forms. Miéville is intrigued by cephalopods and they constantly infiltrate his thoughts and work. In his essay "Alien Evasion" (2012) Miéville sums up the appeal of the cephalopod as a monstrous entity:

> Invisibility is nothing. An invisible thing in a landscape is just a landscape. The point of invisibility is to fail. A just glimpsed beast-shaped burr - now that catches the breath. The realisation that a vine is not a vine, but a limb, and that it's hunting: that sensory stutter is what gets you. (n.p.)

Miéville alludes to the alterity of cephalopods and their abject form: a natural existence that we do not want to reconcile; a form which makes us question our understanding of materiality and highlights our limited perception of biology. It is this alterity that makes tentacular beasts so appealing to genre writers: Lovecraft's Cthulhu, J. R. R. Tolkien's Watcher in the Water, Jules Verne's colossal squid in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) are all tangible examples of the horror of the tentacular, the unknown, and the 'other.' As Richard Ellis describes in *The Search of the Giant Squid* (1999): "There is probably no apparition more terrifying than a gigantic, saucer-eyed creature of the depths with writhing, snakelike, grasping tentacles, a huge gelatinous body, and the powerful beak of a humungous seagoing parrot. Even the man-eating shark pales by comparison to such a horror" (168). Tentacles best replicate the "just glimpsed beast-shaped burr" which Miéville references. They move swiftly: grasping, constricting, reaching. Their similarity to fingers imbues tentacles with a sense of uncanniness – an appendage that operates in a familiar manner yet is biologically different to our own. Our curiosity is piqued by the unnatural, by that which is uniquely different from us.

Miéville hints at a mythical origin for the cephalopod, referring to them existing out-of-time, "the lone survivor from an earlier world" (2012, n.p.). Miéville is communicating his desire to break away from Euro-centric folklore motifs – he is forming a new folklore for the cephalopod here as an entity which presents itself as something primordial, from the depths of another history or place. It is no wonder giant squid specimens caught or seen in the early days of maritime exploration were re-interpreted as mythical krakens. There was no benchmark by which to compare these specimens, leaving the imagination to interpret these unique entities, the mysterious disappearance of vessels suddenly explainable by imagining the attack of colossal specimens. The tentacular is more than a manifestation of monstrous uncanniness. It is an echo of a mythical past. It is physical but simultaneously unnameable, 'away,' 'outside,' or 'not of canniness.' *Ab*canny.

VI

Being *tentacular* is not just about the presence of an actual tentacle-like limb. Other entities and motifs can adopt elements of pervasive disruption associated with this interpretation of the tentacular. Sometimes these tentacular actions can be invasive too. In his book *Entangled Life* (2020), mycologist Merlin Sheldrake describes the tentacular world of fungi. Sheldrake reveals many astonishing statistics about the labyrinthine network created by fungi: their slippery forms; their "mycelial minds" (105-136); their mind-bending chemical interaction with the human brain (110-113); their ability to take over insect bodies and force them into unnatural activity for the benefit of the fungus itself (107-109;118-119). This kind of fungal mind-control can be seen in popular culture examples, such as M. R. Carey's novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) or the world depicted in the popular videogame series *The Last of Us* (Part I in 2013 and Part II in 2020). In both of these examples, mankind has been decimated by mutated strains of *cordyceps* fungi which turns humans into zombie-like creatures. Not only is fungus being utilised as an abcanny motif to ask questions about the veracity of being human, but it is also being used as a methodology for blurring genre boundaries. Adler is also keen to highlight the application of fungi in earlier Weird Fiction, especially in the work of Hodgson: "malleable and liminal forms of cryptogams are used to produce monsters that blur the boundaries of animal and plant and of alive and notalive." (175). As Sheldrake reminds us: "In many instances – from lichens to the boundary-stretching behaviour of mycelium – fungi challenge our well-worn concepts of identity and individuality" (124). As a species, humans understand and use fungi for a variety of purposes, yet they remain mysterious to us.

The rhizomatic root systems of fungi are inherently tentacular and this makes them interesting motifs for fantastical constructs. The root network of fungi consists of tiny, tentacular hyphae able to shift direction towards food sources and change the structure of the network in response. However, this does not make fungi inherently abcanny – humanity has an ontological understanding of fungi and even though they are tentacular in nature they are not abcanny. However, their actions and the effects they have on their environments defy ontological perceptions in a similar fashion to other abcanny forms. If this is filtered through the lens of monstrous gigantification, then the results do become challenging to ontological perceptions. There are several examples of the fungal monstrous producing abcanny effects in genre fiction, most noticeably the work of Jeff VanderMeer, whose

"Ambergris" series (*City of Saints and Madmen* (2001), *Shriek: An Afterword* (2006), and *Finch* (2009)) feature the Grey Caps, a race of mushroom-like humanoid creatures. Fantastical fungi and spores also have a presence in VanderMeer's acclaimed novel *Annihilation* (2014). Area X, the mysterious world of the novel, is a wilderness that does not conform to normal laws of nature. When investigating the Tower (the region's most prominent feature) the science party leading the twelfth expedition into Area X discover writing on the walls of the mysterious building:

> At about shoulder height, perhaps five feet high, clinging to the wall of the tower, I saw what I first took to be dimly sparkling green vines progressing down into the darkness […] Then, as I stared, the "vines" resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall. (23)

The protagonist, a biologist, posits that the writing is "a type of fungi, or other eukaryotic organism" (24). It becomes clear that this fungus is integral to the unique ecosystem of Area X, which contains multiple examples of abcanny bodies, such as human-hand-shaped creatures made from brain cells and moaning entities that resemble the discarded shells of horseshoe crabs but, on analysis, are revealed to once have been human too.[4] In *Annihilation*, it is fungi which has an active role in the creation of this abcanny landscape. As Timothy C. Baker suggests in *Writing Animals* (2019), Area X is an *oikeos tropos*: "a favourable place that allows for a new approach to interspecies relationality; at the same time, however, it defies understanding" (166). It is a strong example of the definition of the abcanny monstrous being explored here, with its blurring of interspecies boundaries and the questioning of humanity through indescribable constructions. Not only this, but Area X is also a setting which defies conventional interpretations of space – it does not behave as humans would conventionally expect. This invites us, as a reader, to reimagine non-anthropocentric methods for evaluating space, to build a new conceptual framework for our surrounding environments which incorporates utopian ideals of interspecies connectivity.

Fungi are a common feature in contemporary Science Fiction narratives too. In *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present) the eponymous starship can jump instantaneously to anywhere due to an organic propulsion drive fuelled by astromycological spores. These spores form a navigable mycelial network that only organisms attuned to the rhizomatic nature of the spores can traverse. Indeed, the Discovery inadvertently finds itself crossing dimensions and experiencing alternative realities to their own, the mycelial network acting as a gateway to an abcanny realm of multiverse travel. Rhizomatic networks also play a key role in the novel *Rosewater* (2016, revised 2018), by Tade Thompson. *Rosewater* establishes a city of the same name in Nigeria where the presence of an alien entity called Wormwood produces incredible healing properties. Upon establishing roots, Wormwood spews forth microscopic alien spores, which creates a telepathic network known as the xenosphere. A few human 'sensitives' – such as the principal characters of Kaaro, Bicycle Girl and Eric – discover they can access the xenosphere and the more powerful they become within that 'bio-virtual' space the more they can manipulate it to their will and, by extension, challenge traditional

human perception of the world around them. This interspecies connection between human and fungi results in radically altered perceptions of time and space.

For both *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Rosewater* the spore networks only reach their full potential when intertwined with other species, producing abcanny monstrous bodies. In *Star Trek: Discovery*, the propulsion drive only works when the spores interact with the consciousness of another agent, biological material becoming fused with the spores, resulting in a living navigational system. For example, by joining with the spores, Chief Engineer Stamets slips out of recognisable categories of 'human.' By embracing the astro-mycelial network and becoming an abcanny body, Stamets becomes an important symbol, presenting an alternative conceptual framework created through interspecies connectivity. The abcanny monstrous here presents a new interpretation of what interspecies life *can* be. In *Rosewater*, the gloopiness of the tentacular, abcanny monstrous is more overt. As Kaaro and Bicycle Girl learn to navigate the xenosphere their powers grow stronger. The xenosphere becomes an abcanny landscape of vividly descriptive 'meat palaces,' of blood and flesh, of monstrous shape-shifting gryphons, and giant Rastafarian guardians. The tentacular spores create not only a network for transferring alien and human consciousness but also a canvas for creating fleshy, abcanny bodies, variations of human structures which are ontologically warped to defy logic and biological categorisation. Bicycle Girl is particularly interesting as she is later revealed to be a 'ghost' trapped within the xenosphere, appearing in the real world as an abcanny projection sustained by the tentacular, xenosphere spores. In these examples it is fungi that creates the abcanny monstrous; not directly, but through hybrid associations with other biological bodies or environments. The result is the crafting of new versions of the world for us to comprehend, a world freed from conceptual limitations.

VII

Some monsters do not directly incorporate the tentacle within their form but still embody the gloopy, *tentacular qualities* associated with the abcanny monstrous. The monster from the 1958 film *The Blob* may be simple in its conception, but its gelatinous body is all consuming, terrorising the citizens of small-town America after crash-landing on the Earth aboard a meteorite. As it consumes buildings and humans alike it grows bigger in size and turns a deeper, more vibrant, shade of red. This monster fits Miéville's definition of the abcanny monster perfectly; a shifting, oozing, uncategorisable mass that becomes tentacular in form. The Blob, at first glance, appears to be just a comical monstrous adversity for the film's protagonist, but as a metaphorical device it demonstrates a deeper meaning. As Juli L. Gittinger observes in *Personhood in Science Fiction* (2019), the chronological timing of the film means that it could be "interpreted as a metaphor for communism, the popular bogeyman of the 1950s in which it is set. As its sole purpose is to absorb and overwhelm everyone it encounters (growing bigger and redder), it highlighted fears about the 'red menace'" (188). Taken literally, the abcanny form of the Blob – with its shapeshifting, tentacular nature – signifies the political repression and the fear of communist influence on American society which had been prevalent during the heights of McCarthyism.

Figure 1: The Mind-Flayer from *Stranger Things*, Season Three. Image found at https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-11-best-things-about-stranger-things-3

The popular Netflix show *Stranger Things* (2016-present), some sixty years later, once again tapped into the abcanny symbolism depicted in *The Blob,* albeit in a gorier, body horror fashion. In Season Three, the show's principal monster and antagonist – the Mind Flayer – bridges across from the Upside Down to the real-world of 1980s Hawkins. As part of the process, the Mind Flayer goes through a transitional state, constructing a physical, monstrous body from random biological components it finds around the town, including bodies of rats and flayed victims lured by the brainwashed Billy.[5] The resulting monster is a perfect encapsulation of abcanny, body horror motifs. It is biological but beyond comprehension, its form shifting and collapsing in on itself, disappearing down drains and sliding menacingly through air vents. This is best shown when the Mind Flayer pursues Nancy and corners her in a locked room. It takes the powers of Eleven to save her, the Mind Flayer disappearing into the sewers in an oozing, primordial puddle of bloody gloop. Senior visual effects supervisor for *Stranger Things*, Paul Graff, commented on the abcanny construction of the Mind Flayer: "It's not a well-designed creature; it's a thrown-together, nasty, weird body parts creature so it should be limping. Maybe some of those limbs you see are completely dysfunctional and it's just dragging them behind him" (Bucksbaum, n.p.). Staff writer, Kate Trefy pushes the symbolism of this aesthetic even further, stating that "Puberty is disgusting and it's awful [...] Let's lean into that as much as we possibly can" (Bucksbaum, n.p.). They astutely liken the Mind Flayer's transitional gloopiness to the pubertal transformation which occurs not only in the teenage body but also within the chrysalis: the dissolving and reconfiguring of a body into a new, developed form. Considering that the principal characters in *Stranger Things* Season Three are going through teenage puberty – re-establishing their identities and dealing with new emotions they are yet to understand – the Mind Flayer represents their transitional state very effectively, albeit utilising abcanny body horror rather than more gentle motifs and symbolism.[6]

One final example to consider appears in VanderMeer's 2017 novel, *Borne*. Here, creatures have been engineered and set loose by the mysterious Company, resulting in the apocalyptic devastation of an unnamed city. These creatures include the giant bear Mord (standing skyscraper-tall amongst the ruins) and a myriad of insectile and mammalian creatures and fungi. The entity known as Borne is discovered in the fur of Mord by the human protagonist, Rachel, a scavenger searching for biotech amongst the ruins of the city. Initially, Borne is described as resembling "a half closed, stranded sea anemone," but as it increases in size, Borne's form fluctuates, initially becoming more plant-like in nature: "a sleek vase with rippling colors that strayed from purple toward deep blues and sea greens. Four vertical ridges slid up the sides of its warm and pulsating skin […] Much later, I realized it would have smelled different to someone else, might even had appeared in a different form" (3; 6). Borne's form quickly develops abcanny, cross-boundary characteristics: "The sides of Borne peeled back in segments to reveal delicate dark-green tendrils that even in their writhing protected the still hidden core" (18). Throughout the novel, Borne continues to grow in size, phase through different colours, and change from tentacular to human. Borne's physicality is gelatinous and shape-shifting, monstrously consuming flora and fauna, breaking them down into constituent parts to analyse and further comprehend the construction of biological entities. At the end of the novel, Borne manifests into its most abcanny form to fight Mord:

> A glowing purple vase shape, a silhouette rising that could have been some strange new building but was instead a living creature. Borne was failing as Mord, so now he would try his luck as himself. He rose and rose to a full height a little taller than Mord, the familiar tentacles shooting out, while below, at his base, I knew that he was anchored by cilia now each grown as large as me. (312)

In these final moments, Borne becomes a vision of abcanny interspecies monstrosity, plant and animal hybridity within a tentacular biomass of gargantuan proportions. The description of Borne resembling a building, interestingly brings man-made architecture into this abcanny hybridity. Comparisons between Borne and the monster in *The Blob* can be easily drawn, both writhing, gelatinous, consuming, and ever-growing. VanderMeer's novel is one of the most effective examples of the abcanny monstrous in contemporary fiction, playfully presenting encounters with non-human entities in order to realign the reader's anthropocentric ideals. Once again, what VanderMeer achieves in *Borne* is similar to *Annihilation*. In both texts, VanderMeer is utilising abcanny bodies to express a new way of conceptualising the world – one a world rich with interspecies connections and new biological networks. What is also important to remember is how in both of the worlds in which VanderMeer depicts these abcanny bodies are in opposition to destructive, capitalist forces: in *Borne,* this is the Company, whose bioengineering experiments have created this apocalyptic wasteland; in *Annihilation,* the abcanny landscape consumes the invaders of the science party sent into Area X by nefarious, government agency. It is by critically considering ontological boundaries that the abcanny can query and suggest a reassembling of socio-political structures.

VIII

In the depths of the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum lie the specimens that constitute the Spirit Collection tour.[7] After passing through airlocks you are presented with a room full of steel cabinets. There is a mechanically controlled chill in the air, a perfectly maintained temperature. The cabinets remain closed, except for two that have glass fronts, and only then is the fascination of these secret specimens revealed: a bat suspended in amber fluid; a nest of rats preserved in sealed jam jars; a freakish menagerie that you cannot stop looking at. And tentacles. Lots of tentacles, frozen in time, reaching for you. A nine-metre tank dominates the room, the cloudy yellow brine-Formalin slowly revealing its contents like a ghostly, abcanny God. Archie. *Architeuthis Dux*. The giant squid. A real-life Kraken.

Figure 2: Archie, the giant squid specimen at the Natural History Museum. Author's own photograph.

Archie truly is a sight to behold. Her head evokes images of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, rising from the depths. A mass of muscle and mantle. A tentacle lulls to one side, suckers on show, their chitin teeth eager to latch on to flesh. "Archie is a young specimen," we are told. "A teenager." The horror of a fully-sized adult certainly springs into your mind. Archie stretches most of the colossal tank, mesmerising in her grandeur. No wonder the mythology of the Kraken exists.

Figure 3: One of Archie's tentacles, detail of suckers. Author's own photograph.

The tour guide delights in talking about Archie's fans, stories of visitors and their reactions. They mention a man who talked about a book that depicts Archie being stolen. After visiting the Spirit Collection, re-reading the opening of China Miéville's novel *Kraken* (2010) conjures up a sense of déjà-vu. Following our tour guide, I am reminded of Miéville's cephalopod curator Billy Harrow, and his initial discovery of Archie's disappearance. It is easy to see how Miéville may have been inspired by his own visit to the collection. Indeed, he references the sights of the tank room accurately, marvelling at "ribbon-folded oarfish, an echidna, bottles of monkeys [...] tea-coloured crocodiles and deep-sea absurdities" as well as the historical significance of the Beagle jars (9). One's own wonderment at the sight of Archie is matched by Miéville, who remarks upon entering the room as breaching "a Schwarzschild radius of something not canny, and that cephalopod corpse was the singularity" (10). Miéville's description of Archie as "not canny" invites a consideration of the tentacular monster as a body which stretches beyond comprehension, something free from the restrictions of our normal perceptions of the teratological.

In "On Monsters", Miéville concludes the teratological exploration with one final hope: that monsters "Help just occasionally with thinking" and "become permanent parts of our conceptual arsenal, as it is for example my sincere aspirations that the abcanny does" (391). The growing presence and critical appreciation for the abcanny tentacular suggests that Mieville's hope is being realised. These brief critical flashes demonstrate how the tentacular, abcanny monster has many different forms in popular culture. From the hybrid body horror of the Mind Flayer to the gelatinous blob monster, the appendages of the cephalopod to the rhizomatic network of spores and fungi, the tentacular monster has the power to hold our attention, tap into our deepest fears regarding the 'self' and express something to us about interspecies dynamics and the chaotic networks of the contemporary moment.

Long live the tentacle, indeed. Welcome to the abcanny monstrous!

NOTES

1. Weird Fiction has interestingly created its own folklore around monsters and genre characteristics, such as the 'Cthulhu Mythos' to more contemporary iterations such as the roleplaying-game system *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) or video game *Bloodborne* (2015) that each develop a folkloric mythology around the narrative ideas and motifs of the Weird.

2. Popular culture examples of cephalopods and tentacles are far-reaching: from "Doc-Oc" in *Spiderman* to Squidward Tentacles in *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999 – present)*;* Professor Inkling in *Octonauts* (2010-present) to Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (1989); the visiting aliens in *Arrival* (2016) to the kitsch cult classics *Deep Rising* (2008), *Mega Shark versus Giant Octopus* (2009), and *Sharktopus* (2010).

3. It is worth noting Georges Bataille's other interpretation of abjection put forward in his 1934 essay "Abjections and Miserable Forms" – that of 'social abjection' which is often used to describe marginalised social groups such as sex workers, convicts, spies or disavowed citizens, poor, or disabled people.

4. Even though Alex Garland's filmic adaptation (2018) compellingly depicts the weirdness of Area X, the abcanny bodies described in the novel are replaced with more *uncanny* images of people's bodies being consumed by plants, presented as floral statues.

5. In this respect the Mind Flayer is like the monster depicted in China Miéville's short story "Familiar," from the collection *Looking for Jake and Other Stories* (2005), a creature which assimilates the biological and man-made detritus it comes across, transforming into a large, abcanny beast which seeks out its creator.

6. The consideration of burgeoning sexual maturity suggested by the Mind Flayer links into the sexual connotations inherent within the motif of the tentacle. There is not room to develop this idea here but, for more on this, see Hannon 2009.

7. This description of the Spirit Collection is based upon my own experiences of the tour, Thursday 25th August 2016.

WORKS CITED

Alder, Emily. *Weird Fiction and Science in the Fin de Siècle*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Arya, Rita. *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Baker, Timothy C. *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Bennett, Andrew & Royle, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th edition. Pearson Education, 2009.

Bucksbaum, Sydney. "*Behind the Scenes: Stranger Things 3* podcast reveals how puberty inspired the Mind Flayer's monster." *Entertainment Weekly*. 25 July 2019. <https://ew.com/tv/2019/07/25/behind-the-scenes-stranger-things-3-podcast-mind-flayer-episode/>

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror*. Routledge, 1990.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (ed). *Monster Theory*. University of Minnesota Press. 1996.

Duffer Brothers, The, creators. *Stranger Things.* Performances from Millie Bobby Brown, Finn Wolfhard, Winona Ryder, David Harbour. Netflix. Television. 2016-present.

Ellis, Richard. *The Search for the Giant Squid: The Biology and Mythology of the World's Most Elusive Sea Creature*. Penguin Books USA, 1999.

Fuller, Bryan, and Kurtzman, Alex, creators. *Star Trek: Discovery.* Performances by Sonequa Martin-Green, Jason Isaacs, Doug Jones. CBS All Access. Television. 2017-present.

Gittinger, Juli L. *Personhood in Science Fiction.* Palgrave Macmillian, 2019.

Hannon, Amanda. "Sucker Love: Celebrating the Naughty Tentacle," *Tor.com*, 17 December 2009. <https://www.tor.com/2009/12/17/sucker-love/>

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.

Miéville, China. "M R James and the Quantum Vampire". *Collapse IV*. May 2008. 105-128.

---. "Weird fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction.* Edited by Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint. Routledge, 2009. 510-515.

---. *Kraken*, Pan Macmillan, 2010.

---. "Alien Evasion." *Arc 1.1: The Future Always Wins.* Reed Business Information Ltd, 2012. E-book.

---. "On Monsters: Or, Nine or More (Monstrous) Not Cannies." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts,* Vol. 23, No. 3. 2012a. 377-392.

Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Worlds and Share Our Futures.* The Bodley Head, 2020.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE Publications, 2002.

Thompson, Tade. *Rosewater*, Orbit Books. 2018.

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation.* 4th Estate, 2015.

---. *Borne.* 4th Estate, 2017.

Yeaworth, Irvin, director. *The Blob.* Performances from Steve McQueen.1958. Film.

BIONOTE

Rob O'Connor is a Lecturer in Creative Writing and Creative Industries at York St John University, UK. Rob's research focuses on genre theories, Science Fiction and Fantasy, contemporary fiction, creative industries, publishing and creative writing practices. For his PhD research, Rob focused on the work of China Miéville and his use of monsters as a motif to explore different concepts of landscape. Before becoming a lecturer, Rob spent ten years in the book retail industry, working within literary event management. He is also the chairman of York Literature Festival.

SOMETIMES; OTHER TIMES: UNSTITCHING GOTHIC AMBIGUITY IN SOFIA CARRILLO'S *PRITA NOIRE/BLACK DOLL*

Helena Bacon & Luis Daniel Martinez Alvarez

While clearly following in the footsteps of stop-motion animators such as Jan Švankmajer, Wladyslaw Starewicz and the Brothers Quay, Sofia Carrillo's short animation *Prita Noire/Black Doll* (2011) steps away from the allegory and textural weightiness of Švankmajer's work, the complex narratives and humour Starewicz applied to dead animals and the ornate, self-contained structures of the Quays, becoming something altogether more contemporary, mercurial and fragile and a highly original production in its own right. It is a film that, significantly, refuses to answer any of the questions it poses within its narrative or through the means of its construction; its internal mechanisms are created and sustained by repeated contradictions that permeate its constituent components. Narrative elides with and slides away from narration, imagery from object, and doll from human in a fantastical melding of incoherent elements that, in the film's slight eight minutes, leaves the viewer with a series of incompletions that speak to – in their inchoate nature – a wider postmodern Gothic that goes beyond any moral, psychological or narratological framing, and un-anchors even familiar Gothic elements from what might be reliable or programmatic forms and readings. This elliptical assemblage is realised through stop-motion animation, the subsequent kineticism this creates affecting the man-made figure of doll Prita, the spiders that accompany her, and, perhaps more surprisingly, her human sister (a human performer also filmed in stop motion). All are subject to the stop-start method of production stop-motion entails, which creates a disjointed, uncanny mood that permeates the film through the physical manipulation of human and material beings on screen, and indeed by the screen. Because the production process involves a temporal disjunction – with action created through the intense truncation of the painstaking work involved in setting up each static shot – the screen itself in stop-motion becomes not simply a passive recorder of the directed but internally generated movement of an actor filmed with a rolling camera; instead, it becomes an active producer of motion created by external sources – the animator's hands moving or guiding the scene frame by frame.

In *Understanding Animation* (1998), Paul Wells, discussing the idiosyncrasies of short-form stop-motion animation, suggests that "[t]hough all the elements that construct any film are important, the *mutuality* of the constituent elements of the animated film all call attention to themselves as the bearers of significant information because of their place within the short film" (99). The hidden-in-plain-sight elements of cinema that disguise their own construction, then, produce the hyper-real appearance of live-action cinema and, as Wells argues, inform some orthodox forms

of animation also: "[i]ronically, the dominance of the *cartoon* (i.e. traditional cell animation in the style of Disney or Warner Brothers, which is predicated on painting forms and figures directly onto sheets of celluloid which are then photographed) has unfortunately misrepresented the animated film *because* its art seems invisible or, more precisely, is taken for granted by its viewers" (7, original emphasis). *Prita Noire* resists such orthodoxies through its form and its subject matter. Discussing stop-motion, Suzanne Buchan in *Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom* (2011) states that "[t]he viewer of such films […] is confronted with an illogical, yet comprehensible vision of objects that move, have intent and personality, and can be cunning" (xii). The 'mutuality' of the elements in Carrillo's animation, combined with the internally illogical yet overarchingly coherent stop-motion construction elide with Gothic aesthetic and thematic concerns here.

Following this pattern of construction and disintegration, structure and fragmentation, then, we intend in this article to situate *Prita Noire* within the realms of animation and Gothic studies; we will explore how recognisably Gothic traces within Carrillo's film work, in symbiosis with stop-motion animation, construct a world within which this process of coalescence and destabilisation can take place, and how this world presents an extreme and postmodern form of the uncanny, its elements becoming unfamiliar, drifting away from any demonstrable position or exegesis, as soon as we recognise them and projecting a distinct and determined ambiguity despite the material, concrete elements utilised in the film's production. To articulate this, we will examine, using aesthetic, ontological and narrative frameworks, how the film both stitches and unstitches itself (stitching a key motif in the film itself) in both material and narratorial terms; and how specificity – as demanded again by the film's form and its reliance on the material and the object – seems to stand for, or create a series of disquieting absences.

Narrative Condensation: Mutuality and Chronology in *Prita Noire*

The summary of *Prita Noire* provided at and by the Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia, in which *Prita Noire* won Best Animated Short in 2011, simply states "[p]risoners, two sisters share their lives in a foreign land. The everyday and curiosity will lead Prita to turn to the limits of the safe zone" (*Prita Noire* – FICM). Carrillo herself provides an alternative encapsulation on the film's Vimeo page: "[u]n relato espeluznante de dos hermanas unidas por los lazos que las atan: la co-dependencia, la ansiedad de separación y la rutina/A spooky tale of two sisters bound together by the bonds that bind them: co-dependence, separation anxiety, and routine" (*Prita Noire* – Vimeo). These are both sufficient – basic narrative events are accounted for in the former, thematic concerns in the latter – but, if we are to consider the mutuality of filmic components as Wells suggests, then they seem to render them if not inaccurate then severely abridged or simplified and we soon find these components are not harmonious. We are shown Prita's unnamed human sister in a close-up pan down her body – she is sat on a chair; the camera then changes the angle of its approach and we zoom in on Prita herself, a doll sat in a kind of conical jar placed between her sister's legs on the chair. Both are asleep to begin with though Prita soon awakens. Her sister appears troubled by strange dreams, her head twitching and her eyelids flickering as she sleeps. We see a spider stitching up a tear in the sister's lace outfit. Prita sings and looks out at the clouds that surround them and is visited

by a spider. Then we regress to an earlier moment, and see an armless baby doll in a web, presided over by a spider with a doll's face; we view the baby walking, attached to something above it out of shot by threads; finally, we are shown that it has grown hair, the threads have fallen and are being dragged behind it in a world made of scratched walls before we see Prita's face in close-up, staring at the camera, the film suggesting using the most minimal elements that the baby was, in fact, Prita. The spiders then stitch Prita some arms and raise her out of her jar onto her sister's shoulder. She leaves her sister, jumping off a ledge only to be hoisted away into the cloud, seemingly by the spiders. How she got into the jar, where her sister came from, why the one spider has a doll's face when the others do not, why she has no arms… these are just some of the deliberately signposted anomalies and mysteries that the film contains but does not address.

We might hope then that the film's non-diegetic narration might provide further elucidation regarding what these characters are doing here but once again we are left without anything that might resemble clarification:

> There were once two sisters who lived together; only one grew up, but she remained strangely overpowered by the will of her little sister, name Prita. Sometimes if Prita is thirsty, she will sing. Sometimes she is curious. Other times she gets very bored. Sometimes, spiders pay her a visit. Prita does nothing all day. Are days possible here? Time seems endless. Children can lose themselves sometimes; they go to sleep, and grown-ups awake.

Though there are some clear moments of elision – two sisters, singing, spiders, and Prita's stasis – the narration here again minimally suggests any tie to the sequential events of the film itself. These slight, short statements do not adhere in any strict sense to what we are being shown, with the question posed by the narration considered implicitly through this loose collection of images and events. Ewan Wilson in "Diagrams of Motion" (2018) states that "live-action filmmaking halts the march of time for its subjects, while animation creates time for that which has none of its own" (149). Given that *Prita Noire* utilises both 'live-action' in the form of Prita's human sister yet applies stop-motion to her and to puppet Prita, the temporality of the film is disjointed throughout via its specific elements and 'actors'. Wilson continues, suggesting that "stop-motion animation employs the evocative quality of the plastic arts to give the illusion of occupying the same temporal reality as its audience" (150); the manufactured plasticity of stop-motion figures and their interaction with their surroundings seems to locate them in an equivalent corporeal and sequential arena to the viewer even if a fantasy world is being depicted. This 'illusion' is constructed, then, through the way each frame is forcibly creating a sense of time for the film's puppets, as well as the defined running time of the film itself, and also synchronously through the film's narration and its single human presence. The question as to whether 'days' are possible within the realm it depicts is answered both in the affirmative and the negative because time seems to pass for one character and not the other and the live-action element of the film suggests a stasis while the animated elements create a

temporal movement, the two interfering with each other through their interaction within the film and their separate, representative presences.

We are left with two figures, then, human and doll, flesh and plastic, the trajectories of which converge and diverge, highlighting and distorting each other as they progress within a concurrently existent and non-existent timeframe. Wells suggests that "[a]nimation predominantly occurs in the short form and manages to compress a high degree of narratorial information into a limited period of time through a process of condensation" (76). Both definitions of the term 'condensation' seem to apply to *Prita Noire*: the film compacts a great deal of information into these stylistic and temporal confines. We have seemingly a longer chronology squashed into the film's running time, with the suggested flash-back to Prita's development from baby to girl, as well as a whole world suggested, if withheld in actuality, that encompasses a doll/human relationship, some kind of transgression or oppression indicated from the manner in which they are contained, the influential presence of arachnids, and the possibilities left open by the sisters' separation. The film also produces different states through the instability of the images themselves, the disjointed material textures Carrillo contrasts – the flesh of a human and the clay and cloth of a doll; thick, inert glass and ever-spinning and unravelling spider silk; shifting cloud occasionally punctured by reflections of light – and the strange way the visual story both is and isn't reproduced in the film's verbal one. These combinations mean that we get the never-quite-fluid transformation of narration into image and vice-versa, the narrative so insecurely collected, like Prita's unfinished arms, that the compression of these elements, instead of distilling them into greater clarity, pushes them into new, unclear territory. The solidity of Prita and her sister and the way in which they move – the visible effect of the animator on their presentation – directly contrasts and, therefore, highlights the more amorphous nature of the narrative and narration that directs them, as well as the rain, tears and cloud that make up the other less concrete matter that features within the film. Condensation disturbs, through proximity and truncation, any real sense we might get here of what is going on beyond the direct, immediate statements Prita makes – thirst, singing, boredom – and leaves us to weave together or untangle these facets as we can, the process of stop-motion animation itself indicating its own compacted form of continuity because of the way it is produced, one cell or still at a time, and the way that it cannot avoid revealing the method of its production through its tangible, material qualities and the never-quite-fluid transformation of image into movement.

Returning to the Morelia Festival's summary, the only signification we have that they are 'prisoners' (the term, or anything similar, not actually used at all within Prita's account) is the glass jar Prita appears in and the chairs they are both sat on, though it is unclear whether the sister is tied to hers with her arms behind her back or if she too simply lacks arms. It seems at first that it is solely Prita who is contained in this way, the sister sat among the clouds with no other built environment around her. However, at 03.43 minutes into the film, for just a moment, we see a wide shot of the sister who appears to be in her own much larger jar; this seems to a fleeting hint at the way their world might be constructed as a series of prisons, the 'safe zone' Prita escapes a form of entrapment which is then simply replaced by a larger, but otherwise identical one. These 'safe' prisons are without origin or function beyond both being and signifying walls and the only opening is the gaps in the tops of the jars. What that freedom might be, the realm beyond the glass and the cloud, is never realised.

Material Disjuncture: Animate and Inanimate Systems in *Prita Noire*

This loose end suggests then that the means of Prita's new-found freedom at the end of the film become the new terms of her confinement, just as the mode of animation becomes the means of narrative confinement because the two cannot be undone or unpicked from each other despite seeming to have separate lives. The crafting of the film itself draws attention to itself as a form of containment through simulation, one that the sisters are trapped in and one in which we struggle to locate meaning, a synthetic world where the human has no agency and even her tears are produced by the whims and absences of her fabricated sister. Buchan states that "since many of the worlds that animation conjures technically can have little to do with the tangible world, the viewer must be able to develop different schemata from those she constructs for live-action film" (117). If, as Wells continues, "[t]hree-dimensional animation is directly concerned with the expression of materiality and, as such, the creation of a certain *meta*-reality which has the same physical property as the real world," (90) then the film seems to be making a case for moving away from materialism into a new conceptual schema – the equal positioning or conceptualising of objects and people within an ontological framework. Graham Harman establishes this philosophical position clearly in the opening chapter of *The Quadruple Object* (2011) when he suggests that materialism "is the hereditary enemy of any object-oriented philosophy" and that "objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional," (107). *Prita Noire*, in positioning a doll as 'sister' to a human without seemingly needing to explain why, animating both through stop-motion/pixilation and having their entrapped states echo each other, suggests a levelling of the material and human within this cloud-filled plane that reflects Harman's philosophical position. The synthetic features of the film stand on equal terms to the corporeal and human, this footing granted again through the animation employed to move every element that sits within the film's frames. Despite the ambiguity the film consciously employs, there appears to be some interaction here with the idea that objects are just as possessed of significance as the human realm and – contradicting Buchan's assertion that the "human form is paired in binary opposition with the nonhuman creatures and inanimate objects" (53) in stop-motion – fuse with it in developmental ways within Carrillo's film.

Look again, however, at the film's components and we find that even this conceptualisation does not fully adhere to what the film is showing and telling us. *Prita Noire* seems to leapfrog Harman's conceptualisation of the object and, through simulation, ascribe all of the 'life', or consciousness, to Prita and *not* her sister. Rather than simply a 'meta-reality' that either emulates, mirrors or matches the real world in any given ontological hierarchy, the objects here, whether it be Prita, the spiders, the glass jars, or the threads, all enact some kind of effect within the film as opposed to the human sister, who sits, eyes shut until the film's end, clearly tormented but unable to react to the forces being exerted upon her. Of course, Prita and the spiders are granted movement, agency and influence where glass jars and silk are not, but they exist, materially, within the same realm and inhabit the same man-made parameters. The film does not try to disguise their material qualities, but instead enhances them through their textual and physical relation to the paralysed human form among them.

Wells suggests that "[t]hese aspects of signification create the climate of the uncanny yet maintain the essential *concreteness* of objects rather than place them in transition" (91); while the narrative may be fluid in a sense, we never lose sight of Prita's doll form and the importance of the material and the textural within the film – the spiders stitch the film's title as they stitched her arms, and the credits do not show either sister but are overlaid against a range of surfaces featured within it: glass, lace, mirror, carved walls. What is concrete remains concrete: Prita moves, sings, gasps and experiences emotions but her proximity to her human sister mean we never forget that she is a 'made' object that is doing all of these things, and not a puppet passing as human because of a lack of other defining context that we might find in a film that solely animates the man-made, without human presence. Indeed, Wells continues: "[s]imultaneously, the object etc. is both alien and familiar; familiarity is a mark of associational security while alienation emerges from the displacement of use and context" (91). We know Prita is a doll but might accept the possibility of her being 'alive' within certain confines due to the familiarity and abundance of non-human or semi-human figures within animation in general, as Buchan suggests: "[w]e see a moving image, but we know that the objects we see appear alive are pure artifice [but] the spectator may oscillate between this awareness and a sublimation of it that allows her to perceive animated objects as living" (104). The viewer straddles or at least shifts between belief and disbelief, allowing Prita to become not just doll but character within the same tangible realm as her sister, at least some of the time. Here, however, we have none of the usual narrative referentials that might make this acceptance quicker or easier. We are continually presented with a discordant doll/human relationship and are faced with the prospect that Prita is in control, as the narration suggests: the human sister remains 'strangely overpowered' by the little doll below her, and unable to exert any control over her attachment or detachment to her.

The potentially sinister quality of the uncanny life located in Prita points us towards reading the film as Gothic Horror, a more productive framework than any kind of ontological experiment and one more obviously manifested here. In *The Gothic Vision* (2002), Dani Cavallaro suggests: "[n]arratives of darkness give shape to the disorientating sensations […] by intensifying their power and frequency through an emphasis on the irreducible hold of the inexplicable" (14). Alongside the distinctly Gothic aesthetic Carrillo models, then, we can also pinpoint the ways in which the uncanny enhances the film's generation of symbiotic order and disorder. Multiple strands of the uncanny are woven together here, each enhancing the other. As Joana Rita Romalho suggests in "The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls" (2020): "[i]n the Gothic imagination, dolls are scary simply because they are dolls, their presence is enough to instil fear. Moreover, it is the camera itself that creates Gothicity by privileging the object and making it the focus of the action" (33). Dolls as simulacra of human life are innately uncanny creations, even more so if they appear to move, to model the autonomy of the living (or in this case, to appropriate it), to speak, to think without explicit human manipulation. Romalho emphasises that the object becomes subject here, the material superseding or even erasing the human as the locus or driver of said action. The film's aesthetic certainly overlaps with this threat; though removed substantially from standard signifiers and locations of the Gothic or of Horror cinema, there is still a presentation of dark influences and possibilities here generated by Prita. The Gothic seems located in Prita herself and the spiders that seem to tend her and her sister. She is the eponymous 'black doll' of the film's title – both named 'doll' and made 'doll' by Carrillo's

decision to make her a model and use a live actor for her sister. Her 'doll' qualities are further emphasised and yet corrupted by the ways in which her form is rendered in Gothic terms. She is, in essence, what a doll should be – small, babyish, with short limbs and a large head that houses disproportionately large eyes but otherwise small features.

Her form, however, does not adhere completely to these expectations but rather takes on a specifically Gothic presentation. She has rough cut black hair; her eyes are mismatched in size and seem – despite the muted tones Carrillo employs – to be heterochromatic; her teeth are primitively rendered and appear blackened again by the almost monochromatic world the pair exist in, her mouth caught somewhere between a smile and a sneer. She has no arms until the spiders weave some for her, and despite being both doll and the younger, or certainly smaller sister (we are never given their ages but are simply told that 'only one grew up') is the one in control. Romalho continues: "Gothic dolls rarely appear fully undamaged, their physiognomy vividly displaying the corruption caused by human manipulation and the passage of time" (30). Here, intriguingly, the damage and corruption visible on Prita's form does not seem to have been caused by human hands but is inherent to the doll herself – she has 'grown-up' looking like this, inhabiting this aesthetic. What are supposed to typify baby-like features – innocence, cuteness, what is, in essence, doll-like – is recognizable but made even more unsettling, uneven, or incomplete because we are not sure if Prita's appearance is simply surface detail or an organic manifestation of an inherently 'corrupt' nature, as this physiognomy only intensifies as Prita develops, as depicted in the flashback sequence covering Prita's babyhood before the spiders finally stitch arms for her, concretizing her 'made' status. The film goes on to suggest this nature is possible: if, in its bridging the distance between past and present and artifice and the real, "contemporary Gothic seeks the illusion of the hand-made" (Spooner 200) as opposed to the natural, the modern or the mass-produced, and privileges the explicitly crafted in order to hide a possible lack of meaning behind an aesthetic artifice, then the hand-made, the artifice, here seeks both the illusion of the real then control over it, revealing the uncanny un-life Prita possesses, and seems to use if not against, then in manipulation of her sister. She is only stopped by something more material and unbending than her – a wall of glass she cannot be lifted over or climb.

If, as Sigmund Freud suggests in "The Uncanny" (1919, McLintock translation, 2003), "children are not afraid of their dolls coming to life" (141), this possibility an extension of the manner with which they play with them and respond to a doll's mimicry of human qualities, then the implication is that (in what Freud leaves unsaid) an adult response to a doll 'coming to life' is fear, or certainly trepidation, generated through the knowledge that, while it looks human, it is not and should not model life but remain a static, mimetic image of it; its potentiality always rests in the human hands that touch and move it, rather than in its own form. Buchan states:

> [p]uppet animation can create an analogous experience for the viewer of similar so-called miracles – nonorganic entities, machines, and objects that are materially extant in the phenomenal world but have qualities on-screen (cognizance, intention, ability to move independently, to react) that would otherwise reside only in the imagination (xx).

Prita is the moving force here, the creator and narrator of her bid for freedom in the limited world she inhabits at the film's beginning. It is her 'will', as she says, and not that of her grown, human sister, that dominates the relationship, which has little physical interplay other than the suggestion that Prita singing somehow produces tears from her sister that assuage Prita's thirst, an effect produced from an unconscious response. In *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001) Victoria Nelson, discussing a "post-religious intellectual culture" that has led to the use of the grotesque, and puppets and dolls specifically, in a wide range of cultural productions suggests that the "repressed" religious experience or desire:

> endures as a fascination with the spiritualizing of matter and the demiurgic infusion of soul into human simulacra [… which] came to carry the burden of our outlawed but tenacious belief in the holiness of graven images, and behind that in the immortality of the human soul […] (20).

Here, this material reversal and spiritualization is taken to extremes – we go beyond a doll physically manipulating a human, and instead see a doll subconsciously manipulating one instead. The material, the graven image, goes beyond itself, embodying a form of holiness to the human beside it and becoming not only physically grotesque or uncanny, but psychically affective also.

The sisters, though different 'species' in material terms, act also as an uncanny double, which seems amplified, in accordance again with Freud's conceptualisation, "by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other – what we would call telepathy – so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience" (141). Prita's sister never actually looks at her, and never speaks. The film never seems to address whether this telepathic, uncanny connection the two have is benign or not, Prita's will a force that is neither defined as keeping her sister stable or subjecting her to (though limited by setting and context) the unknown whims of her animated counterpart. The film retains this ambivalence and an enduring sense of the *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* converging in Prita as she moves to separate herself from her living double. This is again another reversal – here of the typical horror trope of someone trying to rid themselves of a wayward or malevolent doll animated by any number of suspicious circumstances. Prita's movement has no obvious cause: she and her sister just 'are', existing symbiotically in their glass jar world. Uncanniness is then generated through her relationship to her sister and not through the common referentials of the material world of horror with some recognizable 'real-life' settings – Prita is not actually 'haunted' or possessed, just as her aesthetic has not been brought about through degradation, but she nevertheless troubles her sister here through the ways in which her movements and presence seem coupled to the distress the sister exhibits and then through the creation of distance between them as Prita leaves.

Freud continues: "[i]t is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of 'chance'" (44). The sister's doubling

continues through their repeated, concurrent experiences and the imagery used to invoke them, Prita's 'escape' thrown into question as there is no indication that she has breached the larger jar; narrative resolution is withheld despite our attempts to create a form of orthodoxy or locate a logical structure within the film. Instead of linear storytelling, the narrative sequence is further distorted through these repeated images – vases that contain worlds that relate but barely interact, and that represent vessels used to store flowers, beautiful objects that are dying as they are admired until their visual value rots into collapse. Prita cannot 'die' because she is a puppet, a simulacrum of a human, yet she seems to bear the marks of the deathly as determined by her Gothic presentation and traditional Horror patterns which again problematise her connection with her living and troubled counterpart. Prita, until her escape, has a simple existence. She is either thirsty, curious or bored – the simple, nascent emotions of a child – whilst her mute sister seems to suffer unspoken psychical torments that cause her head to twitch in staccato fashion, movements interspersed with the odd, troubled smile. When her eyes open as Prita is leaving, we hear the sound of something crumbling, the image and sound bearing little obvious relation to each other, as Wells suggests: "[o]ften […] apparently impossible relationships are created through the fusions of contrasting figures and forms, placing formerly disjunct or unrelated elements into new conjunctions" (93). A new sign is produced through previously unrelated images and sounds, and becomes a new language for psychological collapse, which seems to continue as Prita escapes and tears track down her sister's face, again depicted through stop motion rather than a rolling camera, every movement or micro-movement separated by the incremental motion capture of the animated form. This gives the film its own uncanny life, one much longer and more expansive than the simple information given by the object and spaces bounded within the screen. These iterations and repetitions of the uncanny, however, are left unresolved as no narrative resolution is ever reached; indeed, the film determinedly resists such outcomes and retains a distinctly homogenous irregularity.

Gothic incoherence: an unanchored uncanny in *Prita Noire*

We can link this resistance to the idiosyncrasy of animation (and of stop-motion animation specifically) with notions of representation and postmodernism as related to the Gothic. In *Gothic Literature* (2013), Andrew Smith suggests that "a contemporary post-modern […] world is defined by the absence of absolute meaning, and in literature this becomes manifested through stylistic play in which narrative and form are run together to create synthetic worlds which foreground issues about representation above any moral or metaphysical concerns" (141). Though Smith is discussing literature, his analysis still adheres in relation to animation; the animated form, through the slow craftsmanship involved and the manner in which animation has always been subversive, as Wells suggests, because it has been marginalized or relegated to limited or child-based audiences, has meant that these 'unguarded spaces', unseen or disregarded by mainstream and/or adult audiences, have produced opportunities for animators to use the "unique vocabulary available to the animator which is not the province of the live-action film-marker" (11). Smith continues: "post-modernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world" (141).

Prita Noire seems, again through the potentiality of its form, to exist with and utilise this incoherence. Everything is carefully chosen: there cannot be anything we could confidently label as arbitrary here, given how each frame in its eight minutes has been tangibly manipulated by the animator herself. And yet, once again, nothing quite adds up. The uncanny is usually employed with a purpose; Fred Botting, having previously suggested one iteration of it was the unresolved past returning to trouble the present in *Gothic* (1996), updates his position in *Limits of Horror* (2008), arguing that "[t]he uncanny, less a return from the past, becomes an effect of a disturbed present, a present affected by massive upheaval and transformation" (7). Though there exists, as outlined, the possibility that the film is engaging in ideas of material equality or even superiority, that the human condition is at risk from interference by a representative of the world of objects, or even the more familiar trope of a child-like or doll-like figure having unnatural abilities that may not be entirely without malevolence, the uncanny here is also here a venue for the "doubleness of modernity: fantasy erupts into reality, ghosts, death, darkness and monstrosity crossing lines of exclusion, otherness returning upon the same," (Botting 7). The bare-bones formulation of this animation means that, though it uses the uncanny in intense ways, it stops short of suggesting that it has any real kind of allegorical function or is engaged in a meaningful contemporary commentary or returning formerly repressed aspects to the fore. The uncanny here exists, through image and narrative, but is not given its usual textual or contextual purpose; it is freed from any usual historical or cultural anchors and becomes simply another undefined element in this collection of assorted incompletions, identifiable only in form rather than function, the material concealing the absence beneath.

If, as Noël Carroll suggests in "Why Horror?" (2002), "horror thrives as a narrative form" (34), and that it focusses centrally on "not the monster as such but the whole narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged," then once again, *Prita Noire*, beyond Prita's appearance, avoids orthodox manifestations of horror and any such manifestations become sublimated into the specifics of the world she occupies; it is a narrative of ideas, rather than one of sequence. Carroll continues, suggesting that "what leads people to seek out horror is fascination," (40) a fascination that is indulged, disgust set aside or quelled, because the logistical and moral issues regarding how to deal with a monster are negated through its unreality; we know it is a fiction, a mirage. *Prita Noire* embodies this allure, creating an implicit horror that resides within the unknowable that takes our fascination and returns it to us, unanswered. If "[h]orror stories, in a significant number of cases, are dramas of proving the existence of the monster and disclosing (most often gradually) the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster" (Carroll 34), then Carrillo allows us to know only the identity (in very limited terms) of her horror and makes us guess at the rest. We return to the uncanny as a force suspended between two states or spheres of influence – Prita remains 'concrete' rather than 'transitional' but the circumstances regarding her existence and future remain very much in flux and open to interpretation despite the 'flashback' we are given regarding her relationship with the spiders. Cavallaro suggests that "[u]ncanny effects arise when familiar circumstances unexpectedly acquire unfamiliar connotations without our being able to ascertain how or why this has happened" (4). We are used to flashbacks providing or leading us toward narrative closure; here though not only does the chronological regression remain completely untethered to Prita's narration, but it remains, itself, incomplete. Her connection to the spiders is undefined, whatever she is tied to above her

remains resolutely out of shot and the temporal parameters of her development are unclear and unmarked. We know the spiders have tangible effects on this world in that they stitch bits of it together, but given they also stitch the title, as mentioned, their presence draws attention to this film as construction – another one of their incomplete projects and an example of artifice perpetuating artifice. The resolution we expect is denied by these usually explanatory sequences, and Prita's origin remains incompletely rendered. The sequence ends with Prita looking directly at the camera as if in rebuke to our expectations and as confirmation of her undefined existence, the close-up shot of her face at 03.37 the most unsettling moment within the film, Prita's expression undeterminable yet not blank, her smile-come-sneer turned fully on us. The viewer is positioned briefly as Prita's sister is, stuck in between the known and unknown and subject to both the influence of narrative absence and potentially malevolent presence.

Wells states that symbols are "defined by a series of substitutions" (63). The images curated and presented resist firm interpretation, remaining distanced behind the screen despite their hyper-tangible appearance and effects. We know they have meaning, but we must engage in continuing analysis and addition in order to interpret what that meaning might be, and even then, we are not guaranteed conclusions, just as Prita seems suspended between possible freedom and further entrapment. The form itself takes on the mechanism of its narrative in a labyrinthine yet rapid wind towards an end, or series of dead ends. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981, Glaser translation 1994), Jean Baudrillard suggests that "an entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view" (10). We require a visible continuum, a visible point, a visible myth, or origin, which reassures us about our end. Prita and her sister have no 'past' we can stockpile: their world, though real in a material sense, disintegrates into cloud beyond their bounded forms. We, and they, are denied this sequential hoard, and are simply given an ontological accumulation of individuated objects; we must drift between symbol and state as they do – all we have are the frames we are given: "[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyper-real" (Baudrillard 1). This accumulation in the film constructs a sense of this "hyper-real" but withholds what the objects collectively and individually might even begin to mean as we struggle to locate them within a given textual framework or a cultural one beyond the horror of postmodern dissolution, as Botting suggests: "Boundaries between fiction and reality blur, to the extent that each interpenetrates and shapes the other, dismantling conventional patterns of differentiation" (Botting 5). We are given a heterochromatic experience – real and manufactured, symbol and source, substitution and original – to unravel and must consider the animation as Prita does her own existence – naively, thirsty for progression and unsure of the outcome because Carrillo's presentation paralyses any approach beyond this natal dubiety. We are positioned as are Prita and her sister in this evasive Gothic form, only more culturally helpless as we do not have the spiders to patch up our unravelling comprehension.

Cavallaro suggests that:

> [t]he interaction of terror and horror is most explicitly conveyed by stories that articulate the experience of fear as an ongoing condition. Such narratives intimate that fear is not triggered by a single disturbing moment or occurrence but is actually a permanent aspect of being-in-the-world […] Concrete and intangible phenomena contribute equally to its dynamics. (6)

What *Prita Noire* is doing then, both directly, indirectly, quickly and gradually, through objects, symbols and visual dialogue, is generating fear – fear of and fear for Prita, small and vulnerable in a vast but limited world, and fear for her sister, who seems both vulnerable to Prita and vulnerable without her; fear that we either don't understand what is happening in this world, and fear that there might be nothing to understand, that there is no meaning – we cannot fill in the gaps because there is nothing to fill them with. Mutuality, then, involves vacancy. We, or it, are deficient. The sisters' separation, instead of resolving this or assuaging our anxieties, only perpetuates this sensation, rendering it 'ongoing.' We, in our world and in theirs (we can barely see more than they can, barring the larger glass jar) have no choice but to accept the indeterminacy we are constantly subjected to in the film, and live with the distress it generates.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the film's refusal to provide any standard narrative cohesion, undoing each interpretation it suggests as it suggests it, returns us time and again to the form itself. The eight minutes of stop-motion animation that utilises both man-made, material, 'plastic' life *and* the human, shown in conjunction and subject to the same formal processes, forces us to acknowledge that we are trying to stich things together like Carrillo's spiders. However, our interpretations are forever thwarted by the resistance of the images presented to our attempts to constrain them through conventions of narrative, setting or time. The inherently uncanny nature of stop-motion is exacerbated in *Prita Noire* by numerous other instances of the uncanny – alienated forms and figures, temporal discordance, doublings, and repetitions – that are never determined. Gothic aesthetics provide a source of further disruption, giving life and power to the embodied, deathly world Carrillo has created while holding the ghostly living in a tormented stasis, the material beings around Prita's sister moving and acting as she should be moving and acting. Her agency is displaced, transposed onto a small, ghastly doll who is, nevertheless, her sister. Even the horror this might generate, however, is ultimately disturbed by a fleeting clue that Prita's escape might end up limited by the new parameters that she will eventually discover keep her trapped still in this world of glass jars and cloud storms, simply in larger confines. Wells' mutuality here is once again condensed back into a world of specifics – indeed, all we are left with are specifics that we cannot then piece back together in any satisfying way nor use to get beyond the hand-made artifice we are shown: the 'synthetic world' of *Prita Noire*, in its taciturn oscillation between temporal, corporeal, material, and narrative states, presents a new kind of stop-motion arrangement. The film generates an acutely nebulous form of the uncanny and a refusal of

representation, perversely, in its truncation, stretching the incoherence of postmodern frameworks Smith outlines to new limits and rendering even familiar Gothic elements uncomfortably inconcrete.

WORKS CITED

Buchan, Suzanne. *Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Botting, Fred. *Limits of Horror.* University of Manchester Press, 2008.

Botting, Fred. *Gothic.* Routledge, 1996.

Carroll, Noel. "Why Horror?" *Horror: The Film Reader*. Edited by Mark Jancovich, Routledge, 2002, pp. 33-46.

Cavallaro, Dani. *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear.* Continuum, 2002.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny.* 1919. Translated by David McLintock, Penguin, 2003.

Harman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*. Zero Books, 2011.

Nelson, Victoria. *The Secret Life of Puppets*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

Prita Noire/Black Doll. Directed by Sofia Carrillo, Consejo Estatal para la Cultura y las Artes & Nahuyaca Films, 2011. Film.

"Prita Noire – Peliculas, FICM". *Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia*. 2011. https://moreliafilmfest.com/en/peliculas/prita-noire/.

Prita Noire/Black Doll. "Tagline". *Vimeo*. Accessed 17 October 2021. https://vimeo.com/ 415040713

Romalho, Joana Rita. "The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film." *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 27-38.

Smith, Andrew. *Gothic Literature.* 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Spooner, Catherine. "Twenty-First-Century Gothic." *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination.* 2014. Edited by Dale Townsend, British Library, 2015, pp. 180-215.

Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation.* Routledge, 1998.

Wilson, Ewan. "Diagrams of Motion: Stop-motion Animation as a Form of Kinetic Sculpture in the Short Films of Jan Švankmajer and the Brothers Quay". *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal,* vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, pp. 148-161.

BIONOTES

Helena Bacon has taught literature, film and creative writing across the University of East Anglia, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Nottingham, and is currently visiting lecturer in film and television at the University of Suffolk, UK. She has published work in journals such as *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, *Gothic Studies*, *Horror Studies* and *Gramarye*, among others, has presented at various conferences both nationally and internationally and is now working on her first monograph - *Nuclear Gothic: Textual and Cultural Fusion* - due out with Anthem, 2023.

Luis Daniel Martínez Alvarez has a Bachelor of Music from the Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP), Master in Research in Images, Art, Culture and Society from the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos, Master in Studies on Orchestration and Composition for Film, Television and Videogames from the Berklee College of Music of Boston, and PhD in Creation and Theories of Culture from the University of the Americas Puebla, in addition, he has courses on art at International Universities such as Yale on Classical Music and its musicological and theoretical relationship. He is the author of several book chapters and articles on topics related to music, philosophy, art, sociology, film and animation in Mexico, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany and India. He specializes in studies on philosophy, sociology, animated film, musicology, and art history.

"SHE LUSTED AFTER BUILDINGS, AND THEY LUSTED AFTER HER": OBJECTOPHILIA AND COMMODITY ANIMISM IN JUNJI ITO'S "WOODEN SPIRIT" AND "FUTON"

Leonie Rowland

A Series of Shocks

Neoliberal Japan is often discussed in Gothic terms.[1] In *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic* (2013), Michael J. Blouin refers to customary paradigms of the country "as a monstrosity, as sheer excess, as unbridled capitalism run amok" (104). Likewise, in *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012), Charles Shirō Inouye argues that "Japanese culture is profoundly Gothic," suggesting that the Gothic inhabits day-to-day life in twenty-first century Japan (444). Accordingly, this paper views the social ramifications of Japanese capitalism in a Gothic framework, focusing specifically on the symbolic animation of inanimate objects, which are treated as substitutes for human connection in Junji Ito's manga short stories "Wooden Spirit" and "Futon" (2014). In doing so, it demonstrates, first, that horror in these texts is generated by the departure from conservative narratives surrounding wealth and gender, combined with the implication that transgression from social norms is only acceptable if it is carried out within the capitalist system; second, that both texts privilege object obsession over human connection, framing the fetishisation of private property as a source of personal loneliness and cultural destruction; and third, that Japan being "profoundly Gothic" in the twenty-first century can be attributed at least in part to the transgressive human–object relations proffered by Japanese capitalism (Inouye 444).[2]

The connection between "mass destruction" and capitalism that Christopher Sharett identifies in *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005) as a defining feature of Japanese Horror marks a point of return to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to the reimagining of the Japanese home, family, and community in a neoliberal framework (xii). Despite the fact that Japan was already a budding capitalist nation, economic reforms implemented during the postwar years of Allied occupation (1945-1952) are best understood in terms of Naomi Klein's disaster capitalism, which she outlines in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007).[3] For Klein, this brand of capitalism occurs when disasters – in this case, the concurrent bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to Japan's unconditional surrender – are viewed as "exciting market opportunities" (6). Consequently, socioeconomic reforms are implemented in societies that, in better health, would have resisted them. Klein argues that disasters such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki put

> the entire population into a state of collective shock. The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies […] Like the terrorised prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect (17).

Despite the fact that the term was coined decades after Hiroshima, John Dower's description of occupied Japan echoes Klein's definition of disaster capitalism. In *Cultures of War* (2011), he argues that America's "political and civic virtues helped make it possible to move decisively during the brief window of a few years *when defeated Japan itself was in flux and most receptive to radical change*" (338, emphasis mine). Dower's language resists moral judgement – he uses "in flux" and "receptive" where Klein uses "shocked" and "coercion" – but the overwhelming consensus is that Japan was a passive partner in the creation of its postwar foundations (Dower 338; Klein 17). Thus, since Japan's emergence into the global marketplace meant restructuring around Western economic models – first in 1868 at the dawn of the Meiji era, then during the Allied occupation – the capitalist system is coded as a tool of de-Nipponisation, often harnessed by the Japanese themselves as a means of competing with Western powers. As such, the texts in question do not necessarily assert that Japan is unique in the pervasiveness of its capitalist system, but rather that the manner of its implementation and continued manifestation have perverted traditional Japanese values, leading to an eruption of transgressive human-object relations in fact and fiction alike.

The loneliness epidemic that Japan has been facing since the 1980s is a direct result of capitalist reforms. In *Japan's Old Men are the World's Loneliest* (2018), psychologist Junko Okamoto calls Japan the "loneliness superpower," using language associated with the nation's economic ambitions ("superpower") to emphasise the duality of its much-coveted world influence (cited in Lewis, n.p.). Loneliness, Okamoto implies, not only results from Japan's economic power but surpasses it in the global consciousness. The word *kodokushi*, or lonely death, was first used at the height of Japan's economic success in the 1980s to describe people who were dying alone and remaining undiscovered for long periods of time. The word *karōshi*, or death by overwork, was also used at this time to describe individuals, usually successful businessmen, who dropped dead without any prior signs of illness. Both terms are evidence of the breakdown of traditional social bonds (such as family and marriage, which are explicitly or implicitly absent in both scenarios) and are indicative of a nationwide environment where people cannot form interpersonal relations because they are devoted to corporate culture. In this way, capitalism makes people lonely and then uses their loneliness to sell them the illusion of companionship through cunningly Shintoesque marketing techniques.

In *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006), Anne Allison argues that the value placed on personal acquisition in Japan is a result of wide-spread social disconnect. This drives people to seek companionship in commodities, compensating for inadequate interpersonal relations by purchasing goods that have been encoded with personalities. Typically,

these goods include anything from anthropomorphic products like Tamagotchis or Pokémon, to games consoles and virtual partners, to brands that one associates with oneself. Such strategies are particularly prevalent in Japan because of their roots in animism, which Roger J. Davies in *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations* (2016) describes as the "attribution of conscious life to nature or natural objects, and a belief in the existence of innumerable spirits which are thought to inhabit sacred places and which are intimately involved in human affairs" (40). Whereas animism is usually associated with reverence for the natural world, the allocation of "conscious life" to commodities relocates the "sacred places" of Shinto to supermarkets and shopping malls (40). Allison calls this "commodity animism," suggesting that contemporary Japanese commercial culture inhabits a pseudo-spiritual realm where objects are endowed with personalities (86). It is the ownership of these 'living' things that allows people to exist without contact with others, making personal acquisition a priority insofar as it is a comfort. This is evident in "Wooden Spirit," when a woman is sexually fulfilled by her house instead of her husband, suggesting that the ownership of private property is a greater source of intimacy than marriage. The same can be said for "Futon," when an adulterer turns to his bed rather than his spouse to protect him from evil spirits that have inhabited his flat. This kind of animism is less about reverence for the natural world and more about ownership of the commercial objects that have overrun it. However, these products also offer a carefully constructed alternative to a lifetime of loneliness, reinforcing conservative narratives by locating the solution to problems caused by the capitalist system within the system itself.

Accordingly, in *The System of Objects* (1968), Jean Baudrillard argues that human relationships have become relationships of consumption because they are experienced indirectly through commodities. He uses the purchase of wedding rings, through which the idea of marriage is consumed, as an example. In "Wooden Spirit," the building facilitates Manami's objectophilia and is thus consumed as the idea of sexual union. Likewise, in "Futon," Tomio's bedding becomes an expression of his absent mother and alienated partner, allowing him to consume the illusion of safety by concealing himself in its comforting embrace. The commodification of human faculties is, in Baudrillard's words, the formal logic of the commodity as analysed by Karl Marx "in its most extreme expression," demonstrating that his reading of commodity in *The System of Objects* is essentially Marxist (216). As such, it complements my readings of the relationship between late capitalist consumerism and Japanese religious culture (the marriage of which creates commodity animism). However, for Baudrillard, it cannot "be said that objects are an automatic substitute for the relationship that is lacking, that they serve to fill a void: on the contrary, they *describe* this void" (221, original emphasis). Whereas objects in these stories certainly describe the void between people, they are also anthropomorphised as direct substitutes for lacking human relations. In "Wooden Spirit," this substitution is effective, since Manami's seduction animates the house, and they achieve sexual union. In "Futon," it is not, and the futon is revealed as a mere descriptor of the void left by the destruction of Tomio's maternal and marital ties. In both cases, commodity animism ultimately offers the women in question a better life to the one they were previously living. However, it also reinstates conservative narratives that frame neoliberalism as a moral force, designed to protect those who adopt it as an ideology. This protection is, of course, illusionary, and one oppression (in this case, patriarchal figures) is traded for another (dependence on commercially available objects).

As such, horror in these texts is derived from the assertion that liberation from gendered social constraints can only take place within the capitalist system.

Fetishising the Domestic Space

Junji Ito is arguably the most successful contemporary horror *mangaka* in Japan and certainly the most well-known in the West. His cannon ranges from *Uzumaki*, a three-volume epic about a town overtaken by spirals; to *Tomie*, which ran from 1987-2000 and follows a beautiful girl who is periodically dismembered and reborn; to *Junji Ito's Cat Diary: Yon & Mu*, a semi-biographical account of his cats. In 2019, Ito received the Eisner Award for his adaptation of Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein* (1818), and has written numerous short stories that have influenced (and are influenced by) the Japanese Gothic and J-Horror traditions, as well as their Western counterparts. "Futon" and "Wooden Spirit" (also known as "Blanket" and "Haunted Wood Mansion") open his 2014 collection *Fragments of Horror* (or *Shard of Evil*), which was originally serialised in *Nemuki+* magazine in 2013. The primary consumers of his work are young women (*josei*), but he is read widely across demographics, and his 2019 adaptation of Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* was targeted specifically at middle-aged men, signalling an intentional expansion of his audience. In this sense, his work is consumed in a similar way to commodity animism, which is targeted overtly at young girls (through products such as Sanrio's Hello Kitty and Bandai's Tamagotchi) but consumed in its various forms across Japan and the globalised world. Thus, the animation of commodities that occurs in "Wooden Spirit" and "Futon" is of particular concern to readers of Ito's work.

Accordingly, in "Wooden Spirit," Manami, a woman claiming to be an architecture student, destroys her marriage when she turns to her home rather than her husband for sexual gratification. She enters the house as a lodger and is accepted by a father and his daughter, Megumi, with varying reluctance, under the promise that she will complete their household tasks in exchange for a room. She eventually marries into the family but refuses to leave the house to go on her honeymoon, preferring to rub her naked body against the walls. After gratifying her object sexuality, Manami turns to wood and becomes a part of the building, which responds to her advances by transforming into a monstrous creature. The father and Megumi flee in horror, concluding that "[s]he was a pervert… she lusted after buildings, and they lusted after her" (40). Manami's objectophilia leaves her family lonely and displaced, demonstrating that the privileging of material possessions over human connection creates interpersonal disconnect.

The lust-worthy building is a symbol of the family's inherited wealth and personal histories since it was owned by their ancestral line. Manami's seduction and consequent destruction of the property leaves Megumi and her father without a home, dislocating them geographically. It also creates the conditions of existential "uncertainty, of rumbling instability" that, in *Precarious Japan* (2013), Allison argues have led many Japanese people to feel "that they don't belong (anywhere)" in neoliberal times (13, 8). Megumi describes the property in animistic terms, stressing the emotional importance it holds for her and her father, who share "joy, sadness, everything with this house" (12). The building functions as an addition to their immediate family as well as a signifier of their

ancestors, suggesting that the adoration they feel towards it is a passion for private property, which is valued for its connection to their family line. This demonstrates the way in which possessions can act as substitutes for absent relationships, since the house is transformed into a vessel for human passions that were once, but can no longer be, directed towards other humans. As such, it enacts Baudrillard's argument that:

> our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as the 'human' passions. Indeed, the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reigns supreme, all other passions being absent (91).

The intensity of passion sparked by the house in both Manami and the family is enhanced by its status as a "registered national tangible cultural property," a title reserved for works of art and architecture that embody the legacy of the Japanese people, making it a site of cultural importance (12). Thus, the familial and cultural legacies it embodies are commodified and made available to the public through guided tours, repurposing them as products that can be consumed by entering the house – and in the family's case, by owning it. This exposes the depthlessness of the house as a historical artefact on a personal and cultural level: it is no longer the private space Megumi and her father grew up in, so its authenticity as their family home is lost. Likewise, its status as a cultural relic only extends to its surface appearance because it has been upset by modern additions such as a television and electric lighting, which are anachronistic to the building's time of construction in 1854. This "flattening" of history into its surface aesthetic is attributed by Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), to the "depthlessness" of postmodernism, which empties historical objects of their original significance (9). He writes: "we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (9). For Jameson, the postmodern subject is content to consume the past through surfaces, such as the preserved exterior of a building, regardless of the historical accuracy and depth of meaning that lies behind them. This can be seen in "Wooden Spirit," since the building is reinstated as a modern household (rather than a relic of the Ansei period) and a tourist destination (rather than a private home), resulting in the "waning" of its authenticity (10). Manami's objectophilia, which ruptures this surface aesthetic when the house transforms into a monster, exposes the superficiality of the family's ties to their ancestors and the past more generally, both of which are corrupted by her unwillingness to preserve the illusions of historical, cultural, and emotional significance that are signified by the building's pristine exterior. The desires of an individual are here prioritised above the wellbeing of the family because Manami views the building in terms of the wealth accumulated by its cultural significance, demonstrating the way in which culture is fetishised by the neoliberal consumer. The commodification of culture, Ito asserts, is responsible for its destruction.

It is, of course, the building's surface aesthetic that originally draws Manami to it. For

Baudrillard, the commodification of this kind of building, which is only accessible to the public through advertising and allocated visiting hours, triggers sublime awe in those who cannot afford to own it. He composes a list of "houses beyond compare," which are photographed in magazines and consumed by the public as "dream creations without any commercial significance" because they are financially unavailable (18). Megumi's "noble wooden building" could sit quite comfortably among them. Baudrillard writes of "old eighteenth-century mansions, miraculously well-equipped villas, Italian gardens heated by infra-red rays and populated by Etruscan statuettes – in short, the world of the unique, leaving the reader no alternative […] but contemplation without hope" (18). Initially, Manami embodies this "contemplation without hope," which is tied to questions of financial prosperity and social class, when she is told she must join a tour group in order to enter the house (18). Megumi, on the other hand, represents "the world of the unique," of flourishing private property and cultural heritage, and in doing so, she is processed by Manami as an *alternative* to hopeless longing (18). In contrast, Manami embodies a general public who lust constantly after what they cannot afford. The fetishisation of high-priced items such as the building is, according to Allison, "one of the most visible, if superficial, markers" of neoliberal Japan, facilitating nationwide fantasies of personal ownership and national prosperity (*Millennial Monsters* 67). This desire for inaccessible affluence shares connotations of imagination and unreality with Baudrillard's "dream creations," suggesting that freedom to buy is only available to the economically elite (18). Here, as in Allison's observation that "Japan is becoming a place where hope has become a privilege of the socioeconomically secure," hope itself is acquired through financial wellbeing, making it into a kind of commodity (*Precarious* 34). It is determined by the subject's freedom to buy and therefore finds its antithesis in the inaccessible wealth of others.

Consequently, the story hinges on a tension between the public and private spheres, where 'private' connotes prosperity and 'public' connotes relative financial lack. The separation between the home and the wider world is established in Japan from a young age as *uchi* (inside, clean) and *soto* (outside, dirty). The former is fetishised and the latter is embodied by Manami, who imposes herself onto the private lives of Megumi and her father in order to seduce the building. She is associated with the outside (*soto*) because of her financial precarity and lack of blood ties to the family, both of which alienate her from the culturally significant building. However, although Manami enters the building as a guest, she quickly transforms it into a domestic space that depends on her, since her promise to take care of Megumi and her father in exchange for a room implies that she is allowed to treat the house as her own. Of course, if Manami must live in the house before she can domesticate it, it follows that she must marry its owner before she can seduce his property. Her sexual inclinations are tied up in questions of marriage rights, which entitle her to the building and retransform the space from public back to private. Her role as the father's cook, cleaner and, eventually, his wife, upholds normative gender dynamics since the private sphere is owned by a man and run by a woman, meaning that Manami rules over the domestic space but is ultimately powerless because she has no financial stake in the property. Thus, despite her induction into the private sphere, she remains an outsider in her own home, bound by the implication that women can only express themselves economically and erotically with the help of men. It is not until she joins with the building in sexual union that her husband's dominion over his home, and therefore over

her, ceases to exist. In this way, Ito frames commodity animism as an escape from the tyranny of oppressive gender roles. Manami may be a slave to materialism, it asserts, but at least she is not a slave to domesticity.

Consequently, Manami's desire to acquire the house is sexually coded in the "chills" she gets from looking at the ceiling, the "masculine strength" she attributes to its joists and her observation that the woodwork is "very sexy" (16). Megumi later complains about Manami sexualising her home, maintaining that her new stepmother is "weird" because she goes "around to other people's houses […] talking about how sexy they are" (19). Megumi finds the word 'sexy' uncomfortable, but this is less because Manami is speaking to a building and more because she is speaking to a building that does not belong to her. So, Megumi's response to Manami anthropomorphising the woodwork further suggests that marriage, which would make the house hers by proxy, is necessary to the fulfilment of her fetish, echoing Baudrillard's insistence that "the purchase itself, simple approbation, is transformed into a manoeuvre, a scenario, a complicated dance which endows a purely practical transaction with all the traits of amorous dalliance: advances, rivalry, obscenity, flirtation, prostitution – even irony" (188). Manami's powers of persuasion take the place of a regular purchase, marking a return to a pre-capitalist system where a service (in this case, cooking and cleaning) is exchanged for an object (a room in the house) without money as a mediator. Once Manami is no longer required to pay for the room, she is liberated from hopeless contemplation and initiated into a world where dream creations are at her fingertips. The source of eroticism, then, is the possession of private property without financial exchange, which facilitates the pretence of wealth – even though this is at the expense of her newly forged human ties. Again, normative gender dynamics are unsettled by Manami's objectophilia, since her marriage is a temporary, albeit necessary, measure. However, the story is conservative in the sense that Manami's sexual and financial liberation is achieved through the competitiveness and individualism that characterises neoliberal thought. Thus, commodity animism frees her from the constraints of wealth and gender, but, like progressing in a competitive work environment, she triumphs at the expense of others.

So, Manami's marriage is emptied of the usual connotations of love and longevity, retaining significance only in the access she gains to her husband's property. Here again is a postmodern depthlessness, this time of emotional bonds that dissolve beyond the image of a marriage presented in the couple's wedding photo. Manami's lack of love for her husband is clear when she refuses to leave the building to go on her honeymoon, offering "I love being in this house" as her only explanation (23). Here, the word 'love' is reserved for an object rather than the man she has just married, simultaneously revealing the emptiness of her relationship and the extremity of her objectophilia. However, as Manami's attraction to the house increases, her husband's attachment to it weakens. He becomes "pretty down" after Manami chooses the house over their honeymoon and wonders, "is it really that wonderful?" suggesting that his home, which he must compete with for his wife's affection, is no longer his "pride and joy" (24). This demonstrates the ultimate failure of the house to preserve personal and cultural heritage since its "wonder" is lost without any changes to its exterior. The historical coding remains intact, but the father's grief empties it of the emotional resonance it once held. Since the building also "lusted after [Manami]," it is as if it must abandon him to pursue her (40). Both his wife and his home have chosen each other, leaving him lonely and financially destitute. Thus, the severing of his ties with Manami and the house also coincides with

the severing of ties with the past, especially because the building is "annull[ed]" of its status as a national treasure due to its "lost" value (40). The disorientation this causes is evident when Megumi calls her stepmother "that woman," dropping her name in a show of disownment (40). Her father also oxymoronically states "our house isn't ours anymore," signalling a confusion of ownership in his use of a possessive pronoun (*our*) that is immediately undercut (*isn't ours*) (40). In this way, the loss of the past causes a loss of orientation in the present, suggesting that the family's identity is tied inextricably to their material possessions. Since it is this demographic that commodity animism targets, Manami turns them into the ideal consumers.

The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs attributes the creation of tangible cultural properties to Japan's wealth of artefacts that are "endangered due to lifestyle changes" and "societal changes," where *change* refers to the modernisation and Westernisation of historically significant spaces, many of which "have been rapidly disappearing" (n.p.). Manami, with her materialist ambition, embodies the change in lifestyle (or acceleration of capitalism) that drives people to value personal acquisition above all else, including the preservation of history. She has symbolically replaced traditional Japanese culture with modern consumer culture, exposing the former as an empty relic of a time that cannot exist in conjunction with the present. As such, Ito presents the fetishisation of private property as a source of personal loneliness and cultural destruction, not least of all because Manami's success hinges on her romantic and sexual attraction to a cultural heritage site, which is preferable to a human.

Object Dependency

In "Futon," Tomio, a man who retreats under a futon because he believes his apartment is filled with dark nature spirits, also chooses an object over a person, but this time it is to keep him safe rather than gratify him sexually. He lives in a single room with Madoka, the woman he eloped with, and depends on her for food, money, and care. However, Tomio's attachment to the futon alienates Madoka since he associates it, rather than her, with his continued wellbeing. Madoka cannot see the spirits and believes her partner is going mad. Eventually, Tomio confesses to infidelity with a witch, whom he invited into their flat. This coincides with an overworked Madoka finally witnessing the spirits. She flees from the building and returns a month later to find Tomio still under the futon, coated in a blanket of hallucinogenic mould. The connotations, here, are that Tomio feels a greater kinship with his futon than his partner. However, the futon punishes rather than protects him, binding him to the site of his infidelity in an attempt to reinstate lost family values.

In *No Logo* (2000), Naomi Klein argues that brands "conjure a feeling" of safety and familiarity to encourage the public to buy their products, suggesting that Tomio's object dependency can be attributed to the illusion that objects take care of their owners (6-7). For Klein, this illusion is achieved by using "imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences," reinforcing social norms in order to make the buyer feel like a functioning member of society (29). However, the absurdity of Tomio's faith in the futon is clear from his belief that it will shield him from the spirits, even though it can neither conceal his body (which forms a mound in the middle of the

bed) nor secure him against anything capable of entering the flat. The fact that Tomio identifies the futon as the safest place in the apartment suggests that the carefully constructed feelings of safety and familiarity identified by Klein do not stop at purchase. They are internalised by the consumer so that products associated with comfort are expected to perform emotional duties that surpass their functional role. Baudrillard's observation that "[i]f all advertising were abolished, individuals would feel frustrated […] by the feeling that they were no longer somehow 'being taken care of'" also suggests somewhat ironically that the 'safety' embodied by brands is necessary to psychological wellbeing, even though the 'care' they project is illusory and, in Tomio's case, harmful (189-190). His inability to see beyond his perception of the futon-as-protector and comprehend Madoka's role in his survival is evident when he encourages her to "hurry and hide" with him, suggesting that they will both be safe in bed-bound withdrawal (4). When Madoka works to keep Tomio alive, she accidently perpetuates the illusion that the futon is his saviour, since he implicitly attributes her efforts to the object. This further isolates Madoka from her thankless partner because he is blind to the sacrifices she makes for him. Thus, Ito suggests that the familiarity conjured by brands is a malign force, designed to threaten the values it claims to uphold in order to ensure the consumer, who senses their lifestyle under threat, will continue to buy into its promise of safety.

Tomio's retreat into the futon infantilises him whilst forcing Madoka into the public world, overturning conservative gender roles. Since the futon is affiliated with the home, it takes on a traditionally female role. Likewise, since Madoka is forced to go outside and work, she takes on a traditionally masculine role. However, the futon is an incapable parent, and Madoka is pushed to her "mental and physical limits" in her attempts to sustain Tomio financially, feed him, and remove his waste (5). Consequently, the home is framed as a site of continuous labour, forcing Madoka to take on work associated with both gender roles. The emasculating effect this has on Tomio is symbolised by the image of him peering out of the futon, which recurs throughout the story: only his right eye is visible as he cowers under the covers like a child, the rest of his face covered by a floral duvet. In *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005), Jay McRoy associates the image of a gazing female eye, which appears famously in *Ju-On* (2003) and *Ringu* (2000), with vaginal imagery. The panels showing Tomio peering out of the futon are framed similarly, with the duvet standing in for the usual curtains of hair. Such associations serve to symbolically castrate him in a similar way to the father in "Wooden Spirit," who cannot defend his home, secure a future for his daughter, or maintain either of his marriages. However, the father is emasculated because of his wife's infidelity, whereas Tomio is emasculated because of his own transgressions. When he uses the word "summoned" to explain how "a witch" ended up in his bed, he displaces his infidelity onto the supernatural, shrouding it in mystical language to divorce it from reality (9). The line, "I confess! I was the one who summoned her here!" accepts ownership of the situation, while also suggesting that this ownership is circumstantial, subject to the knowledge that the woman he slept with is a supernatural entity who could have influenced him at any turn (9). Likewise, Tomio's claim that the witch "did all of this" implies a lack of agency and disregard for the consequences of his actions (8). His infidelity is positioned in contrast with Madoka's unwavering devotion, demonstrating that, spirits aside, he is responsible for rupturing their relationship. In the panel where the confession takes place, Tomio's eye is positioned behind branded bottles, which appear uncanny against the carnival of dark nature spirits taking place above

them. In the background, Madoka stares in their direction. Since Madoka bought the drinks with the money she earned to sustain her partner, the empty bottles emphasise her nourishing role in contrast with the destruction and devastation that hangs above them, which Tomio is responsible for. Her glance, intentionally or not, bypasses him and rests on them in contemplation of her efforts. It is a moment of revelation, not only that her partner has slept with another woman but that her attempts to save him, and their relationship by proxy, have failed. This ultimately amounts to the fact that she cannot assume the role of both man and mother, suggesting that the only way to combat her exhaustion is to reinstate the conservative gender dynamics Tomio has perverted. Thus, the nuclear family, in which men and women successfully carry out their allocated roles, is presented as an alternative to a life of continuous labour.

Tomio's self-imposed confinement echoes the *hikikomori* phenomenon that gained media coverage in Japan during the Lost Decade of the 1990s, when the country was suffering from the collapse of its asset price bubble.[4] *Hikikomori* translates as 'social withdrawal,' and according to Tamaki Saitō's psychological study *Adolescence Without End* (1998), "the term refers to the act of retreating from society and avoiding contact with all people other than one's own family" (18). It is linked to feelings of loneliness and disconnect because it treats the home as an isolated space that functions most prominently as a barrier to the outside world. There are an estimated one million *hikikomori* cases in Japan today, many of which are attributed to feelings of shame that arise from perceived failure to meet the demands of capitalism. These demands include pressure to achieve in school and work environments, which Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya (1999) credit to the precarious and pressurised job market characteristic of the post-bubble economy. Whereas Tomio, whose maladies stem from infidelity, cannot be viewed as a universal symbol for *hikikomori*, Ito's depiction of social withdrawal is significant in its engagement with commodity animism. Saitō (1998) notes that *hikikomori* are largely middle-class because most working class shut-ins are eventually forced to leave the home to work – but the couple's one room apartment, combined with the fact that Madoka has to "work all day" in a factory to care for Tomio, situates them as a working class household (Ito 5). Thus, the futon's association with safety fuels Tomio's belief that danger is located in the outside world rather than in his precarious financial situation, forcing Madoka to bear their financial burden alone. In other words, the couple's inability to cope with the pressures of everyday life is treated as a personal, rather than a systemic, issue, and Tomio's reliance on the futon as a solution perpetuates this illusion.

The ultimate depiction of the futon as a damaging force comes when Tomio, still tucked inside, is found engulfed by a "spongy" blanket of hallucinogenic mould (10). Here, Ito invokes the fantastic, theorised by David Roas as "a conflict between (our idea of) the real and the impossible," to suggest that the futon may have been causing Tomio's visions in the first place (3). Since their apartment is so small, the mould could presumably have affected Madoka too, explaining their shared perception. According to Roas, "the fantastic will always depend, by means of contrast, on what we consider as real," and its presence here exposes the empty promises of protection upheld by capitalism, which "manufactures" our conception of reality (5, 12).[5] For example, as Alejandro Rossi notes, "[w]e count on the existence of the outside world when we sit in a chair, when we lay

down on a mattress, when we drink a glass of water," but these things are commodified and filtered through the capitalist system, which becomes synonymous with existence itself (34). Thus, for Ito, the real (capitalism as protector) and the impossible (capitalism as perpetrator) are two sides of the same system: rather than one reality infiltrating another, the shadow side of consumerism (in which objects turn on their owners) intrudes on the "[w]ish-fulfilments" and the "animation of inanimate objects" that Sigmund Freud associates with "fairy-stories" and are, incidentally, defining features of commodity animism (249). Since Roas equates "impossible objects" with the fantastic, reality under capitalism is not entirely at odds with the supernatural but rather *with the supernatural as a malicious force* (4). The irony, of course, is that the object Tomio chooses as his protector is the thing causing him harm.

This serves to implicate Tomio and the futon in the destruction of their domestic space. Just as Manami becomes a part of the woodwork in "Wooden Spirit," the image of Tomio consumed by the mould binds his body and his bedding, transforming them into one monstrous being. They are an anti-advertisement, an exposure of the empty promises made by retailers such as Belle Maison, a Japanese company selling heated table-bed hybrids called *kotatsu*, who have made their name internationally as a brand that "lets you stay in bed FOREVER" (n.p.). Here, hyperbole is used as a transparent sales technique since few people would actually attempt to stay in bed forever. However, the statement acts in service of both consumer (who would rather stay in bed than go to work) and capitalism (which requires the consumer to buy the bed *and also* go to work, not least of all to facilitate the purchase). Since it is impossible to please both parties, the product is imbued with false promises that lull the buyer, who never truly expects to achieve bed-bound bliss, into believing their desires are understood by society. The "obviously fake" reciprocity that occurs is explained by Baudrillard as follows: "what adapts to you is an imaginary agency [here, the promise of a lifetime in bed], whereas you are asked in exchange to adapt to an agency that is distinctly real [a society that runs off the exchange of capital, which requires a lifetime of work and therefore undermines the initial promise]" (191). The reality of eternity in bed, Ito suggests, is laced with financial precarity and loneliness, which affects Tomio and Madoka alike. At the story's close, Madoka, like the father in "Wooden Spirit," has lost her home (from which she retreats), her partner (who cheated on her), and her family (who are absent in the wake of her decision to elope). Likewise, Tomio has alienated himself from everything except his futon, which punishes him on Madoka's behalf, forcing him to relive the destruction of his marriage through the host of spirits cackling above him. Both characters are made lonely by Tomio's transgression and subsequent object obsession, but if "Wooden Spirit" concludes that the rejection of normative gender roles and destruction of the home is the only way to escape domestic horror, then "Futon" suggests that upholding the nuclear family is the only defence against the physical and financial demands of capitalism.

A New Kind of Home

In both stories, objects assert themselves as the protectors of women who have been wronged by their social roles, while also presenting consumerism as the sole solution to their problems, causing isolation and loneliness. Without material possessions, the texts decry, the characters in question

would be doomed to a life of disappointment, frustration, and powerlessness, usually facilitated by oppressive domestic space. This demonstrates that commodity animism is inherently exploitative because it capitalises on "lives at once obsessed with and then left unfulfilled by food, human connection, home" (Allison, *Precarious* 2). However, it also gestures to the fact that, exploitative or not, personal fulfilment is often inextricable from personal acquisition. The self, in other words, is made up of objects in the same way that objects are imbued with a sense of self. Considering that the characters discussed always become a part of the objects they have fetishised, the prevalence of commodity animism in these texts, and in contemporary Japanese society more generally, suggests that the market dictates not only what it means to be alive but what it means to be human.

It is necessary, then, to redress the way people relate to their possessions. Allison argues that:

> family, in the postwar buildup of corporate capitalism, became not only the seat of hard work and high performance, but it also fed consumption as the site of a new kind of home: a privatized, domestic space filled with consumer electronics – washing machines, electric fans, and a family car parked outside (*Precarious* 22).

Here, owning the latest products (despite having to pay for them) is a reward for adhering to cultural expectations of the nuclear family. In the texts discussed, objects are either used to actively enforce this dream (in the case of "Futon") or to deviate from it all together (in the case of "Wooden Spirit"). This is indicative of commodity animism's ability to adapt to the needs of the consumer, abandoning the connection-based values it claims to uphold at a moment's notice in order to generate capital. So, on the one hand, the Gothic in these texts reaffirms the belief that capitalism is looking after people by supplying material solutions to their loneliness. On the other hand, it implies that these so-called solutions are themselves Gothic entities, born of a system that is at once excessive in its inescapable cycle of labour and consumption, and deficient in its attention to humanity's emotional needs. In the face of this contradiction, commodity animism cunningly suggests that the real problem is people – their lack of care for each other, their adherence to regressive social structures, and their insatiable desire to consume.

NOTES

1. Broadly, neoliberalism describes social systems that deregulate markets and make cuts to public spending in order to boost the private sector. This is achieved, according to David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), through "government decentralization, deregulation, privatization and *laissez-faire* measures that allow for a free and competitive international trade" (2).

2. Here, 'transgressive' describes human-object relations that are considered illegal, immoral, or outside of social norms.

3. The occupation was spearheaded by the United States and led by Douglas MacArthur. It is the only time Japan has been occupied by a foreign country and involved comprehensive reforms in the economic, social, and political spheres.

4. Japan's bubble economy lasted from 1986-1991 and was caused by the substantial inflation of real estate and stock market prices. The 'Lost Decade' (which actually refers to the period between 1991-2010) was the period of economic stagnation that followed. According to Allison, the collapse of the asset bubble transformed Japan "from a society with a vast (and materially secure) middle class to one that is now […] downstreaming, bipolarized, and riddled by class difference" (*Precarious* 5).

5. Although Roas does not use the word *manufacture* in direct relation to capitalism, it is revealing of a socio-economic context in which the capitalist system infiltrates our collective reality at the level of linguistic expression.

WORKS CITED

Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan. "Tangible Cultural Properties." No date. <https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/cultural_properties/introduction/buildings/>.

Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. University of California Press, 2006.

---. *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. Translated by James Benedict, Verso, 2005.

Blouin, Michael. J. *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Davies, Roger. J. *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations*. Tuttle Publishing, 2016.

Dower, John. W. *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII*. Translated by James Strachey, Hogarth, 1953.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Inouye, Charles Shirō. "Globalgothic: Unburying Japanese figurality." *Globalgothic*. Manchester University Press, 2013, pp. 202-213.

---. "Japanese Gothic." *A New Companion to the Gothic*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 442-454.

Ito, Junji. *Fragments of Horror*. Translated by Jocelyne Allen, Viz Media, 2014.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo*. 2000. HarperCollins, 2010.

---. *The Shock Doctrine*. Penguin Random House UK, 2007.

Lewis, Leo. "Japan's Literature of Loneliness Depicts Solitude as a Noble State." *The Financial Times*. 08 June 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/e4d15154-6a31-11e8-b6eb-4acfcfb08c11>.

McRoy, Jay. *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Okamoto, Junko. *Sekai ichi kodoku na Nihon no ojisan*. Kadokawa, 2018.

Okano, Kaori and Tsuchiya, Motonori. *Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Roas, David. *Behind the Frontiers of the Real: A Definition of the Fantastic*. 2011. Translated by Simon Breden, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Rossi, Alejandro. "Confiar." *Mannual del distraído*. Anagrama, 1997, pp. 33-37.

Saitō, Tamaki. *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*. Translated by Jeffery Angles, University of Minnesota, 2013.

Sharrett, Christopher. "Preface: Japanese Horror Cinema." *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2005, pp. xi-xiv.

Strutner, Suzy. "This Brilliant Japanese Invention Lets You Stay In Bed FOREVER." *HuffPost*. 29 October 2015. <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/kotatsu-japanese-bed_n_563209e7e4b0c66bae5b0ea8>.

BIONOTE

Leonie Rowland is a PhD student with the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, where she also completed her MA. She is researching commodity animism in the Japanese Gothic. Leonie is Assistant Reviews Editor at The British Society for Literature and Science and Editor-in-Chief of The Hungry Ghost Project. Her academic work has been published in *Japanese Horror Culture: New Critical Approaches* (Lexington) and The Dark Arts Journal. Her debut collection of prose is available from Dreich.

THE GREEN KNIGHT'S TOOL-BEING AND MAGICAL BODY-AS-THING: INVESTIGATING MATERIALITY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Zita Hüsing

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (*SGGK*), an anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English poetic narrative, tells a marvellous adventure within the realm of the Arthurian courtly romance.[1] In the poem, the Green Knight (GK), a mysterious, gigantic knight clad in green, visits the Arthurian court, an event that forms the crux of the narrative. The GK challenges each of the courtly knights to attack him with an axe, as long as they are willing to receive a returning strike from the GK a year and a day later. Sir Gawain accepts the challenge and beheads the GK, who surprises his audience by picking up his own head and leaving the court. A year later, Sir Gawain fulfils his promise and goes on a quest in search of the GK. After wandering through the wilderness of Wille he arrives at Hautdesert, the residence of Sir Bertilak, where Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce him. At the conclusion the GK reveals himself as Bertilak of Hautdesert, an envoy of the enchantress Morgan Le Fay. He inflicts only a small cut on Sir Gawain's neck, a power manoeuvre within a larger scheme initiated by Morgan le Fay. The GK then reveals himself as Morgan's servant, explaining to Gawain: "Ho wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle / For to assay the surquidré, yif hit sothe were" / "She sent me in this wise to your rich hall to assay its pride and try if it were true" (*SGGK* 2456-2457, Neilson 49).

This article argues that GK/Bertilak functions as a tool or object for Morgan le Fay to influence and disrupt the Arthurian court, in a manner that complicates the GK's own sense of agency as he is entangled in a mesh of materiality surrounding his body, agency, and knighthood. By investigating the materiality of the knight through a close examination of the human and non-human objects associated with him, such as his holly-branch, his axe, and his own head, this analysis will reveal the function of the GK's body as a tool. Indeed, I contend that his body becomes a magical *body-as-thing* in conjunction with Morgan Le Fay's role as a representation of the magical or 'marvelous' aspects of the poem that contributes to its ambiguity, which Scott Lightsey in *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (2007) argues is a "spellbinding" introspection of "magical *thingness*" (3, original emphasis). By drawing on contemporary theories of materiality, particularly in line with New Materialist thought, I offer a reconsideration of the GK as both object and objectified.

New Materialist thinkers often seek to distance themselves from anthropocentric ideas and attempt to approach all things as having agency or meaning. With *Reassembling the Social:*

An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (2005), Bruno Latour's work partially inspired this new theoretical turn as well as Martin Heidegger's works *Being and Time* (1927) and his essay "The Thing" (1971). Latour coined the idea of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which focusses on the distributive agency involved when human and nonhuman actors interact with one another. For Latour, ANT reveals that it is necessary to observe the actors to thus "learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish" (12). Latour foreshadowed the theoretical importance of investigating networks as relations between *things* and emphasised the value to re-think and rebalance humanity's relationship with materiality. Additionally, Heidegger's work inspired the philosophical movement of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), including such prominent scholars as Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Graham Harman. In *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018), Harman defines OOO as a new "theory of everything," separating it into its main components of objects "that need to be explained rather than assumed" and ontology as "the study of being" or metaphysics (21, 10). Thus, Harman also distances himself from Heidegger's preference of the terminology of the 'thing,' a declaration that Heidegger famously asserts in his 1927 work *Being and Time*. In a move away from Kantian anthropocentrism, Harman reflects that "contrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*" which allows us to understand the "object in its own terms" (2002, 2, original emphasis). Harman separates his thinking from ANT, since OOO introduces a "flat ontology" or a study of being that erases distinctions between subjects and objects (2018, 217). In a flat ontology, all objects are "given equal attention" without any hierarchies, "whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real, or fictional" (2018, 9). For instance, the human is no more important than an axe. Thus, the GK's head can become a meaningful object as well as his body, his axe, and his holly-branch. Far from being inert, I observe that these non-human objects emphasise the marvellous aspects of the poem while inviting an inquiry into the 'web of things' that the poem associates with the GK and consequently challenges notions of agency. In addition, I approach his unnatural, non-human/human body as a *thing* and his associated objects as meaningful *tools*.

Historically, scholars have focused on investigating the poem in terms of hunting, legal issues, knighthood, disability, speech, theology, animal studies and ecocriticism in its rich context.[2] A New Materialist reading of *SGGK* deviates from traditional critical readings and offers new insights of the meaning of bodies and materiality, illuminating 'things' about the poem that would otherwise be obscured. Instead of limiting actions to an anthropocentric depiction of "what 'intentional,' 'meaningful' humans do," it is important here to see how the GK acts as a material entity under Morgan's influence (Latour 71).

In this context, it is important to define objects, things, and tools. While Harman prefers the word *object,* Heidegger prefers the term *thing* (Harman 2018, 41). In Harman's reading of Heidegger, a thing describes "a hidden thing in its own right, beyond any false objectifications of it," while an object becomes interrelated with how we perceive an entity (42). For Harman, an object has a broader definition and he proposes that an object is "anything that cannot be entirely reduced

either to the components of which it is made or to the effects it has on other things" (43). Following Harman and Heidegger's insights, I prefer the term thing since it distances itself from the value judgment of objectification.[3] I draw on OOO as a highly relevant approach to *SGGK* to challenge the binaries of "life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic," while positioning "*things* at the center of being" (Bennett x; Bogost 6, original emphasis).[4]

Further, I want to draw attention to the terminology of the *tool*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger studies 'being' by famously pointing out the uses of a hammer and a doorknob (96). He elaborates how the process of "hammering itself uncovers the specific manipulability ("*handlichkeit*") of the hammer" (26, original emphasis). The hammer thus possesses a kind of Being named "readiness-to hand" or *zuhandenheit*, which establishes the hammer's true being as a tool instead of being simply an object which is just present-at hand (*dasein*) (98, original emphasis). Heidegger realises that the meaning of "the vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists but in the void that holds," in the readiness-to-hand (1971, 169). In his work *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), Harman takes up the terminology of readiness-at-hand and refers to it as "tool-being" (4). He applies Heidegger's famous tool analysis not only to technical devices but also to "*all* entities, no matter how useful or useless they might be" (4, original emphasis). This universal application of Heidegger's work ultimately led to the idea of a flat object-oriented philosophy (1). Harman's interpretation of Heidegger's work inspired my approach to the GK as a "tool-being" which combines a reading of both his body-as-thing and a reading of *things* as agents or tools in the poem. In particular, the arrival scene of the GK at the Arthurian court accentuates a web of *things* because it reveals the GK's role as a *tool-being* in a critical reading of his magical-body-as-thing.

The Magical Body-as-Thing

The poem begins by describing the Christmas setting of the young Arthurian court that has not yet "come of age" and includes a young King Arthur surrounded by his various knights (Cohen 1999, 146). The immaturity of the court is central to the poem since Gawain's quest, as my analysis will show, demonstrates his cowardice as a form of weakness. Morgan in particular criticises the empty performativity of the court and its overemphasis on materiality and indulgence. Ultimately, Morgan's plot is for the GK to reveal the internal instabilities at Arthur's court as a political move to imply that the court lacks moral integrity due to their comfortableness, over-abundance of wealth, and their pride. When the GK arrives, the knights and ladies of Camelot are celebrating Christmas in an environment of abundance: food, celebrations, kiss-exchanges and gift-giving in "rechles merthes"/ "great mirth" (*SGGK* 40, Neilson 4). This material wealth and indulgence of the court contradicts the abstract materialism of moral integrity associated with the Arthurian knight. From the opening of the poem, the narrative presents the court as materially enriched in food and gifts; a focus of material wealth, which already foregrounds the importance of things.

The GK interrupts the celebratory atmosphere by arriving in the moment when King Arthur states that he would not eat dinner "er hym devised were, Of sum aventurus thyng an uncouthe

tale, Of sum mayn mervayle, that he myght trawe" / "before he was told an uncouth tale of some adventurous thing, of some great marvel that he could believe" (Neilson 3, *SGGK* 91-95). Promptly, the GK announces himself as a terrible "noise," a description that re-occurs upon his re-entrance at the end of the poem (Neilson 4). I read this noise as both the rude interruption of the Christian festivities just after the serving of the first course and the announcement of the 'othered' non-human, animalistic agent. He storms into the hall as an overwhelming verdant presence and is described "in height one of the tallest men in the world" (Neilson 4, *SGGK* 137). The depiction of the GK as a superbly green "half giant" or "aghlich mayster" further interrupts the ritual by presenting him as a supernatural, otherworldly, and marvelous non-human force (Neilson 4, *SGGK* 136). The GK's limbs are extremely "long and so grete," / "long and so great" thus highlighting his unusual stature (*SGGK* 139, Neilson 4). While focusing on the material aspect of the body, this intense description recalls how human bodies are themselves composed of matter. The emphasis of the gigantic physical proportions of the GK reads as a focus on his material presence rather than his character and invites a reading of the GK as a body-as-thing.

At the GK's abrupt arrival, the Arthurian knights become enthralled and "swogh sylence" / "deep silence" spreads through the hall (243, Neilson 6). This disappearance of human speech operates in the favour of the presence of the non-human or magical. The poem stresses the marvellous as central to the GK particularly after his beheading, as the court judges the knight as explicitly magical: "Forthi for fantoun and fayryye the folk there hit deemed" / "for phantom and faery the folk there deemed it" (240, Neilson 6). The court evocates phantoms and fairies, an association which can be linked to the enchantress or fairy Morgan Le Fay. The mentioning of fairies also connects the supernatural to the GK, who is described as "an alvish mon" / "an elvish man" (681, Neilson 15). The GK-as-thing demonstrates the enchantment of the mundane by the poem's presentation of the knight as marvellous or magical. Thus, the GK's arrival appears magical due to the impression of him being *more* than his material parts, especially due to his sudden disruption of the Christmas festivities. However, I argue the GK as a material thing equally provides excitement to the mundane environment of the court.

When considering the body of the GK and his transformation into Bertilak of Hautdesert, he represents "tensions between the ideal and the natural body" as well as tensions between the magical, transformative, non-human body and the human body (Westerhof 7).[5] It is important to recognise the Arthurian fascination with the "marvelous" or "otherworldly," an introspection that also foreshadows the enmeshment of the Christian tradition of Christmas with the marvellous (Green 2). This requirement for a "marvel" supports the general fascination of medieval writing with "wonder" as elaborated upon by Caroline Walker Bynum in the essay "Wonder" (1997, 3). Bynum states how "'Wonders' and 'marvels' have recently been the subject of a good deal of research on early modern Europe" and that historically, "the period from about 1180 to 1320 saw a great increase in stories of marvels, monsters, miracles, and ghosts" (2). The association of the GK's appearance as marvellous supports the etymological roots of the word *marvel* from the Latin *mirare* which implies "a visual *apparition*" (Le Goff 31, original emphasis). Thus, a marvel highlights here the significance of the GK as a thing. Bynum elaborates that marvels often stands out due to the "singularity and significance

of the thing," recognising that only "that which is different from the knower can trigger wonder" (3). The poem highlights the significance of the GK as a thing through an intricate description of his appearance – he is familiarly human but colourfully strange, clad entirely in green, with a green belt, a green holly-branch, a green axe, a green beard, and a green horse with a saddle of silk with natural embroideries, all in the same green (*SGGK* 166, 147, Neilson 4-5). The poem emphasises green as a colour that bears natural, earthly and thus material connotations that attempt to tie the GK to the natural world while opposing him to the artificial luxury of the court. The appearance of the GK also demonstrate how he is using *tools* such as the axe and the girdle to augment his position as a body-as-thing. The GK's overwhelming materiality makes his entrance so impactful but equally highlights his position as a controlled pawn in Morgan's plans. While asking ontological questions about the GK's state of being it becomes clear that the Knight occupies an in-between state of both human and non-human.

His "overal enker-greene" / "all green" 'natural' color is also emphasised by his green horse as a possible non-human reflection of the Knight's body, thus blurring the animal/human divide (*SGGK* 150, Neilson 4). As Susan Crane asserts in *Animal Encounters* (2013), this performance of knighthood and its connection to horse is "inextricably technical, organic, and symbolic" (140). In this sense, horses as *tools* function by augmenting the human. In a reading of the humans and their bodies-as-things, the human becomes tied to other things in a material, symbolic, and organic manner. The horse positions knights as privileged individuals and distinguishes them from other 'common' men. In this context, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work *Medieval Identity Machines* (2003) unpacks the identity of knights which is deeply intertwined with chivalry which reflects upon a "code of idealized masculinity" (46). The green colour of the horse and the knight reflects upon this empty symbolism of the horse while mocking the code. In a parodic performance, Morgan uses the horse as a functioning tool or "revered body" to introduce the GK as a supposedly respectable knight (Cohen 2003, 46). Morgan critiques the Round Table reliance upon the chivalrous figure of knighthood. Thus, the GK's identity is an intertwinement of the significance of the horse as a tool and the symbolism of knighthood. This enmeshment illuminates how the ritual of celebration and 'honouring' knight of the Arthurian Round Table is ultimately an empty, material motion.

Reconsidering the Agency of Things

When approaching the GK as a thing, it is valuable to reconsider agency in the poem in relation to his body-as-thing. As I established, the poem presents his body in a fragmented manner. Additionally, as Richard Godden points out, the poem includes a recurring "tension between bodies and objects, and between wholeness and fragmentation" ("Prosthetic Ecologies" 1274). The materiality of the body and the things the knight uses becomes blurred. One of these is his own armour which is described as "a strayte cote fun stregth, that stek on his sides / "a straight coat sat tight to his sides" (*SGGK* 152, Neilson 4). The coat almost merges with the knight's body and functions as a tool in his performance of an idealised masculine knighthood. Godden accentuates that the knight's armour appears indistinguishable from a knight's body as a "second skin" (1273). In the context of knighthood, Danielle Westerhof's observes that "character, or interiority, was thought

to manifest itself within and upon the physical body in the perception of aristocratic identity in the thirteenth century" (4). Thus, Westerhof here links medieval aristocratic of identity to notions of sovereignty.[6] This reading emphasises sovereignty not as an immaterial notion but as one that is tied to the materiality of bodies and the control of such 'things.' For a Medieval setting, the identity of the knight is constructed by the objects that he associates himself with; the things he owns, the weapons he bears, the colour of his clothes, everything is 'meaningful' in this context. I thus argue that the GK's merging with his armour acts as a mesh of objects, a unification of medieval aristocratic knighthood with the body.

The GK is particularly relevant for critical study due to the political-body-thing network constructed by Morgan to disrupt the Arthurian court. The influence of Morgan's magical abilities is evident when the GK loses his head (after the axe strike by Gawain) and picks it back up. The description of the length and the focus on the head can be re-aligned with the description of the GK himself, who appears taller than the Arthurian knights "by the hede and more" / "by a head and more" (*SGGK* 333, 8). The emphasis on the head is an extension of the recurring head-motif throughout the poem that reflects the Cartesian divide between mind (head) and body. However, since Morgan in fact controls the GK's body, the mind (head) appears disempowered while the body assumes an agency as a thing. The fragmentation of the GK's body by beheading is the well-known outcome of the beheading game initiated by Morgan.[7] The GK offers his axe as a reward to any who strike him, as long as he may return the strike after a year and a day. Sir Gawain offers to fight him as he humbly considers himself as "the wakkest," / "the weakest" (*SGGK* 354, Neilson 8). Gawain attempts to embody the knightly virtue of humility and volunteers to carry out the first strike with the Knight's precious axe. As a thing, the axe takes on the role of a facilitator of corporeal play upon the body. Cohen makes a crucial observation concerning the Knight's decapitation scene: "(C)utting something off will not extract it from entanglement" (1, 2019). The manner in which the head retains agency after its separation from the body can be challenged by a New Materialist reading as it refocuses on the entanglement of objects such as the physical body and the axe. The axe itself takes on a meaning of its on as a tool, revealing the networks of agency surrounding it, including Gawain as an agent who strikes the GK. The axe thus reveals the GK's body-as-thing by splitting it into two separate yet entangled entities, the head and trunk of the body.

The GK's body is first fragmented and 'othered' when the knight readies himself for Gawain's axe strike by uncovering his flesh (Neilson 9). The emphasis lies here on the carnal and the nakedness of the flesh, a recurring motif throughout the tale. In a grotesque, animalistic description, the blade of the axe cuts through the GK's spine and his "fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe" / "fair head fell from the neck to the earth" (427, Neilson 10). The reunion of the head with the earth echoes the representation of the GK as 'natural' and accentuates the head's consideration as a thing that returns to the realm of materiality. The poem evokes this emphasis on the earthly again with the description of the Arthurian knights' new game of a gruesome "head-soccer" which entails hitting the severed head with their feet (*SGGK* 428, Neilson 10). The fragmented body thus reveals the social response of the court as indignant and flawed. Westerhof observes that the aristocratic treatment of bodies and their burial as more "than an act of piety; it also was a confirmation of

one's status in society" (Westerhof 8). Culturally, the court demonstrates a disrespect towards the deceased body and the GK's status as a knight. Their treatment of the head as a material object or *tool* demonstrates the objectification of the GK and their desire to demonstrate superiority over him even though he is already dead. In this cruel game, the GK's head assumes a new agency by becoming the corpses' remnant that is wondrously making itself active again by becoming a 'play-*thing*.'

Further, the corpse of the GK gushes blood everywhere, overwhelming his verdant attire (Neilson 10). The blood interrupts here the (un)natural greenness of the GK's attire and signifies the violent treatment of the Arthurian knights. The Knight begins to "brayde his bulk about / That ugly body that bled" / "turned his trunk about / That ugly body that bled" (440-441, Neilson 10). As a shocking surprise for the Arthurian knights, the mobility of his body has not ceased to function, it has not been affected by the beheading. The poem relates how the GK "nawther faltered ne fel the free never the helder" / "never faltered nor fell the hero for all that (430, Neilson 10). Instead, his body does not fall but jumps back up on his feet (433, Neilson 10). The GK subsequently holding his own head by the hair emphasises the enmeshment of things once again and contrasts the prior treatment of the head as a tool by revealing himself as still a 'subject.' Following his bodily resurrection, his severed head comes back to life as well. "[H]it lyfte up the yghe-lyddez" / "it lifted up the eyelids" and his "muthe" / "mouth" began to speak again to remind Gawain of his promise to receive the GK's axe strike at the promised time (*SGGK* 446-447, Neilson 10). The GK appears marvellously resurrected due to Morgan's puppetry and demonstrates that she – like the court – turns the knight into an object with debatable agency. In so doing, Morgan thereby points out the irony of the position of the knights at the Arthurian court as things by indicating that they act as puppets to their sovereigns, unable to make independent decisions.

Another key object that exemplifies the entanglement of things and magic in the poem is the enchanted girdle that Lady Bertilak offers to Gawain. Lady Bertilak promises that the girdle or sash will protect Gawain from being injured. Gawain accepts the girdle despite breaking his promise to Lord Bertilak that he will be truthful about his promise and due to the dishonourable acceptance, he does not lose his head. The green girdle functions here as a non-magical, performative thing. However, in contrast of being magical, I interpret the girdle as a thing of disenchantment. Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) suggests: "The figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies" (xii). Even though it is disenchanted, the girdle still resides within the entanglement of things surrounding the GK in the narrative. In fact, it is the overall entanglement of this poem which Dinshaw suggests "defies all our most treasured and consoling ideas of human wholeness, unity, and sovereignty" (359-360). The girdle thus disrupts such ideas or beliefs of sovereignty. This disruption becomes further emphasised by the revelation of the girdle's non-magical qualities. When Gawain discovers that the emptiness of the faith he put into the girdle as a magical object, it also indicates that the empty promise reveals the belief in the marvellous or immaterial as empty and misleading.

As OOO indicates, everything can be a thing, not only humans but also bodies and abstract concepts. Instead of things, Bennett uses the designation of active agents which "can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both" (9). Accordingly, her observations contribute to breaking down human/non-human and object/subject as well as object/body binaries. Two non-human objects, the axe and the holly-branch, highlight this marvellous aspect furthermore. In interpretation, *things* like these tend to be overlooked or pushed aside due to their apparent inertness. The poem introduces the axe however as magical when it is first described as a "spetos spathe to expoun in spelle, quasi myght. / The lenkthe of an elynyerde the large hede hade" / "a weapon merciless almost beyond description; the head had the vast length of an ellyard" (*SGGK* 209-210, Neilson 5). The depiction of the axe as a weapon "beyond description" reflects how we can never understand an object in its own ontological terms. The emphasis lies here on the extraordinary length of the axe, its large head, and its merciless qualities. The poem introduces the axes thus as an immensely material agent that through the GK's intimate connection also functions as a symbol of his knighthood identity. However, it can also be approached as an object in its own terms. The axe features "al bigraven with grene in gracious werke" / "rich embroidered buttons of the bright green" which underlines the axe's intricate artisanship, while evoking an unnatural, bright greenness once more (216, Neilson 6).[8] The depiction of the axe equally underscores its relation to being a manufactured thing, thus finding itself between, as Lightsey argues, an "objectified instrumentality and ambiguous, autonomous potentiality" (24). The axe can also be re-evaluated by its gift-giving function, an aspect that illustrates its workings as a tool. It is crucial that Gawain keeps the original axe as proof of the "mervayl" / "marvel" where the marvellous here entails the arrival of the GK, the beheading game, and his magical resurrection (*SGGK* 480, Neilson 10). The axe thus serves as a materialised reminder of the abstract ritual and broader immaterial promise that Gawain makes. It becomes "an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness," a quality that Bennett designates as "vibrant matter" (3). Bennett's concept of matter or "thing-power" designates the "vitality intrinsic to materiality" (13; 3). The author highlights the connection of all things to life; all of them entangled in a mesh of materiality. Bennett's vital materialism gives new meanings to things, bodies, and personhood and helps us to expand our selves with a "shared materiality" of all things (13). Similarly, the poem presents the axe and holly-branch as part of the GK's body-as-thing and in fact, it is their entanglement with his body, which make him come *alive* as a character.

For instance, the holly-branch as a vital thing also reveals Morgan's goal to present the court as performative, immature, weak and reliant upon a construction of violent masculinity. Upon entering the court, the GK holds in his hand "a holyn bobbe, / That is greatest in grene when grevez ar bare" / "a holly twig, that is greenest when groves are bare" (*SGGK* 207-208, Neilson 5). The attribution of the branch with an unnatural greenness in the depth of winter, disrupts material expectations for the court and the poem's audience. Cohen adds that the branch would carry red berries, which can be read as a reiteration of "Gawain's blood on the Green Chapel snow" but also a foreshadowing of the GK's gushing blood following his beheading (12, 2019). James Winny associates the axe and the holly bob to "merry-making," "blood-sacrifice," and as a revival of "human licentiousness" (142). The aberrant materiality of the branch draws attention to the indulgent behaviour of the Arthurian court and casts the court members as unnatural actors, due to their engagement in lewdness and

over-indulgence. Overall, the axe and the holly-branch turn out to be intentional tools in Morgan's plot to reveal the court's underlying violence. In contrast to the upcoming bloodshed, the GK also stresses the peaceful attributes of his holly-branch: "Ye may be seker bi this braunch that I were here / That I passes as in pes, and no plyght seche"/ "by this branch that I bear here that I pass in peace and seek no quarrel" (*SGGK* 265-266, Neilson 6). Here he may seem to announce his peaceful intention, when, in reality the branch becomes part of Morgan's deception. Although the object itself does not intend to be deceptive, Morgan instructs the GK to use the branch to fool the court into believing he has peaceful intentions. Due to the semantic associations of the branch, the court aligns itself with the object, demonstrating a dependence of believing in the peaceful symbolism of the branch. In this sense, the branch occupies the same place as the girdle because it illuminates the trust of Arthurian knights into objects that bear magical or ideological meaningful qualities when they are in fact part of a deceptive network of things.

Addressing Materiality, Knighthood and the Forest in the Mesh of Things

The network of things is central to the poem. As a conclusion of this interrogation of the GK as tool-being, this analysis will thus address the notion of 'mesh.' When considering the role of knighthood, sovereignty and unnaturalness, the holly-branch is significant as it is an indication of the 'natural' space of the medieval forest, representing the external world meshing with the artificial world of the court. I contrast the concept of the forest to Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's notion of biopolitics which assumes that the sovereign controls the forest and, as Karl Steel notes, "demonstrates his supreme position by killing" forest animals ("Biopolitics in the Forest" 35). Thus, the sovereign *claims* to be supreme in the forest and aims to be the master of life and death in his realm. However, the forest resists complete control since the animals and plants have their own agencies and are meaningful things in their own right.

In a further step, I relate this evocation of the marvellous to the inherently magical qualities of the axe as symbolising an otherworldly thing. Since Morgan le Fay controls the axe it represents the empty illusion of the marvellous and highlights Gawain's naivety and immaturity. As while the axe may seem to have agency it is actually another tool in her machinations to undermine the sovereign power of King Arthur. In a similar manner, Morgan controls the artificially constructed GK. Since the holly branch appears eerily green in the time of winter, the poem foregrounds its natural/unnatural state. Like the forest, the branch conveys the idea of the natural when it is in fact artificially or magically manufactured by the puppeteer Morgan who introduces the disruption into the court through the object. This small exploration into the Medieval forest and its meaning in relation to the branch demonstrated that, once more, not all objects appear passive. From a New Materialist perspective, they are part of a mesh of things that furthers Morgan's plan.

Further, the apparent connection between the branch and the system of the forest reflects what Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) describes as "the thinking of interconnectedness" (7-8). Similar to Bennett, Morton observes that all life is intertwined in an entangled mesh that thrives on a vast "ecological thought" (3). This concept describes a progressive

ecology that imagines a vast, global, and dislocated enmeshment of living and non-living things (28). OOO and Morton's approach thus influence and enrich each other by both addressing the decentred mesh of "people, places and things" (Dinshaw 353). In contrast to Morton, my approach to the poem is not one of ecocriticism but mainly of the consideration of the larger readings of the poem regarding the relationships between things and bodies.

Indeed, Dinshaw describes the GK as a "whole green package – human, animal, vegetable" (356). In contrast, I argue that the GK only *seems* natural, when he is in fact an unnatural, engineered *thing*. His body-as-thing becomes a combination of different elements within itself. The GK only seems like a human-nature creature. Through an ecocritical lens, Dinshaw asserts "the plant-man creature here illustrates the radical interconnectedness of all created things" (350). However, I argue that the GK is indeed *anti-natural* and resists an attempt to split the world into "*human* and *nature*" (Bogost 4, original emphasis). By appearing at Arthur's court, the GK indeed challenges a binary, anthropocentric reading of the world into human and nature and challenges the very meaning of the word 'natural' for the present knights.

Through a New Materialist reading, the GK challenges such dualisms as "truth and falsehood, agency and structure, human and nonhuman, before and after, knowledge and power, context and content, materiality and sociality, activity and passivity" by focusing on *relationality* and liminality (Hodder 22-23). His apparent superhuman strength accentuates his non-humanness: "Hit seemed as no mon might / Under his dynttez dryghe" / "It seemed as if no man could endure under his blows" (*SGGK* 201-202, Neilson 5). The poem further underlines his strength and liminality since he is wearing no helmet and no steel shoes, no armour that protects his neck; "no schafte ne no schelde to schwa ne to smyte" / "nor shaft nor shield to guard or to smite" (*SGGK* 205, Neilson 5, Winny 142). It is interesting to note that the GK's strength is *not* associated with materiality or things like armour or steel shoes. Since Bertilak/the GK enmeshes and overcomes binaries this observation further serves to emphasise his in-betweenness and evokes questions about his 'nature.' This super-human representation of his invulnerable body demonstrates his connection and dependency to the magic of Morgan Le Fay as his master furthermore. Consequently, this supernatural aspect of his body appears as part of the knighthood performativity that Morgan initiates and accentuates the liminal state of his body.

As this investigation into the agency of the GK's body-as-thing demonstrates, the magical and the *thing* complement and relate to each other, emphasising that an analysis of object-relations can assist in critically departing from anthropocentric human-object-relation readings. Moreover, the GK can be re-assessed as a *tool* that Morgan Le Fay employs to achieve her own agency. While Cohen observes the "interwoven, veering, and tenacious *heres* inextricable from bodies, climate, atmosphere, the *eros* and flourishing of plant, animal, stone" in the poem, this investigation has also shown the importance of focusing on the object as a meaningful thing in its own right rather than purely enmeshed with other systems (2019 2, original emphasis). The object remains important both as an individual and in a collective approach. Morgan Le Fay's role should not be side-lined when analysing *SGGK* but rather it is crucial in relation to the meaning of things in the poem, such

as the GK's head, girdle, axe, holly-branch and the overall performativity of knighthood that Morgan is critiquing. In a move away from anthropocentrism, this investigation has shown the relevance of a New Materialist approach to *SGGK* by analysing the role of objects in the text. As often overlooked features, this inquiry into the role of things offers a reconsideration between material and immaterial actors while critiquing perspectives of agentic behaviour. I argue that it is crucial to continue investigating the enmeshment of human and non-human things in critical close readings of literary works, to access the "enchanted" realm of materiality studies.

NOTES

1. I will primarily refer to James Winny's translation of the poem but will also draw upon W. A. Neilson's more modern translation where relevant. Cotton MS Nero's website offers a lightly edited edition of the whole manuscript. The poem has proven to be the source of ongoing popular imagination as exemplified by David Lowery's recent film adaptation (2021).

2. See works by Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, Steven Bruso, Richard H. Godden, Sara M. Pons-Sanz, Ad Putter, Iris Ralph, Gillian Rudd and Cicilia A. Hatt, respectively.

3. Bill Brown coined the phrase "Thing Theory" in an essay that discusses things in the context of human-object interactions to investigate what they disclose about society, history, culture, and nature (4). I similarly look at things to investigate the GK's body-as-thing and its relationship to its surroundings.

4. Bogost elaborates his definition: "[T]hings are usually taken either as the aggregation of ever smaller bits (scientific naturalism) or as constructions of human behavior and society (social relativism) […] OOO steers a path between the two" (6).

5. Morgan Le Fay initiates the shapeshifting – a process which implies the malleability to objects based on human or actant's desires. In *Persons and Things* (2010), Barbara Johnson makes a crucial observation: "Under the spell of shape-changing, anything can become anything at any moment […] The relation between persons and things grows more uncanny" (5).

6. Similarly, Crane defines medieval clothing as a symbolic medium of "material self-presentation in social performance" (2002, 15).

7. Beheading games are a well-known trope that can be found in medieval narratives as Sheri Ann Strite emphasises in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: To Behead or Not to Behead-That Is a Question" (1).

8. Cohen also observes that the GK "enmeshes the vegetal and animal, leaf and silk, tendril and embroidery, works of nature and artisans" (12, 2019).

WORKS CITED

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Stanford University Press, 1998.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things.* Duke University Press, 2010.

Blanch, Robert J. and Julian N. Wasserman, "Medieval Contracts and Covenants: The Legal Colouring of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Neophilologus*, vol. 68, 1984, pp. 598–610.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology: Or, What it's Like to be a Thing.* University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 28, 2001, pp. 1-16.

Bruso, Steven. "Bodies Hardened for War: Knighthood in Fifteenth-Century England." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* vol 47, no. 2, 2017, pp. 255–277.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Wonder." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 1, 1997, pp. xx-26.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Giants. Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages.* University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

---. *Medieval Identity Machines.* University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

---. "The Love of Life: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Close to Home." *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination.* Edited by Vin Nardizzi and Tiffany Jo Werth, University of Toronto Press, 2019, pp. 25–58.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, and Lowell Duckert, eds. "Eleven Principles of the Elements." *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire,* University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. 1-26.
"Cotton MS Nero A X/2." *The British Library*, <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Nero_A_X/2>, accessed 16 November 2020.

Crane, Susan. *The Performance of Self : Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

---. "Chapter 6: Knight and Horse." *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, pp. 137-168.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Ecology." *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, edited by Marion Turner, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 347-362.

Foucault, Michel. "Society Must Be Defended: From Chapter 11. 17 March 1976 (Biopower)." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* edited by Vincent B. Leitsch, third edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 1440-1450.

Godden, Richard H. "Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 30, no. 7, 2016, pp. 1273-1290.

Green, Richard Firth. *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Harman, Graham. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Open Court, 2002.

---. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory on Everything.* Penguin Random House, 2018.

Hatt, Cecilia A. *God and the Gawain-Poet: Theology and Genre in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. D. S. Brewer, 2015.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time.* Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, 1927. Blackwell, 2001.

---. "The Thing." *Poetry Language Thought,* translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 165-186.

---. "Being and Time: Introduction." *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger,* edited by David Farrell Krell, 1972. Harper Perennial, 2008, pp. 37-88.

Hodder, Ian. "The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View." *NLH*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 19-36.

Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* Oxford University Press, 2005.

Le Goff, Jacques. *The Medieval Imagination.* Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Lightsey, Scott. *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Lowery, David, director. *The Green Knight*, performances by Dev Patel, Alicia Vikander, and Joel Edgerton, A24, 2021.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

Neilson, W. A. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Middle English Series, 1999.

Pons-Sanz Sara M. "Fights and Games: Terms for Speech in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 119, no. 3, July 2020, pp. 353–379.

Putter, Ad. "The Ways and Words of the Hunt: Notes on '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Master of Game, Sir Tristrem, Pearl*,' and '*Saint Erkenwald*'," *The Chaucer Review*, 2006, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 354–385.

Ralph, Iris. "An Animal Studies and Ecocritical Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, vol. 44, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 431–444.

Rudd, Gillian. "'The Wilderness of Wirral' in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.'" *Arthuriana*, vol. 23, no. 1, Apr. 2013, pp. 52–65.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Edited and translated by James Winny, *Broadview Press*, 1992.

Steel, Karl. "Biopolitics in the Forest." *The Politics of Ecology: Land, Life, and Law in Medieval Britain* Eedited by Randy P. Schiff and Joseph Taylor, Ohio University Press, 2016, pp. 33-55.

Strite, Sheri Ann. "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: To Behead or Not to Behead-That Is a Question." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1–12.

Westerhof, Danielle. *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England.* Boydell Press, 2008.

Winny, James, editor. "Notes on the Text." *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Broadview Literary Texts, 1992, pp. 142-154.

BIONOTE

Zita Hüsing is a Ph.D. candidate at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, USA. She received her M.A. in English Literatures and Cultures and her M.A. in North American Studies from the University of Bonn in Germany. Her primary area of research is twentieth and twenty-first century American literature with an emphasis in Science Fiction, with critical research interests in the Posthuman, New Materialism, Critical Disability Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Gender studies.

NON-FICTION REVIEWS

GOTHIC CINEMA (2020) BY XAVIER ALDANA REYES

Review by Joana Rita Ramalho

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Gothic Cinema*. Routledge, 2020. 256 pp.

Horror and the Gothic have acquired an increasingly favourable position in academic circles over the last ten years, but while film criticism on the Horror genre has proven rife for several decades, monographs on Gothic cinema have been notoriously scarce. Aldana Reyes's *Gothic Cinema* (2020) is a comprehensive study guide that will likely become an invaluable resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Gothic. It contributes to a growing number of film-focused publications on the mode (Hopkins 2005; Hanson 2007; Forshaw 2013; Leeder 2015; Hubner 2018; Piatti-Farnell 2017; Hand and McRoy 2020) and stands out as the first sustained attempt in English-language scholarly criticism to produce a detailed overview of the Gothic as it manifests in global film. Bringing to the fore lesser-known productions alongside canonical ones, the volume is a fascinating and long overdue addition to the discipline's output, urging the reader to think about the cinematic Gothic generically, thematically, transnationally, and in direct relation to technology and shifting audiences.

Grounded in the author's extensive knowledge of the field, the breadth of the book's scope is remarkable, moving from the early experiments in proto-cinematic technologies to 'punisher films,' 'horrotica,' and postmodern romance Gothics. Attentive to the question of which films get labelled 'Gothic,' Aldana Reyes decisively contributes to the project of defining the cinematic Gothic beyond genre and national contexts. In doing so, the author reminds us of the screen language the Gothic created, as well as its widespread impact on film genres across a variety of periods and nations, a fact that has for far too long remained obscured by the critical attention directed towards its more popular counterpart, Horror. Specifically, Aldana Reyes seeks to understand and define the mode through an investigation of its aesthetic qualities rather than through its "alleged cultural purpose" (6). This is a refreshing – if unfashionable – critical perspective. Having followed a similar approach in my own work on Gothic cinema, I am particularly sympathetic to this engagement with 'the surface.' The question of whether Gothic cinema is only valuable so long as it is read as a metaphor – as a barometer of political upheaval and social anxiety – begs reconsideration. As Catherine Spooner observes in *Post-millennial Gothic* (2017), justifying "Gothic through its utility has resulted in a narrow understanding of its possibilities" (17). Aldana Reyes shares this perspective and emphasises the same caveat as Spooner – that these two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive; in other words, the focus on the artistic does not preclude or diminish the importance of social, historical, or political interpretations.

Arranged across seven chapters, the book unravels from the premise that Gothic cinema is characterised by technical innovation, technological developments, and audience tastes more than "the weight of a literary lineage" (3). Aldana Reyes acknowledges the monstrous heritage screen Gothic received from its literary ancestors, but eschews a limiting view of Gothic film as inescapably mediated by the Gothic literary tradition. This offers new possibilities of pinning down what precisely Gothic cinema is, what it does, and where its origins lie. That the filmic Gothic dialogues intimately and often self-reflexively with Gothic literature is indisputable. However, its many monsters, Aldana Reyes explains, owe more to folklore and superstition as represented in phantasmagorias, magic lantern projections, magic shows, and Grand Guignol than to Gothic novels (45, 47). Gothic iconography, then, "developed alongside the Gothic literary tradition, instead of strictly from it" (49), a point David Punter alerts us to as well in "The Original Gothics" (2013), arguing that the history of the "filmable Gothic" "does not conform to the literary one" (103). Increasingly, in fact, the mode, as Spooner elucidates, is "recognized and understood in visual terms that do not fully coincide with conventional literary definitions" (10).

The emergence of early Gothic cinema is perceptively analysed in the first chapter, "Transitional Origins," as "an accidental affair" (46), in the sense that there was no concerted effort on the part of the filmmakers to produce Gothic films: Gothic elements were typically incidental and included for wonder and entertainment, reflecting the mode's interstitial existence (54). This is a thought-provoking argument and it reminds me of Angela Wright's observation in "Gothic, 1764-1820" (2014) that "'Gothic' as a literary form […] began almost accidentally" (91). Wright is referring to Horace Walpole's infamous subtitle – "A Gothic Story" – appended to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which might be read as a "convenient excuse for creating something so outlandish as a supernatural tale in eighteenth-century enlightened Britain" (Wright 91). An accidental genesis may therefore be construed as another meeting point between Gothic film and literature.

Of particular interest to Gothic students and scholars is the renewed attention the book affords to the categories of 'Horror' and 'Gothic'. Often used interchangeably, Aldana Reyes sets out to show us both how they differ and the extent to which they overlap. To the common assertion that Gothic conceals while Horror reveals, the author adds some much-needed nuance, reminding the reader that Gothic films, such as Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015), are often graphic too, even though the Radcliffean tradition has been historically favoured to the detriment of bloodier imagery in the tradition of Lewis or Maturin. This point, which the author examines at length in *Body Gothic* (2014), attests to the fact that the intersections between these neighbouring film forms are more complex than much extant scholarship might indicate. Unlike the Gothic, Horror is an established genre, which Aldana Reyes defines through affect (11; see also *Horror Film and Affect*, 2016). Grounding the distinction primarily on affect seems nevertheless insufficient, especially if we define the Gothic as a "literature of terror" (Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 1980), as Spooner remarks (28). In *Gothic Film* (2020), Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy also stress the Gothic's affectivity, claiming that it "is a way of arranging literary and cinematic elements to create a particular affect" (3). Aldana Reyes suggests that the Gothic is instead "governed by the elicitation of suspense," which operates at the level of setting, narrative, and characters (12). Another distinctive feature between

Gothic and Horror pertains to time and space: while Horror is "freed from historical periodisation" (107), Gothic transposes the mystic qualities of old Europe to a mythicised urban present, which is often not as immediately appealing to audiences. Read through this lens, the Gothic is primarily psychologically affective, which does not exclude a recurring reliance on gory imagery; importantly, however, the fear it seeks to instil is inextricably tied to specific narrative, spatio-temporal, and aesthetic elements, while Horror is "not bound to a certain type of landscape, setting or character" (11).

On this, T. S. Kord's detailed investigation of the topic would have been a helpful addition to the discussion (*Little Horrors*, 2016), namely her argument that "What the horror film wants from us is not fear but an admission of guilt" (7): through point-of-view camera angles, Horror aligns the audience visually with the killer's perspective at crucial narrative moments, privileging the "perp-spective" over the victim's position (8). This undermines our ethical allegiance with the victim, thereby precluding compassion – a feature of Gothic films. "Without compassion," Kord claims, "fear is not an option" (182). Kord concludes that Gothic productions ("suspense films") "center on fear, declaring that it can be conquered," whereas "horror movies focus on guilt and show that it can't" (10). She argues that a hopeful ending is the province of the Gothic, as is the centrality of the unknown. Horror, in turn, "epitomize[s] predictability and repetitiveness" (11, 181). These points would have nicely complemented Aldana Reyes's observations, as they concern not only narrative and thematic elements, but also film technique. Nonetheless, the author's careful attention to the specificities of Gothic and Horror furthers critical thinking on this significant issue and succeeds in locating the Gothic aesthetic within – and outside – Horror.

One of the book's strengths is the agility with which it moves across different iterations and aspects of the filmic Gothic, from *fin-de-siècle* trick films to the dark superhero films of the post-millennium. In between, it highlights the significance of colour tinting, colour photography and sound technologies; the shift in the representation of female heroines; the work of individual directors and studios; the changes in laws about onscreen sexuality and violence; the crystallisation of the Horror formula and its successful global commercialisation; and the celebratory register of postmodern gothic films. The chapters alternate between a more overt concern with cinematic style and character types (chapter two) to corporate strategy (chapter three), themes and narrative (chapter four), technology and studio rivalries (chapter five), market logic and Continental Gothic (chapter six), and the mainstreaming of the mode (chapter seven). I found the shift between historical, thematic, and formal analysis slightly less effective in the last chapter, as I believe it would have been helpful for students to see a clearer temporal progression of the 'decoupling' of Gothic and Horror. This is a drawback of the overall emphasis on thematic structuring, but the chapter remains valuable for its careful consideration of the Gothic "as an aesthetic marker" (214) across different genres, from melodramas to sitcoms, cartoons, mystery films, fantasy, and Tim Burton's oeuvre.

In conclusion, Aldana Reyes draws upon a wealth of experience in the field of Gothic and Horror studies and produces another valuable addition to both fields. Given the book's format as a study guide, the proposed journey through the world of Gothic film is necessarily concise. Nevertheless, the author supplies a detailed filmography and bibliography at the end of each

chapter, alongside plenty of in-text references to directors, films, studios, technologies, theoretical debates, and visual entertainments that are not discussed in depth, but which might hopefully pique the interest of students, inspiring them to continue researching this ever-timely mode.

I would have welcomed a note about Gothic cinema and streaming platforms, which could have furthered and nicely wrapped up earlier arguments about changing audiences and demographics. Similarly, the deployment of special effects, particularly CGI, has helped shape and revitalise the Gothic on the screen, making it more palatable to a younger demographic. This point could therefore have been more closely explored, especially in the final chapters. Finally, perhaps an appendix containing a taxonomy of the manifold subcategories the mode has splintered into as a consequence of greater critical attention would have been useful to students, too. These are nonetheless minor observations in what is a welcome, engaging, rigorous, and thoroughly global study guide that will no doubt become a staple in reading lists.

WORKS CITED

Hand, Richard J. and Jay McRoy. "Introduction." *Gothic Film: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edited by Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 1-7.

Kord, T. S. *Little Horrors: How Cinema's Evil Children Play on Our Guilt*. McFarland, 2016.

Punter, David. "The Original Gothics." *Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film*. Edited by Jamel Bell, BFI, 2013, pp. 103.

Punter, David. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. Longman, 1980.

Spooner, Catherine. *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Wright, Angela. "Gothic, 1764-1820." *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination*. Edited by Dale Townshend, The British Library, 2014, pp. 68-91.

BIONOTE

Joana Rita Ramalho is Lecturer (Teaching) in Film Studies, Comparative Literature, and Portuguese at University College London, UK, where she teaches Gothic film and literature, Spanish cinema, musical satire, and Portuguese. She has published on topics as varied as sexsationalist feminism in postmillennial Gothic musicals, haptic motifs and sensory contagion in terror cinema, thing theory and creepy dolls in Gothic and Horror films, 1940s Gothic melodramas, radical humour in the repertoire of The Tiger Lillies, and the mock heroism of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. She is currently working on a monograph, *Routes of Remembering: The Gothic Aesthetic in Film*.

MONSTERS: A COMPANION (2020) EDITED BY SIMON BACON

Review by Jack Fennell

Bacon, Simon, editor. *Monsters: a Companion*. Peter Lang, 2020. 280 pp.

As a former editor of a previous volume in the *Companion* series, *Sci-Fi: A Companion* (2019), I am well aware of the inherent challenge of compiling a work of this type: the result has to be accessible to newcomers without putting off seasoned experts; it has to cover the fundamentals without re-treading old ground; and it has to do what previous critical companions did, while also differentiating itself in terms of range, approach, and content. In this regard, editor Simon Bacon and the contributors to this volume have succeeded admirably.

The book is divided into five sections – 'Home,' 'Society,' 'Cultural Intersections,' 'Gender,' and 'Futures' – which are, naturally, interpreted in a broad, thematic sense to allow for a variety of approaches. Thus, 'Home' addresses migration and mental illness alongside domestic violence; 'Society' encompasses a wide range of social problems and phenomena, from education to urban legends and the morality of 'witnessing'; 'Cultural Intersections' deals with reinvention 'within' cultures as well as intercultural exchanges; 'Gender' includes feminist and queer readings of various texts, and 'Futures' considers not just Science-Fictional monstrosity, but anxieties about what awaits us in the very near future. This kind of division is rarely perfect, but such things give a book its own particular character. Here, Murray Leeder's very informative and engaging overview of the use of animated skeletons as antagonists in fiction, with a particular focus on their deployment in the *Game of Thrones* TV series (2011-2019) created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, is included in the Gender section. I choose to interpret this as a bold editorial gesture, inviting us to consider how much of our identity is expected to be contingent on external appearance.

'Home' gets off to a strong start with Angela M. Smith's analysis of the depiction of mental illness, using Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) as a focal text. Smith not only explores the fraught relationship between superstition and neurosis in medical and cultural discourse, but also brings this insight to bear on the look of the film itself, noting that the Babadook's appearance calls to mind both the Victorian medicalisation of 'deviance' and the design of several classic movie monsters. Simon Bacon's own chapter on *The Invisible Man* (2020) and domestic violence follows with a number of striking observations about Leigh Whannell's film and its fictional antecedents. For example, it had never occurred to me before that the titular antagonist of Paul Verhoeven's film *Hollow Man* (2000), with his 'facelessness' and tendency to prey upon women within his own social circle, is a literal embodiment of sexual assault statistics.

Phil Fitzsimmons' chapter on Jennifer Kent's film *The Nightingale* (2018) considers the evils of colonialism in Australian cinema, including a brief consideration of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) directed by Peter Weir, though this is secondary to a psychoanalytical reading of paedophilic themes and implications in the chosen texts. Agnieszka Kotwasińska's analysis of the Polish musical Horror movie *The Lure* (2015), directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska, meanwhile, considers the film's humorous re-framing of Hans Christian Andersen's (1837) fairy tale "The Little Mermaid" as an immigrant story in light of European hostility towards migrants, with the Mediterranean as a "sea of bodies," the "gothicization" of immigration, the dehumanisation of immigrants, and the implication that acceptance is contingent on the migrants' willingness to be objectified for the gatekeepers' profit or gratification.

The 'Society' section begins with John Edgar Browning's insights into teaching a class on slasher films, generously including a week-by-week outline that should be of interest to any reader who might be putting together a Fantastika-related module, while Lauren Rosewarne's chapter on cyberbullies makes a good case for considering the cyberbully as a latter-day 'bogeyman,' highlighting the resonances between the anonymous online aggressor and traditional antagonists such as ghosts, shapeshifters, and slasher villains (e.g. their indeterminate identities, their ability to strike from anywhere, inhabiting an unreal 'dream world,' and so on). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas gives us a good overview of urban legends and their proximity to lived experience, before looking specifically at the Japanese urban legend of the Slit-Mouthed Woman and describing its changing contexts, from the rapid urbanisation of the Japanese countryside during the twentieth century to the conscious reinvention of Folk material in present-day Horror cinema. W. Scott Poole's analysis of Sara Perry's novel *Melmoth* (2018) concludes the section with a troubling rumination on the idea of 'bearing witness' to atrocity and human suffering, when the act of witnessing achieves nothing and the witnesses refuse to acknowledge their own part in that suffering.

Part Three, 'Cultural Intersections,' effectively a showcase of selected monsters from different world traditions, will be of particular interest to monsterologists. Benjamin Baumann charts the pop-culture evolution of the Thai 'Phi Krasue,' examining how a creature that initially did not fit into any convenient Western category came to be 'vampirised' as a consequence of globalisation, and is now beginning to return to its roots as an object of pity rather than revulsion. Inés Ordiz, in turn, looks at the roots and evolution of La Llorona, the weeping, child-murdering spirit of Mexican legend – from her possible antecedents in pre-Columbian religion, to her identification as the hated La Malinche (who supposedly betrayed her people to Cortéz), to her reclamation by twenty-first century Chicana feminists. Gail de Vos uses Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* and the on-going franchise (1993-present) as a starting-point to examine the Russian folkloric figure of Baba Yaga, and highlight what a varied and multifaceted creature she is, though more often than not in Western media she serves as a signifier of "strange Russian otherness." Partha Mitter takes the still-cringeworthy *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), directed by Steven Spielberg, as a prime example of Hindu deities being conflated with Western demonic imagery, and traces the roots of this calumny all the way back to the end of the first millennium. Yasmine Musharbash closes out the section with a look at the depiction of monstrosity in the TV series *Cleverman* (2016-2017), created by Ryan Griffen,

which takes the Indigenous Australian myth of 'hairy people' as its basis. Musharbash introduces the reader to the concept of the "indigenous uncanny," derived from feelings of curiosity rather than fear, and shows how the hairy people (or yowies) are positioned as relatable monsters for Australian Aboriginal viewers.

'Gender' begins with Eddie Falvey's analysis of Robert Eggers' film *The Witch* (2015), which provides a basis to look at how Satan is incorporated into gendered Horror narratives. Falvey describes an interesting shift from depictions of Satan as a violator to ones that present him as a saviour of oppressed women – a change that is all the more interesting for being teased out through a story that presents the seventeenth century Puritan worldview literally. Emily Brick follows with an interesting overview of the 'warlock' figure, coining a memorable descriptor in "male-pattern monstrosity", and Craig Ian Mann lays out a convincing argument against the standard interpretation of werewolf narratives as dramatisations of male anger as "the beast within," focusing on emancipatory stories of female werewolves, such as in Jonas Alexander Arnby's film *When Animals Dream* (2014).

In 'Futures,' Leah Richards underlines the themes that render clones into 'monsters' in fiction (e.g. there's never just one of them, implications that they possess a 'hive mind,' and so on), and makes a number of very sensible points that debunk each of these in turn, highlighting the plasticity of the human genome and the effects of socialisation. Dahlia Schweitzer uses the Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan TV series *The Strain* (2014-2017) to discuss how plagues are employed discursively to separate in-group from out-group, and Self from Other. Carl H. Sederholm takes us in an interesting direction with his chapter on death metal band Abhorrence's album *Megalohydrothalassophobia* (2018), through which Sederholm expands upon cosmic pessimism, 'the mesh,' hyperobjects, and the Anthropocene. Gerry Canavan revisits Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) to examine the story's implied argument about legal versus biological distinctions between human and non-human, and briefly mentions an intriguing theory about the alien 'Prawns': that they are all in fact transformed humans, abductees who were previously exposed to the mutagenic compound that drives the film's plot. Finally, Elana Gomel addresses the zombie through Mike Carey's novel *The Girl With All the Gifts* (2014), looking at the convergence between the zombie and the posthuman, with the zombie as a representative of "the perpetual now" that recycles human culture even as it supersedes us – as Gomel puts it, "Humanity is dead, but the Oxbridge curriculum lives on" (238).

The chapters that did not convince me have one thing in common, which is psychoanalytical criticism. I harbour no specific animus against the psychoanalytical approach in itself, but I find that it lends itself to argument by assertion, and its efficacy depends on the reader's own adherence to Freudian orthodoxy. I admit that I did not understand Anthony Curtis Adler's chapter on Lady Gaga, as analysed through her guest appearance in an episode of Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* (2012). I felt I was on surer ground with Daniel Sheppard's analysis of the TV series *Bates Motel* (2013-2017), developed by Carlton Cuse, Kerry Ehrin, and Anthony Cipriano, as an articulation of queer monstrosity, but I was still conflicted; I may be reading Sheppard's argument incorrectly, but I did not understand how the queer-coding of fictional serial killers could be read as something to

be celebrated. Again, this may come down to a question of personal taste, and readers who are better-versed in psychoanalytic literary theory will probably engage with these chapters in a more rewarding manner than I did.

It should be noted that the production timeframe between issuing a call for papers and publication can sometimes work against a book's contents, especially with the accelerated news cycle of the past five years or so, and this is thus reflected within the text. A couple of essays make references to a then-current Trump presidency, and Dahlia Schweitzer's chapter, in tackling the subject of plagues with reference to the depiction of such in disaster movies of the 1990s and 2000s, has been noticeably impacted after the fact by the Covid-19 pandemic; this book thus falls just a few months short of the most obvious 'dividing-line' in recent history since 9/11, another victim of the Cursed Year of 2020. This is, of course, no reflection on the contributors or the editor.

I felt that I should save discussion of the Foreword and Afterword to this volume until the end of this review, to better to sum up the phenomenal breadth of its subject matter. The Foreword, by Sherry C. M. Lindquist, is an overview of an exhibition held in the Museum of the University of Memphis in 2018, featuring works by the artists Wangechi Mutu, Le Marquee La Flora, William Christenberry, Roger Cleaves, and Saya Woolfalk. Lindquist's account of this exhibition describes a space in which different kinds of monstrosity, from the figurative to the conceptual, are represented within the larger monstrous contexts of colonisation and racial violence, demonstrating that the monster can exist as both an object amenable to understanding and a presence lingering within the negative spaces of history, trying to avoid articulation. Patricia MacCormack's Afterword focuses on the TV series *Hannibal* (2013-2015) developed by Bryan Fuller, interrogating the highly stylised depictions of murder with reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'body without organs,' and exploring our fascination for fictionalised murderers that are, after all, a very different species from their real-world analogues. These are appropriate pieces to parenthesise this collection: whatever the monster's merits, at the end of the day it remains a monster, and we would do well to remember our ambivalent relationship to it.

Overall, this companion volume to monsters is an edifying introduction to a field of study that until relatively recently was somewhat obscure; it is straightforward and matter-of-fact enough to be welcoming to the beginner, without sacrificing theoretical complexity when needed, and the variety of approaches on display means that those well-versed in the study of monsters will also find it enlightening. A worthy entry in the series, and a worthy inclusion for a researcher's reference library.

BIONOTE

Jack Fennell is a researcher, writer, and editor based in Limerick, Ireland. He is the editor of two anthologies, *A Brilliant Void* (2018) and *It Rose Up* (2021), collecting lesser-known Irish Science Fiction and Fantasy stories respectively, both published by Tramp Press. His academic studies *Irish Science Fiction* (2014) and *Rough Beasts: Monstrosity in Irish Literature, 1800-2010* (2019) are published by Liverpool University Press, and his own fiction has appeared in *Silver Apples Magazine*, *The Only One in the World,* and *Who Sleuthed It?* He teaches at the University of Limerick.

EXPLORING THE HORROR OF SUPERNATURAL FICTION: RAY BRADBURY'S ELLIOTT FAMILY (2020) EDITED BY MIRANDA CORCORAN AND STEVE GRONERT ELLERHOFF

Review by Amy Bride

Corcoran, Miranda and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, editors. *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction: Ray Bradbury's Elliott Family. Routledge*, 2020, 246pp.

Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction: Ray Bradbury's Elliott Family is a comprehensive compendium which fulfils a conspicuous gap in existing Bradbury scholarship. As editors Miranda Corcoran and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff note in their introduction to the collection, the overwhelming majority of Bradbury criticism focuses on his contributions to Science Fiction and Dystopian writing, and even the small yet insightful handful of works that do consider Bradbury's supernatural works – such as Jonathan R. Eller and William F. Touponce's book *Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction* (2004) and the latest issue of *The Ray Bradbury Review* edited by Jeffrey Kahan and Eller (No. 6, 2019) – relegate this writing to a side-note to his other, more famous publications. As the first book-length study to concentrate on Bradbury's Gothic writings, and his Elliott Family stories in particular, Corcoran and Ellerhoff's volume proposes a critical realignment of Bradbury as a seminal twentieth century Horror writer whose tales of spooky sister-witches, flying vampire-uncles and millennia-old mummified grandmothers have as much to say about the socio-political developments of mid-to-late-twentieth-century America as his dystopian visions of nuclear apocalypse, space travel, and book burning. To this point, *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* achieves an easy-win; the quality of the close readings and gothicised interpretations of Bradbury's work provided by the volume's contributors make it difficult not to recognise Bradbury's skill, importance, and impact as a Gothic writer. As such, this volume is a must-read for Bradbury scholars and fans who might be unaware of his supernatural works and are thus missing out on a critically relevant and intellectually stimulating aspect of his career.

Beyond this immediate success, *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* provides a fascinating insight into Bradbury's creative and editorial processes across his career. Due to the nature of the publication history of the Elliott Family stories (which appeared in various magazines between 1946 and 1994, with many revised and republished, and then later compiled in the 2001 'fix-up' novel *From the Dust Returned*), analyses of these works open a gateway through which the reader may examine Bradbury's creative and political leanings at a given time, which is then

comparable with the earlier or later versions of the same story. Corcoran and Ellerhoff exploit this opportunity to great effect, with a number of essays in the collection focusing on the same core stories (most notably, "The April Witch" and "Homecoming") from different publication perspectives. Dara Downey's essay "'Inverted and Dark and Mildly Different': Gothic Domestic Relations in Ray Bradbury and Shirley Jackson" is a particularly effective example, with Downey drawing connections between Bradbury's engagement with the carnivalesque and the development of domestic idealism, cultural homogeny, and suburban conformity in post-war American culture. Downey's analysis compares the wedding scene in the original version of "Uncle Einar," first published in *Dark Carnival* (1947), in which ritual, ceremony, and performance are celebrated as part of the positive carnivalesque, with the edited and republished version of the same story which appeared in *From the Dust Returned*, in which the wedding scene is significantly downplayed, to the point of obscurity within the narrative. Downey argues that this shift between presenting the wedding as an openly and overtly Gothic spectacle to a distinct lack of disclosure of details can be read against changing attitudes towards domestic privacy (during a post-war era which promoted the home as both a private family space and where one's private family interactions were publicly scrutinised as evidence of anti-American sentiments), as well as the growing taboo surrounding carnival attractions such as freak shows which simultaneously challenged and reinforced societal norms regarding bodies, behaviours, and beliefs.

By recognising and investigating the differences between the two versions of "Uncle Einar," Downey teases a reading of Bradbury's changing attitudes towards the carnivalesque as influenced by the socio-political moment in which each version was published and subsequently provides a multi-dimensional close reading of Bradbury as a socially-engaged self-editor in addition to the compelling analysis of the work he produced. Downey's contextualisation of Bradbury's work against that of canonical Gothicist Shirley Jackson is exemplary of an additional, noteworthy success of *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction.* Much is made throughout the volume of Bradbury's deserved place amongst, and relationships with, canonical writers of American Gothic fiction, with Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, and Nathaniel Hawthorne amongst the most noted connections. Far from detracting from the volume's single-author focus, this contextualisation strengthens the editor's arguments for Bradbury's recognition as a Gothic writer whilst highlighting intriguing comparison points between Bradbury's supernatural works and those that have received more critical attention, thereby providing an anchor-point for readers who are unfamiliar with Bradbury's Gothic yet familiar with American Gothic more generally. Melanie Otto's essay '"'Other Ways of Being': Ray Bradbury's 'The April Witch' in Conversation with Jamaica Kincaid's 'In the Night' and Leonora Carrington's 'The Seventh Horse'" provides the most unexpected, and in many ways the most rewarding, author comparison of Bradbury by positioning his work against continental American Magical Realism. Otto reads Cecy Elliott, big sister of the Elliott clan and eponymous "April Witch" of Bradbury's story, in relation to "concepts of shapeshifting, and dream journeying in creole and indigenous American folklore" in order to demonstrate her affinity with the self-assertive, sexually curious, and indeterminately-human, female protagonists of Kincaid's and Carrington's texts (91). As powerful women, Kincaid's, Carrington's and Bradbury's characters are, according to Otto's reading, both closer to nature and unnatural beings, at once threats to and protectors of the natural order that weave in and out of magical realms according to the desired power dynamics of their given circumstances.

Miranda Corcoran makes a similar argument regarding Cecy Elliott in the chapter "'I'll be in Every Living Thing in the World Tonight': Adolescent Femininity and the Gothic Uncanny in Bradbury's 'The April Witch.'" Corcoran examines the relationship between literary horror and female adolescence as a period of transgression from subject to object (including the self-alienation from one's own changing body, the discovery of sexuality, and the increasing pressures of societal expectations and gender conformity) to argue that "adolescent femininity is central to the narrative economy of the gothic" and, more specifically, that "the teenage girl [is] the archetypal embodiment of the uncanny" (71). Drawing on medical history, social discourse surrounding womanhood, the legacy of spiritualism, and even testimony from the Salem Witch Trials, Corcoran provides a highly compelling and engaging critique that is further supported by her analysis of the advertisements that accompanied the original magazine publication of Bradbury's tale through which Cecy's simultaneous rejection of domestic conformity and susceptibility to its restrictions is explored. According to Corcoran, "'The April Witch' foregrounds a vision of teenage femininity that is beholden to Cold War anxieties about the nuclear family and the reactive domesticity of the postwar period. At the same time, however, its construction of female adolescence is fundamentally uncanny and cloaked in the visual signifiers of the gothic that challenge the utopian optimism of the period" (71-72). This depth of investigation and vast array of cultural and clinical evidence makes Corcoran's chapter the stand-out essay of an already highly rigorous and readable collection.

A number of chapters touch upon or deal directly with the autobiographical aspects of the Elliott Family stories, including Bradbury's Illinois childhood, his eccentric extended Scandinavian family (upon whom many of the Elliott Family members are based), and Bradbury's own fears regarding life, death, and legacy. Whilst the establishing frameworks of these chapters are somewhat repetitive, given that most restate Bradbury's biographical data anew each time, the critical perspectives provided in these essays are varied and nuanced, meaning that a broad and insightful overview of Bradbury's autobiographical influences is available via a particular combination of chapters, should the reader wish to attain it. In this regard, the book might benefit from a separate author biography that covers the information relevant to his creation of the Elliott family. The inclusion of an appendix outlining the exhaustive publication history of each Elliott story is incredibly useful to readers who are likely to devour the entire volume and are interested in publication contexts, as the numerous publication dates and settings of each story can be difficult to map when discussed conversationally. Whilst the sole focus on the Elliott Family stories is at once understandable, engaging, and critically lacking in current scholarship, some comparative work between these and Bradbury's more dystopian works would have made an interesting entry point for readers more used to Bradbury's Science Fiction work. That being said, the Elliott Family stories certainly provide enough material to warrant a stand-alone critical volume; whilst *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction* is not an exhaustive collection of interpretations of Bradbury's Supernatural Fiction (nor does it claim to be), it does cover the major stories, characters, themes, and contextual influences in great detail and from alternative perspectives, and thus successfully establishes a firm foundation upon which future readings will be obligated to draw upon in their critique. Corcoran and Ellerhoff have selected essays that speak to each other as well as to the main concerns of the Elliott Family stories, and as such, have produced a volume that will no doubt become a seminal go-to text for Bradbury studies, and scholars of American Gothic literature more widely.

BIONOTE

Amy Bride completed her PhD in American Studies at University of Manchester, UK, in 2019. Her thesis examined the intersection of race and finance in American Gothic Monster Fiction of the Long American Century. She has previously published on the work of Bret Easton Ellis as late-capitalist hyper-gothic, and the development of racial finance in the American domestic slave trade. Her other research interests include the Blank Generation, technogothic, body horror, and cinema of the 1980s.

THE BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW (2021) BY DAVID EVANS-POWELL

Review by Marita Arvaniti

Evans-Powell, David. *The Blood on Satan's Claw.* Auteur Publishing, 2021. Devil's Advocates. 116 pp.

David Evans-Powell's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* was published by Auteur Publishing as part of their ongoing *Devil's Advocate* series , each book of which explores a single piece of horror cinema. The volume was published in 2021, the year of the film's 50th anniversary, and attempts to cover the production history and initial receptions to the film as well as introduce its themes and characters. At the same time, David Evans-Powell situates *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971, directed by Piers Haggard) within British culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, highlighting its importance in the trifecta of folk horror texts that were presented as a response to the time's massively popular Hammer Horror films. Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw* is commonly grouped together with its two, rather more well-known, contemporaries: *Witchfinder General* (1968, directed by Michael Reeves), and *The Wicker Man* (1973, directed by Robin Hardy). As Evans-Powell notes in his introductory chapter, he intends to "celebrate" the film which he views as having been "much maligned" in terms of contemporary opprobrium and revised appreciation and "hidden in the shade of its more celebrated bedfellows" (9-10).

Given the subject matter of the film, please be advised that this review will contain discussions of a rape scene. The film itself is simultaneously simple and tricky to sum up adequately. A small English village in the early 1700s becomes prey to satanic powers with the unearthing of a number of bestial body parts from a furrowed field. The plot then splits into two distinct storylines, each exploring an aspect of the encroaching satanic presence in the village. In the manor house, Isobel Banham does not approve of her nephew Peter Edmonton's fiancée Rosalind and insists that she spends the night at the attic. In the night, a mysterious presence terrifies Rosalind who starts screaming uncontrollably, causing the household to run to the attic. The following day as Rosalind is about to be collected for Bedlam (a psychiatric hospital), she discovers that her right hand has turned into a gruesome claw, which she then uses to scratch Isobel. Rosalind is taken to Bedlam and Isobel is taken to bed with a fever, presumably caused by her injury. Soon after, Isobel disappears, never to be seen – or mentioned – for the remainder of the film. In the village, the teenaged Angel Blake discovers a beast's claw in the field and takes it with her. She proceeds to become the film's main antagonist, the self-made priestess of a devil-worshipping cult made of most of Angel's peers. Many villagers are quickly marked with the skin of the beast growing in patches on their bodies and Angel and her followers attempt to harvest those pieces in order to help the entity regain a corporeal form. In the course of the film Angel commits a number of transgressions as she attempts to seduce the

curate, lies, kills, and leads the cult to commit the horrific rape and murder of Cathy Vespers, easily the film's most controversial and horrific scene. Eventually, Peter summons the Judge, who returns to the village and leads a mob to interrupt the cult's ceremony, kills Angel Blake, and succeeds in burning the corporeal form of the demon.

Evans-Powell's book is fragmented, rather like the film it is analysing, with each chapter covering a different aspect of the film. "Production and Reception" covers the technical aspects of the film, providing some short biographies of the creative team involved as well as details on the film's development, reception, and legacy. This chapter is informative and well researched, presenting what would be dry information in an engaging and efficiently communicative manner. The chapter is oddly weighted, however, as Evans-Powell often devotes pages on biographical information, a decision which leaves some of the more intriguing sub-sections, such as the one on Ingmar Bergman's influence of the film, feeling rather under-developed and rushed.

The following two chapters "A Green and (Un)Pleasant Land" and "Nature and Civilization" discuss the film's rural setting as a way of unearthing its deeper themes: the tensions between city and wilderness, rural living and the urban, civilized society, reason and superstition. The film's pre-credits sequence is analysed in depth and Evans-Powell's close reading of it is fascinating, leading seamlessly into an analysis of the shifting landscapes of the film which he separates in five categories: the rural, the pastoral, the uncanny, the malign, and the resistant. Evans-Powell also writes in depth about Haggard's framing of the open countryside and the muted interior shots of the film. As Evans-Powell notes, Haggard had stated a desire to "avoid the excesses of Hammer's gothic horror films," which placed "a great emphasis on artificiality and sumptuousness," with a lot of the action being set indoors, showcasing the studio's "heavily ornamented sets" (31). It is in this section that Evans-Powell underlines the importance of *Blood on Satan's Claw* as a folk horror piece specifically, tracing the echoes of the way it depicts the uncanny English countryside in subsequent folk horror works reaching to the present day. The two chapters are perhaps the strongest of the volume and Evans-Powell's expertise as a historian and folk horror film scholar shines through in his discussion of Haggard's landscapes and sets and the integral part they play in the film's narrative.

Evans-Powell proceeds to turn his attention away from the land and towards the human agents of the film in "The Fiend and His Followers" and "Agents of Order." It is in those chapters that the fragmented structure of the book begins to work against Evans-Powell, as it proves to be difficult to discuss the film's characters without returning back to the analysis of its powerful landscape. Evans-Powell skilfully builds on his previous observations about the various meanings the countryside and the city take on in the film but these descriptions occasionally come across as repetitive, perhaps due to the brevity of each analytical section. The 'unearthing' of the fiend's remains becomes an analytical tool as Evans-Powell draws on Reza Negarestani's work on "relics from the past" from 2008's *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, in order to analyse the summoning of the demon and his subsequent hold on the village's populace. According to Evans-Powell, the fiend's remains fit Negarestani's definition of the "xenolithic artifact," describing its "baleful influence" that requires no "specific act of removal from the ground, summoning spell

or anything of that sort" to be unleashed, the second the remains are perceived (61). By reading the fiend's remains as a xenolithic artifact, Evans-Powell can then place *Blood on Satan's Claw* in conversation with a number of British television films from the late '60s to the late '70s, specifically adaptations of M. R. James' story and other similarly antiquarian horror tales.

Finally, Evans-Powell returns to examining the world outside the film in his final chapter "Anarchy in the UK," in which he traces the film's contemporary influences, from the general state of political and cultural anxiety in the wake of the 1960s' youth movements and the resurgence of the occult in Britain to very specific instances of violence such as the 1969 Mason Family murders in California and the 1968 case of Mary Bell in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It is an interesting chapter, which would again be incredibly useful as a prompt for further class discussion and analysis, but one that feels out of place at the end of the volume following such an in-depth examination of the film itself.

Evans-Powell's writing throughout this short volume is interesting and engaging as well as informative, but there is a rising sense of unintentional conciseness in some of his arguments and analyses; many sections read like abstracts of longer papers, summarising and describing the arguments rather than providing in-depth explorations of them. It is clear that Evans-Powell is an extremely knowledgeable and insightful scholar, and when his arguments are given the necessary space to expand they are unfailingly compelling and rigorous, as shown especially in his sub-sections on Angel Blake and the multi-faceted figure of The Judge, inarguably the two central figures of the film. Where Evans-Powell's analysis falls short, however, is in limiting its scope to specifically celebrating *Blood on Satan's Claw*, providing a critical analysis that fails to criticise and occasionally feels shallow because of that focus on the film's merits. *Blood on Satan's Claw* is and will continue to be a polarising film. While there is a lot to commend it, it also rightfully invites criticism, both in terms of craft and in terms of how the film handles its subject matter. In his effort to celebrate the film, Evans-Powell does it a disservice by flattening those complexities of artistry and content.

Within the greater context of its publication history, the book is a success. Evans-Powell is meticulous in providing a lot of useful introductory information about the film that will undoubtedly prove helpful to future researchers, especially in a classroom setting or an undergraduate course. The very same conciseness that occasionally precludes it from delving deeper into its subject makes it a great tool for students, as it leaves a number of unanswered questions and implicitly provides prompts for further study in practically every page. *The Blood on Satan's Claw* also succeeds in generating interest in a film that is still not so much popular as, perhaps, notorious. Ultimately, however, it leaves the reader wanting more in terms of analysis. While that might make the book a useful teaching tool, this very quality makes it an unsatisfactory resource for the researcher. Like the film it discusses, Evans-Powell's volume frustrates and intrigues in equal measure. The book is a valuable entry-point for classroom engagement with the *Blood on Satan's Claw* film, despite being somewhat over-eager to defend the artistic value of an interesting but flawed work, positioning *Blood on Satan's Claw* as a prime example of Folk Horror without really exploring its more unsavoury aspects.

BIONOTE

Marita Arvaniti is a part-time PhD student in the University of Glasgow, UK, investigating the lasting effect theatre has had in the birth and evolution of contemporary fantasy literature. She is currently working as the Conference Administrative Assistant for the Once and Future Fantasies Conference (13-17 July 2022).

UNCANNY BODIES (2020) EDITED BY PIPPA GOLDSCHMIDT, GILL HADDOW AND FADHILA MAZANDERANI

Review by Miranda Corcoran

Goldschmidt, Pippa, Gill Haddow, and Fadhila Mazanderani, editors. *Uncanny Bodies*. Luna Press Publishing, 2020. 284 pp.

There is a wonderfully emblematic anecdote in the introduction to *Uncanny Bodies*. Considering the complex historical relationship between synthetic technologies and the organic body, the editors discuss the first medical x-ray, produced by German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen. Experimenting with a new technique to capture radiographic images, Röntgen created a transparent picture of his wife Anna Bertha's hand. Upon first being presented with this image of her own skeletal hand, Anna Bertha exclaimed, "I have seen my own death"(4). This intersection of technology and body, life and death, visible and invisible signals some of the ways in which the corporeal can be understood as uncanny. The body is, after all, a ready home for the strange. Its boundaries, which we so often characterise as immutable, are in actuality transient and permeable. New technologies, from prothesis to implantations, trouble the divide between human and nonhuman, interior and exterior. Likewise, our ever-evolving understanding of disease and illness forces us to reconsider our belief in a bounded, self-contained individual, remote and distinct from the world it inhabits.

Uncanny Bodies is a unique project that advances the concept of the uncanny in the wake of evolving scientific knowledge. As the editors explain in the book's introduction, they are particularly interested in "the intersection between the uncanny, human and animal bodies, and biomedical sciences" (1). Drawing on both Ernest Jentsch's essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906) and Sigmund Freud's seminal work *The Uncanny* (1919), as well as later figurations of the disquieting like Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley, the book explores embodiment, technology and identity. *Uncanny Bodies* contains fiction, poetry, academic scholarship and (auto) biography, as well as hybrids comprised of some or all of these categories. As Goldschmidt, Haddow, and Mazanderani explain in the introduction, the desire to cross disciplinary and generic lines was itself informed by Freud's *The Uncanny*, a psychoanalytic study that centres its excavation of the human psyche around E. T. A Hoffmann's 1816 short story "The Sandman." In this way, the collection asks what it means to represent the body through words, to embody physicality in text: How might the corporeal experiences of illness, injury, or surgical intervention be conveyed through language?

The collection is divided into three sections. The first of these, "Pain, illness and healing," centres on physiological states, such as disease and pain, showing how they destabilise the notion

of a seamless, uncomplicated relationship between the thinking self and the body that houses it. The second section, "Situating bodies: the uncanny in the city and the forest," focuses on the spatial orientation of bodies and the related conception of the body as space. The final section is entitled "Transforming bodies into Other" and is comprised of works investigating the role of technology in effacing boundaries between the human and the non-human.

Following a brief introduction wherein the editors trace a concise history of the uncanny, we encounter the first creative piece printed in *Uncanny Bodies*. A poetic reflection of the more academically rigorous introduction, nicky melville's "familiars" is a found poem, cobbled together from all of the phrases containing the word "familiar" in two different translations of Freud's *The Uncanny*. The typography is such that the poem can be read either directly across or in two parallel columns. The phrases are vaguely similar, with the words on the left-hand side of the page coming from Alix Strachey's 1955 translation and the ones on the right from David McLintock's 2003 translation. The manner in which the words echo each other across the page gives the impression of mirror images in which the reflection is slightly distorted. In its playful intermingling of scholarly text and experimental poetry, "familiars" sets the tone for the rest of the collection, indicating an ongoing dialogue between the academic and the artistic.

The book is comprised of almost forty different pieces, and it is, therefore, impossible to discuss each one in this short review. While not every piece can be mentioned here, each one is – in its own way – intriguing, thought-provoking, or in some way illuminating. Section One opens with Dilys Rose's "Half Here, Half Where," a work that frames the experience of having a stroke as a sudden encounter with alienation, a vanishing in which "half of you evaporated – poof!" (19). The next two pieces, Alice Tarbuck's poem "Forgetting" and Sarah Wasson's essay "Pain's Uncanny," serve as a conversation about chronic pain. Another notable entry in the first section is Ritti Soncco's "Unbecoming Animal," a work whose title suggests both unseemliness and dissolution. The story is told from the perspective of a deer infected with Lyme disease, and the text describes the creature's awareness of bacteria multiplying within its body; "making strangers out of my organs; dislocating me from my inner worlds" (79). Through the voice of the deer, the story imagines how it might be to live with certain microbes and how their presence might render one's own body unfamiliar. Jules Horne's playful, unsettling dramatic dialogue, "The Stane Bairn: An Uncanny Play" delivers a particularly poignant piece. Written largely in Border Scots, the dialogue initially appears to capture a conversation between an expectant mother, delirious with the excitement of baby-clothes shopping and knitting outfits, and her unborn infant. As the conversation continues, however, the child, who identifies itself as the "stane bairn,"(29) becomes increasingly recalcitrant, telling its mother that it will never speak nor sing nor skip. The baby, we learn, is not a soft-skinned infant, but rather a fibroid (uterine tumour) whose growth gives the appearance of advanced pregnancy. Based on the author's own experiences, the play evokes a disquieting sense of simultaneous fullness and emptiness, growth without life.

Section Two, "Situating bodies: the uncanny in the city and the forest," investigates the relationship between space and the uncanny, considering the body both *in* space and *as* space. The

section opens with a poem by Sarah Stewart entitled "Revenant Visits Her Old Bedroom." This poem establishes a recurring motif that will reappear throughout the section, as it imagines the spatialised body in terms of haunting. The next poem, "The Dark Forest," also by Sarah Stewart, likewise deals with haunting. This time, she evokes notions of emptiness and absence, the almost tangible vacancy left behind in the wake of loss. In her subsequent response to the poem, Emily F. Port uses "The Dark Forest" to investigate not only themes of absence, but what the absence of humans might mean in a natural space. Without humans, Port suggests, the forest may never be entirely empty or silent, as even trees communicate with each other using underground fungal networks.

The section continues with Pippa Goldschmidt's "Ma," a magical realist tale that interweaves themes of family, illness and genetics through the central image of a knitting machine. It is followed by the analytical essay "Uncan" by Shona Kerr. This brief response to Goldschmidt's story fixates on the role of the knitting machine and argues that the machine's capacity to fashion body parts from wool functions as a metaphor for the encoding of instructions in DNA. Kerr explains that just as the knitting machine can only work properly if it receives accurate instructions, so too does the "machinery in every cell in the body [depend] on the accuracy of the instructions it is given on when to grow and when to stop" (150). Another fascinating piece in this section is Eris Young's "Little Cat from the Bronx." A darkly humorous tale, "Little Cat" spatialises the gender politics of post-war America, as a careless husband is forced to navigate traditionally feminine spaces when his wife, Kat, begins to neglect him in favour of spending time with another woman, Kiki. The most memorable contribution to Section Two, though, is Donna McCormack's reimaging of the transplant recipient's body as a kind of embodied haunted house. McCormack's essay, entitled "The Haunted House, or the Other in the Self," imagines transplanted organs, residues of the dead, as manifestations of Otherness haunting the recipient body. McCormack explains that if the body can be spatialised as the place in which the self is housed, then transplanted organs can be viewed as spectral traces of the deceased haunting the house of the self.

The final section, "Transforming Bodies into Other," brings together a series of works that explore the increasingly tenuous border between human and machine, or human and non-human animal. The first two pieces interrogate the now-ubiquitous figure of the virtual assistant. Alice Tarbuck's poem "Alexa" enumerates the many powers of the eponymous disembodied assistant, conceding that while "Alexa is no witch, no enchantress, no circe, no baga yaga,"(175) her enchantments are numerous and perhaps deceptive. "Alexa" is followed by a short scholarly article by Benedetta Catanzariti, a researcher working on affective technologies. Catanzariti provides an overview of scientific attempts to systematise human emotions and teach computers to comprehend them. The next two pieces are also closely related, united by their preoccupation with the phenomenology of the prosthesis. Jane Alexander's "The Lag" examines how the wearer of a prosthesis might not only experience their body as different or strange, but also how they might experience temporality in a new way. In Alexander's story, an amputee is frustrated most of all by the temporal "lag" that now characterises her movement, "the theft of a second with every step" (185). In her response, Clare Uytman uses "The Lag" as the starting point for a broader exploration of how amputees experience their prostheses.

The most arresting work in Section Three is likely Naomi Salman's "sur la comète," a love story between two cyborgs that foregrounds both the relationship between the two cybernetically augmented organisms and the relationships they each have with their implanted devices. Salman questions how cybernetic implants might complicate binary notions of human and machine, while also exploring the role of individual identity in mediating the interaction between biology and technology. The story is paired with an insightful response by Gill Haddow, who traces the history of the cyborg back to the coining of the portmanteau – from "cybernetic organism"(230) – in the 1960s through to later speculations about how the cyborg might serve to liberate us from classificatory categories. Haddow's essay culminates in an insightful reading of "sur la comète" in which it is argued that the cyborgs featured in Salman's story choose body modifications reflective of their own, pre-existing identities.

Uncanny Bodies is an innovative and thoroughly original exploration of the embodied uncanny. Each work in the collection raises urgent questions about how we relate to and experience our bodies. Echoing Freud's use of "The Sandman" as a prism through which to view the uncanny, this collection challenges the reader to interact with the uncanny from both an analytical and a creative perspective. This is a collection that will, undoubtedly, have a broad appeal. It can be treated as an anthology, a dynamic compilation of scholarly and creative works, and read for pleasure. However, *Uncanny Bodies* will also intrigue researchers working on topics such as embodiment, the Gothic, gender, Horror and Science fiction. Many of its essays, including Haddow's discussion of the cyborg, Catanzariti's history of affective recognition, and Vassilis Galanos's chronology of the uncanny valley, serve as informative overviews of their respective topics. For this reason, *Uncanny Bodies* may also appeal to teachers. The individual essays not only explain, clearly and concisely, difficult concepts related to embodiment and uncanniness, but they can also be easily paired with one of the many relevant creative works included in the collection. *Uncanny Bodies* is a unique intervention in the study of embodiment. A hybrid of art and scholarship, this is a book that challenges disciplinary categories and forces us to reconsider the familiar space of the body.

BIONOTE

Miranda Corcoran is a lecturer in twenty-first-century literature at University College Cork, Ireland. Her research interests include genre fiction, popular fiction, Science Fiction, Horror, and the Gothic. She is currently writing a monograph on adolescence and witchcraft in American popular culture.

ABSENT REBELS: CRITICISM AND NETWORK POWER IN 21ST CENTURY DYSTOPIAN FICTION (2021) BY ANNIKA GONNERMANN

Review by Laura Winter

Gonnermann, Annika. *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction*. Narr Francke Attempto, 2021. 352 pp.

Whether or not they succeed in their mission, rebels have been a staple of classical dystopian writing. The compelling subplot of resistance invites readers to side with the dissidents and embrace the proposed alternative to the oppressive system. However, these genre hallmarks seem to be fading as the focus of contemporary dystopias shifts from state totalitarianism to free market capitalism, and the protagonists become increasingly powerless, trapped in opaque network structures. In *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction* (2021), Annika Gonnermann traces the absence of rebels in dystopian fiction produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Crucial to Gonnermann's thesis is the link between network power and immanent criticism, a performative mode of critique that helps to unravel oppression within seemingly free neoliberal societies.

Gonnermann takes on the impressively ambitious task of mapping how literary dystopias practice criticism and propose alternatives to the status quo. The author establishes the parameters of her book with a refreshingly realistic claim early on, arguing that dystopias written over half a century ago fail to be adequate channels of critique to make sense of contemporary ills (13). Although classics like George Orwell's ur-text *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) offer timeless lessons about the violation of human rights, they no longer capture the current mechanisms of Western societies, the demise of the nation state, and the encroaching forces of the free market imperative. Novels that adhere to the state-vs-individual paradigm, Gonnermann argues, no longer shock readers, and the wearing out of genre materials continues to weaken their warning effect.

Against this backdrop, the book is comprised of two parts. "The Dystopian Genre" establishes the theoretical backbone of the book, which traces the formulations of critique and investigates the depictions of power in the dystopian canon. The second part offers insightful close readings of five contemporary novels that the author identifies as paradigmatic texts for her argument. Because "they do not flesh out alternatives but rather restrict themselves to demanding a change from the status quo by cognitively mapping the exploitative systemic deficiencies of contemporary neoliberal capitalism," these texts, by form and content, offer a much-welcomed update within the canon and lend themselves to exploring current socio-political and economic complexities (308).

The careful analyses, which occupy most pages of the book, are written with remarkable clarity and are likely to spark interest also amongst those readers unfamiliar with the novels.

The first section begins with a brief overview of the etymology and history of dystopian fiction. Building on observations by Tom Moylan, amongst others, Gonnermann discusses the 'big three' genre-defining works by Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Yevgeny Zamyatin, and outlines dystopia's logic as a genre to prepare readers for the proposition that contemporary dystopias ultimately function differently from classical dystopias. For readers familiar with the genre, the book's novelty emerges when Gonnermann turns to different formulations of criticism. Following Rahel Jaeggi's *Critique of Forms of Life* (2014), the author contextualises external and immanent criticism against the backdrop of dystopian writing. While external criticism lends itself particularly well to critiquing structures like totalitarianism, immanent criticism seeks to unravel inherent contradictions of the status quo. From the outset, Gonnermann convincingly justifies the book's focus on immanent criticism by pointing to its transformative potential to transcend specific contexts. This *performative act* of criticising, she argues, provides a valuable framework to interrogate the absence of rebels in neoliberal dystopias.

Gonnermann links classical dystopian writing with external criticism, which finds expression in established plot devices like the subplots of resistance and the notion of a ready-made alternative. Orwell's Winston Smith or Huxley's Savage are mouthpieces for an alternative way of life and become easily identifiable rebels, distinguished by their outstanding intellect and ability to think critically, prompting readers to accept the suggested alternative to the dystopian system. Gonnermann posits that these generic templates are insufficient to capture the pervasive atmosphere of the free market imperative, leading her to conclude that classical dystopias "struggle to maintain their integrity as channels of criticism" (67). In turn, she argues that there are texts that employ criticism "without resorting to a patronising, prescriptive, often westernised discourse of how individuals should live." (40) Rather than offering normative solutions, these novels merely unearth contradictions within the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal capitalism. The lens of immanent criticism, Gonnermann argues, helps to make sense of dystopias that blatantly expose characters (and readers) to an atmosphere Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism' in which the market logic has successfully conquered the spatial and cognitive capacities of contemporary life. Although these novels seem less radical than classics, the author makes clear that they are no less effective in their transformative potential because they aim "to solve the immanent paradoxes by making them comprehensible in the first place" (68).

Having outlined the shift from external to immanent criticism in the dystopian canon, Gonnermann concludes the first section with key aspects of decentralised power structures, which the author identifies as the narrative *modus operandi* of contemporary texts. Drawing on David Grewal's concept of network power, Gonnermann points to the "peculiar mixture of individual agency and systemic coercion" found in recent dystopias (72). The author emphasises the dangerous entanglement of perceived freedom and actual freedom (voluntariness) in network structures that are shaped by a dominant standard: since there is a lack of acceptable alternatives, individuals

are ultimately pressured into accepting a particular way of life by fear of social exclusion (73-74). Recognising the network power mechanisms is key to deciphering why most protagonists today seem to accept the status quo – a thesis that Gonnermann puts through its paces in the second part of the book.

In the analysis chapters, Gonnermann turns to five contemporary dystopias, all of which *perform* criticism of the paradoxes inherent in neoliberal capitalism. In so doing, they dare to violate stock features of the genre and modify established character constellations. According to Gonnermann, these novels chronicle the extent to which recent texts have ultimately deviated from classics: They do not impose one world view onto another (external criticism), nor do they recover the underlying values and morals (internal criticism); they are first and foremost diagnostic in nature. These literary examples "spell out the inevitability of free-market capitalism" and cognitively map the entrenched mechanisms of network power, self-consciously pointing to their own limitations in conceptualising alternatives (304).

The suggested continuum starts with Dave Egger's *The Circle* (2013). Arguing that this novel confronts readers with a "form of power that has rarely featured in dystopian fiction to date" (118), Gonnermann delineates the intradiegetic shift from democracy to corpocracy and the emergence of a particular technological standard called 'SeeChange,' which ultimately "alters the code of conduct for politicians" (92). Showcasing how difficult it is "to criticise the shining world of the Circle externally," the author fleshes out the alluring mechanisms of this crowd-funded dystopia (114). Gonnermann uses vivid examples to support her argument that the protagonist not only disqualifies as a dystopian rebel but also plays an active part in establishing the hegemony of the Circle. Particularly revealing is the discussion on the tragic attempt of rebellion which outlines that network power nullifies any meaningful challenge to the status quo. In a similar vein, the author investigates the inconsistencies of the Consilience project and points to the devastating effects of conflating freedom and voluntariness in Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015).

In her analysis of M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), Gonnermann explores how difficult it is to resist the 'feed' standard in this hyper-consumerist society in which schools carry trademark labels, and the state is conceptualised as a dangerous, unwelcomed residue that interrupts the flow of capitalism. The chapter frames protagonist Titus in his function as a mouthpiece *for* the dominant neoliberal ideology, rather than against it. Void of alternative structuring principles and meaningful resistance, the only 'way out' is the complete breakdown of the status quo: "everything must go" (201). This notion of the (post-)apocalypse as the logical conclusion of the trajectory of neoliberal capitalism resurfaces when Gonnermann turns to Zachry's narrative in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Here, the author fleshes out "the defining matrix behind all social interaction" in the six historical snapshots the novel offers, illuminating capitalism as an imperative inextricably linked to human history (212).

The analysis section closes with Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a novel that exposes readers to a claustrophobic world void of alternatives. According to Gonnermann, the

novel's use of euphemisms underlines the extent to which the clone protagonists have accepted the dehumanising logic of this world. Given the absence of punitive measures common in classical dystopias, they live under the illusion that their choices are free. The author refrains from accusing the clones of compliance, and instead plausibly outlines their entrapment in a network shaped by a dominant standard. Ishiguro's novel seems a fitting choice to close the proposed continuum, as it marks the greatest deviation from the traditional *modus operandi* of dystopias, primarily due to the protagonists' inability even to *imagine* alternatives. Throughout the book, Gonnermann convincingly delineates the critical potential of these texts, pointing out parallels among the novels and thereby cementing her thesis that network power is the common denominator of the respective dystopias. The author argues that they encourage readers to think "systemically and globally" and ultimately function as innovative channels of critique because they do not fall for methodological individualism (303): rather than seeking the cause of oppression in individual sin, they foreground the pathologies of the centreless network structure of late capitalist societies.

Absent Rebels does not end on a hopeless note. Drawing on Theodor W. Adorno, Gonnermann argues that these novels dialectically start "a long-term project, which departs from the false and which will eventually lead to the good" (45). They offer no "exact route" but subscribe to a "trial-and-error principle," gradually nudging readers towards a better understanding of the entrenched network power mechanisms (305). Gonnermann finally hopes that these "iconoclastic dystopias" show readers a *direction away from*, instead of a *direction towards* (308). To tackle capitalism's hegemony and initiate reform, *Absent Rebels* concludes by advocating that network power should also be recognised as a positive force rather than an obstacle to be overcome. Just as network mechanisms can spin into dystopian nightmares, the accumulated choices of individuals can also yield network standards that fit "the imperatives of sustainability and equality" (311). Against the backdrop of the socio-political ills that mark the twenty-first century, *Absent Rebels* makes a clear case for the urgent need for a network theory of collective responsibility.

Taken together, the strengths of this book lie in its refreshing insights beyond the content of contemporary dystopian writing. Readers interested in literary dystopias will find a plethora of impulses and will not be disappointed by the in-depth discussions of novels that have received less critical attention to date. However, given that dystopias increasingly escape the literary form and proliferate in the film and television landscape, *Absent Rebels* would have benefited from a more nuanced contextualisation of dystopias on screen. Comments on cinematic and serial adaptations do surface throughout the book (119, 215, 292). Yet, these are largely restricted to fidelity problems and focus on the 'unsuccessful' adaptation of the respective source text. With the exception of one positive reference to the *Black Mirror* (2011-current) anthology (107), these rare but nonetheless recurring passages might leave readers with the impression that audio-visual renderings of dystopia ultimately remain stuck in external criticism, struggling to find a language for the absence of rebels. More explicit references to the critical potential of dystopias outside the literary realm, which follow their own media-specific logic, would have countered this lingering notion. In fact, there is a growing number of examples that show that dystopias on screen have become an equally potent vehicle for criticising contemporary ills. However, given that Gonnermann's primary interest lies in the literary

genre, this minor shortcoming does not outweigh the rich and hugely researched substance of this book. *Absent Rebels* makes an essential contribution to dystopian studies and pursues new horizons in scholarship by tracing in elegant details the changes and modifications of the genre.

BIONOTE

Laura K Winter is a final-year PhD candidate at the Chair of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Mannheim, Germany. Her research focus includes Dystopian and Post-apocalyptic fiction in contemporary film and television, digital culture, technology and criticism, the good life, mental health, resilience, and metamodernism. Her latest publications include two book chapters on *Black Mirror* (Narr Francke Attempto, 2019) and *The Walking Dead* (Peter Lang, 2021).

PHASES OF THE MOON: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE WEREWOLF FILM (2020) BY CRAIG IAN MANN

Review by Thomas E. Simmons

Mann, Craig Ian. *Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film.* Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 257 pp.

Arguably, the 'big three' in the contemporary Horror monster market are zombies, vampires, and Victor Frankenstein's creature. A mummy occasionally makes an appearance, perhaps a ghost. But cinematic werewolves have been – until recently – relegated to 'B' or even 'C' list monster status, especially in terms of the attention they have received in critical scholarship. Sheffield Hallam University's Craig Ian Mann's book aims to address that deficiency. It comes on the heels of other scholars and their books sharing the same goal and just as a plethora of new werewolf films are also being released.

Until recently, the landscape of popular culture werewolf monographs was rather bare. Prior to 2020, there was really only the excellent *She-Wolf* (2015) edited by Hannah Priest which focused a feminist lens on werewolf literature and film and Chantal Bourgault du Coudray's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (2006). Bourgault Du Coudray's work explored psychological interpretations of the werewolf myth in a number of different popular forms, including film, as well as literature, governmental insignias, and graphic novels. James Gracey's *The Company of Wolves* (2017) restricted its focus to film – but only the single film of its title. And Kimberley McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver's *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture* (2012) drew upon recent contemporary case studies of werewolf tropes in various media.

Within the last two years, the werewolf popular culture studies scene has exploded. Mann's work came into print. It was quickly followed by *In the Company of Wolves* (2020) – collecting essays which examined werewolves as cultural symbols in multiple contexts including eighteenth century debates about wild children, folk tales, and film – and *Gender and Werewolf Cinema* (2020) by Jason Barr. Barr's book unpacked the masculinity of werewolves in twentieth century films and the emerging femininity of twenty-first century werewolf cinema. Then, released in 2021, *Werewolf: The Architecture of Lunacy, Shapeshifting, and Material Metamorphosis*, a collection of essays edited by Caroline O'Donnell and José Ibarra, attempted to address the intersections of werewolf mutability and several emerging architectural theories.

Onto this stage, Mann's *Phases of the Moon* (2020) monograph stands alone in training a cultural analysis spotlight on the scope of werewolf cinematic appearances in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – all the way from the lost film *The Werewolf* (1913) through *Wildling* (2018). (It necessarily omits newer films like *The Wolf of Snow Hollow* (2020), *Eight for Silver* (2021), and *Bloodthirsty* (2021)). Mann's is an encyclopaedic undertaking, an ambition he acknowledges when describing his intent to construct "the broadest cultural history for the werewolf film possible within the confines of a single monograph" (215).

Comprehensive surveys like this one either result in an unusable weighty tome or a condensed work with breezier summaries of less interesting films. This work is of the latter variety. Thus, we have a readable summary which occasionally devotes only a thumbnail sketch to some entries. Still, if it skimps a bit here and there, it succeeds in grouping films into eight thematic categories, arranged more or less chronologically, as a means to summarise the common motifs and cultural angles which emerge, generate, then fade, over time.

Mann – like Carys Crossen's *The Nature of the Beast* (2020) (yet another recent entry in the field, but one which studied popular fiction werewolves) – rejects the simplistic cultural assessment of werewolves as manifesting division-of-self or 'beast within' metaphors. The full cultural range of werewolves, Mann proves, is magnitudes richer than merely this trope. Beginning with a grouping of xenophobic werewolf films, he demonstrates that the shape-shifting lupine monster is more than simply a Dr. Jekyll with fur. The werewolf is often politicised, occasionally contradictory, and invariably a product of its times. Not all of this critical work is original with Mann, and he acknowledges and sources prior scholarship quite frequently.

Mann begins by explaining how the first werewolf films used "the werewolf as a xenophobic metaphor to demonize those alien to the white United States" (13). The first two recorded werewolf films (both now lost), *The Werewolf* (1913) and *The White Wolf* (1914) appropriated Native American mythologies of skin walkers and presented indigenous cultures as shocking, foreign, and threatening. The first surviving werewolf film, *Wolfblood* (1925) repeated this treatment, not with overtly Native American elements, but Mann emphasises, with "a clear reference to Native American totems" (17).

With America's entrance into global conflict of World War Two in 1941, "vilifying the country's own minorities in popular culture quickly became counterproductive, likely to drive America's people – and its armed forces – further apart at a time when they needed to be unified" (27). And so, the antagonists flipped to external threat malefactors (specifically, traceable to Romani 'gypsy' camps). Xenophobia of Native cultures gave way to xenophobia of foreign cultures while the werewolf themselves became sympathetic, especially as immortalised by Lon Chaney Jr.'s portrayals of Lawrence Talbot (*exempli gratia*, *The Wolf Man* (1941)). Talbot's unwitting transformation into a reluctant killer paralleled the experiences of many young men drafted into the armed services, engendering still greater empathies. Meanwhile, a related grouping of werewolf films, Mann explains, posited "werewolfism as a hereditary and normally European curse" (39).

Despite the strong forces of national unification in the 1940s, however, not all werewolf films cooperated with messaging which supported the war effort. *The Mad Monster* (1942) demonstrated an unease with technology and the misuse of science. Its protagonist was an Allied powers scientist – and a patriotic one at that – who attempted to fashion weaponised werewolf super-soldiers by means of wolf blood transfusions. The vilification of unrestrained scientific advancements continued into the 1950s with films like *The Werewolf* (1956) which featured an atomic werewolf.

A fresh pack of werewolf films was introduced, Mann continues, with *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957). In these films, the werewolf stood for the country's latest moral panic – juvenile delinquency. Out of these themes grew a related strand of werewolf films which concerned themselves with the horror of counterculture movements such as *Werewolves on Wheels* (1971). Werewolves as hippies aligned themselves with society's seeming out of control trajectory. Out of the country's ideological crisis emerged films with much more subversive themes of social collapse and the failure of authority. With *The Boy Who Cried Werewolf* (1973), werewolves even attacked the nuclear family.

Mann next introduces the reader to werewolf films of the 1980s, which began to speak to a new cultural fear – that of disease and infection occasioned by the AIDS crisis. The 'body horror' films of David Cronenberg and werewolf movies like *The Howling* (1981) revealed a fear of the frailty of one's flesh – and an anxiety of how to control it. Werewolves in this period became much more lupine (thanks in part to advancements in special effects) and much less human. Lycanthropy, it is emphasised in films like *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), is something you can catch. It spread via infection in *Monster Dog* (1984) and erupted out of sexuality in *The Company of Wolves* (1984) where wolves burst forth from men's mouths in the act of coitus.

It is with Mann's dissection of werewolf films spawned out of the Reagan-Bush years and the 'New Right' movement in American politics that his scalpel becomes unsteady. He reads a rather large number of films as reactions to fiscal conservatism, restricted rights to abortion, tax reform, deregulation, and religious morals. At times, he seems rather preoccupied with the conservativism (which he clearly opposes) and its failures (which he highlights). Still, he makes some astute points. His analysis of the community horror text of *Silver Bullet* (1983) is convincing. His assessment of the anti-establishment message of *Howling IV* (1988) is equally instructive. And his examination of the lampooning of traditional gender roles in *My Mom's a Werewolf* (1989) is quite compelling.

Finally, after surveying the many gender-identity-themed werewolf films of the 1990s and 2000s – like *Wolf* (1994), *Ginger Snaps* (2000), and *Wilding* (2018) – Mann turns to a cluster of class-conscious underdog films like *Howl* (2015) in which werewolves attack a stranded British commuter train's passengers. The passengers in *Howl* are divided by economic status; an underpaid transit worker protagonist must put a rich football player in his place. Initially, it seems, the 'other' of the vicious pack of fanged antagonists are simply monsters. But upon closer examination, it seems, these werewolves actually occupy the lowest rung on the social hierarchy. One werewolf, the passengers notice, wears a wedding ring. The werewolves are not back-and-forth shapeshifters. Rather, they

have been irrevocably transformed into nonverbal pariahs. The werewolves are the indigent – and just plain hungry. Mann notes: "They function, then, as a particularly potent metaphor for austerity's victims: those who have found themselves unemployed, destitute, homeless or dependent on food banks as a direct result of cuts to public spending – and those who have died as a direct result of government policy" (203-204).

Even as recently as less than ten years ago, a reasonable person could legitimately wonder, like Craig Anderson did in the pages of *Fangoria* magazine, if the werewolf's limitations had rendered it "simply not all that salient anymore?" (74). No credible lupine scholar would ask that question today. Werewolves are everywhere and aggressively shapeshifting into previously unimagined morphologies. They are being endlessly restyled and repurposed. Their flexibility, Mann demonstrates, is quite remarkable. Perhaps it is the metamorphising potential of werewolves which underlies the astounding variety of different cultural possibilities mapped in Mann's book. *Phases of the Moon* merits a place on any bookshelf alongside other leading cultural history Horror studies like *Zombies: A Cultural History* (2015) and *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995). Indeed, it is indispensable.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Craig. "Where are the wolves?" *Fangoria*, no. 329, 2014.

BIONOTE

Thomas E. Simmons is a tenured professor at the Knudson School of Law in Vermillion, South Dakota, USA. His research, course offerings, and scholarship concern trusts and estates, with occasional forays into popular culture and film. He is a regular contributor to AllHorror.com. His collection of biographical horror poems, *Tod Browning Loose-Leaf Encyclopedia*, was published in 2020 by Cyberwit.

THE SHAPE OF FANTASY: INVESTIGATING THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN HEROIC EPIC FANTASY (2020) BY C. PALMER-PATEL

Review by Janet Brennan Croft

Palmer-Patel, C. *The Shape of Fantasy: Investigating the Structure of American Heroic Epic Fantasy.* Routledge, 2020, 188 pp.

C. Palmer-Patel's thesis is neatly summed up in her concluding chapter: "Heroic Epic Fantasy is logical and contains real-world scientific and philosophical ideas which are embedded directly into its narrative structure" (179). What supports this thesis is a heady and challenging mix of scientific theories (about paradox, entropy, chaos, and other topics) and philosophical, literary, mythic, religious, and cultural concepts, all applied to a selected group of Fantasy novels published in the United States between 1990 and 2009 (the actual works discussed range far wider than those highlighted in the table of contents including, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and N. K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* (2017)).

Why this particular term – Heroic Epic Fantasy – and what gives this genre its perennial appeal? Palmer-Patel elucidates this in her introductory chapter: "the Epic is a journey which results in fulfilling a world destiny; the Heroic journey is one where the hero achieves spiritual transcendence; and the Heroic Epic is where the two meet" (7). In the Heroic Epic, "the hero realises a messianic duty via a journey […] which results in a spiritual transcendence […] along with the salvation of the world" (6). The Epic Hero's destiny is self-sacrifice in order to restore the balance of the world. Their messianic mission combines their willing submission to death for the good of the community with their own more personal ascension to a state of higher consciousness or divinity; in fact, each element depends on willing consent to the other. This is the stuff of myth and the human psyche is practically hard-wired to respond to these stories; in fact, in Palmer-Patel's analysis, and as Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung might well agree, it is very nearly a law of nature that so many of our most enduring myths and stories fall into this pattern.

Palmer-Patel's insistence on Fantasy's logic, rationality, and adherence at story-level with scientific laws (4-5) echoes Tolkien's championing of the same concepts in "On Fairy-Stories" (1939), when he asserted that Fantasy "does not destroy or even insult Reason" and "neither blunt[s] the appetite for, nor obscure[s] the perception of, scientific verity. […] The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make" and the better it will exhibit "the inner consistency of reality" (65, 59). The same applies at the meta-level of story as at the mundane level of setting; a clear understanding of the Epic Hero's path and purpose and their variations gives the writer great freedom within a timeless structure to tell a meaningful story.

Each chapter explores a central concept with the aid of one particular textual example. Taken in order, the chapters build logically from a relatively straightforward interpretation of Palmer-Patel's thesis through variations and complications on the theme. The first half of the book focuses on character, and in these tales the hero must "begin the journey as a naïve character, the tarot Fool" (26). The interaction of fate, prophecy, destiny, and free will are investigated in the first chapter with the aid of one of my own favourite books, Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Curse of Chalion* (2001) and Bujold's Five Gods universe more generally; the Heroic Epic protagonist is shown to absolutely require the action of free will, an assertion bolstered by reference to classical Stoic philosophy. Chapter Two moves on to choice and paradox with Mercedes Lackey's *The Fairy Godmother* (2004). Chapter Three deals with the recursive and with the mutual influence of hero and story; Robert Jordan's *The Great Hunt* (1990) is the text here. The fourth chapter introduces the useful concept of the ou-hero: "the protagonist *or* antagonistic that demonstrates the potential to be a hero but fails to actualize the role," who makes inappropriate choices like refusing the call to adventure (67, original emphasis); this chapter uses David Farland's *The Wyrmling Horde* (2008). The ou-hero might be a precursor to the hero, or an antagonist, or, as in the case of Ursula K. Le Guin's Ged in the *Earthsea* books, one's own Shadow. This particular concept repays careful attention; I look forward to comparing it to a colleague's current project on the villain's journey. The final chapter in the character section focuses in closely on the hero's willing and messianic confrontation with death, using Gail Z. Martin's *The Summoner (*2007).

The second half of the book deals with a series of ways in which plots can be constructed in the Heroic Epic universe; each chapter builds on the previous in a satisfying progression. Chapter Six considers increasing entropy as a precipitating motif, using Terry Goodkind's *Stone of Tears* (1995). James Clemens's *Shadowfall* (2006) is the focalising text for Chapter Seven, in which Palmer-Patel contends that "the hero's role is to reverse the system of entropy, restoring the balance, while simultaneously re-establishing a closed system" (15). In Chapter Eight, the issue is heroically and deliberately rebelling *against* a closed system or stagnant equilibrium; the utopia/anti-utopia cycle in Brandon Sanderson's *Hero of Ages* (2008) provides the illustration. And in Chapter Nine, the broader meta-cycles of long-running Fantasy series are shown to reinforce these themes at each fractal level. David and Leigh Eddings' *The Seeress of Kell* (1991) is a fitting source to use, but it would be fascinating to apply these insights about "recursive symmetries between scale levels" to a long-running Science Fiction or Fantasy television series with strong season- or series-long storytelling arcs (Hayles, quoted 164). The conclusion ties all this together with a discussion of Anne McCaffrey's *All the Weyrs of Pern* (1991) and the permeable borders between Science Fiction and Fantasy.

As useful and interesting as all this is, what really makes this book stand out is the scaffolding of scientific and philosophic theory used to support and explain these concepts, going well beyond the highly competent and concise but expected summary of definitions and theories of Fantasy (Brian Attebery, John Clute, Darko Suvin, Tzvetan Todorov, and so on) that leads off the book. Stephen Hawking's explications of quantum time form a basis for a discussion of choice and forking paths and his discussions of entropy undergird the chapters on fighting entropy and breaking

stagnation. The "strange attractor" of James Gleick's work on chaos makes sense of how a hero both influences and is influenced by events. The chapter on the ou-hero uses the Zen concept of balance to problematise right/wrong binaries and choices, settling instead on the *appropriateness* of the hero's choices to the balance of their world. I found particularly compelling how, in unifying Richard Mathews' vertical and horizontal hero types in the person of the messianic hero, Palmer-Patel draws on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and then later goes on to apply Frye, Joseph Campbell, Sir James George Frazer, and M. M. Bakhtin to the mythic death and transcendence of the epic hero.

While Palmer-Patel relates this model to Fantasy and the sort of Science Fiction that veers towards Fantasy, it might also profitably be applied to works in any genre or medium that are redolent of the mythic and feature a call to heroic self-sacrifice. I think there would be very interesting resonances to be discovered between this book and John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), which re-examines Campbell's hero-journey in its peculiarly American expression in the Western movie and other genres.

In "uncovering its mechanics," Palmer-Patel reminds us, "a reader may gain further pleasure in the text" (175). Indeed, I look forward to reading the next Heroic Epic Fantasy on my to-be-read pile with this book close to hand. And I am particularly eager to engage with the sections of Chapter Three on recursion, repetition, and layering in my own research.

The book is marred slightly by poor proofreading, as so many academic books are currently in this age of cutting staff and production costs. Recommended for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and mythology library collections and scholars in particular; the hardback price puts it somewhat out of individual reach, but a Kindle edition is available, and a paperback edition was released this summer.

WORKS CITED

Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, edited by Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. 27-84.

BIONOTE

Janet Brennan Croft is Associate University Librarian at the University of Northern Iowa, USA. She is the author of *War in the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Praeger, 2004). She has also written on Terry Pratchett, Lois McMaster Bujold, Joss Whedon, and other authors, TV shows, and movies, and is editor or co-editor of many collections of literary essays; forthcoming in 2021 from Mythopoeic Press is *Loremasters and Libraries in Fantasy and Science Fiction: A Gedenkschrift for David Oberhelman*, co-edited with Jason Fisher. She edits the refereed scholarly journal *Mythlore* and is Chair of the Mythopoiec Society for 2021.

POSSIBLE WORLDS THEORY AND COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORICAL FICTION (2020) BY RIYUKTA RAGHUNATH

Review by Alexander Popov

Raghunath, Riyukta. *Possible Worlds Theory and Counterfactual Historical Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 224 pp.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WORKS CITED

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

BIONOTE

Alexander Popov holds a PhD in Informatics from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria. He teaches Linguistics and Science Fiction at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and is currently working on a postgraduate research project examining Artificial Intelligence from an interdisciplinary perspective. His interests range over Utopian Studies, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism, and Cognitive Science.

TRANSPLANTATION GOTHIC: TISSUE TRANSFER IN LITERATURE, FILM AND MEDICINE (2020) BY SARA WASSON

Review by Rebecca Gibson

Wasson, Sara. *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film and Medicine.* Manchester University Press, 2020. 232 pp.

Sara Wasson's *Transplantation Gothic: Tissue Transfer in Literature, Film and Medicine* invites slow consideration. Described by Wasson as a "shadow cultural history of transplantation" (1), *Transplantation Gothic* is intimately concerned with the human reality of tissue transfer, taking a cautious and empathetic approach when analysing its relationship with Gothic. Anyone familiar with Wasson's work will not be surprised by this; her scholarship is characterised by this kind of deliberate compassion, which in this instance allows for equal attention to both donor and recipient figures. No other Gothic cultural history of transplantation yet exists, marking Wasson's work as a watershed moment in the history of medical Gothic. Wasson aims to complicate conventional understandings and terminologies of tissue transfer by emphasising that "transfer is not a single momentary event between two parties but involves multiple parties over an extended duration" (22). Wasson lingers on the strange intimacies of tissue transfer, committed to the consideration of creative representations of prolonged suffering in not only this medical context but in its social consequences too. In doing so, she provides an important critical intervention in medical Gothic but also more broadly in the medical humanities – acknowledging that while transplantation surgery is indeed "astounding and life-saving," "[c]elebrating transplantation does not require denying the suffering that can be part of these complex processes" (3-4). Wasson's attention to all individuals involved in the process of tissue transfer builds on the work of Lesley Sharp (*The Transplant Imaginary,* 2013), who argued for use of the word "transfer" over "transplantation" as it "includes the donor as well as the meditating practices and parties" (2). As well, Wasson's focus on hierarchies of life-value is in agreement with the work of Philip Barrish, whose article 'Health Policy in Dystopia' in *Literature and Medicine* in 2016 argued that "medical humanities should do more to consider the economics of medical care" (20).

Wasson's approach is historicist, but her chapters are divided into consideration of figures rather than proceeding chronologically through history: Chapter 1 focuses on practitioners, Chapters 2, 3, and 5 on donors/suppliers, and Chapter 4 on transfer recipients. Theoretically rich without ever seeming dense or overburdened, *Transplantation Gothic* draws examples from a wide range of material including medical writing, Science Fiction, life writing, and the visual arts to argue that medical science and Gothic have informed each other throughout the history of tissue transfer; the depth and breadth of Wasson's knowledge is immediately felt. Chapter 1 details the use of Gothic

within medical literature on transplantation, beginning with an extensive and fascinating account of definitions of brain death, which vary across the globe. The differing diagnostic entities of "'whole-brain death', 'brain-stem death', and 'controlled circulatory death'" present certain challenges to the logistics of tissue transfer, ones which impact the medical team as well as the donor and the recipient (39). One of *Transplantation Gothic*'s greatest strengths is its commitment to analysing all facets of these interactions; in this chapter, Wasson argues that the experiences of medical staff assisting in tissue transfer are often mediated through Gothic imagery and narrative strategies, sometimes in contradictory ways. Gothic can be used variously to "express uncertainty or unease or, by contrast, to manage doubt and normalise" (39).

This acknowledgment that Gothic can be complicit in problematic "hierarchilisations of life that reinforce biopolitical exclusions" is carried through in Chapter 3, which argues that racial inequalities act upon the transfer process in another form of structural violence (23). Wasson demonstrates how forced organ procurement narratives – urban legends imagining children and other vulnerable groups being preyed upon for organs, usually in non-Western environments – "invert real trends in the flow of organs and tissue, the neocolonial predation of transnational trafficking" (94). In highlighting Gothic fictions of tissue predation within India, Britain, and North America, Wasson resists the common assumption that such exploitative practice exists only outside Western territories. This chapter interrogates the debatably voluntary nature of donating tissue under these exploitative circumstances, examining fiction which uses horror registers to explore the often-dystopian consequences of economic precarity and healthcare marginalisation for minorities. In these texts, Wasson argues, slow structural violence – defined as "violence in which time itself is a force of ruination" – forces "the prolonged enduring of vulnerability in time, within neoliberal and necropolitical frameworks of clinical labour" (92, 95). Here as in Chapter 4, in her discussion of surgical time in *Les yeux sans visage (Eyes Without a Face)* (1958), Wasson proves the extent to which the emotional vulnerability of transfer can "colour the apprehension of space and time," exploring texts which engage fully with the "challenge to find ways to represent suffering that occurs over a long duration" (6, 128). One of Wasson's key contributions to Gothic critical discourse is her assertion that Gothic is not only an "anxious form" but one which can also be speculative; in the transplantation fiction she discusses, it also provides a space for "speculative theorisations […] attempts to *think* about biotechnologically mediated states of extreme precarity" (11). Among the most intriguing theorisation strategies discussed by Wasson is the idea of tissue that has agency, found in texts which engage with the uncanniness of both the pre- and post-surgical body as if "both the received tissue and the original body are rife with agencies generating scripts that subjects cannot control" (135).

Wasson synthesises analysis of well-known texts such as *Les mains d'Orlac (The Hands of Orlac)* (1920) with lesser-known examples to weave a compelling cultural history of tissue transfer, arguing that speculative modes such as Gothic and Science Fiction allow for complex and unusual articulations of time and space during the process of tissue transfer. One of the most viscerally horrifying fictional examples of exploitative tissue transfer practice in Wasson's book illuminates "the strain of living in the knowledge of imminent wounding" (102). In Manjula Padmanabhan's play

Harvest (1997), set in 2010, Jaya's husband Om sells the rights to his organs after losing his job and struggling with economic precarity. Jaya breaks down the horror of Om's impending surgery – which could come at any time – via traditional high-caste mourning rituals: "If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles – but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time?" (Padmanabhan 21). Such transfer horror foregrounds the mutilating cost of exploitation and exclusion. To expand on this point, Wasson draws on other fictions such as Walter Mosley's short story "Whispers in the Dark" (2001), in which African American man Chill sells his "eyes, legs, spinal nerves, genitalia, and other organs in return for six million dollars" in order to fund his nephew's education and provide a stable home in a near-future era of hyperinflation (Wasson 114). Mosley's story acts as a commentary on the profitable industry of incarceration in the United States, which disproportionately exploits African Americans. As Wasson proves again and again, "[i]n transfer, the repair of certain bodies relies on injury to certain others […] certain bodies are more likely to enter that encounter as donor or supplier than recipient" (18).

Despite her emphasis on the possibilities of tissue transfer narratives in the Gothic mode, Wasson is cautious to stress emphasise that while Gothic is a useful tool for representing pain, grief, and transformation, capable of "restor[ing] particular suffering to the field of vision," it can also be complicit in the very erasure and marginalisation under discussion (2). Other examples given in *Transplantation Gothic* run the risk of "distanc[ing] atrocities as performed by monsters"; Gothic can be wielded for both progressive and regressive purposes (9). Thus, throughout *Transplantation Gothic* Wasson is alive to the complexities and intricate nuances of language surrounding tissue transfer, discussing in Chapter 3 how the term 'harvest' risks dehumanising donors and "implying that the surgical procurement is a natural and destined reaping" (95). Chapter 5 explores this idea in more depth, focusing on narratives of state-sanctioned harvest in dystopian fictions such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007), which use this trope to examine hierarchies of life which already exist in less extreme forms. Here Wasson builds on her argument from previous chapters that societies render some lives more precarious than others; "[n]ot all deaths are striven against to the same degree" (164). This chapter focuses on speculative fiction in which both the state and privatised groups delineate which deaths are permissible, even desirable, in pursuit of better lives for the few, arguing that in these works, the lexical fields surrounding tissue transfer normalise the state-sanctioned violence which creates such hierarchies of life. Wasson's writing is concise and clear even when mired in discussion of such tragedies; applying critical attention to "lives in permanent precarity, 'ungrievable' because never recognised as quite alive" is tense and important work (163). Wasson interrogates discursive constructions such as the language of organ scarcity to demonstrate how they contribute to "discourses of variable life worth," illuminating the chain of events which must often occur in order for donation to go ahead: "[d]onation after brain death requires neurological failure in an otherwise relatively healthy body, and as such disproportionately involves sudden violent death" (163). As Wasson specifies, "no transplant surgeon ever wants such deaths to increase," but deaths from opioid addiction, gun violence, and traffic fatalities have root causes which stem from failure "to invest collective energy into fostering life under particular conditions" (163). Within such framing, some deaths are less mournable than

others. Wasson argues that the speculative fiction discussed in this chapter encourages readers to reflect on their own contexts in order to recognise "sociocultural dimensions of biomedicalised process and the impact of contemporary metaphors for transfer tissue" (166).

Transplantation Gothic will be of obvious interest to readers studying medical Gothic, but it also contributes to wider discussions on the ever-evolving role of the Gothic mode. As pointed out by Wasson, a question which often appears in Gothic studies is "the degree to which fictional representations may be informed by real suffering" (8). Gothic and Horror allow for deep explorations of the kinds of distress often found in medical writing, the bodily disruptions and vulnerability of the patient which can expand in such a mode. Wasson argues in her introduction that this Gothic work is not only valuable but imperative: "non-realist representation may be *necessary* for representing extreme experience […] distortion may be required in order to convey the epistemological challenge or the affective intensity of an experience" (25). *Transplantation Gothic* leaves us in no doubt that this work is vital indeed.

WORKS CITED

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Harvest*. 1997. Aurora Metro, 2003.

BIONOTE

Rebecca Gibson is an associate lecturer and researcher at Lancaster University, UK. She recently completed her PhD, titled "Uncanny Incisions: Plastic Surgery in the Gothic Mode." She has recent publications in *Gothic Nature Journal* and *Horror Homeroom*. Her research interests include medical Gothic and the medical humanities, ecoGothic, gender and queer studies. Her Twitter is @face_of_gothic

FICTION REVIEWS

ABSTRACTED EMBODIMENT AND IMMERSION IN MIHOYO'S *GENSHIN IMPACT*

Review by Padraig Lee

***Genshin Impact*. 28 September 2020. Version 2.1.0, MiHoYo, 01 September 2021 PC. Video Game.**

Chinese game studio MiHoYo's latest game and first foray into the PC and console market, *Genshin Impact,* sets itself apart as a gorgeous, exciting, and thoroughly enjoyable free-to-play entertainment experience. As a video game, *Genshin* further develops upon the anime-style visual aesthetic and action role-playing game (ARPG) combat developed in MiHoYo's previous title, *Honkai Impact 3rd* (2016), while incorporating exploration mechanics and enemy design that are no doubt inspired by other recent open-world action-adventure games – most notably, Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017). However, despite its enjoyable moment to moment gameplay, progress slows considerably within the first few hours due to the sheer amount of content blocked by paywall, gambling mechanics, and a demanding time commitment to attain necessary resources. Additionally, the Wish and party systems used in the game, while customisable and suited to player interest, ultimately reveal issues of both character agency and a prevailing dissonance between the player and the in-game characters they choose to use: a dis-embodied relation between player and character.

Genshin Impact takes place in the mystical world of Teyvat, a pseudo-medieval world of swords, bows, magic, dragons, and quests galore. From cooking competitions and flower deliveries to monster hunts, spelunking through ancient ruins, and battling ancient gods, activities vary wildly in their manner and scope. The game synthesises various media to establish the story's core and extended lore – including the use of gameplay, thematic cutscenes, animated stories, as well as supplementary manga and social media posts – allowing the game to maintain a far-reaching and highly varied player-character experiences, as well as maintaining player involvement and commitment to *Genshin*'s world. By maintaining multiple avenues which entice the player to return to the game, releasing content for the game on a 'drip-feed' over months and years, and creating pressure to return at specific times via rewards and timed events, *Genshin* has established itself as a 'game as a service,' one without an apparent end, and therefore a locus for the expenditure of potentially limitless time and money by its consumers. The connection between player and Teyvat is often facilitated by the player's happy-go-lucky 'navigator,' Paimon. The game's menu button, where non-immersive actions such as graphics, sound options, as well as mail and networking is a profile for Paimon, who is also the facilitator of 'Wishes' that the player can make to acquire other characters that exist in the game world and add them to their party, whether or not this makes

sense in the context of *Genshin*'s story. Paimon is the first character the player meets upon waking in Teyvat, speaks on behalf of the player in almost all dialogue interactions, and is the player's repository of lore and knowledge throughout the game. Additionally, Paimon also extends into a more metatextual role, as it is supposedly Paimon who sends the player notifications and email about both current and upcoming events, which both facilitates a sort of out-of-game immersion for the player as well as incentive for them to return and invest more hours into *Genshin*.

The game's plot is driven primarily by the desire of the game's protagonist, known only as 'the Traveller,' to be reunited with their lost sibling, who is separated from them in the game's introductory cutscene. Interestingly, these two siblings act as completely interchangeable characters in the story, as the player has the opportunity to play as either the brother, Aether, or the sister, Lumine, with the other taking up the role of 'missing sibling.' This seemingly irrelevant distinction between 'main' and 'foil' character acts as the first of many oddly undeveloped character rotations within the game, especially considering the only distinctions between Aether and Lumine, in a practical sense, are their appearance and gender. The player is also not limited to exploring the world as the Traveller but can control other characters that they receive via 'Wishes,' essentially possessing and directing them as best suits the player's desires through gameplay. Playing as these characters does not convey a sense of embodying them or manifesting their will, but, instead, abstracts and reduces them to the status of 'weapon' in 'body' form. This detachment is further emphasised by the third person camera angle that encourages the player to observe their suite of characters performing flashy attacks and abilities, without absorbing the action from a more intimate or embodied perspective. Considering that recruitable characters occasionally roam around Teyvat, even while you are playing with that character as your primary avatar, not only showcases another way that party-switching poses potential issues for a player's fully immersive experience, but also reveals a bizarre disconnect between each side character's in-game 'agency' and their overruled function as a game tool for the player. While party-switching and character choice options are common in many games – especially online games – the player's ability to project a sense of 'self' onto any chosen character is inhibited by not only the necessary and frequent swapping of characters, but also the sheer lack of development these characters receive *as* members of the player's party. The player does not actually play *as* or *with* the characters they are choosing to utilise in a given moment, but as a homuncular tool, a facsimile of that character as it exists in Teyvat's world that is discardable, replaceable, and above all, collectable.

Aside from character (dis)embodiment, another important component of the game includes its 'literal' world as *Genshin*'s regions function not only as facsimiles of real states and cultures but also bear connections to thematically important in-game elements, embodied by a corresponding god ('Archon'). Mondstadt exists as a Germanic or Western European-derivative nation associated with the element of wind and the ideal of freedom; Liyue serves as a proxy to mainland China and embodies stone and contracts; Inazuma represents Japan, electricity, and eternity. While the cultural generalisations made to achieve a sense of cultural legitimacy in each of Teyvat's lands is rather reductive, the unique atmospheres that each region manages to convey through their visual and musical aesthetics creates a situated sense of exploration and discovery that may be *Genshin*'s greatest achievement. However, as the player explores these lands and finds rewards in the form

of chests, resources, and 'spirits of the land' ("Oculi"), the world becomes depleted and barren. The player is actively encouraged to exploit Teyvat's resources, and progress is severely gated behind resources that both do and *do not* replenish. Thus, as the player explores each new region, the excitement of personal progress is tempered with a desire to be as efficient and thorough as possible, so as not to miss any crucial resources needed to progress. In making the game's core resources so scarce, MiHoYo has actively strained the player's relationship with their environment, transforming it from the playroom of wonder it has the potential to be into a highly economised personal repository. Considering, then, these rewarded practices of resource exploitation, alongside the world's reductive parallels to 'real-life' countries and cultures, *Genshin* opens itself to critique (and further research) by actively reifying colonial ideologies and practices in its gameplay.

Considering then each region's ties with a respective god who embodies the literal and physical soul of that nation and the difficulties that other characters in the game go through, in both the acquisition and the use of their Visions, the costs of power explored in *Genshin* seems undermined when considering that the Traveller attains the power of any element that rules the land that they visit; they receive blessings from these gods at statues of the seven by 'resonating' with them and become empowered through 'worship' of the statues (though it is yet unclear whether the traveller derives their elemental power from other deities, or from the land itself). Similar to how the player takes on new characters and rotates through them as 'tools', this conveniently granted magic both empowers and abstracts the player from sensations of immersion and embodiment by becoming another rotation of game commands. While playing, this mechanic similarly diminishes the price of power explored for every other character in the game, setting the Traveller and the player up as 'external,' and privileged to the fruits of the world without engaging with it on the terms set out for its other inhabitants.

Ultimately, while *Genshin Impact* is a massive, gorgeous, and mostly fulfilling gaming experience, it struggles to maintain the player's immersion, leaving interaction with its world and characters far removed from the game's own situated context. However, as the game continues to receive expansion, perhaps some of these issues will be addressed and developed. Regardless, scholars and players alike interested in considering embodiment, character agency, and dynamics between player, character, and environment will find ample material in *Genshin Impact* to explore.

BIONOTE

Padraig Lee has just completed his master's degree in Philosophy at the University of York, UK. With a background in Botany and a keen interest in ludology and computer science, he enjoys exploring works at the intersection of science, the Humanities, and technology. He lives in Ireland with his partner, their dog, and a seemingly insurmountable backlog of video games and fantasy novels.

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF RAISING CHILDREN?

Review by Lobke Minter

Guzikowski, Aaron Fuller, creator. *Raised by Wolves*. Performances by Amanda Collin, Abubakar Salim, Winta McGrath, Niamh Algar, and Travis Fimmel, HBO Max, 2020. Television.

In the opening scenes, *Raised by Wolves* (2020) invokes Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome who were raised by a she-wolf in a cave, as twelve frozen human embryos land on a new planet. These embryos are to be raised by two androids, Mother and Father, in order to start a new human civilisation. The austere landscape of the planet, Kepler-22b, is a telling choice as a setting for this series. Even though the planet itself exists, discovered in December 2011 as an exoplanet orbiting within the habitable zone of the sun-like star Kepler-22, the planet itself is an otherworldly and grim reality that this unusual twenty-second-century family needs to survive[1].

While *Raised by Wolves* is writer Aaron Fuller Guzikowski's first foray into Science Fiction, it is definitely not Ridley Scott's who directs the first two episodes and is an executive producer on the series. Those familiar with Scott's cinematic approach will find interesting visual resonances to his earlier work. The aesthetic of the smooth hulls of the spacecraft and the birth technology evokes *Alien* (1979), while the dark tones and low lighting used in the series are similar to the cinematic approach of *Blade Runner* (1982). However, the pacing and tone of *Raised* differ quite substantially from both, by being more methodical and tense. The tension is particularly well-executed by the use of long sweeping shots of the desolate alien landscape and lingering attention to facial expressions which are unexpectedly interrupted by violent bursts of frenetic action or explosions of visceral horror. The thematic concerns are also not unusual given Scott's oeuvre, with an Earth deemed uninhabitable after a seismic war (in this instance between believers and atheists), possibly empathetic androids and a generally dim view of humanity. As each episode unfolds more about the Earth that was and how Mother and Father raise their children, this series is significant in taking Science Fiction tropes and subverting them in a way that destabilises the viewer's expectations. Initially, it seems to be gearing up as a 'pioneer' Science Fiction plot; however, the deeper philosophical questions the show poses create a narrative scope that elevates the series beyond being focused purely on survival.

Rather than focusing on the show's exploration of religion, science and body horror, this review reflects on the figures of Mother, performed by Amanda Collin, and Father, portrayed by Abubakar Salim. This parental duo stands, clad in silvery latex, at the centre of the debate around nature versus nurture, broader questions of what differentiates a human being from an android, and

whether there is a difference in behaviour when intelligence is programmed or artificial rather than innate. While these questions are not ground-breaking within themselves or within the genre, the performances of Collin and Salim brilliantly nuance these questions as they relate to Mother and Father and the impact it has on their human children. Both Collin and Salim are able to harness a neutral affect and the deliberate movements expected of a machine while also showing moments of empathy and connection with the children, as well as disagreeing with each other on how to parent most effectively.

While both Mother and Father are androids, right from the start, there are distinct differences between them. They agree on their programming and their mission to start a thriving atheist colony, and effectively raise their children and prepare them for survival on the planet. However, as Father removes the babies from the synthetic womb system which brought them to term - powered by Mother - the final baby, number six of generation one, is not breathing. Mother asks to hold the baby, while Father suggests breaking it down and feeding it to the five that have survived so that the proteins are not wasted. The baby does start breathing, and they name him after their creator Campion. This first moment of difference continues, and after twelve years, all covered during the first episode, only Campion has survived, leaving the question as to whether Mother and Father, or perhaps androids more generally, are effective parents.

The way in which the story evolves highlights this question consistently, as Campion initially has no doubts that "No matter what happened Mother and Father would always keep us safe." ("Raised by Wolves," episode 1), but as he grows and his 'siblings' are lost one by one this belief is shaken. As a ship of believers crashes onto the planet, he finds himself in contact with other children who see androids as machines or 'fake' humans leading him to further question and resist Mother and Father, asking them to stop pretending, "I know it is not real, how you look at me" ("Pentagram," episode 2). While Campion grapples with his feelings towards the androids that raised him, the dynamic between Mother and Father also takes strain as they start having very different views of their mission. Their difference is revealed as potentially stemming from the android models that they are. Father is a service model, programmed to make 'dad jokes' to lighten the atmosphere, and his main incentive is to be useful to the family. He is endearing and ultimately long-suffering. Mother, however, is an android model known as a Necromancer, a weapon used during the war that ended human habitation on Earth. She has been reprogrammed to be the mother of a new humanity but is able to fly and destroy lifeforms with a shrill banshee-like cry. Essentially, Mother is now the she-wolf of the Roman myth, dangerous and feral, with a climbing death toll reflecting just how threatening she is.

Reprogramming a weapon as a primary caregiver seems an odd choice for someone who wants to create a new Earth without war. However, as the realities of Mother's power becomes clear and the threat posed by contact with other survivors increases, strange creatures that hunt at night and shadows that haunt this family steadily erode this utopic vision. The tension in the story between what is hoped for and what is the reality, between Mother's ability to kill without compunction and her literal howling for the loss of her children, arguably is what makes the series work. Essentially, it becomes clear that the planet has a history that all the settlers from Earth, whether Mother

and Father or the believers whose Ark crashes on its surface are completely ignorant of. It is this ignorance that is their greatest peril, as they all assume that the planet is uninhabited and a blank slate for them to write the future of humanity on. This blank slate is also invoked as Mother and Father are confronted with the results of how they have raised Campion. The nature/nurture debate finds its nexus point in the boy's sense of self. It becomes clear that there are elements of his identity that the androids could not anticipate for all their programming. He increasingly insists on being led by empathy rather than reason. While Father takes this in his stride, encouraging Campion to test the world independently, Mother struggles with Campion's need for self-definition. These dynamics echo familiar family systems, where viewers could almost forget that Campion's parents are androids until Mother takes flight or Father shows his superhuman strength.

With the second season in production, it seems likely that some of the planet's history, only hinted at in season one, will be explored. With more human survivors finding their way to the planet at the end of season one, this time atheists rather than believers, it remains to be seen whether peaceful cohabitation is at all possible. *Raised by Wolves* plays with the alterity of android parents and orchestrates various material and symbolic juxtapositions, which dynamically shift and change as the plot and various subplots develop. The questions posed throughout, even as to whether androids should raise children, remain answered and unanswered at the end of season one. Ultimately, *Raised by Wolves* is a story that reflects on how parental features could be synthetic rather than biological, proving that a more philosophical approach can coexist with phenomenal cinematography, riveting action and an on-the-edge-of-your-seat Science Fiction watching experience.

NOTES

1. See Dunbar, Brian. "NASA's Kepler Mission Confirms Its First Planet in Habitable Zone of Sun-like Star." NASA. 05 December 2011. <https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/kepler/news/kepscicon-briefing.html>

BIONOTE

Lobke Minter is a PhD student at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her thesis, titled "Speculative Gothic Fiction and the Scar as Trauma Trope: Imagining Hope through Horror" seeks to explore the scar as an expression of resilience. Her research interests include Dark Romanticism, specifically imaginative explorations, Gothic expressions of Speculative Fiction, and Science Fiction across a variety of subgenres.

NAVIGATING THE ACADEMY

Review by Anna McFarlane

Harvey, Janet, writer. T*he Curie Society*. Illustrated by Sonia Liao, MIT Press, 2021. Graphic Novel.

There has been a significant tradition in Anglophone culture of harnessing the power of the graphic novel for didactic purposes. As Juliane Blank points out in "Adaptation" (2021), the tradition of Albert Kanter's *Classic Comics* series, which adapted classics of the English and American canon into comic book form, continues to this day (194). The theory goes that the bold artistry can be used to capture the eye of even the most distracted target audiences, and the visual medium means that the pressure is taken off of the words to carry the story. Such an approach can create graphic novels that lack the gravity of texts produced by artists whose aim is merely to inhabit the form, rather than exploit it. For example, there are now graphic-novelisations of many classic literary works, designed for accessibility but often lacking the harmony (or tension) between text and image that great comics know how to use (although there are notable exceptions, such as Russ Kick's *The Graphic Canon: The World's Great Literature as Comics and Visuals* series, 2012-2013). From its front cover, *The Curie Society* is clearly a graphic novel pitched at encouraging young women into STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Its heroines appear to float in zero G (although this is not what is happening, given that one of them rides a jet board and there are drones using propellors in the mix as well). Our heroines are dressed in matching jumpsuits, not so far from the slick uniforms of *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017 – present), and they are watched over by a traditional portrait of Marie Curie in the background. This contrast between the historical figure of Curie and the speed of scientific progress gives the impression of a work that seeks to marry the two, showing a rich tradition of women in STEM while promising that such women will shape our future.

While this first impression might suggest a didactic and worthy text with little to offer an adult reader, the story itself is interesting and the artwork complementary. Our heroes Simone, Maya, and Taj meet in their freshman year at university when they find themselves sharing a dorm room. At first there is conflict between them: Simone, a life sciences major, leaves her ant colonies lying around; Maya, the mathematician, is a spoilt little rich girl who is none too pleased when Taj gets hair dye on her monogrammed towels; and Taj, who has an affinity for electronics, is not impressed with roommates who take little interest in gaming. The three are brought together when they receive an invitation to join the Curie Society, a secret organisation started by Marie Curie and based in universities all around the world, which develops the talents of young women in the STEM subjects, preparing them for a lifetime of using their skills for the greater good. The new recruits see de-extinction (bringing extinct species back to life through genetics á la *Jurassic Park,* 1993) being trialled to slow the pace of climate change and ionic winds used to sustainably power aircraft.

These technologies are represented as science-fictional but tantalisingly close to realisation, simply requiring the commitment of these young characters to the goals of scientific progress. However, this vision, represented as utopian, is soon complicated as the young women face the villains of the piece. There is Amy Vauss, an ex-Curie Society member now working for the private sector. There is also Dr Xio who, while she holds the same goals as the Curie Society, believes that the ends justify the means and is prepared to kill human beings in pursuit of her belief that decisions for humanity's future should be made via science alone. The message is that an individualistic pursuit of money amounts to the exploitation of the noble traditions of science, while a purely scientist perspective comes at a human cost. The Curie Society teaches that interdisciplinarity, teamwork, and respect for other people is fundamental to the successful pursuit of science. One could argue that this is a particularly idealistic approach that ignores the ways in which 'science' is inextricable from discourses of capitalism, colonial exploitation, and utilitarianism, but the point of the book is to paint scientific study in a good light, so perhaps it is churlish to point this out.

The setting of the book in a university means that a number of issues can be overlooked; primarily, the wealth and privilege necessary for a student to make it into further education in the USA. The university is idealised as a place of knowledge and tradition, the kind of environment that allows Marie Curie's legacy to be passed down the generations; this stability and intellectualism might be hard to recognise for those in the academy dealing with neoliberal policies and the ensuing precarity. There is a nod to realpolitik when it becomes clear that the Curie Society is funded by the scientific patents of its scholars, allowing the society to keep its independence. While this suggests the necessity for academics to hustle for funding in order to pursue their interests, this entrepreneurial structure is idealised in the book rather than acting as an obstacle to the pursuit of knowledge.

While the university is idealised in some ways, the environment is shown to be patriarchal, and sometimes unsafe for women. On Simone's first day on campus, she is bowled over by a male student as he catches a frisbee; a young student, she is dwarfed by him, which sets the scene for an environment that might not allow her to flourish. Later, Taj witnesses some frat boys hassling a young woman at a music event and violently intervenes. The need for violence as a response to a violent world comes up regularly in the book: Taj is a good, physical fighter against these misogynists, while Maya is given a ring similar to a Taser to protect her during a mission, and even punches someone, crowing 'I've never punched anyone before!' (137). The implication that violence is a necessary part of training to be effective in the world is perhaps a little at odds with the book's core messages of teamwork and empathy, and perhaps a legacy of the comic book medium which finds it hard to resist the visual catharsis of a fist fight.

As problematic as some of these points might be, the fact that this graphic novel raises such questions is an accolade in itself. On the score of offering a didactic and encouraging introduction to women considering a STEM career, it has many features to recommend it. The novel is peppered with quotes from Marie Curie herself, suggestively bringing her voice into the story in a way that might encourage young readers to find out more about her. The novel does not stop with name-dropping

Curie but includes a range of female scientists and features a series of biographies at the end, informing the reader about the real-life scientists who consulted on the book, as well as a glossary of terms giving information about the scientific theories featured and advice about where to learn more. As an introduction to STEM study for young women this book is persuasive and engaging; for others, its assumptions encourage the reader to ask questions about the systems (particularly of patriarchy and neoliberalism) that the academy demands its scholars and staff navigate. The gap between this uncomplicatedly utopian presentation of science and the reality that faces women entering these disciplines is informative, and tells us why a book like this has a market in the first place. If the real world were more like that portrayed in *The Curie Society*, I doubt that we would need persuasive graphic novels to encourage young women into the STEM disciplines.

WORKS CITED

Blank, Juliane. "Adaptation." *The Handbook of Comics and Graphic Narratives*, edited by Dan Hassler-Forest and Dirk Vanderbeke, De Gruyter, 2021, 183-212.

BIONOTE

Anna McFarlane is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow, UK, working on traumatic pregnancy and its expression in science fiction, horror, and fantasy. She is the co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020) and is co-editing *The Edinburgh Companion to Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities*. Her first monograph is a study of William Gibson's novels, *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades* (Routledge 2021).

"WHAT'S SO PRECIOUS ABOUT DYING IN THE SAME FORM YOU WERE BORN INTO?"

Review by Charlotte Gislam

Kim, Bo-Young. *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories.* Translated by Joungmin Lee Comfort and Sora Kim-Russel, Kaya Press, 2021. Short-Story Collection.

Evolution is a process playing out over multiple generations that, to us, as twenty-first century humans, moves so slow that it is undetectable. We can chart a course from our primate ancestors back into the primordial soup, but where this process of transformation will take us as a species is unknown and full of possibilities. *On the Origin of Species and Other Stories* (2021), a short story collection by famed South Korean Science Fiction (SF) writer Bo-Young Kim, explores evolution, adaption, and transformation from numerous 'what if' premises spanning aeons of time. The stories, which are connected by this thematic thread, present imaginative and thought-provoking scenarios, which would be of interest to any reader drawn to posthuman fiction. However, the unique draw of Kim's work comes from the combination of her large-scale ideas with how she focuses on producing a narrative that is empathetic towards the character's experience as individuals caught up in these worlds. It is from this blend that the collection's understanding of the posthuman SF subject, as an agentive force in the world rather than the primary source of change, can emerge.

Outside of a handful of stories being individually translated for anthologies and magazines, this collection, alongside *I'm Waiting for You and Other Stories* published by Harper Collins, marks Kim's 2021 English language debut. Therefore, this publication makes it almost twenty years since her Korean language debut novella, *The Experience of Touch* (2002), was awarded the Korean Science & Technology Creative Writing Award. Kim's ideas are original, and her writing is exemplary; hopefully, this initial burst of English publications signals the beginning of an increased translation of her work.

The collection begins with an introduction by Kim entitled "A Brief Reflection on Breasts." This starting point aims for a naturalisation of the relationship between women and Science Fiction. Kim argues that breasts and science are often seen as the main feature of each, respectively, either repulsing or attracting those who view them. However, Kim states that both breasts and science are simply a part of their respective whole, beautiful and interesting in much the same way as the rest of the body/narrative is. As Kim's categorisation as an SF author has come from her readers and not herself, she states that she did not consciously add science to her stories as much as she has not needed to add breasts to her body.[1]

Although Kim states that science is an unconscious part of her fiction, one of the first stories in the collection, "Between Zero and One," puts scientific frameworks under the microscope. The story posits whether learning either Newtonian or Quantum physics could change how someone may view the world. In the story, those taught Newtonian physics argue that there are rigidly defined ontological categories that are created through averaging the individual points of data, saying, for example, that "kids are all the same." However, for those who have always known quantum physics, these categories contain infinite possibilities because there is always the probability of 1 + 1 = 0; therefore, the kids are not all the same as each point of data has the possibility of being different. "Between Zero and One" presents a fictional version of Korea that has undergone shifts in its social and cultural spheres because of the epistemological and ontological implications of quantum physics. As such, Kim may say she does not consciously add science into her fiction, but this story shows that she has a keen interest in contemporary science and the possible 'what if' ramifications of the thought processes it produces.

With quantum physics acting as an early touchstone in the collection, the interest in breaking down rigid ontological categories is continued in the two stories which surround "Between Zero and One" as they both focus on a midway transformation between the human and the non-human. "Scripter" is the first story in the collection and is set inside a game world that has been abandoned and is facing destruction as a glitch condenses all the matter contained within. Meanwhile, "An Evolutionary Myth" focuses on a deposed prince as his body transforms into a multitude of creatures to survive the current harsh political and physical climate. Parts of his body transform to take on the aspects of cats, snakes, fish, deer, and eventually a giant dragon. Both deal with the melding of the human with non-human matter and how that can signal either death or survival depending on the intent surrounding the transformation. By focusing on intent and the mental processes behind the transformations, rather than the body-horror visuals, Kim presents an empathetic imagining which does not rely on a verifiable "humanness" to express agency in their surroundings.

In contrast to these explorations of the fluid boundaries between human and non-human entities, "Last of the Wolves" presents an irreconcilable split between the perspectives of humanity and dragons, which challenge whether our understanding of non-human life is affected by our own capacities. Dragons have taken residence on Earth, and humanity's best chance of survival in this new world is to be kept as pets. The dragons do not consider humans intelligent as they have senses which humans do not have. This causes misunderstandings which the protagonist of the story struggles to contend with, resulting in an outpouring of grief for what cannot be shared. For the humans in this story, adaption and evolution cannot be achieved by force of will; the inability for the species to understand one another means that they are distanced from each other even though they occupy the same space. As a result, this story questions whether our mental and physical capacities create limitations on our ability to empathise with other perspectives outside our own and interrogates the drive to try regardless.

The setting of "Last of the Wolves" and many of the other stories take place on some version of Earth that is radically altered from the borders set in the twenty-first century, where the

specific location is either unnamed or within Korea. "Stars Shine in Earth's Sky" is unique as it has a contemplative view of Earth, set on a version of the planet that is much closer to the centre of the universe where the sky is a constantly glowing carpet of stars. The story is written as a letter sent from a woman to her brother detailing her experience of what their society labels a chronic illness, but a twenty-first century reader of the collection will likely experience every day. The drive to identify a cause of change and how the unknowable nature of the body has a hand in the obscuration of past evolutionary adaptations takes centre focus in a story where unproductive changes which lack cause are considered dangerous.

Similarly, the loss of knowledge is also a key element of "On the Origin of Species," which provides the title to the collection. It has an unusual structure to the rest as it is split into two parts. The first follows Kay, a robot who is part of an all-robot society that rose long after human and non-human organic life went extinct. Their dissertation unknowingly begins a new science, organic biology, which attempts to prove that organic matter grows by taking in nutrients, something which the all-robot university discredits. The first part of the story leaves Kay dreaming of creating organic life, while the second part picks up after that dream has seemingly been realised. The organic biology department has proven that organic matter grows, but their findings have the staff raptured in cult-like reverence. Kay, having left the department before these events, is convinced to return and finds a creation that threatens the continued existence of robotkind. What follows feels as close to horror as the collection gets, as adaption is conceived as a threat where sight alone of what was grown in the lab is enough to break all logic functions and cause a disintegration into madness. The reader is confronted by robot body-horror, a cult closing ranks, and a gory slaughter scene that gives the final notes of the collection a distinct feeling of existential dread often found within Weird fiction.

The metamorphoses which the posthuman protagonists of Bo-Young Kim's stories either pass through, witness, or attempt to will into being are not simply positive or negative actions. This is not a collection that attempts to pass moral judgment, transformation is simply either happening, not happening, or has happened, and those characters caught up in its effects are aiming to survive no matter the odds. Instead, Kim's writing is deeply empathetic and able to inhabit its characters effectively, often lingering within the character's mind to focus on their thoughts and feeling surrounding the narrative's broader ideas. The result is a collection containing scenarios that dig into the ontology of the posthuman subject, which any potential reader will find thought-provoking, whilst simultaneously being able to drill down into the characters and present them as more than example showcases for plot points but rather individuals who affect and are affected by the situations in which they find themselves.

NOTES

1. Kim makes clear that breasts are not a necessary requirement of being a woman, a statement which I believe places Kim's work as at least provisionally trans-inclusive, pending any statement from the author herself. I will state upfront that the collection did not to my mind contain any transphobic elements, however, I say all this as a UK cisgender reviewer whose knowledge of the politics of Korea and its treatment of its transgender population is limited.

BIONOTE

Charlotte Gislam is an AHRC funded PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research is focused on interrogating the ways in which non-human matter, such as artificial intelligence and game space, is used in the generation of narrative in digital games. Her other research interests include spatial theory, Science Fiction, Gothic, and film. She can be found on twitter @Gislam93.

ON 'CONTAINING MULTITUDES': EMBODYING GRIEF IN TAMSYN MUIR'S *HARROW THE NINTH*

Review by Kimberlee Anne Bartle

Muir, Tamsyn. *Harrow the Ninth*. Tor, 2020. Book. The Locked Tomb Series 2.

As the sequel to Tamsyn Muir's first gory, hilarious, genre-blending necromancy novel *Gideon the Ninth* (2019), we see Muir's tale naturally shift towards its 'new' namesake in *Harrow the Ninth* (2020), as she tackles the challenges of Lyctor-dom. While *Harrow* delights in witty conversation, flighty alliances, planet-killing, awful cooking, and ample backstabbing (literally and figuratively), it is perhaps most notable for what it *lacks;* namely, despite Gideon's ultimate sacrifice at the end of book one, there is a bewildering absence of the feisty, sunglass-clad cavalier within book two. From having Harrow's cavalier's name line scribbled out in the text's Dramatis Personae to odd, flashback-style interactions with deceased characters in an alternate "Canaan House," there is an overwhelming sensation of confusion and distorted reality that permeates the novel. With frequent thematic discussions of 'fate' and being structurally broken up into five acts, featuring a prologue, parados, and epilogue, the novel also recalls the Greek Tragedy form, which affords the text a literary foundation to grapple with themes of haunting and loss. Paired not only with the text's incongruous timelines, extreme time lapses, and shifts between second-, third-, and even first-person narration but also with Harrow's self-professed insanity, her noted status as an incomplete Lyctor, and her seemingly inescapable impending death, the reader is often forced into the role of detective, attempting to navigate the various complexities of the plot. Ultimately, *Harrow* exists at the intersection of intergalactic epic and reality-blurring liminal; of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery, and Horror, offering an intimate and complex perspective on the pressures of ascension and power, as well as literally embodying grief.

As a new Lyctor – an immortal necromancer servant to the Emperor and Necrolord Prime, John – Harrow spends the majority of book two coming to terms with her altered status, powers, and precarity. However, despite her new station, Harrow's magical and social ascension is stunted, making her like a dog "with three legs missing" in a den of (Lyctoral) wolves (170). Harrow's failed progress leaves her subject to frequent assassination attempts by the other, more ancient Lyctors and to occasional acts of seduction by fellow 'infant' Lyctor Ianthe. These tenuous-at-best relationships leave Harrow isolated, highlighting the absence of her prior companion, defender, and Cavalier, Gideon. As the novel frames itself within the impending threat of a vengeful Resurrection Beast, the seemingly inescapable bodily possession by the relentless, anonymous "Sleeper," and the Emperor's impending assassination, *Harrow* is paced with a sense of anticipation and doom akin to the Y2K New Year's Eve countdown.

The text repeatedly explores the boundaries of reality, perception, and selfhood as Harrow's new powers develop. From early on in the text, the narration focuses on being very much 'within' the body; frequent sensory descriptions of breathing, touching, seeing, hearing, and, of course, a lively smattering of necromantic violence and gore abound. However, Harrow's hyper-awareness of sensory inputs, granted via the partially successful Lyctoral process, does not lend her an air of demigod superiority or perceptual confidence. Rather, she feels "assaulted by… sensory data" (34), overwhelmed by external stimuli, and unable to respond appropriately to her immediate reality in the Mithraeum. Harrow often finds herself aware of things having moved without her knowledge, even 'waking up' to find herself performing deeds outside of her own apparent awareness, and is sometimes triggered into lapses of consciousness, leaving her feeling strangely disconnected from her own body and agency. Thus, guided only by the ghostly presence of figure known only as "the Body," dreamlike interactions with various late members of book one's Canaan House, and a smattering of odd letters written by a "previous Harrow," both she and the reader find themselves plagued "by doubt in the face of fact. The uncertainty of the insane" (349). Harrow's paradoxical inhabitation of her 'self' not only affords others the opportunity to (in)validate her 'reality' but ushers in the possibility that she "might also be *haunted*" (254, original emphasis). Certainly, plagued by the fact that she bears the spiritual signatures of 200 children and, thus, literally "contain[s] multitudes" (132, 72) – a literalisation of the same line from Walt Whitman's 1892 poem, "Song of Myself" – Harrow ashamedly reconciles herself to being "the product of [her] parents' genocide" (157).

Muir's multifaceted exploration of Harrow's actions and thoughts offers a sympathetic and nuanced exploration of loss and survivor guilt. In attempting to reconcile her heritage and new powers, Harrow is repeatedly vexed by the true price of power, making her feel "beyond pity" and utterly alone (461). In the case of her inherited power, Harrow wrestles with its origins in her premeditated, magical, and genocidal conception. Meanwhile, the power she is meant to wield comes with the forced demolition and absorption of a sacrificed sword hand, or by ingesting a Cavalier for 'full' Lyctoral ascension (401). Her guilt concerning these past sacrifices and fear of history repeating itself causes Harrow to literally wall off her mind, making herself a sort of mental "mausoleum" by rewriting the past and refusing her future (460). While Harrow is literally 'haunted' by the spirits of the deceased, she is, moreover, figuratively 'haunted' by the guilt of survivorship. Thus, as Ortus suggests, Harrow was, perhaps, "never *mad*" but, rather, overburdened with grief, saying, "the mind can only take so much pressure before it forms indentations" (415, original emphasis).

In playing with malleable conceptions of memory, perception, sanity, and reality, Muir's novel not only offers a nuanced exploration of responses to trauma but also highlights potential sites of empowerment and agency. Shifts in narration style and time play into Harrow's 'wielding of multitudes' and the desire to reject the trauma surrounding her reality, alongside the construction and manifestation of that same reality. From Harrow's own (re)creation of the alternate Canaan House to the epic poem-directed battle against the Hazmat suit-wearing Sleeper (Chapter 49) – who, of course, was also "hijack[ing] the play" of Harrow's direction and, thus, wielding the narrative power

of reality construction (384) – these varying, almost absurd levels of authorial power and 'reality' not only showcase Muir's incredible ability to weave complicated and hilarious threads together ("Why am I talking in meter?" 443), but also show Harrow the means to her empowerment. Rather than living apart from her "own master plan" (65), Harrow has the cognitive strength to (re)direct her reality and tackle the challenges of the future.

While *Harrow the Ninth* does not offer a straightforward narrative, Muir's exceptional ability to interweave different 'realities', characters, and inter-/hyper-textuality in a way that is both sincere and hilarious affords readers the opportunity to explore complex conceptions of power and embodiments of grief. Like *Gideon*, *Harrow the Ninth* ultimately offers a unique narrative that defies strict conceptions of genres, wielding the fantastic, the violent, and the surreal with unparalleled ease. For those interested in exploring trauma, mental illness, queer relationships and representation, embodiment, agency, magics of life and death, hauntology, fate, and Science Fantasy with all its diverse affordances (and, of course, epic sword fights, creepy tombs, petty banter, and gore galore), *Harrow the Ninth* is a veritable cornucopia of necromantic delight.

BIONOTE

Kimberlee Bartle has most recently completed her second Master's degree from the University of Cambridge, UK, in Critical Approaches to Children's Literature, where she graduated with distinction and won the Best Dissertation Award. She currently lives in Ireland with her partner and is learning a great deal about cows (and the joys of rural internet). She is most interested in both the use of the Fantastic to navigate trauma and the specific, critical affordances of necromancy in contemporary Young Adult literature in order to explore issues of identity and (re)imagined futures.

POSTHUMANISM COME HOME

Review by Thomas Connolly

Williams, Sheila, editor. *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends*. The MIT Press, 2020. Short story collection. 240 pp.

There was a time when the term 'posthumanist' might have conjured images of Donna Haraway's cyborg and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Thanks to a growing body of critical and cultural discourse dedicated to tearing down the old humanist guard, this term is now imbued with a much wider significance, examining topics as diverse as gender pronouns and climate change. In this context, *Entanglements: Tomorrow's Lovers, Families, and Friends* (2020) is an appropriate and timely collection exploring the subtleties and challenges of living in a posthumanist age.

Entanglements features ten original stories by a diverse array of Science Fiction (SF) authors. Established names such as Nancy Kress and Xia Jia sit alongside up-and-coming writers to offer an assortment of insights into posthumanist experience. Connecting the stories is a selection of arresting artworks by Moscow-based artist, Tatiana Plakhova. The collection roots posthumanism in the here and now – not as theory but as lived reality. The stories aim, as editor Sheila Williams notes in her introduction, to explore "the effects that scientific and technological discoveries will have on all the relationships that tie us together" (ix). Hence, for example, in Kress's "Invisible People," genetic engineering is explored in the context of the family: in this case, a couple discovering that their adopted child was subjected to illegal gene altering to make her more altruistic. All the familiar shades of a classic SF tale are present: the shady corporation, the black-suited FBI agents, the dogged investigative journalist. But these take a back seat to the emotional ramifications of two parents discovering that their child is genetically conditioned to risk her life for others. The implications of this, the conflicts that arise as the parents struggle to understand and protect their child from her own selfless nature, are the elements that drive the story.

Indeed, the most successful stories are those that shift the explicitly posthumanist themes to the background, clearing the way for more familiar explorations of love, identity, relationships, gender, and sexuality. Reading Mary Robinette Kowal's "A Little Wisdom," for example, you might be forgiven for overlooking its SF elements entirely. This tale explores themes of ageing and generational conflict between a museum curator and her young manager. It also features "eDawgs" – canine robots that provide support to differently abled individuals – but these feel almost incidental to the story. A similar example of this is offered in James Patrick Kelly's "Your Boyfriend Experience." The story, although it centrally features a "playbot" that offers romantic experiences both in and out of the bedroom, is really about the precarious conditions that define modern working life. When roboticist Jin is presented with a bonus cheque from his boss, a reward for his work on the playbot, he sees it as his ticket to home-ownership – but at the price of a brutal work schedule that threatens

his relationships with partner Tate and mother Hani. The solution is the playbot itself, which comes to act as a surrogate partner for both Jin and Tate, neither of whom can rise above the malaise, demands, and disconnection of twenty-first-century life.

These are the stories that feel most true to the lived experiences of posthuman realities. For those raised in the gig economy, in which the connection between hours worked and quality of life attained has been slowly whittled away and in which the flow of capital has demanded the uprooting of an entire generation from their networks of support, Kelly's story will resonate on a level that goes far beyond its SF trappings.

"Your Boyfriend Experience" is also unusual within this collection for engaging with themes of class, which represents perhaps one blind spot in the collection. Technology is not concerned merely with questions of ability and agency, but also of access. New technologies – and with them new modalities, experiences, and ontologies – are always wrought with questions of inclusion and exclusion. These stories, while keenly aware of the body as a key material space on which technology acts, are less explicitly concerned with social materiality and technology as a site of concentrated privilege that excludes those without the means to access it.

This lack of interest in class is surprising given the keen sensitivity that the stories demonstrate towards other sites of potential social exclusion. Throughout the collection, there are polyamorous couples, non-binary individuals, same-sex relationships. The stories are not 'about' these themes any more than a conventional love story is 'about' cis-genderism or heterosexuality – or, rather, they are as much about those themes as any conventional love story *is* about cis-genderism or heterosexuality, albeit without acknowledging or recognising it. In this way, these elements form part of the posthumanist project of the collection: the inclusion of gender-neutral pronouns, in this context, itself constitutes a radical act of normalisation. If humanist discourse has historically been concerned with logicising, controlling, and hierarchising, then to mix and blend those categories is already to challenge the "Father Tongue" (to use Ursula Le Guin's term) of humanism.

While there is not a bad story in the collection, some of the tales perhaps lack the same finesse in balancing narrative intimacy with technological exposition. Sam J. Miller's "The Nation of the Sick," for example, features two twinned narrative arcs: one focusing on a revolutionary figure, Cybil, who reforms the world through open-access technologies, the other on a drug addict who is saved from an early drug-related death by that same revolutionary. The parallel is just a little too forced and the celebration of technology as the cure to the world's ills just a little too uncritical. The story is thought-provoking, but as a utopian vision rather than grounded reality – a technocrat's vision of a world without politics.

Suzanne Palmer's "Don't Mind Me," too, falls into the SF trap of elaborating a technological conceit at the expense of character. The story focuses on a group of teenagers forced to wear "minders," censorship devices that prevent children from seeing or hearing anything deemed by their radical conservative parents to be inappropriate. The idea is a fascinating one, and the story

takes on pleasing tones of *1984*-meets-*The Breakfast Club* as the teens form an after-school rebel group to study forbidden material. Ultimately, however, the story does not quite ring true: the characters talk about little other than the central technology of the story, which is, I would suggest, directly contrary to the way in which most people experience technology. The smartphone, once a revolution, is now an icon of how technology becomes normalised, and with it all the changes it brings to the way that we communicate and interact. We are, as the title of the collection suggests, entangled in technology, in culture, and in discourse – and just as the stars appear more brightly in our peripheral vision, so the exploration of technology is made more effective by placing it just off-centre.

Entanglements, then, is a very far cry from the colliding of bodies and (literal) borders in classic posthumanist texts such as *Neuromancer* or Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. It is a quieter, more thoughtful posthumanism – one that is concerned not with sudden and radical upheavals but with gradual shifts and slow realisations of the profound effects of technology on the experience of everyday life. It is posthumanism come home – and forces us to consider not the cyborg in the laboratory, but the one in the living room mirror.

BIONOTE

Thomas Connolly is an independent researcher based in Dublin, Ireland. His research interests include Science Fiction, posthumanism, disability in literature, and popular culture. He is the author of *After Human: a Critical History of the Human in Science Fiction from Shelley to Le Guin* (Liverpool UP, 2021).

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

If you would like to submit an article or review a title for *Fantastika Journal*, contact us at editors@fantastikajournal.com.

We invite submissions from all areas of Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror, Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space. *Fantastika Journal* is an English language publication and all submissions must be submitted in English. The journal does not accept work that is under submission elsewhere and will not print previously published material.

All article submissions to *Fantastika Journal* will undergo a two-stage peer review. Articles will initially be reviewed by the editorial board, within two to three weeks, and will then pass on to a second stage of external double-blind peer review if the board feel that the submission is suitable to the journal. Authors who reach the second stage should expect to receive an editorial recommendation and copies of the reviewers' reports to be returned within 12 weeks of original submission.

Contact us for further information or visit https://www.fantastikajournal.com/ for submission guidelines. We are always looking for regular volunteers for peer reviews and for fiction and non-fiction reviews as well. If you are interested in becoming a reviewer for us then please get in touch.