Foundation

Special SF Theatre Issue

Foundation

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Editorial

Paul March-Russell

This is my third attempt at writing this editorial. Now that I am in a position to reflect upon my first year as an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge, I have struggled to convert my thoughts into words. My difficulty has arisen from trying to express what I learnt most from the Award, which was not matters of taste, judgement, criteria or genre definition.

What I learnt, instead, was just how small the sf community is.

It almost goes without saying that the decision-making process was – and remains – confidential, although I would mention to friends and colleagues the books I was enjoying. But even this outlet dried up the more serious the judging became and the closer we got to the shortlist meeting. Despite (or because of) the confidentiality, speculation upon the Award was rife, an atmosphere intensified by the presence this year of the shadow jury chaired by Nina Allan.

The Clarke judges tended to avoid such speculation – which also meant avoiding much of social media. Friendships became, if not strained, then warped by the fact of being a Clarke judge. I became self-conscious about what I could or could not say to friends, even those associated with *Foundation*'s editorial team, especially if they were also connected to the shadow jury. A wariness dogged my social relations whilst speaking with writers, who may or may not have been under consideration for the Award but who might be connected to those who were, so that discourse became virtually impossible. As the books poured in, I turned inwards, only occasionally raising my head above the parapet.

What was strange, and most unexpected, was how the shadow jury itself became shadowed, most notably by the contributors to *File 770*. Accusations that the shadow jurors were somehow like the Sad Puppies not only misunderstood the purpose of the shadow jury, let alone the Clarke Award itself, but also accentuated the claustrophobia of the sf community. It seemed as if it had become impossible to say anything or, in the Clarke's case, to raise speculation without impinging upon someone else's likes or dislikes. Such claustrophobia may indicate proximity but it does not suggest closeness – whilst negotiating one's own critical position almost inevitably affected someone else's position, at the same time, vast tracts of in- or miscomprehension lay between rival and competing echo chambers.

Suddenly, it became clear to me just how small the sf community is – small in the sense that an opinion or speculation voiced in one place almost automatically effects a response from elsewhere, but small also in the

atomisation of what we still call a 'community', even if it now appears to be so many isolated hamlets rather than a city of Babel. Small in a third sense, too, in that few of the controversies which agitate so many within sf have any direct bearing on the worlds outside sf – that nebulous culture we erroneously describe as 'the mainstream', as if that too could be reduced to a single entity.

How can criticism operate in such a scenario where, alternately, opinions and speculation jostle with one another, and vast areas of ignorance lie in-between? There is no easy answer to this question. Except perhaps that a journal such as *Foundation*, which stands back from the incessant chatter of social media, has a role to play precisely because of its relative aloofness. In what may be taken as a New Year wish to our readers, the comparative distance of the journal makes it all the more attractive to support.

As a writer, fan and critic, Brian Aldiss knew similar tensions within the sf community, especially when he was most associated with the New Wave. His death in August, at the age of 92, received widespread attention. I am grateful to Colin Greenland, Michael Moorcock, David Wingrove and our very own Andy Sawyer for writing in commemoration of him. The New Wave is further remembered by Henry Wessells in his note on the short-lived *Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry*, co-edited by Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek and Pamela Zoline.

The centrepiece of this issue, though, is the special section on sf theatre guest-edited by Susan Gray. I am also delighted that Jim Clarke was able to review for us the National Youth Theatre of Ireland's recent revival of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920), a landmark of both sf and modernist drama. Matthew De Abaitua, meanwhile, reflects on the influence of Alan Moore and Ian Gibson's *The Ballad of Halo Jones* (1984-6), the first time a graphic novel has featured in the Fourfold Library.

By the time this edition goes to press, the appointment for our new Book Reviews Editor will have been decided and made public on (of course) social media. We hope then that the spring 2018 issue will see a smooth handover from Andy Sawyer to his successor.

Spring 2018?! And Christmas only just upon us …

Brian W. Aldiss (1925-2017)

Brian Aldiss, one of the most important figures in the history of post-war science fiction, died in the early hours of 19 August, having just celebrated his 92nd birthday with his family. Although he began by writing mainstream fiction, he was a long-term fan of sf and devoted the larger part of his career both advocating for and upbraiding the genre that he loved. An admirer of H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, the entropic trope that characterises his early novels – *Non-Stop* (1958), *Hothouse* (1962), *Greybeard* (1964) – also prefigured the concerns of the British New Wave. He subsequently became a key player in the story of *New Worlds*, producing such novels as *Report on Probability A* (1968) and *Barefoot in the Head* (1969). His critical work on sf, prefaced by his anthologies for Penguin and his long friendship with Harry Harrison, culminated in *Billion Year Spree* (1973), one of the most influential works of sf criticism, not least in its defence of Mary Shelley as the mother of science fiction. In the 1980s, Aldiss caught the resurgence of hard sf with his *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-5), whilst in 2001, the long-delayed adaptation of 'Supertoys Last All Summer Long' (1969) became the basis for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.* By this time, his contribution not only to sf but also to modern literature had been acknowledged by Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature, and then in 2005, an OBE for services to literature. I met him only once, on the eve of his 90th birthday, and was gratified to learn that he was still writing. Brian Aldiss' commitment to the craft of storytelling will be sorely missed.

Colin Greenland

Brian Aldiss invented me. When I was contemplating studying *New Worlds* magazine for my D.Phil., and wondering if the University of Oxford would even consider it, my friend Josie said, 'You should write to Brian Aldiss.' He was a neighbour of a friend of her family, apparently, and she easily got me his address, so I wrote. In reply, Brian didn't just say 'Good luck' or 'So what?' He invited me to dinner.

I had no idea then what a remarkably kind and civilised response that was. And after that evening, it's amazing to think what hours and hours and *hours* Brian spent reading my essays, early drafts of chapters of *The Entropy Exhibition*, and talking and writing to me about them, and about sf in general and the New Wave in particular. We hit it off. He supported me, and encouraged me, and more than that: he inspired me.

Once I'd submitted my thesis, he still wasn't finished with me. When I applied for the Writer's Residency at the S.F. Foundation, there he was, sitting on the interviewing board. I do believe he argued the rest of them into selecting

me. After my first fantasy novels were published he accosted me on a train to demand, 'Why aren't you writing bloody science fiction?' Then, when I did write *Take Back Plenty* and won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, he sent me a postcard saying 'Bloody good!'

That vortex of enthusiasm and truculence and generosity is, for me, Brian. Brian through and through. The extraordinary variety and unpredictability of his work proclaims his avidity. There was no form, from haiku to triple-decker planetary history, that didn't appeal to his creative appetites, his sympathies, his tireless imagination. He recognised no prohibitions, respected no prejudices.

His personality was what gave his work its impetus. I've just turned on the radio and heard 'Galaxy Zee' – late Aldiss, not great Aldiss, but a full-throated protest nonetheless: against prudent conventionality, for compassionate spontaneity.

Literature was his love, SF his passion. Impatient to see the whole world irradiated with its eerie, apocalyptic energies, he spotted me, the most callow of students, as someone who might share that vision and add an arm to that crusade. It would be nice to think I was worth even a fraction of the help and attention he gave me.

Bloody good, Brian. Bloody good.

Michael Moorcock

In his younger days Brian could be brilliantly funny, furiously angry and, above all, enthusiastic. He could be generous, petty, tolerant, rude, gracious, charming and cruel – all with the utmost vitality. One of my happiest memories is when we got drunk in Yarmouth and went into Woolworth's looking for meat pies. 'Make way for Mr Moorcock!' he called to the Saturday morning shoppers, who obediently parted. Later that day, taking part in a ketchup fight along the front, we shocked passers-by who thought we had emerged giggling from some terrible accident. Strong drink had quite a lot to do with our adventures in those days.

As a youth, I would visit him in Oxford, especially during the time he was breaking up with Olive, his first wife, when he had a full-time job as Literary Editor of *The Oxford Mail*. He had a tiny flat in Paradise Square, then a bit of a slum, and I'd visit him there, talking long into the night. Later, he would visit us in Ladbroke Grove, and my first wife Hilary would always get a visit from him when our children were born.

I knew him for sixty years and, though we quarrelled occasionally and once or twice stopped speaking, we remained good and fundamentally loyal friends. And it is for his best qualities I remember him. As time went on his generosity grew stronger and his enmity grew weaker, reserved just for one or two people.

He was almost never a hypocrite and more often very direct in his likes

and dislikes. He could also change his opinions and almost always forgive old scores. In the early 1960s he was reluctant to identify with what became known as the 'new wave' in sf, putting out his own critical journal, *SF Horizons* (with Harry Harrison), but after about a year he warmed to what *New Worlds* was doing and joined forces with J.G. Ballard and myself, becoming known as one of the 'Three Musketeers' of British literary sf.

New Worlds, when its publisher and distributor were bankrupted, was saved by two men. Brian was the one who proposed applying to the Arts Council for a grant and Angus Wilson, then head of the Literature Panel, talked his colleagues into giving it to us. Perhaps, if Wilson had floated the notion, Kingsley Amis might have turned his back on it, but Brian, then one of his best friends, persuaded him to come on board. Brian also got Doris Lessing, the Tillotsons and Freddie Ayer to recommend us. Brian had already published some of his best work in *New Worlds*, including the *nouvelle vague*-influenced *Report on Probability A* and *An Age (Cryptozoic!)*. Once we were up and running in a format designed to attract non-genre readers, he began contributing the stories which would make up my personal favourite of his, *Barefoot in the Head*.

I read and loved *The Brightfount Diaries* before I knew of Brian as an sf writer. I probably would have continued to read him if he had never written sf. I loved his Horatio Stubbs novels and was able to get *The Hand-Reared Boy* published when its original publisher turned it down. When I complimented him on the writing of *Helliconia*, he could tell I wasn't all that enthusiastic and, typically, graciously accepted the compliment 'as a sign of your generosity rather than your enthusiasm'. But they were the only books of his I couldn't get in to. I read everything else, including his non-fiction like *Cities and Stones* ('There are two kinds of food in Yugoslavia: luke-warm and cold'), and his literary reminiscences like *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's*. I didn't always agree with his criticism and my memory sometimes differed from his, but, over the years, he built a remarkable body of non-fiction, including *Billion Year Spree*. He relied on hearsay and memory for much of his history. For instance, he made me the active agent in getting the Arts Council grant when he played a far more important role than mine. In other places where he writes about me, his tendency is to talk up his friends and show extraordinary generosity towards us.

One Christmas in the mid-1960s the snow was falling and there were few coals to warm the chilly toes of the little Moorcocks. There was no wassailing or tree-trimming in our big front room. Contrary to the wisdom of most freelance writers, something had not turned up. I could go to Portobello Road at the last possible minute, and hope to buy the unsold turkey and veg discounted by merchants, but there wasn't much chance of getting cranberry sauce or a pudding and mince pies. Brian heard of this somehow. Christmas Eve dawned

and I prepared to face the crowd. Gathering my small family about me I did up my scarf and was pulling on my gloves when the doorbell rang. A glance through the window showed a familiar dark green electric delivery van. I opened the door to find a large Harrods hamper. It was packed with goodies. The children danced with joy. Hilary glowed with relief. I bent to open the hamper and inside found a card. *Compliments of Brian and Margaret* it said on the label, *Merry Christmas*. And inside – *With love*.

I forgot to say how much we both cared for Dickens.

I've tried to pass the love on ever since.

Andy Sawyer

At the age of twelve or thereabouts I came across a book called *Hothouse* – I never forgot it. (It is also one of the few sf books my wife will admit to having read and enjoyed: something that pleased Brian when I told him some years ago.) Some twenty years later, I picked up a new copy of Brian's *Trillion Year Spree*, an expansion (with David Wingrove) of his earlier *Brillion Year Spree*, the ground-breaking history of sf. I don't know why I was looking at the index, but there was my name. An essay I'd written about Doris Lessing for the BSFA's *Vector* had been quoted: the first time I had ever been cited in a book. I still don't know if it was Brian or David who had picked up on it, but I'm grateful to them both for making me feel that I was part of the critical community and could actually write about sf.

Later on, I met Brian. And yes, there are memories of science fiction conventions and conferences and conversations and arguments and although there are many people within the science fiction community who were a lot closer to Brian than I was, I'm proud to have known him and saddened that I've lost a friend.

Like Olaf Stapledon, one of his inspirations, he had a visionary core to him which came out of his response to more than sf (though he remained close to sf, and sf fandom, all his life) and was rooted in more mainstream culture. He was a poet, an artist, a writer of mainstream novels and a critic who shared his responses. He championed Mary Shelley and the idea of *Frankenstein* as the novel which taught us what science fiction was, and was for. He was central in more ways than one to the 1960s 'New Wave' of sf, though to paraphrase a letter to Judith Merril, he was there before it and remained after it, 'still writing bloody science fiction!'

Though many of his books and stories were nominated for (and sometimes won) the major awards in the field, his achievement was possibly marred by his commitment to quality and diversity rather than to market popularity. It sounds a very back-handed compliment, but my own admiration for him as a

writer stemmed from the fact that I was never sure that I would *like* the next book. Certainly, I like some of his books much more than others. In a market dominated by doorstop series and retrospective revisitings of a formed success, he only wrote one trilogy (the magnificent *Helliconia*) but it knocked spots off the competition. One of my other favourites among his novels, *Report on Probability A*, was greeted by bafflement as much as praise. He treated us as readers like he treated those of us who might be standing next to him in the bar at a convention – as people who *of course* were interested in all this literary conversation, and in being challenged, and in being welcomed.

He was awarded an OBE in 2005 for 'services to literature' and an honorary doctorate by Liverpool University in 2008. When the Science Fiction Hub – a website which was basically an excuse to get research funding to catalogue a large tranche of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection – was launched, Brian (along with Ramsey Campbell and Stephen Baxter) came to preside over a somewhat impromptu 'launch ceremony'. When Ramsey welcomed us in verse, Brian was not to be outdone, and pulled out a poem 'written on the train up' in which he offered the typically fannish advice that when the festivities were over:

Shall we, in ways traditional,
All clear off to the nearest pub?

What could we do, after Steve Baxter's (prose, but equally welcome) effusion, but follow his instructions?

My memory of the ceremony conferring Brian's D.Litt, however, is him at his most characteristic, and why, I think, those who knew him loved him so much. He avoided a worthy moral address. Instead, he showed something of the absurdity of the world, and how totalitarian systems embody this absurdity when they scrape around for justification. He told of a British Council-backed tour of the USSR at which he sloped off from the official function and ended up beside a bridge in Moscow seeing parts of the Moscow underworld which the authorities claimed did not actually exist anymore in this new, improved society. His local 'minder' managed to find Brian just as he was getting into conversation with a particularly attractive young woman . . .

The audience were on the edge of their seats as they wondered just how unsavoury the tale might get. But there was nothing 'unsavoury' at all, simply a punchline that showed the inventive desperation of Brian's minder as he came up with an explanation for this world-that-did-not-exist that saved face even as it beggared belief: '*I've discovered who she was . . . it was the wife of the Japanese ambassador!*' One of the Liverpool dignitaries said to me afterwards

that it was one of the funniest speeches she had ever heard.

David Wingrove

It was 1984. I was thirty, Brian was fifty-nine. As a writer of fiction I was unpublished, whereas Brian was renowned throughout the world. Seen in those terms it was immensely generous of Brian to bring me aboard. And then …

Not a cross word during the whole process. We were fifty-fifty partners. Anything we didn't agree on we would discuss and come to an amicable decision.

Put simply, Brian allowed me to work on *his* project as if it were *ours*. But I was aware, throughout, that this was the book – as *Billion Year Spree* – that, in its blue jacket Corgi paperback edition, had got me into SF.

So how did we work? *Part One: Out of The Gothic* was Brian's. I added and made minor suggestions, but it was mainly the old material reworked intelligently. *Part Two: Into The Big Time*, was mine. I say that, but Brian made endless suggestions and the book would have been a lot more dour – a lot more 'academic' – than it ended up being.

Our method? Each of us would work on our assigned chapter (Brian's updated nine and my brand new seven – together with the Bibliography and Index, which were my responsibility), and, finished – to a deadline we would exchange and 'correct'. And mainly it worked, its new 511-page Gollancz version a satisfying end to two years of labour. But even when it was done and dusted, we still had another go at it, re-vamping it for the new 688-page Paladin edition.

Looking back, Brian could not have been kinder nor more encouraging. Collaboration on a project as large as this ought to have been difficult, but it wasn't, and I bless Brian for giving me the opportunity to wallow in the genre and help me shape what remains, for me, a wonderful book, though it sounds immodest to say that. Thanks Brian, wherever you now are, dear friend.

Guest Editorial

Susan Gray

Despite the increasing advances in technology today, the concept of the 'live' experience remains attractive. We have, for example, 'live streaming' for people to create a sense of (albeit mediated) presence. With the numerous distractions of technology vying for our attention in our homes and during our commutes, the commitment to set a date and time as well as to physically travel to a venue for a live performance still holds cultural cachet. No matter how far we have come technologically, we still have the ancient art of theatre to question and challenge aspects of our humanity, past, present and future.

As science fiction ever more permeates the spaces of popular culture at large, so has the movement of science fiction theatre. *Constellations* (2012), portraying the highs and lows of a relationship against the backdrop of multiverse theory, won the best play category in the London Evening Standard Theatre Awards that year. Anne Washburn's *Mr Burns* (2012), set in a post-apocalyptic world where the remaining cultural sources are drawn from *The Simpsons*, was nominated for Outstanding Production of a Broadway or Off-Broadway Play at the 2014 Drama League Awards. *The Nether* (which had its world premiere in 2013), a play that explores the ethics of Virtual realms, won the 2011–2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. All of these provide just a flavour of some of the successful science-fiction plays produced in recent years.

Are we, then, in a golden age of sf theatre?

I think there is still some way to go. One of the main issues I have with sf theatre specifically stems from its marketing, as this sets the expectation for new audiences; those who are fans of theatre or science fiction, or perhaps neither. What makes a production 'sf', 'post-apocalyptic' or the catch-all phrase 'experimental theatre'? What term draws an audience and what term drives a potential crowd away? The genre debate (what distinguishes sf from fantasy, for example) has been going on for a long time, and sf theatre is no exception to this. However, this stigma may dissolve in the future. There are new companies dedicated to the performance of Science Fiction theatre that are working towards potential answers. These companies include The Navigators Theater Company, Otherworld Theatre, Science Fiction Theatre Company, and Stars or Mars as a non-exhaustive list.

The articles in this special section also form part of that process. Geraint D'Arcy focuses on the demands placed upon adaptation whilst Tajinder Singh Hayer reflects on his own writing for the theatre. Shelby Brewster, Ian Farnell and Martin McGrath all examine contemporary examples of sf theatre. These

range from seemingly left-field dramatists, such as Jordan Harrison and Anne Washburn, to bastions of apparently mainstream theatre, such as Alan Ayckbourn. The responses they pose to these works actively contribute to the furtherance of an aesthetics of sf theatre. I hope this upwards trajectory continues well into the future.

Performing Cognitive Estrangement: Future Memory Technics in Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime*

Shelby Brewster (University of Pittsburgh)

The problem of staging science fiction, according to Ralph Willingham's *Science Fiction and the Theatre* (1994), is two-fold. First, the special effects necessary for the majority of sf narratives cannot be achieved on the stage as they might be on film or television (although, in light of technological advances since Willingham's work, this particular critique might be revisited). Second, Willingham hypothesizes that theatre artists share a popular misconception of sf as only escapist entertainment: 'gadget- and adventure-oriented fluff' (Willingham 1994: 3–4). Perhaps Willingham is right, and theatre artists as a whole dismiss sf as a genre for its technological preoccupations, leading to the dearth of sf plays, and sf dramatic criticism. Willingham's work remains the only monograph specifically dedicated to sf plays.

Playwright Jordan Harrison, in the postscript to his 2015 play *Marjorie Prime,* echoes some of Willingham's sentiments. The play, which premiered in Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum in 2014 and received its New York premiere at Playwrights Horizons in late 2015, follows a family conflict in an unspecified near-future. Married couple Tess and Jon struggle to care for Tess's 85-year-old mother Marjorie, who is slowly losing her memory to a form of dementia, with the help of a new technological innovation: Primes. Despite its critical and audience reception as a work of sf, Harrison himself does not consider his play to be science fiction: 'While the play rests on a technology more advanced than what we're accustomed to, I don't think of it as science fiction. The less the audience is put in mind of how the technology works, the better' (Harrison 2016). Harrison's attitude toward sf demonstrates a misunderstanding of the critical possibilities of sf on the part of theatre artists, particularly how they can be explored and performed onstage. Through particular sf techniques, namely cognitive estrangement, Harrison's play exemplifies the possibilities of sf plays: how they can help us understand what it means to be human in the present and how that meaning could change in the future. For Willingham, the defining factor of an sf play is its 'novum', a concept he draws from Darko Suvin. The novum, an innovation or novelty, must be integral to the narrative of the plot in order to be considered sf (Willingham 1994: 11). In *Marjorie Prime,* the novum which Harrison has devised is a new kind of holographic projection, infinitely customizable and quick to learn. The Primes, specifically designed and marketed by a company called Senior Serenity, act as companions to the elderly who might otherwise be left alone. Jon and Tess decide to purchase one

of these Primes to ameliorate the memory loss caused by Marjorie's dementia. They program it to appear as Walter, Marjorie's late husband, as he looked when he was in his thirties.

While widespread access to holographic technology of this complexity is not currently feasible, robotic and artificial intelligences are already performing this kind of labour. French robotics firm Aldebaran recently debuted Pepper, a four-foot-tall humanoid robot which can recognize and respond to human emotion. Pepper and other robots like it are increasingly common in Japan, where they can be found caring for the elderly in senior centres and as customer service agents in Japan. Cognitive psychologist Sherry Turkle reads robots like Pepper as instantiations of what she has called 'the robotic moment,' dominated by preoccupations with liveness, authenticity, and intimacy. For Turkle, the robotic moment is marked by both emotional and philosophical readiness to think of robots and other artificial intelligences (AI) as capable of emotion: 'We don't seem to care what these artificial intelligences "know" or "understand" of the human moments we might "share" with them. At the robotic moment, the performance of connections seems connection enough. We are poised to attach to the inanimate without prejudice' (Turkle 2011: 9–10). Other forms of disembodied AI are quite common; Harrison was partly inspired by a conversation he had with a chatbot. In the robotic moment, the relationship between the human and the technical shifts, a change Harrison's play takes as its central preoccupation: how will technology change human memory, and by extension human relationships? In order to examine this question, I turn to *Marjorie Prime* as a critically valuable exploration of both present and future memory technics achieved through sf techniques.

Following Gerald Alva Miller, Jr., I take sf as 'always already critical theory' (Miller Jr. 2012: 3), creating virtual spaces in which the limits of humanity are explored. The sf technique that Miller espouses, which is a key part of *Marjorie Prime*, is Suvinian cognitive estrangement. Drawing from Bertolt Brecht's theatrical *verfremdungseffekt*, cognitive estrangement entails a critically rich tension between what is in the present and what might be in the future: 'science fiction, then, always reflects our reality, but it also points the way to other possibilities – it is both cognitive (realistic) and estranging (marvellous)' (Miller Jr. 2012: 15). Particularly in terms of memory technics, Harrison's play walks a very fine line between the realistic and the marvellous, pushing just enough into the possible to spark unsettling questions about the nature and future of human memory. For the sake of this inquiry, I am interested in the affective, cognitive, and technical dimensions of human memory, particularly as they relate to present and potential future technological innovations. In the multi-volume *Technics and Time* (1994–2001), philosopher Bernard Stiegler

proposes that human beings are essentially and inherently technical; all human actions have to do with technics. For Stiegler, technics is also the genesis of temporality, and so memory becomes a fundamental to his argument: that technics may facilitate an expansion of human capacity to create meaning, changing the very construction of human consciousness. Stiegler differentiates this consciousness into primary, secondary, and tertiary retentions. If primary retention is the 'now', tertiary memory is 'a memory resulting from all forms of recording' (Stiegler 2011: 16). Of particular import here is the characterization of tertiary memory as 'not a *memory* of that consciousness; it is an artificial memory of what was not perceived nor lived by consciousness' (Stiegler 2011: 20). The implications of artificial memory for human relationships, made more pressing by new technical developments. *Marjorie Prime* asks what happens when artificial memories become commonplace. The play successfully enacts critical theory through the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar elements; the future, unfamiliar, artificial memory technics performed in the play are made strange by their comparison with a number of familiar memory technics.

Reminiscences: Familiar Memory Technics

The strangeness of Harrison's Primes resonates with the familiarity of a number of other memory technics found in the play. These serve as a site of comparison for the Primes, but also trouble the meanings of memory, identity, and relationships. To discuss these memory technics, I follow Andy Clark's theory of the extended mind. Clark argues that humans are and have always been 'human-technology symbionts' (Clark 2003: 3) or cyborgs. Therefore, all cognitive processes, including memory, are achieved through technical means. Departing from understandings of cyborg technologies as embedded, grafted, or implanted within human flesh, Clark includes technics of all kinds within the extended mind. Clark uses the example of a man with memory loss writing down an address in a notebook, then later using the written information to recall the location of a particular meeting (Clark 2005: 1–2). Such memory prostheses have become integral to human cognition, and include both electronic and non-electronic examples: written texts, photographs, cell phones, computers, etc. I term these particular examples familiar memory technics, extensions of the human cognitive process.

Harrison shows a number of familiar memory technics throughout *Marjorie Prime*; in particular, Tess and Jon try to shore up Marjorie's deteriorating memory with a box of mementos she has kept. These include letters from old flames, family photographs, and small keepsakes. Although Jon excavates this box of artefacts for particular items that will help Marjorie maintain her memory, to preserve Marjorie's personality, she struggles to remember the moments which

these technical objects represent. She fades in and out of awareness of herself. Despite Jon's efforts, age and dementia continue to chip away at Marjorie's memory. As an example of what I call familiar memory technics, these letters and photographs are an imperfect technical reflection of Marjorie's identity in the Platonic sense. In *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE), Plato rails against the written word as the site of knowledge, because it can only ever be an inadequate image rather than the truth: writing 'will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is not an aid to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only *the semblance of truth*' (Plato 1871: 28). Marjorie's neurological condition prohibits her from keeping the 'truth' of her memories, so Jon can only offer her the reminiscence, the semblance of truth contained in the box of her mementos.

But even more than attempting to keep her memory intact, Jon connects his actions to preserving Marjorie's very identity. As neurologists Stanley B. Klein and Shaun Nichols write, 'memory is at the heart of the way most people think about personal identity […] If I had no memory of past experiences, the sense that I existed in the past would be dramatically compromised' (Klein and Nichols 2012: 677). Their empirical research has demonstrated that the relationship between identity and memory entails two parts, the content of the memory and the sense of personal ownership. If one of these two components is deficient, damaged or missing, the sense of identity is compromised. Marjorie's letters in particular capture her memories' content and sense of ownership, and Jon hopes that they will help her retain both, and therefore retain her identity, even if it is merely a semblance of the truth. Marjorie's particular neurological disorder manifests more often as a loss of content. She has lost specific episodes of her life, such as the moment when Walter proposed to her. Throughout the play's first part, Tess expresses her doubts about the whole endeavour, wondering what possible benefit Jon's actions might have. In response, Jon asks her, 'How much more does she have to forget until she's not your mom anymore?' (Harrison 2016: 21).

Jon shows his concern for what neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has called the autobiographical self, or 'autobiographies made conscious' (Damasio 2010: 210). If the human brain contains the entirety of a person's memory, in order to construct the autobiographical self, 'we rely on key episodes, a collection of them actually, and, depending on the needs of the moment, we simply recall a certain number of them and bring them to bear on a new episode' (Damasio 2010: 211). Some of the key episodes that constitute Marjorie's autobiographical self are her past love affairs, with Walter as well as other men in her youth. Jon uses

the artefacts in the box and Marjorie's own narratives of these key episodes to preserve her autobiographical self in the face of her neurological deterioration. However, Jon's actions beg the question just how much Marjorie's self remains autobiographical. He judges not only *what* Marjorie should remember, but *how*. Through his prompting, a past love of Marjorie's who merely played tennis in college becomes a world-renowned French tennis champion who pined after her despite her marriage to another man. Jon and Tess together decide to keep particularly traumatic memories away from Marjorie; they try to avoid discussion of Marjorie's son Damian, who committed suicide. If her memories of her past are no more than a 'semblance of truth', created through the imperfect technics of writing and photography, is Marjorie still Marjorie?

Harrison also shows us the moment of memory creation. Jon takes up the habit of recording Marjorie's musings in order to tell them to Walter Prime, again hoping to preserve some sense of herself:

> MARJORIE: What are you doing?
> JON: I'm writing down what you said.
> MARJORIE: I'll have to be more careful. (Harrison 2016: 42–3)

Marjorie's memories, already removed from the 'truth' by the twin spectres of age and her disease, become further degraded by Jon's transmission of them to paper. It is this twice-removed memory that Walter Prime will receive, playing it back to Marjorie again in a third iteration of this process. Perhaps because of this imperfection, and certainly due to the amount of both cognitive and emotional labour required to maintain Marjorie's memory, Tess and Jon decide to take advantage of the newest technological innovation: Primes.

'It's Programmed to Appear Interested:' Unfamiliar Memory Technics
The core of Harrison's play concerns the relationship between the human characters and artificial intelligence, in the form of the Primes. We see three distinct incarnations of this technology in the play: Walter Prime, Marjorie Prime and Tess Prime. Each is an instance of unfamiliar memory technics, an extrapolation of already-existing technologies that provoke a number of questions about human-technology relationships and the ability of AIs to possess emotions. The various Primes perform a combination of cognitive and affective labour, depending on the reason behind their purchase. Walter Prime, meant to preserve Marjorie's memory, serves both a cognitive and affective function. Both Marjorie Prime and Tess Prime, however, act as emotional support rather than cognitive; they are purchased to provide affective, therapeutic labour.

The first Prime introduced in the play is Walter Prime, which Tess purchases to keep Marjorie company. Marketed as the latest technological invention in

eldercare, the Primes can be shaped in the image of anyone, provided with the appropriate photographic and digital evidence. Tess programs the Prime to (re)present Marjorie's late husband Walter as he appeared when he was thirty years old. Although the play does not explore the technological specifics of the Primes' operation, Jon mentions that they are made of pixels; a note in the play's front matter indicates that the actors playing the Primes should not make physical contact with any other actor or prop in the space, enforcing their purely imagistic embodiment. Because Tess and Jon still retain a nurse to take care of Marjorie's physical and medical needs, Walter Prime serves a purely emotional and cognitive purpose. He is both Marjorie's conversation partner and a technical extension of her mementos in the box. Through their interactions Marjorie will hopefully maintain her memories, and therefore her sense of self.

Walter Prime 'learns' through conversation, proclaiming early in the play, 'I sound like whoever I talk to' (Harrison 2016: 3). This process of learning is no more than an illusion, a performance of uncanny humanness. Walter Prime does gather more information, and as a result can change his output accordingly. But he cannot learn or know another human being better; he is not capable of empathy. Knowledge of this fact, his lack of empathy, coupled with his skilful representation of human, leads to anxieties for each of the play's human characters. Marjorie expresses her apprehension about Walter Prime in the opening moments of the play, telling him, 'I feel like I have to perform around you' (Harrison 2016: 1). Walter Prime's excessive and unexpected humanness prompts an impulse in Marjorie to mimetically perform a similar humanness. The affordances of theatrical performance enhance this uncanniness even more. Because Walter Prime is played by a human actor (Noah Bean, in the Playwrights Horizons' production), Walter Prime can perform human to an exceedingly high degree. Walter Prime's performance of consciousness so closely resembles that of an actual human being that Jon and Tess argue about whether to refer to the AI as 'him' or 'it.'

Although holographic technology of the sophistication that would make the creation of the Primes possible does not currently exist, Walter Prime's performance of intimacy is an integral part of Turkle's robotic moment. She has conducted extensive research with both children and the elderly to explore how humans connect with forms of artificial intelligence, ranging from popular toys like Tamagotchi and Furby to advanced robotics at MIT. Exploring emotional attachments between humans and AIs, Turkle focuses on what these attachments create in the human user, especially that we are willing to enter into relationships with technologies that *appear* to connect emotionally with us. Ultimately, she concludes that 'in the robotic moment, what you are made

of – silicon, metal, flesh – pales in comparison with how you *behave*' (Turkle 2011: 69). Because Walter Prime's performance of connection is so skilful, his behaviour so humanlike, Marjorie also feels the compulsion to perform, to be authentically human. His successful imitation of the human causes Tess's continued unease about leaving Walter Prime at home alone with her mother, or about Jon giving him too much information, because the more information the Prime has, the more his performance approaches real human connection.

A desire for this sense of connection, or at least the appearance of it, motivates the purchase of two more Primes in the latter two-thirds of *Marjorie Prime.* After Marjorie dies, in the second part of the play Tess seems almost incapable of dealing with her grief, especially because her relationship with her mother prior to Marjorie's dementia was particularly strained. Jon decides to purchase another Prime designed in Marjorie's image to help Tess cope with her loss. Aside from being 'a bit more smartly dressed and made up than before' (Harrison 2016: 48), Marjorie Prime resembles Marjorie as she was just before she died. If Walter Prime performed both cognitive and affective labour, intended to both comfort and preserve Marjorie's memory, Marjorie Prime serves a purely affective function. By speaking to (the image of) her mother, Tess can hopefully work through her emotions, much like going to therapy. Tess's scepticism of Walter Prime builds to a complete disgust for Marjorie Prime. In an effort to help his wife, Jon talks to Marjorie Prime behind Tess's back, hoping to make the Prime closer to Marjorie's personality by giving her more information. The more data Marjorie Prime has, the closer her simulation of Marjorie can be: listening and responding as a human might. This therapeutic implementation represents one of the primary functions for AI technology because 'the robots' special affordance is that they simulate listening, which meets a human vulnerability: people want to be heard' (Turkle 2011: 116). Marjorie Prime's algorithmic functions could be characterized as listening, because the AI takes in information from its environment in order to respond. However, the question of whether or not Marjorie Prime *hears* her is precisely what frustrates Tess in her conversations with the hologram. Can Marjorie Prime *feel*? Does she empathetically understand Tess's experiences?

Tess's attitudes align with Turkle's; she disparages the AI as both incapable of real emotion and inherently deceptive, feigning interest in her stories. Jon argues that there must be some authentic part of Marjorie Prime, because 'She's made of things we say to her, right? So how can you be sure that we don't make it in there somewhere. The human part' (Harrison 2016: 72–3). But as Marjorie Prime hears more from Jon and Tess, gathering more and more data, she doesn't become more and more like Marjorie. She becomes an image of Jon/Tess, literally constituted by the things they say to her. This is, in

fact, Marjorie Prime's closest characteristic to the original Marjorie. In the late stages of her life Marjorie was also made of what Jon and Tess said to her, her memory and identity literally constructed by the stories that she heard. Tess continues to reject this inauthenticity, pushing back against what she sees as the technology's artificial emotions:

> MARJORIE [PRIME]: There's no 'programming,' just talking. Exactly what we've been doing. He wanted to help me be more real. To help you. You've been so down.
> TESS: Pity from a computer. That feels … Do you have emotions, Marjorie, or do you just remember ours? Do you feel anything?
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: I like to know more.
> TESS: Why.
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: It makes me … better.
> TESS: Better.
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: More human.
> TESS: So in other words, you like to be more human.
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: Yes, I think that's right. (Harrison 2016: 60–1)

Marjorie Prime does not pretend to be anything other than a digital representation, but she does profess a desire to become closer to her human original, at least emotionally. Tess tries to maintain the separation between Marjorie the human, her mother who has died, and Marjorie Prime, her image. But the Prime urges her to address it as she would Marjorie, as the authentic, real Marjorie. When Tess asks, 'why is this the way I want to remember her?', the Prime corrects her: 'Me' (Harrison 2016: 57).

This relationship between Tess and Marjorie Prime captures a shift in thinking about the emotional capabilities of technology, on which many scientists remain seriously divided. As Turkle explains, 'for decades computers have been asking us to *think* with them; these days, computers and robots, deemed sociable, affective, and relational, ask us to *feel* for and with them' (Turkle 2011: 39). There is something different between tasking artificial intelligence with a purely cognitive task (playing chess, for example) and an emotional or affective one. Turkle continuously underlines the performative aspects of artificial intelligence. Robots, computers, and other AIs do not have human emotions; they merely perform them through their programmed behaviours. She goes so far as to negate the term 'feelings' in relation to robots, preferring artificial emotion: 'the art of "getting machines to express things that would be considered feelings if expressed by people"' (Turkle 2011: 63). When she is asked, Marjorie Prime does not profess to feel anything. Instead, she has the imperative, due to her programming, of obtaining more knowledge.

Through live performance, the question of robotic emotion might be

explored more deeply than in novelistic sf, despite Harrison's reservations about the genre. Marjorie Prime is played by the same actor who played Marjorie in the first act. This form of doubling, the Prime/image and the human/original represented by the single body of the actor, compounds one of the fundamental questions in robotics that has preoccupied developers since the early days of the field. In 1970, roboticist Masahiro Mori presented the idea of the uncanny valley: as robots became increasingly humanlike in appearance, human affection for them would also increase, until the point at which the robots became *too* humanlike. Since Mori's seminal argument, other roboticists have expanded upon the concept of the uncanny. Of particular relevance here is Kurt Gray and Daniel M. Wegner's hypothesis that humanlike physical features in robots are not uncanny in and of themselves, but only because they indicate the presence of a humanlike mind. In their empirical study, they focus on the human mind as both agency, 'the capacity to do, to plan, and exert self-control,' and experience, 'the capacity to feel and to sense' (Gray and Wegner 2012: 126). Perceiving a mind in a robotic body, a mind that has both agency and experience, is the primary force behind the sense of unease that is the uncanny valley. Because all of the Primes are portrayed by human actors, it is impossible *not* to perceive a humanlike mind inside these forms of AI. The Primes' physical behaviour, speech patterns, and ability to respond to the human characters' emotional states all indicate the presence of this kind of mind, one marked by both agency and experience.

Tess remains reluctant to treat the Primes as if they have human emotions or minds; the uncanniness is too much for her to bear. But in Jon's actions toward the Primes, however, we see a different perspective toward AIs: treating them just like humans. David Levy advocates for this approach, applying the Turing Test to all forms of AI and extrapolating psychological research on human-human relationships and applying it to human-robot relationships. Once AIs appear to have emotions and behave as though they have emotions, Levy argues that they will become capable of empathy, and therefore should be treated as one would treat another human being (Levy 2007: 107). Levy's empathetic stance plays out through the final Prime. After struggling to reconcile herself with the death of her mother, Tess commits suicide while on a trip to Madagascar. Jon purchases Tess Prime. We see the very first moments, after Jon activates her. He tells her her name, and tries to tell her more about Tess in an effort to replicate her personality, small details that he knows from living with Tess for thirty years: 'I'm going to tell you some things and then it'll be like you've always known them' (Harrison 2016: 82). He then proceeds to read a list of things from a piece of paper, things he remembers about his wife. In this exchange, Jon realizes that both his written memories and Tess Prime are just

the Platonic reminiscence, as 'the living word of knowledge which has a soul, and of which written word is properly no more than an image' (Plato 1871: 29). As Tess Prime is in the very early stages of use and yet to adopt enough information, the gap between her, the image, and her original is exceedingly wide. Jon realizes that Tess's opinion of the Primes was true all along. Tess Prime is not Tess, but is instead himself: 'You were right. It's nothing. It's a backboard. I'm talking to myself. I'm talking to myself' (Harrison 2016: 84). Jon wants to build a Tess from his memories but can only achieve a meagre image of her, one made of things he says to her.

The three Primes show several possible consequences of using AI for both cognitive and emotional labour. The play's human characters struggle to achieve the truth, a replication of the Primes' originals, through the imperfect vehicles of their own memories, written language, and the Primes themselves.

Conclusion: Networked Intimacy in the Robotic Moment

As I have shown, despite Harrison's reservations about sf plays, through the technique of cognitive estrangement his play enacts a critical exploration of the present and future possibilities of human memory technics. In Harrison's view, a focus on technical details is what makes science fiction. Therefore, he does not provide many details about the world outside of Tess and Jon's house, which remains sketchy and nebulous. However, critical attention to the few indications of this future world reveals a further defamiliarizing of memory technics, what I call networked intimacy.

The temporal setting of the play is never made explicit, but Marjorie, who is eighty-five at the beginning of the play's action, was born in 1977. In this near-future world, technology seems to have further encroach on the quotidian aspects of human life. When Jon first introduces Walter Prime, Tess expresses her anxiety that facilitating Walter Prime's learning will make humans obsolete:

> Science fiction is *here,* Jonathan. Every *day* is science fiction. We have these things that already know our moods and what we want for lunch even though we don't know ourselves. And we *listen* to them, we do what we're told. Or in this case we tell them our deepest secrets, even though we have no earthly idea how they work. We treat them like our loved ones. (Harrison 2016: 16)

Tess's reservations about the Primes are not unique; she represents a cultural scepticism toward the encroachment of technology in multiple areas of her life. Jon, in his excitement, reflects the optimistic mindset of people like David Levy, who believes that in the future people will see 'the resulting differences between robots and humans as being no greater than the cultural differences between

people from different countries or even different parts of the same country' (Levy 2007: 112). Jon's attitude toward Walter Prime gestures toward the expected behaviours surrounding technology in this world, as he takes Marjorie's engagement with the AI as a sign of her wellbeing: 'I think it's encouraging that she's keeping up with the technology' (Harrison 2016: 15). Both Tess and Jon are in their fifties, indicating that they were both born sometime in the 2010s. Tess's anxieties show that that Primes are just one example of the way technologies have changed what it means to be human within the world of the play.

Tess mentions that she bought the Prime from a company called Senior Serenity. There are several indications that the Primes are becoming popular home appliances. Jon mentions that, in addition to talking to members of the family, Primes have the ability to learn to be more human by communicating with other Primes outside of their home environment: 'The cool part is it can look stuff up. It can talk to other Primes, for practice' (Harrison 2016: 19). The Primes are designed to replicate the structure and connection of human conversation, which they ostensibly will also learn from other Primes designed for the same purpose. Networked on some level, either via the Internet or some unspecified future technology, the Primes have the ability to communicate with any other Prime, including those outside of their home. Perhaps they relay data on their owners back to their parent company, Senior Serenity, or to other entities willing to pay for it. This would not be dissimilar to the algorithms that operate within Internet browsers like Google Chrome or Safari, suggesting advertisements and other material across websites based on browsing and purchasing history. Considering the technical capabilities of the Primes, such manipulation of memory might even extend to government surveillance via the networked Primes. Throughout the action of the play, the Primes remain on the periphery of the room when not directly in conversation with one of the humans. They do not seem to shut off or go to sleep, as a computer might. Instead, they remain upright, silently observing the action occurring in the room. Staging choices made by Anne Kaufman, who directed the play's New York premiere, further reinforce this uncanny behaviour of the Primes. When not in use, the Prime sit either upstage, behind the action, or on the side of the stage, dimly lit but not completely unseen by the audience. Their presence can be felt throughout the entirety of the play.

This performance of a future memory technics, the Primes, troubles definitions of emotion and gestures toward the potential ethical complexities of such technologies. In the play's final moments, we see the three Primes alone together in the house. There is 'a feeling that a great deal of time has passed. Centuries maybe. Planets have turned, bones have been bleached, but none of it has touched this room' (Harrison 2016: 85). Without any of their

human originals or partners as sources of new information, Walter Prime, Tess Prime, and Marjorie Prime carry on a natural-sounding conversation marked by extended pauses that are 'far too long to be natural.' (Harrison 2016: 89). They wonder about Jon's absence as it seems he has been gone for years. The lack of human characters in the scene, reversing the play's previous convention of centring the human interactions with the Primes on the periphery, brings the nature of the Primes into sharp focus. Walter Prime and Marjorie Prime refer to Tess Prime as 'our daughter' despite the clear temporal disjuncture between them (Walter Prime appearing in his thirties and Marjorie Prime in her eighties). Walter Prime tells the story of Marjorie's late son Damian and the family dog:

> WALTER [PRIME]: You put the photograph away, but you never forgot. Don't you remember?
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: I do now.
> TESS [PRIME]: Me too.
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: How I miss them.
> WALTER [PRIME]: I didn't mean to make you sad.
> MARJORIE [PRIME]: You didn't. All I can think is how nice. How nice that we could love somebody. (Harrison 2016: 93)

Although she did have the photograph, Marjorie *did* forget about Damian and the family dog, but Marjorie Prime remembers. Because Walter Prime 'knows' this story, so do Tess Prime and Marjorie Prime. They are networked, wirelessly connected, performing the emotional labour of intimacy, of 'loving somebody.' Whether memory technics of this kind will become an integral part of future human lives remains to be seen, though robots like Pepper indicate that they likely will. Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* offers a vibrant and challenging exploration of what might happen to human memory and intimacy when they do. As Marjorie Prime explains, the future will 'be here soon', so 'we might as well be friendly with it' (Harrison 2016: 90).

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From Page to Stage: Adapting *Vermilion Sands*

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In May 2015, as part of an academic-practice-as-research project, I produced an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Vermilion Sands* (1971). The project was tied in with a production module at the University of South Wales, had a budget of less than a thousand pounds, a cast of sixteen and only four weeks to prepare. Performed to an invited private audience, *Vermilion* was intended as a scenographic experiment in theatrical adaptation practices but it also became an exploration of science fiction writing in theatre.[1] This paper explores as a case study some of the dramaturgical and scenographic decisions made when adapting *Vermilion Sands* for the stage. It examines how theatrical sf sits between literary and cinematic definitions of sf, and argues how sf in theatre is not just a matter of applying an iconographic skin of sf design, but must become a narrativized element of the drama.

Vermilion Sands

Vermilion Sands is a collection of short stories written by Ballard between 1956 and 1970, and published in a single collection in 1971. It was chosen as a suitable source text, partly from a personal affinity for anything science fiction, with Ballard as a favourite, and partly because the short story collection offered a structure which could be parcelled up into scenes with narratives complete in themselves, set within a location that was strange enough to create a retrospective narrative of its own. As the prospective (revelatory) narratives of the scenes and the connecting dialogues become interwoven they create visual and thematic motifs as they unfold, allusions to Vermilion Sands and poetic references to the strange landscapes afforded by its deserts establishing a larger sense of the place only when looking back over the collection of tales.
 Helpful in this respect was the position of the collection as part of the New Wave in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the work of Michael Moorcock, John Sladek and Pamela Zoline, Ballard's fiction is 'highly ambivalent' about its loss of specificity to the sf genre 'even as it strove to make science fiction more literary' (Evnine 2015: 26). Ballard establishes his stories as sf, with each story including an artistic novum, or 'an exclusive interest in a strange newness' (Suvin 1976: 58–59), in the form of an artistic notion or conceptual artistic device. In 'The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D' it is the ability of micro-aircraft to sculpt clouds artistically; in 'The Screen Game' one novum is the ability of the central female character to control and bejewel deadly insects, while a secondary novum uses an extravagant new form of formalist cinema-making as psychotherapy; 'Studio

5, The Stars' features an automated poetry machine; in 'Cry Hope, Cry Fury' a psychotropic painting is made that uses light and emotion to reveal changes over time; in 'Say Goodbye to the Wind' the protagonist is almost killed by a deadly pyscho-morphic suit, similar to the psycho-tropic architecture of the house featured later in the collection in 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella-Vista'; 'Venus Smiles' and 'The Singing Statues' both feature sonic sculptures –in the former, the sculpture grows organically and uncontrollably when planted in the ground, while in the latter, the sculpture turns out to be a fraud, the artist having hidden inside it to impress the fading opera star who purchased it; some form of sonic creatures feature as minor nova in most of the stories but there is a shift to the plant kingdom in 'Prima Belladonna' with the breeding of sonic orchids.

Even though each story contains a technological or scientific novum, there is a good deal of what Simon Evnine calls 'generic entropy' (Evnine 2015: 26) evident in Ballard's work. *Vermilion Sands* often feels like a collection of Chandleresque noirs set in a hot, red landscape, with characters who would not look out of place in the gin palaces and speakeasies of 1930s Chicago or Los Angeles. Each story presents a male protagonist, cyphers of Ballard himself as the differences between the central narrators of each story vary only slightly. When these figures are faced with the ennui of the age, known elliptically in the stories as the 'Recess', they turn their artistic obsessions towards a female figure in the stories who acts as muse to each artist for the duration of each narrative, flitting in and out of their lives, leaving them with only failed art and melancholy memories. The rigidity of any sf definition is, together with the pulp narratives, further offset by the recurring themes of the stories, which are more Gothic than science fiction. There are thematic similarities to the female Gothic in particular, despite the masculinity of Ballard and his central characters, insofar as the stories eschew violence, bloodshed and the manifest monster in favour of existential terror, dread, psychological vulnerability and the haunting persistence of memories (see Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 89; Moers 1976: 90–98; Wallace 2013: 17; Williams 1995: 102–104).

Each of these elements made a compelling source text for adaptation, because the text was not straightforwardly science fiction. The characters were repetitive and flawed, the stories often very interesting in literary terms but inherently undramatic because they lacked action. Drama is about things being done, to use an Aristotelian definition, and in the collection the Recess meant things did not get done at all. Even so, the mood the stories evoked, the idea of Europe lying 'on its back in the sun', meant that the reasons for bringing the collection's 'virtues of the glossy, lurid and bizarre' (Ballard 1985: i) to the stage in the twenty-first century was hard to resist.

The Adaptation

Based on five short stories from Ballard's collection, *Vermilion* was a 95-minute stage adaptation performed at ATRiuM Theatre (22–23 May 2015). The project sought to investigate gender and science fiction through a scenographically-driven adaptation. *Vermilion* evokes a red-desert world where technology and art have become synonymous and the residents of the world, decadent and listless. For Ballard, this was a world where a noir-ish pulp-fiction could provoke a criticism of 1970s California, his stories clinging to the same motifs: a wayward techno-artist meeting a femme-fatale muse. All the stories lead to elliptical literary conclusions where the femmes fatales vanish, leaving the male protagonists alone with their unfulfilling art. These issues made it fertile material for producing a formally rare science-fiction theatre with a materialist feminist agenda (Dolan 1991: 10) through its sustained appropriation (Sanders 2006: 31–32), a methodology which 'affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain' (Sanders 2006: 26). Because of the limitations of the production (the constraints of time, casting, budget and logistics), a more thorough adaptation of *Vermilion Sands*, where the source material was transformed for a new medium as completely as possible, would have been unrealistic. Instead, the chosen production was not merely a staging of the text or an attempt to make it more 'relevant' (Sanders 2006: 19), but an attempt to rework the text for a different existence on the stage as a piece of theatre, and not just drama that observed a 'duty of care' (Minier 2014: 16) for Ballard's work. Even though cinematic adaptations of fiction can often be a successful process, theatre is a different medium and an assumption that adaptation works in the same way from literature to theatre as from literature to film is an assumption that misunderstands what works 'for the medium of expression' (Stam 2000: 58). There have been many filmed adaptations of Ballard's work but few theatrical ones.

Appropriating Science Fiction Definitions

Even though an appropriation may involve a generic shift (Sanders 2006: 26), the intention with *Vermilion* was to make a piece of science fiction theatre. The fields of literary and filmic sf are replete with definitions (see, for example, Mendlesohn 2003: 1–14; Roberts 2006: 1–28; Seed 2005: 1–8), but theatre is not. I will use two of the most distinct medium-specific definitions to highlight theatre's liminal position: Darko Suvin's literary definition of science fiction in terms of cognitive estrangement, and Vivian Sobchack's definition of sf film as that which 'emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile

man with the unknown' (Sobchack 1998: 63).

Although Suvin's work is sometimes dismissed (see Clayton 1998), it provides an interesting overlap with sf in film. Suvin's definition has two elements and one component: cognition (that which is known, socially or scientifically) with a Brechtian concept of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*, often misconceived as 'alienation' but better understood as 'making strange'); and the introduction to a narrative of the component *novum* or 'an exclusive interest in a strange newness' (Suvin 1976: 58–59). These elements and component cover most of Sobchack's definition, developed for talking about certain types of screen science fiction. They do this almost entirely but for the small sub-clause of the 'lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion' (Sobchack 1998: 63), which Suvin regards as 'less congenial to SF' largely because it dilutes sf with other genres of fiction: 'the fantasy (ghost, horror, Gothic, weird) tale, a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment' (Suvin 1976: 62). For Suvin, sf literature cannot afford to waver from his rigid definition as a loss of cognition would affect the 'social truth' (Csicsery-Ronay 2003: 119) of the worlds formed by sf writers, since it would redirect the narrative from the naturalistic, where the protagonists' destinies are inescapably human, towards the metaphysical, where the character has a 'destiny' (Suvin 1976: 65). This literary definition would exclude much of sf film, so Sobchack's inclusion of the metaphysical in her definition allows for the role of destiny to be set alongside elements which could be considered nova or cognitively estranging. It also allows for elements of sf iconography to exist comfortably in the sf film without exposition: space craft, warp engines, energy weapons, nanotechnologies and so on are permitted within a film's design simply by the inclusion of what is basically a magical element within the realism of the text. In cinema, where the design is often considered as pure artifice, having 'decors that desert verisimilitude for visions conjured from legend and eschatology' (Affron and Affron 1995: 115), Sobchack's inclusion of transcendental magic offers *carte blanche* visual design that appears 'true' to the sf world it exists within. In literature, these elements often have the room to be explained, or pondered upon, if they feature as the novum of the text. Scientific explanation such as that included in works like Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* (1970) or Larry Niven's *Integral Trees* (1984) can be rationally understood. Film, however, rarely has the time to delve into specifics. Film must 'give the impression of having photographed real objects' (Barsacq 1976: 7) even if those things are entirely imaginary, and it must do it with as much brevity as possible, without losing the audience's attention.

Caught between these positions, sf theatre is representationally not as iconic (objects are like the photographic representation of them) as film realism,

but still visual; and it is not literary in the sense of it being 'readerly' (Barthes 1990: 4) with the luxury of printed, re-readable text. Theatre has advantages, however, over both fiction, as a more 'writerly text' (Barthes 1990: 5), created as it is experienced both verbally and orally as well as literarily, and over film, for through its manifestly live and ephemeral presence, it can be evocative in a way which film resists because of its iconic realism. Theatre is *psycho-plastic*, able to provoke the audience into filling iconic absences with their imaginations and it draws upon a sense of magic through its performativity and staging (Burian 1970: 123–45; D'Arcy 2012). Consequently, theatre is literary enough to 'reflect *of* but also *on* reality' (Suvin 1976: 64) in terms of its cognition and it is also estranging enough 'as an attitude and dominant formal device' (61) through its live form, but it lacks the iconic realism of a film to include successfully the unexplained nova so often found in sf iconography unless the theatre production has an absurd amount of budget. Even so, an iconically realist theatre production attempting to stage the 'transcendentalism of magic and religion' (Sobchack 1998: 63)is not impossible, nor is it without its precedents theatrically. This one element can be used to describe a great deal of non-sf theatrical drama, but a production that attempts to replicate entirely the medium of film is probably doomed to failure.

To further reduce Sobchack's definition to component and elements , it is difficult to see where the iconographic elements of sf actually fit: essentially it is 'speculative science […] interacting in a social context […] in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown' (Sobchack 1998: 63). This is something that theatre has often done: Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) explore the fringes of knowledge and the occult, whilst Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon speculate upon time and existence in *Waiting for Godot* (1948), although very rarely would we count any of these texts and countless others as science fiction without making a particularly ugly set of forced readings and arguments. Although, if we were to deliberately stage and design them so that they drew upon the iconography of science fiction, then the productions would become science fiction productions of those texts.[2] In the same way that alterations in the uniforms of the Soldiers in a production of *King Lear* (1606) can evoke the historical military uniforms of many periods and historical nations in various stagings of that Shakespeare text, so too can a sf iconography code a production as sf: 'The icons of sf are the signs which announce the genre, which warn the reader that this is a different world' (Jones 2003: 163). Even though the audience may recognize Sobchack's definition as applying to any number of literary dramas, only if a visual realization of a sf design is appended to that production will an audience qualify the production they are watching as sf. The question could therefore become: how much sf iconography is needed to make a theatre production sf?

A designer's reply might be: how much budget do you have and how sf do you want it to be? A more dramaturgical response might be to see in what ways the dramatic narrative can be science fiction without over-explanation, and still appear visually interesting scenographically, without clumsily trying to evoke sf iconography that could not be afforded for the production. That was the approach taken with the adaptation of *Vermilion Sands*.

Vermilion

Due to the constraints of the project, in this theatrical appropriation of Ballard's work, the aim was to embellish the female roles, to redress the gender imbalances whilst exploring the same technological, artistic and interpersonal themes as the source. Female roles were expanded, and some roles gender-swapped, exploring relationships between characters and those between artist and artworks. Central to each story is malfunctioning media technology; the failure of technology to produce art is linked with the failure of relationships. By making media and scenographic technology central to the production of *Vermilion*, the interplay between people and technology and the art that they both fail to create in this world became a central theme of the work; it had to be spatially fluid, allowing diverse theatrical forms such as poetic realism and radio drama to exist within the same theatrical construct. *Vermilion* was not intended to be a dramatic work with a sf skin, but a work of science fiction which explored the same issues as Ballard, but through the theatrical medium. Initially intending to stage versions of all nine of Ballard's short stories within ninety minutes, the production eventually featured just six of the tales in various degrees using a range of theatrical conventions, framing devices and styles to realize the texts. This section will outline some of the scenographically-driven dramaturgical choices.

The play opens to the sound of desert wind, and an empty red stage appearing in the dawning light of a new day. Into the space runs Emerelda, drawn from the wan, insane starlet from 'The Screen Game'. Emerelda's flight from her husband, through the painted re-arrangeable screens set out by him, becomes the recurring scenographic motif. Four wheeled periactoi, pillars with three different painted faces, were moved around the space to create different locales, courtyards, buildings and eventually the psychotropic walls of the killer house from 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista'. The architectural nature of these columns gave a great deal of spatial variety to a limited stage space, and when moved by the actors could produce a variety of environments. Their three faces, painted, white, black and red, matched and contrasted with the vermilion-coloured floor. In conjunction with a simple white cyclorama stretched across the rear of the stage and a limited lighting colour palette of reds, blues

and oranges, the periactoi were all that were needed to produce a sense of shifting time, place and mood. Consequently, a transition from one scene or story into the next became demarcated by the shifting of the screens. Each time the screens were rearranged, Emerelda appeared and engaged in direct address with the audience , a convention that only she was permitted; all other characters were fixed within the realism of their storyworlds so that Emerelda's appearance marked her as an unreliable narrator and an estranging reminder of the theatre. In this way, the red rocks and sand seas of Vermilion Sands were evoked for the audience in each transition, when the machinery, such as it was, was shown to the audience, producing a theatrically estranging effect. Contributing to this scenographic convention, the lighting shifted over time, from red through blues and eventually back to red, establishing a sense of rhythm and the passage of a day cycle; the silence of the theatre was undercut by sounds of desert winds blowing, with the occasional howl from a haywire sonic sculpture.

To add a sense of the surreal and dreamlike, furniture was limited to a single wheeled chaise lounge, which was 'sailed' on to the stage as a sand yacht by the antagonists of 'Cry Hope, Cry Fury' when they rescue the stranded hero of that tale, Melville, and place him on it centrally in the space while he recovers. Here Melville is taunted by a shifting and altering psychotropic painting, created with a surrealistic photo animation projected onto two of the periactoi's white faces. Afterwards the chaise is sailed away again, only to return as a piece of furniture, but also as the site of the memory drum of the house in 'Stella Vista', which is accessed through a panel in the base. Emerelda's obsession with jewelled insects is realized in a similar way to the painting, created via a projection of the bejewelled creatures onto a white cloth placed upon the floor. As animated insects appear to scurry across the cloth and her pale skin she explains the processes used to tame and bejewel them. When Emerelda leaves, the cloth is recoded by Melville as the glass sand of the sea he is stranded on.

The sound sculpture from 'Venus Smiles' was initially chosen as a framing device to introduce all the characters and have them interact at the disastrous unveiling of a vindictive piece of art, but because of its themes the story became a central feature of the play. In the story, the sonic sculpture is created by the artist to give Vermilion Sands a statue it 'would grow to like' (Ballard 1985: 115) but it becomes a horror of a thing which eventually must be destroyed because it grows, and howls, out of control. The story of its unveiling was to be passed over briefly to explore the theatrically more achievable smaller-scale story, 'The Singing Statues', where an artist becomes farcically (in the play) trapped in his own art work; in the performance, one of the periactoi opens to allow the hapless artist inside, and in that small space he remains, singing (a mix of live

voices and recorded sound), with his new owner. Having already presented one idea of a sonic sculpture, the idea of a constantly growing one taking over the world was too much fun not to include.

'The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D' and 'Prima Belladonna' had already been cut from the script for scale, whilst 'Say Goodbye to The Wind' was cut for length. 'Venus Smiles' had brought everyone onto the stage and introduced the mysterious artist responsible for the debacle at the start of the play, so it made sense to blend that character with another of Ballard's femmes fatales, the muse from 'Studio 5, The Stars', and because she had reappeared, so too could her sculpture. Aurora Drexel, an amalgam of Aurora Day from 'Studio 5' and Lorraine Drexel from 'Venus Smiles', became a recurring antagonist and artistic muse whose mission was to wake the artists of Vermilion Sands from their apathy. It seemed fitting that her sculpture should make the final version of the play, not through its physical presence on the stage, as the original story might suggest, but sonically, through a retelling of the tale in a radio-play. We meet the characters first in the opening scene where the sonic sculpture goes wrong and must be carted off stage; those same people reappear in the darkness, their faces and microphones lit, dominated by four of the periactoi looming over them. The mounting terror and inescapable sense of doom caused by the uncontrollable, ever-growing, metallic sonic sculpture and the sonic apocalypse that it causes is an entertaining addition to Ballard's book, but in the prospective narrative of a stage production, an apocalypse that is not at the end of the work is problematic. However, in a theatrical form which relies upon establishing a whole new set of conventions, the narrative would alter retrospectively and be a sf tale within a sf play, and not a realist event in a realist work. The methods and feel of 1950s horror and sf radio shows, like *X-Minus 1* and the *Inner Sanctum*, were deliberately evoked to stage the out-of-control sonic sculpture, and to present the new world that the characters eventually become trapped in. As this section was presented so differently from the rest of the play, and required a different method of audience engagement, the section could exist within its own storyworld and, retrospectively, be seen in narrative terms as an alternate or possible narrative course outside of the main dramatic flow.

The final two stories chosen were 'Studio 5, The Stars' and 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista'. The amalgam character, Aurora Drexel, appeared both as an absent figure in the radio play dealing with her art work, and as the poet's muse in 'Studio 5', with the central editor figure played by a female actor in a revised role inspired by the poet Elizabeth Bishop. Streams of white tape and projected animated text taken from the script flooded the stage and swamped the poet, Paulette, while Aurora Drexel, apparently in control of the maelstrom, laughed. Their ensuing argument summarized the central argument of the play:

'I ask what is art? Only art can answer.' Implying automation and technology have replaced passion and craft in art, whilst ennui and malaise have replaced passion and love in people, Drexel argues for the return of both in humans, and the abandonment of the technology and lifestyle that is their ruination, thus framing the central argument, in various forms, of each of the stories.

The final scene was deliberately the most dramatic of all the stories, and the most realist in theatrical terms, simply because it ended with a death, unlike the other chosen stories. 'The Thousand Dreams of Stella Vista' deliberately made use of the periactoi and the moveable space, by then familiar to the audience, and used them to force the action right down to the apron of the space, and eventually to crush the central female figure of the story. The other stories had been poetic, fleeting, strange, and even surreal, but 'Stella Vista' is a domestic psycho-drama about a couple who end up getting divorced because the house that they move into contains the psychic memory of a woman the husband was once infatuated with. It is this memory which shapes and transforms the plastic architecture of their new home; in the original story, the wife leaves the husband and goes to live with her mother. In the play, the self-morphing pyscho-tropic house kills the wife, not through any sense of misogyny, but necessarily for dramatic irony. It was undramatic to leave the husband moping for his estranged wife in a technologically 'haunted house'. In the story, it is acceptable to understand that the character's life falls apart because of his obsession with a memory of a dead woman he barely knew, but on stage, it weakens the figure of the wife and makes the husband merely pathetic. In the production, when the house kills the wife, it is directly his fault: in the story, it is his neglect of her wishes and his neglect of her feelings and her person which drives her away, in the play it is those same things which kill her and shift the story from the domestically sad to the dramatically tragic. The husband is left destitute and, importantly, haunted by not one, but two women who are dead because of his selfish actions. Foreshadowed by the art work out of control in the earlier radio play section, this scene becomes the culmination of Drexel's argument: balance technology with human interaction or face the inevitable consequences.

Appropriation as Critique

The episodic nature of the production, and the brevity of the story adaptations, plus the importance of having substantial roles in an 'assessed' production meant that everyone had to get an equal part in the play and that the genders must be balanced. Such challenges were met by utilizing the adaptation process not only as an adaptation which realizes several aspects and themes of the original work, but by a methodology that could also appropriate and critique the original text. Genders were shifted and characters blended into each other to make

the new version work dramatically given the constraints. Emerelda became a solitary figure, her husband and would-be lover never seen; Aurora Drexel became an amalgamation of several of Ballard's female characters, including from the two stories that remained unstaged; against Drexel, Paul became Paulette, the regendering of the role having little impact upon their discussion but an intense one upon their relationship. The contexts were altered, though still recognizably Ballardian, the stories adjusted to accommodate these new people and explore the same issues that Ballard explores: themes of obsession, lust, memory and mythology, interwoven with explorations of art in an age of automated reproduction of simulacra. Central to each story was a novum, a technology made to produce art, misused, gone haywire or failing. Each failing technology became coded as a failing relationship. Each artwork was at once fantastical, and cognitive and was central to the discussion of the interpersonal relationships in each section. The technology of Vermilion Sands was created to make art in the Recess, a non-specified period of social and technological atrophy, and its failure to function becomes a central problem in each story, not because the stories spend time trying to fix the technology, but because their failure can be read as the failure of the relationships of the characters involved in the stories. The characters' attempts to manipulate, or possess each other are mirrored by the technologies central to each story: the opera singer falls in love with the sonic statue, because she thinks it sings back to her, when it is actually the artist inside who is infatuated with her; the poetry machine breaks and the poet is forced to write again for the love of the poetry and not just for their muse; a husband obsessed with the recording of a woman ends up preserving the recording of his wife as well. All the stories are intrinsically interwoven with the nova of the originals, since whereas dressing the world with science fiction iconography only makes theatre look like science fiction, the actual exploration of science fiction on stage necessitates a deeper requirement than the surface elements of its design. In theatre sf, the novum needs to be narrativized, used to extend or expand the sf discourse in a way which the iconic realism of film takes for granted, while the specificity of its definition in literature restricts the encroachment of anti-cognitive elements. Even though theatre is capable of being iconically realist or purely literary, it rarely does one or the other; a definition of sf in theatre is hard to pin down in the oscillations between these two positions. By making them integral to the narrative of theatre writing, science fiction elements must be recognized as such. While Ballard's original lacked generic specificity in its attempt 'to make science fiction more literary' (Evnine 2015: 26), the introduction of elements of the Gothic or pulp make the same text seem too much like a common theatre drama. Likewise, what makes a science fiction film appear to be science fiction in theatre may

only mask a similar type of everyday drama by evoking a surface appearance of the genre. By appropriating the stories for theatre performance, even in this small-scale example the nova in the stories which offer a sense of science fiction in the originals become integral to the dramatic narrative of the stage.

Endnote

[1] A video of Vermilion can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OFJr5bpA0g&t=1897s. It was recorded for research purposes only. A pdf of the script is available on request from the author.

[2] Distinct from this is the example of Bob Carlton's 1989 musical *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, which is much more of a cultural appropriation of *The Tempest* than an adaptation or staging of it. This stage musical borrows character names and plot devices, whilst also being an intertextual 'sequel' to the 1956 film *The Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox), itself a loose adaptation of playtext and not really a production of the work by Shakespeare.

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Utopian Dreams, Dystopian Realities in Lucy Kirkwood and Anne Washburn

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In theatre, dystopias are overrated – or, more accurately, overprescribed. A large number of plays in recent years have been critically reviewed as dystopian alongside other labels that were sometimes complementary, other times conflicting. Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* (2014), an urban fantasy drama replete with Lovecraftian imagery was hailed as a 'fierce dystopian drama' (Clapp 2014) as well as the more general 'science fiction thriller' (Trueman 2015), while his follow-up *X* (2016), set on a research station on Pluto, was described as a 'jittery dystopia' (Clapp 2016) and 'the birth of the sly-fi genre' (Cavendish 2016). Mike Bartlett's London drama *13* (2011), Jennifer Haley's virtual-reality play *The Nether* (2014), Tajinder Singh Hayer's post-apocalyptic *North Country* and Ella Hickson's *Oil* (both 2016) all received the dystopian label, and there are numerous other examples to be found.

Such profuse application does not mean to suggest that these productions did not exhibit dystopian tendencies. They all, to varying degrees, deal with 'certain key motifs and ideas that in one way or another involve an opposition between social control and individual desire' (Booker and Thomas 2009: 65). Most of them display the adverse effects of technology in aiding and abetting social constraints. They all imply a world that is in some way worse than the empirical reality of their audiences, expressed variously as the rise of oppressive governments, the implementation of regressive social demands, the loss of privacy or the corruption of nature. But the implementation of the dystopia label to a plurality of plays, most of which could be better described with other terminology – fantasy, post-apocalyptic or non-generic labels such as social-realist or historical – diminishes the overall effect of the dystopian tradition, and fails to accurately reflect how dystopic influences seek to complement, subvert or strengthen the wider concerns of a given text. It also leaves little room to consider any utopian implications that may be buried within the dystopic environment of the text; Hayer's *North Country*, for instance, concludes with its three protagonists, having survived both the apocalyptic event and the various permutations of survival and self-governance that their communities adopt and adapt, now looking optimistically towards the future. A merely dystopian approach often ignores the kernel of hope that lies inside, or often at the end, of these texts. Both Anne Washburn's *Mr Burns* (2013) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), for example, present their protagonists with the challenges of surviving in the face of disaster. *Mr Burns* takes place after global nuclear

meltdown whereas *The Children* deals with the fallout from only one nuclear power station. Neither play fits neatly into typical definitions of science fiction or the fantastic, so why do they warrant consideration at all?

Hoda Zaki, writing extensively on the modern utopia in science fiction, notes that it rejects the stringent formalities of classic utopia, such as a lack of action, a great deal of exposition, and an emphasis on social structures and institutions. Instead, she believes that modern utopias contain 'tantalizing fragments in the utopian tradition' (Zaki 1988: 113), which have permeated the realm of science fiction to create, if not outright utopian forms, then at least 'the possibility of utopia' (Zaki 1990: 243). M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas support this interpretation by noting that in science fiction, utopian ideals can emerge during a process of change (Booker and Thomas 2009: 75), in which the move towards utopia, minute or extreme in scale, is itself a fragment of utopian practice, and indicative of the utopian effect even if it falls short of formally establishing the classic utopian society. Often in sf, this paradigmatic shift from a state of decay to one of hope mingles the dystopian practice of depicting a circumstance worse than empirical reality with the utopian act of passing through this circumstance to a better, if presently undefined tomorrow. Those apparently dystopian dramas which then seek to disrupt or trouble their own dystopian reality must by this very action suggest the seeds of utopia. They may only dream of a better society, let alone manage to achieve a perfect one, but the act of striving for them is itself a utopian practice: 'the new is the longing for the new, not the new itself' (Adorno 1997: 32). Such works are, to borrow a phrase from Margaret Atwood, *ustopias*, defined 'by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other' (Atwood 2011: 66).

As yet there is no term analogous to slipstream for drama, that fuzzy set of texts which 'addresses the possible fluidity of the boundary between sf and non-sf' (de Zwaan, 2011: 500), but whatever the theatre equivalent may be, plays such as *Mr Burns* and *The Children* seem to live within it – the latter more so than the former, as Washburn's play displays science-fictional tendencies if only through the global scale of its catastrophe, whilst Kirkwood's text suffers, for want of a better word, from limiting its scope to a localised disaster. Perhaps more importantly, their inclusion is mandated because they contain that element often akin to the fantastic: speculation. As dystopian science fiction is, in short, 'something that *could* happen – but you usually wouldn't want it to' (Clarke 2000: ix), both plays demonstrate this aptly, as they extrapolate from the world as it is to the world it may become, based to some extent on the direction we are heading; certainly in *The Children*, the post-Fukushima climate is an unavoidable shadow in the minds of audiences. Both texts explore speculative

futures 'in terms of individual and collective human life, in terms of people's interactions, feelings, and the future dimensions of the human consciousness' (Klaić 1991: 5). *Mr Burns* depicts the continuation of storytelling and culture beyond the destruction of society through the actions of a close-knit band of performers, whilst *The Children* follows the personal and professional reactions of its three protagonists to the long-term effects of nuclear fallout. Neither play is so speculative that it departs from the entirely plausible, nor does it rely on a novum or other science-fictional conceit – certainly not outside of nuclear power, itself not new. Instead, they propose potential, negative futures – derivatives of the audience's contemporary existence – the interrogation of which reveals cause for change or the potential for it; the dystopian reality giving way to the utopian dream.

The subtitle of *Mr Burns – A Post-Electric Play* – succinctly describes the setting and intent of the drama. It begins 'in the very near future' (Washburn 2014: i), with several survivors of an apocalyptic event discussing their situation around a camp fire, while trying to remember the lines from a specific episode of *The Simpsons.* The nature of the disaster is never specifically discussed, but is almost certainly to have been caused by the meltdown of several nuclear power stations, which led to the destruction of the national power grid. (Or possibly vice versa, as the details are very broadly sketched, and the audience is granted only incoherent snapshots of the world of the play.) There are mentions of quarantine, evacuations, deserted towns and cities that have been 'burned through' (Washburn 2014: 24). The second act is set seven years later and features the same group, now a travelling theatre company moving between small post-apocalypse communities and performing episodes of *The Simpsons* for entertainment, intermingled with renditions of television adverts and pop songs also remembered from prior to the disaster. The final act is set seventy-five years later, and presents the eventual successor to their work: a Greek drama/comic opera amalgamated from *Simpsons* skits, adverts, songs and pre-disaster references, showing that the work of the performing troupe has outlived them and morphed into a cultural touchstone.

Even if scant on detail, *Mr Burns* clearly occurs within a post-apocalyptic scenario. This term appeared in many reviews of the original US production and subsequent UK staging, but it was often paired with the dystopian label; the *Financial Times* labelled it as a 'post-apocalyptic dystopia' (Shuttleworth 2014) and the *Boston Globe* called it 'a dystopian vision of a post-apocalyptic future' (Aucoin 2016)**.** While not presuming to rigidly impose restrictions on such interpretations, it is interesting to note the conflation between these two terms. The most obvious elements of *Mr Burns* – that of the destruction of civilisation and with it the deaths of likely millions of citizens – are firmly post-apocalyptic,

differing from typical dystopian practice in which some form of controlling authority works to 'regulate thought, imagination and behavior, providing individuals with a very limited range for the expression' (Booker and Thomas 2009: 65). The artistic renderings of (present) history and the (future) present that flourishes in the second and third acts of *Mr Burns* are antithetical to the typical suppression of such work by dystopian regimes. It is of course possible that a dystopian regime may arise from a post-apocalyptic society, but there is little to no evidence of this within the play. It is perhaps more rewarding, then, to focus not on the distinction between varying permutations of future negativity but on the optimistic, utopian fragments within that same future.

Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* bears at first glance only passing similarity with *Mr Burns.* Intimate in scale compared to Washburn's epic, it is a one-act drama taking place in real time over approximately two hours. A meltdown at a nuclear power station – again, the details are fuzzy – has forced retired nuclear physicists Hazel and Robin to relocate to their coastal cottage, outside the farthest edge of the exclusion zone. They are visited by an old friend, Rose, who over the course of the evening attempts to elicit their help in returning to the power plant, where years previously they used to work, to relieve the young men and women working to contain the radiation and take upon themselves the job and consequences of this likely fatal task. It would be an act of self-sacrifice: the poisoned air would kill them over time, but the charismatic Rose argues persuasively that it is the duty of the older generation to shoulder responsibility and spare the younger generations the burden of cleaning up a mess they did not themselves create.

Premiering at the Royal Court Theatre in late 2016, it was – to quote a *Financial Times* review – 'a far-reaching, unsettling play about legacy, survival and responsibility' (Hemming 2016). As well as the more surface features of nuclear disaster, *The Children* shares with *Mr Burns* a thematic interest in preservation and in change. Just as the performers in *Mr Burns* choose to change and adapt the pop culture products of yesteryear to preserve culture in general, Rose attempts to convince Robin and Hazel that their expertise can preserve the lives of others, as well as preserving life as they know it by containing the damage. This would result in a change of role for the characters: Rose, who is childless – and children are an intrinsic role within the show, even if there are none present – views it as an obligation owed by the old to the young, but Robin and Hazel, present in the lives of their children and grandchildren, must change the manner in which they nourish and preserve the lives of their family, and act at a greater remove and in a more abstract but arguably more meaningful and noble manner.

Such thematic preoccupations reverberate throughout the plot, and are

represented even at the level of dialogue. In *Mr Burns*, the text is structured in a manner which, when spoken, resembles realistic conversation, but also implicitly continues to obscure the details of the outside world. Maria relates an encounter she had with a stranger in a shop as they tried to find supplies, her staccato language reflecting the typical flow of half-remembered conversation:

> MARIA: And he doesn't look up at it he presses on and up the little service roadway and he's at the shed, the the service shed and so he, yes, he's totally picturing himself busting at the lock, until he busts it open. And he this shed is vast, and shadowy, and at the end of it this hulking great generator. (Washburn 2014: 35)

Washburn deliberately uses little punctuation to depict shifts in thought, creating something closer to stream of consciousness which, when delivered on stage with pause or effect left to the discretion of the performer, sounds like normal conversation, which is rarely carefully structured or pre-planned. This approach, combined with the snatches of information regarding the state of the world, form an incoherent picture, paralleling the uncertainty felt by the characters, whose own information is a mixture of first-hand experience and occasional rumour, caught as they are in a world suddenly bereft of long-distance communication. This is countered by the dialogue used during the second act as the group tour the country performing *Simpsons* scenes. The humdrum, scattershot approach to conversation is here carefully, mimetically repurposed from the group's collective memory – which like speech can be fractured and unformed – into clear, elegant (if comical) dialogue, as demonstrated when two of the group perform the following skit:

> FIRST AGENT: So when *I* say Mr. Thompson, you respond *as* Mr. Thompson.
> HOMER: Sure.
> FIRST AGENT: Certain you're clear on this?
> HOMER: Piece of cake.
> FIRST AGENT: Really?
> HOMER: Sure thing.
> FIRST AGENT: Mr. Thompson!
> HOMER: (*Blank*.)   (Washburn 2014: 46)

During these performances, their use of language undergoes a change, in that it switches from the clipped exchanges of the performers which are punctuated with misunderstanding, pauses and repetition, to the formal, structured approach of *Simpsons* dialogue, whereby it seeks to preserve the show's cadence, energy and comic precision.

Dialogue in *The Children* is written in the same manner as *Mr Burns*, with a non-conventional approach to lines and grammar that smoothly indicates the not entirely smooth language of everyday conversation:

> HAZEL: […] and then I saw the wave, only it didn't look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it just kept boiling and boiling and.
> ,
> And then everyone was running, so I ran too. (Kirkwood 2016: 11)

Note the use of the full stop and comma, functioning as a pause in thought and coming after a sentence featuring a cumulative repetition of 'boiling' with no given breaks, as if Hazel's memories were spilling out of her, only to be abruptly halted as she contemplated them. This later evolves from disjointed dialogue into a rejection of conversation altogether in favour of dance. At a crucial moment in the play, as Rose and Robin reconcile themselves to their chosen fate at the power station and ruminate over their lives thus far, they break out of their melancholy by playing a favourite song and dancing. This is a deliberate, liberating decision to break from discussion in which their emotions cannot be rendered through words, and instead express themselves through movement and music, evoking the ever-quoted and misquoted adage that a revolution without dancing is not worth having. Here, the revolutionary act is action itself, to change from passivity to agency by facing challenges to which they are eminently suited, though it will cost them their lives. They preserve their determination and resolve, but they change the manner in which they process their emotions into something wilder, more expressive and less refined.

The redundancy of language and its elevation into music and dance has its parallel in *Mr Burns* and the performers' advancement of *Simpsons* dialogue into an art form, which by the third act has further transformed into music. The set piece of *Mr Burns* – the third act musical performance – is a stunning act of community storytelling that preserves cultural expression from the ashes of the apocalypse while simultaneously restructuring it for the purposes of the new world. The seeds of this are laid in the opening scene, when the disparate group members express their excitement at the new group member Gibson's recital of 'Three little maids from school are we' from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1886). Washburn makes the following observation in stage directions: '*Let's just pause to note parenthetically that these are none of them people who, in their previous life, would have enjoyed the idea of an impromptu Gilbert & Sullivan recital*.' From this and other observations it can be reasonably assumed that the protagonists of *Mr Burns* were before the disaster not primarily consumers of high culture as it is (stereo)typically understood**.** Yet the eventual outcome,

the third act opera, is an amalgamation of previous low art content delivered via high art aesthetics – as one newspaper put it, 'Brecht and Bart, Homer and the other Homer' (Brown 2013).

As well as being a repudiation of the high/low culture divide by elevating *The Simpsons* to high art through the emphasis of its universal, ideological qualities, Washburn also empowers the typical consumers of such low art to become the future creators of culture. In revivifying their past – which is of course the present world of the audience – they up-end contemporary cultural or class divides in a performance which incorporates utopia 'by virtue of its explicit anticipation of the future's ontological pull' (Zaki 1990: 247). To that end, Washburn and Kirkwood focus on the social and psychological effects felt by their protagonists. Nothing in their texts demands any physical realisation or demonstration of disaster, and the original London productions stuck stringently to a naturalistic set and style. While they may use technology as a means of creating their environments, each play also promotes the human condition as opposed to technology as the primary means of change or salvation. In *Mr Burns*, the partial rediscovery of technology in the final act, in which performers cycle on static bicycles to provide electrical charge to light bulbs, is less important than the need for and survival of storytelling, which provides a more sustaining, redemptive arc for humanity than a mere return to electricity.

Moreover, not only does storytelling survive, it evolves; the third act operatic performance reinterprets cultural and technological history and transforms now-archetypal figures like Mr Burns and Bart Simpson to respectively embody the evils of nuclear power and the hope of the future. It is an eminently utopian ideal that, while the specific structures of 'technologically saturated societies' (Luckhurst 2014: 3) may be lost, the transcendent act of storytelling, 'itself a utopian practice' (Levitas 2013: iv), helps the newly-emergent society to come to terms with its past and look hopefully towards the future, as Bart demonstrates in his closing song:

> BART: The world is new and glittery
>   I run to meet it hopefully
>   Love never dies in memory
>   And I will meet life gloriously (Washburn 2014: 94-5)

Even here, at the conclusion of the play, there are only glimpses of utopian fragments, themselves hinted at in a future towards which Bart runs hopefully. Perhaps, as Adorno suggested, they will remain forever out of reach, yet the act of chasing such dreams moves Bart and his future audience – as well as the play's contemporary audience – away from dystopia and towards utopia.

In *The Children*, this utopian desire is centred on personal decision as

opposed to the creation of communal art, yet it demonstrates the same longing for change: Rose attempts to convince Robin and Hazel that their expertise can preserve the lives of others, as well as preserving life as they know it by containing the damage wrought at the power plant. Such an act renews their sense of purpose, and reconciles Rose and Robin to their fate – they are both dying in some way, Robin from radiation poisoning and Rose from the ever-present threat of returning cancer, as well as from the stymieing process of retirement; neither of them has comfortably accepted the loss of vitality and relevance that comes with ageing. The more noble choice of intervening at the power station will return some sense of purpose to their lives, as well as saving the lives of others. It is their choice to act itself, not the act of shutting down the plant, that provides the prospect of salvation. There is a moment early on in *Mr Burns* where Maria says she met a man who thought he could intervene at a power plant and stabilise the reactor, but he feared the consequences of prolonged exposure and turned away. This decision haunts him: 'It's not knowing, that's the problem […] I think I can handle anything, if I know what it is. I just can't manage the dread' (Washburn 2014: 36). Standing at the same crossroads in *The Children*, Rose, Robin and Hazel take the alternate path, aware of the consequences and choosing hope over dread. And much like Bart in his closing song, they run to meet the future hopefully – not likely for themselves, but for those they can help to save, but also in some sense saving themselves, from a loss of relevance and from the easy comfort of disinterest and wilful, ignorant bliss. Restructuring the world on the small or grand scale represents a utopian act, and in *Mr Burns* and *The Children*, the negative reconstruction of the world in the wake of nuclear disaster eventually gives way to a utopian revivification of both words and deeds.

As neither play presents a typical dystopia, nor do they advocate a formal utopia, it is important not to simply flatten out the utopian elements as merely hopeful, or dismiss them as simply a happy ending. The rejection of dystopian realities on whatever level allows the emergence of utopian dreams: 'dystopia contains within itself a little utopia' (Atwood 2011: 90), and the word 'little' is a key to the scale of the emergent utopia; these are small but important victories. In *Mr Burns,* the creation and performance of new stories denies the death of culture, whilst in *The Children*, the failure to act and the fear of the unknown is overridden by the shouldering of responsibility. Neither play makes a claim for the perfect society, they remain healthily sceptical of the concept, and display cynicism toward assuming the value of affirmative action. In *The Children*, Hazel much more than Robin or Rose demonstrates a reluctance to settle to the unenviable, suicidal task ahead, whilst the performing troupe in *Mr Burns* still exist within a world of violence, bartering and danger that may not be overcome

simply by sharing stories. In both worlds, the realities remain imperfect, and the improvements are as yet dreams, but the choices of their protagonists to act, either performatively or professionally, pave the way towards a realisation of those fragments of utopia that are achievable in their world and indicative of a better future.

Writing on dystopias in 2009, Graham J. Murphy believed that 'it is too early to predict the resilience of the dystopia in the twenty-first century or whether a new dystopian form awaits over the horizon', yet today, science fiction continues to probe the dystopia for signs of hope – in Murphy's words, 'kicking the darkness until it bleeds daylight' (Murphy 2009: 477). *Mr Burns* and *The Children* sit within a broad grouping of science fiction works, alongside films including *Arrival* and *Star Wars: Rogue One* (both 2016), as well as books such as Neal Stephenson's *Seveneves* (2015), which not only depict the dangers of disaster and dystopia but hint, sometimes on the smallest scale, at the hidden paths to utopia. It would be of some comfort if in the age of upheavals this is the direction the genre and the theatre collectively choose to take – perhaps a little kicking is indeed required. For now, the dreams of utopia, those fragments of a better world, are neither entirely idealised or realised in either *Mr Burns* or *The Children*. Yet the possibility remains.

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North Country: An English Post-Apocalyptic Landscape

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A distraught astronaut beats the sand in front of a half-buried Statue of Liberty. A coma patient awakes and wanders the eerily empty streets of central London. Mutated gangs pillage through a vast nuclear desert. These are the familiar contexts of the post-apocalypse on screen. They feature iconic locales destroyed or transformed into colossal *memento mori*. Or worlds where even those reminders have been scrubbed clean from the map leaving a landscape that is implacable; the nightmare that lies at the heart of Romantic notions of the sublime – a sight that threatens to crush the individual with its scale. These are the widescreen vistas through which post-apocalyptic films can swoop. So why attempt to explore the genre through theatre? And why choose a city, Bradford, which does not automatically evoke the grandeur of a ruined London or New York? To contextualize a little, I have written a post-apocalyptic play set in Bradford; in this article, I will consider how such altered landscapes can be approached on stage, and the way in which the genre can be realized through a psychogeographic research process. I will also consider how the idyll hovers throughout my own work and in other post-apocalyptic fictions, and the implications of this in terms of the English rural mythos.

Post-apocalyptic markers: finding them on stage and finding them on foot
North Country was produced and performed in 2016. It follows three characters – Nusrat Bibi, Harvinder Singh Sandhu and Jason Alleyne – through four decades in a post-apocalyptic Bradford. The first section of the play is set around a catastrophic disease outbreak and its aftermath; the second section is ten years later; the third section is forty years after the initial plague. The play is made up of interwoven monologues and duologues, and is underpinned by a series of themes. It is about communities forming and reshaping themselves in a time of scarcity – a recession play in some ways (although that means something different in the context of a city that never really recovered from the industrial decline of the 1970s and 1980s). It is an explicitly multicultural play (in a contemporary context where racism and jingoism have been legitimised in some political discourses). It uses the post-apocalyptic genre as a means of exploring cultural identity, exile and change; the shift from pre-apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic society (from old country to new country) and the questions of what is lost, what is retained, and what is changed, hold a particular relevance when placed alongside migrant narratives. Bradford, as a city associated with European and Asian migration for more than a century, is therefore fertile terrain

for the genre.

I began this article by positioning theatre as a kind of poor neighbour to film when it comes to representing post-apocalyptic ruin. I hope this was a pardonable rhetorical strategy; in truth, theatre – with its oscillations between the literal and the metaphorical – offers much to an sf writer. If one begins with stage directions, then the meticulous scenarios of Samuel Beckett in *Endgame* (1958), *Waiting for Godot* (1948) or *Happy Days* (1961) create a postage stamp of the apocalypse – blasted heaths, gabbling mutations, besieged homes, humans exposed to a hostile universe. We do not need to see the apocalyptic desert stretching to the horizon; Beckett's slice of the world and his characters' desperate/comic struggles do enough to intimate it. His notoriously precise directions may close some avenues to collaboration, but there is still room for different creative responses to his scripts. The collaborative nexus in theatre – the way that a play will be interrogated and reshaped in a production process involving actors, directors, designers and other creatives – means that directions in a script can take on strange unintended lives of their own. Writers can actively prompt creative responses, can throw down challenges. Consider, for example, the last direction of David Eldridge, Robert Holman and Simon Stephens' *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky* (2010): 'The stars begin to explode in the sky. It becomes incredibly bright, and then suddenly the whole world is black' (Eldridge et al 2010: 112). There are more literal ways of responding to this cue, but I would argue that a metaphorical approach yields a more interesting theatrical experience.

To bring the discussion back to my own practice, *North Country* contains similar challenges to a production team (for example, one of the final scene requires an actor to punt on the surface of a lake in a ruined town centre). However, the play is not set in abstract Beckettian geographies; it is rooted in a city that I grew up in and attempts to extrapolate Bradford into a post-apocalyptic future. The ruined city was very much inspired by the markers of industrial decline that had dotted my childhood and adolescence – abandoned wool mills, stalled regeneration projects and demolished factories. As a consequence, the play almost demands that I explore the region through a process of psychogeographic enquiry; the predominant characteristics of which include 'urban wandering, the imaginative reworking of the city, the otherworldly sense of spirit of place, the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting, the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings' (Coverley 2006: 31).

A key psychogeographic text was Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts' *Edgelands*: *Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (2011); a playful and melancholy exploration of the abandoned corners of England. It is set in

the post-industrial North and seeks to restate the cultural worth of apparently marginal places. It brought moments of personal recognition and, crucially, reinforced the post-apocalyptic imagery that coloured my own psychogeographic imaginings of Bradford:

> We try to picture – in the post-petrol era – being able to walk the M1 Way, from Brent Cross to Scotch Corner [sic], leaving the gravitational pull of London and its inner planet, the M25, on foot, staying overnight at service stations reconverted into hostels. We mean, actually walk it; not use it as a loose narrative device for some *flaneurisms.* (Farley and Roberts 2011: 29)

This use of post-apocalyptic reverie is a psychogeographic intervention in its own right; the type of thought experiment that Guy Debord might have used as part of the 'Psychogeographical Game of the Week' strand in the Letterist International's *Potlatch* magazine (Debord 1981: 6).

Walking is as prominent a feature in the post-apocalyptic genre as it is in psychogeography, for example, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) and David Brin's *The Postman* (1986). The genre presents an urban landscape defamiliarized, feral and re-wilded. It destabilizes the boundaries between the city and the countryside – and emphasizes the capacity for wilderness in both. This is also there at the nineteenth-century roots of psychogeography: for the poet Charles Baudelaire, the city is 'the great desert of men' (Baudelaire 2010: 16). The *flâneur* arose 'at a time when the city had acquired enough scale to become a landscape. It could be crossed as if it were a mountain, with its passes, its reversals of viewpoint, its dangers and surprises too. It had become a forest, a jungle' (Gros 2011: 176).

My wanderings, my *dérives*, through the city would ultimately be mediated through a script-based response rather than the more familiar prose, visual art or filmmaking approaches of psychogeography. There are theatrical explorations of psychogeography: Lone Twin's *Spiral* (2007) sees the company transporting a table through the Barbican estate of London, whilst the Wrights and Sites collective explicitly frame themselves as walking arts practitioners and engage in lecture/performance *dérives* (Wrights and Sites 2013). There are also audio and app-supported walks that theatricalize the spaces that audiences journey through: the Lancaster Dukes Theatre's *Port Stories* (2017) which embeds recorded historical narratives at locations around the city (The Dukes 2017), or Platform's *And While London Burns* (2006) which created an apocalyptic soundscape involving the City of London and climate change. The wider contexts of site-specific theatre overlap with psychogeography's terrain; they both engage with space and 'rely on the complex coexistence, superimposition

and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary' (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 23). However, as a playwright rather than a theatre maker/director/performer/producer, my starting-point would be the script rather than a potential venue (although I did hope that *North Country* would be staged in a sympathetic place in Bradford at some point). In one sense, my work was responding to the 'site' that is the whole of Bradford; key locations appear in the play as a result of their dramatic potential, their practical utility in a post-apocalyptic context (for instance, their nearness to potable water), their autobiographical significance, or their symbolic weight.

Post-apocalyptic idylls, 'natural' England and cultural heritage

The destruction of human society can be used in post-apocalyptic fictions as a framework for an idyllic, almost utopian return to natural states. Either humanity is brought back into a healthier relationship with nature or nature is freed by humanity's extinction; in both cases, one can see the urge to begin again being reaffirmed. The apocalypse becomes an opportunity. I am conscious that the ending of *North Country*, which sees a series of agrarian communities co-existing in the Borough of Bradford, flirts with this trope; a trope which is imbricated with English and migrant nostalgias for the rural.

J.B. Priestley's post-apocalyptic play, *Summer Day's Dream* (1950), explores these utopian sentiments in a particularly English context. It is set in a then-futuristic 1975; however, the England it represents is anything but futuristic – instead, the action takes place in a South Downs rural community, thirty years after a nuclear attack. This is a community that has consciously embraced a return to a small-scale barter economy and agrarian ways of life. An eighteenth-century country house (Larks Lea) is the setting for the action; its inhabitants are Stephen Dawlish (an acerbic country squire), Margaret (his daughter-in-law), Christopher (his grandson) and Rosalie (his granddaughter). They are joined by Fred Voles, the farm bailiff and 'a slow, dependable rural type' (Priestley 1962: 407). The latter class-loaded description appears to confirm a sneaking suspicion about the start of the play: this country house could be as much placed in the eighteenth century as in a post-apocalyptic late twentieth. Modernity intrudes on Larks Lea in the form of three outsiders – Franklyn Heimer (an American industrial executive), Irina Shestova (a Soviet bureaucrat) and Dr Bahru (an Indian scientist) – who crash their air transport in the vicinity. There is also an ulterior motive to their arrival: a desire to survey the area for chalk deposits that can be exploited by their respective national and industrial organizations. This sets up a clash of ideals that forms the crux of the play; a clash that, on the surface, appears to end in a victory for an isolationist, conservative viewpoint. However, Priestley is a writer who appreciates nuance.

The apparently traditional class and power relationship between Stephen and Fred is actually represented as a more equal friendship. Likewise, the outsiders are still welcomed into the community; indeed, they are partly seduced by the world they have stepped into, for example, the cold and methodical Irina actually falls in love with Christopher. This latter development can almost be seen as a trope; the sophisticated and modern outsider beguiled by a slower, gentler and more traditional way of life.

The ethos of Larks Lea is based on an ecological framework that finds expression through the words of Christopher: 'we're not living off it [the land]. We're living *with* it' (Priestley 1962: 415). In turn, his grandfather, Stephen, disparages mass industrialization: 'God designed this island not for factories but for cattle-breeding' (Priestley 1962: 411). Larks Lea is not an idealization of wild nature, but instead represents that familiar English rural idyll. This is a post-apocalyptic land that hymns country habits, pipe-smoking, and gentle artistic pursuits; it is a kind of *Wind in the Willows* in the wake of nuclear catastrophe. Like Kenneth Grahame's novel and its 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' episode, *Summer Day's Dream* also contains a vein of mysticism; an aura of magical possibility that echoes its near namesake, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605), and finds the outsiders recovering from a spiritual malaise they never knew they had. This retreat into bucolic England is not necessarily an entirely reactionary or conservative sign. Christopher Priest's assertion concerning postwar British disaster fiction is significant here. He suggests that writers in the genre might be reflecting 'an unconscious response to the loss of Empire' (Priest 1979: 195). The response in Priestley's play does not appear to be one of mourning for England's fallen station in the world. Instead, Stephen welcomes the change:

> This is a little backwater of a country, no longer busy doing the world's work […] Let the people who are doing the world's work have the telephones and TV-coms and the nervous breakdowns. We don't need 'em anymore. (Priestley 1962: 414-5)

Alongside the retreat from certain aspects of modernity, the inhabitants of Larks Lea are able to leave behind nationalistic antagonism. Bahru reflects on the shift in technological prowess that has occurred between India and England, and is met by a phlegmatic response from Margaret: 'I see no harm in that. Once it was our turn, now it's your turn' (Priestley 1962: 451). The return to an agrarian and local sense of identity sees the abandonment of aggressive, imperialistic ambitions.

The post-apocalyptic genre allows for interesting cultural recoding of landscapes. As an example, the city centre of Bradford becomes a place that is largely ignored until the end of *North Country*. Though it is a site of danger in the

early years, it is depopulated by the end of the play and is recolonized by nature as it transforms into a large lake. A specific real-world aspect of the city centre came to be the primary trigger for the play – a location that I term 'the Hole in the Heart' (figure 1). This was an area of Bradford around Forster Square; in

2004, the shops that occupied this place were torn down with the expectation that the Westfield Corporation would replace them with a new retail centre. However, the redevelopment stalled; for years, the town centre of Bradford – what in other cities might have been prime real estate – contained a boarded-up wasteland. It segregated the historic buildings of Little Germany from the rest of the city centre. It flooded, became a source of civic anxiety, and then a focal point for dissent as an Occupy Westfield group encamped there and (echoing Situationist *détournement*) satirical 'Wastefield' logos were pasted on the fences (Stanford 2015; Wilson 2010). The Hole in the Heart was glaringly post-apocalyptic; it did not require psychogeographic re-imagining to make it so. It was emblematic of the economic stagnation of the city, and the sense of inertia and despair that coloured Bradford at its worst. Yet, Little Germany that bordered the Hole also pointed to the city's industrial heyday; this cluster of ornate nineteenth-century buildings was founded by largely migrant merchants and stood as a reminder of a successful, multi-ethnic past (Ashton 2013; Binns 2006). The Commonweal Mural on the side of the Bradford Playhouse recalls the city's activist history – the Independent Labour Party was formed in Bradford in 1893 (figure 2).

Beneath the Hole flows another consequence of Bradford's industrial rise — the Victorian water system that channels the Bradford Beck through the town centre and out towards the River Aire in Shipley (figure 3). It seems apt that

the Beck should bubble up to the surface at the end of the play; it is not only a common post-apocalyptic trope of resurgent nature, but also representative of the past resurfacing. The former crossing point of the Beck at the foot of Bradford Cathedral – the 'Broad Ford' – is what gives the city its name. It is no accident that the historian figure in the play, Harvinder, should be continually

fishing the waters there; it could be seen as emblematic of my own desire to explore the communal identity and history of Bradford in *North Country*.

These sites – forgotten watercourses and underground vaults – are familiar locations in psychogeographic writing. Peter Ackroyd devotes a whole book to them with *London Under* (2012); his reasoning is based in archaeology: 'The past is beneath us. It exists still as the companion of the present city' (Ackroyd 2012: 1). His psychogeographer colleague, Iain Sinclair, similarly traces the route of the Walbrook and other lost rivers in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997). These rivers are representatives of the pre-urban world still present under the surface; the awkward jostling between nature and the city, the past and the present. The wider subterranean realm holds an obvious chthonic significance; exploring the sewage system becomes a way of reading the city's entrails. This is creative terrain that is open to the occult musings of both Sinclair and Ackroyd. It was a conscious desire on my part to create some of that imaginative grandeur away from London and away from the perceived centre of things. The image of Harvinder as a gondolier through the flooded centre of Bradford was a deliberate gothic flourish – an example of Bradford exhibiting the elegant decay of Venice.

Ackroyd and Sinclair's are tactile engagements with British history: 'We are treading on our ancestors' (Ackroyd 2012: 14). This is a statement that I could read as potentially exclusionary with regards to my own psychogeographic endeavours; my ancestors' literal presence in the country 'only' extends back to the mid-twentieth century. This suggestion of buried forebears is also complicated by a difference in funerary rites; Sikhs practice cremation and the scattering of ashes in water. However, Ackroyd's statement can also be read more fluidly (and, once again, water becomes a potent metaphor). The lake in *North Country* is a site where Harvinder has scattered the ashes of loved ones; it has become a receptacle for memories. It also holds curiously Asian, often holy, associations for me; echoes of the Ganges, the *sarovar* (holy pool) of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, and the Dal Lake in Kashmir. Perhaps most potently, it references the flooding and relocations caused by the construction of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan; a project that was a factor in the migration of many Mirpuris to Britain (and Bradford) in the 1960s.

My re-imaginings of the city centre lake touch upon Kye Askin's challenge to the exclusiveness of the English rural mythos. Her study explores ethnic minority engagement with the countryside and challenges the familiar assumptions behind this supposed non-relationship: migrants have little desire to connect with nature, they lack the historical connections of settled countryside communities, minorities belong in the city, etc. It is a narrative that the British Asian director, Jatinder Verma (whom I shall quote at length), also grapples with:

I think that the notion of integration anywhere in the world can only ever be an imagined notion. It does not lose its potency for being that, but all you can do is to push that idea out passionately. It cannot become a reality in the way a farmer in Norfolk, who has been there for nine or ten generations, is real, is *real* England. You cannot touch that. Or the way, for example, that an Aborigine near Uluru is Australian. Wherever the immigrants to Australia come from – from England, or Italy, or Greece – they will never be able to match that, except with an idea […] I'd say the kind of sensibility that gives the idea of integration, which is only a city idea. And that is what cities are. You cannot help but be multicultural in a city. A city destroys class, race, and gender barriers because it forces people to live cheek by jowl. It may be because of work, or whatever else, but that is what a city is – compressing all those boundaries which in the rural areas are absolutely intact. You know where the lord of the manor lives; you know where the workers are. All those hierarchies are in place. (Verma 2009: 209–11)

This quotation leaves much to unpack. There is an assumption of cosmopolitan energy and freedom to Verma's conception of the city; a picture that perhaps matches parts of London, but which might not suit Bradford in the same way. Verma's recognition of the Norfolk farmer as '*real* England' risks surrendering both the countryside and the nation to one figure (a figure who, despite his countrywide remit, is actually linked to a specific region). The way out of this impasse, however, is through that familiar act of imagination. Askins suggests the term 'transrurality' as 'a more progressive conceptualisation of rurality, one that both encapsulates the specificities of place and is open to mobility and desire – in order to displace rural England as only an exclusionary white space and reposition it as a site within multicultural, multiethnic, transnational and mobile social Imaginaries' (Askins 2009: 366).

Corinne Fowler has identified how writers such as John Agard, Grace Nichols and Lemn Sissay have tapped into this 'transrural imaginary' to write poetry where 'diasporic consciousness overlays Britain's countryside with faraway rural settings like Jamaica's Blue Mountains or the Himalayas' foothills' (Fowler 2016: 188). There is a similar process of cognitive palimpsest with the participants in Askins' study:

The English countryside was connected to countrysides across the world through a 'thick' understanding of materiality linked to notions of the rural-urban binary: rurals were connected by their non-urbanness. During participant observation, direct comparisons were made between the hills in the PD [Peak District] and the foothills of the Himalayas/the Blue Mountains in Jamaica/various hilly areas across Africa; coastal areas of the NYM [North York Moors] were compared

with coastal parts of the Caribbean, Senegal, India and Sri Lanka; and villages in both national parks were associated with villages in (grand/ parental) countries of origin, by first, second and third generation participants. (Askins 2009: 371)

North Country deliberately engages with this transrural imaginary. Whilst Alleyne, a farmer's son, is adept at living off the land, the other Bradfordians he meets initially 'Never had to make or grow a thing in their lives' (Hayer 2016: 14). It is conspicuous, therefore, that some of the 'foreign' communities are better placed to engage with the land due to their farming backgrounds on the subcontinent. The sense of communal connection within British Asian groups also chimes more strongly with visions of the English village's social cohesion (and, perhaps, its restrictiveness).

There is a sense of permanence in Harvinder's hunkering down by the lake; a rootedness that also acknowledges literal and metaphorical fluidity. This grandson of migrants communes with the natural environment of Britain; yet that natural space is created out of an altered urban setting. He is at the heart and at the edge of things at the same time. Similarly, Syed Manzurul Islam's urban wanderers in *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* (1997) negotiate ambiguities with regards to belonging to a place:

> But there is a blind spot, an open manhole, and we slip through, falling into the maze of sewers, into the belly of London. We don't fall like Alice, because migrants like us don't fall like Alice. But we have fallen into subterranean darkness, where tunnels form labyrinths from which one can't escape by simply opening eyes and waking up. But we don't panic. Because London is our city, and we know the city. (Islam 1997: 22)

To continue with the aquatic imagery, the ebb and flow of economic forces have further affected my conception of Bradford town centre. In 2015, the Westfield shopping development was finally completed. I left Bradford in 2012, and so had to re-orientate the perspective I had of the site; there was an *émigré*'s resentment that 'home' had changed in my absence (and these negotiations between *then* and *now* would complicate the process of writing the play even more as time passed). However, there was also an abiding memory of the economic and psychic damage that the Hole had inflicted on Bradford; there was also the sense of the new Westfield development winnowing the rest of the town centre of its remaining large stores. It struck me that Bradfordian audiences for *North Country* would not have to work hard to imagine a ruined space in their city with the Hole so recent in collective memories. These sentiments were reinforced when the play came to be performed in a disused store on Market Street – a

former Marks and Spencer that the company had abandoned in favour of a new space in the Westfield centre (figure 4).

The context of the venue made me feel pleased that I had written *North Country* as a play: the specificity of the performance location and its immersive, post-apocalyptic qualities chimed with the cultural and regional specificity that is at the heart of the story; the in-the-round set-up was a particularly appropriate communal forum for a piece that is all about communities. To widen these concluding thoughts, this is one of the most significant elements that the theatre brings to bear on the post-apocalyptic genre; it can utilise the cultural microclimate of its performance locations (the specific venue and its wider socio-political environs). It can engage with a genre that frequently bristles with reshaped identities, temporalities and belonging through a communal, live lens.

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Ayckbourn's Artificial People

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This article explores how Alan Ayckbourn's science fiction, in particular the use of androids/gynoids in the plays *Henceforward...* (1987), *Comic Potential* (1998) and *Surprises* (2012), casts light on the themes that run throughout his work. It looks especially at how Ayckbourn characterises power relationships between men and women, and suggests that Ayckbourn's use of science fictional tropes brings his recurring concerns into sharpest focus. Although Ayckbourn's themes remain constant, the props of science fiction allow him to achieve a precise rhetorical effect not available to him in the straightforwardly domestic plays for which he is most famous.

In any discussion of Ayckbourn or his work it seems obligatory to begin by noting that while he is, by some distance, Britain's most successful living playwright, he is rarely the subject of critical analysis. There are numerous suggested reasons why this might be the case, and it is useful to take a moment to reflect on them as they help illustrate how Ayckbourn's writing is often categorized.

One common suggestion is that Ayckbourn's sustained and impressive popularity arouses the suspicion of the 'intellectual classes' who dismiss the popular as automatically second rate and unworthy of study (Billington 1990: 40). A second theory is that Ayckbourn's resolutely middle class settings, 'the sleepy atmosphere of a semi-detached' (Almansi 1984: 109), immediately mark him out as unfashionably orthodox, and apart from his contemporaries, such as John Arden, Harold Pinter and Arnold Wesker, who were pursuing a more radical theatrical agenda in the early 1960s. A third suggestion is that Ayckbourn's focus on technical, as opposed to formal, innovation in his plays gets dismissed as trickery, and his intense familiarity with and exploitation of the intricacies of theatrical production does not win him artistic credit (Holt 1998: 31). Michael Billington also suggests that Ayckbourn's prolific output suggests a lack of depth: 'a dramatist or novelist who reluctantly squeezes out a single work every decade [...] is going to be more highly regarded than one who produces two or three major pieces a year' (Billington 1990: 130).[1] A fifth possible explanation is that Ayckbourn's traditional approach to 'dialogue, individual characterization, theme and action' (Brown 1984: 8) has meant that his reputation has never escaped its early, rather damning, attachment to old-fashioned boulevardier playwrights such as Terrence Rattigan. Ayckbourn himself offers a sixth, and final, reason why his work may have been overlooked: his attachment to comedy. Critical appreciation only comes long after the death of the comic

writer: 'By which time, of course, most of the comedy is incomprehensible and can only be laughed at by scholars' (Ayckbourn 2004: 4).

Some of these criticisms of Ayckbourn's work have undoubted force. The world of his plays does hark back to an earlier era and can seem old-fashioned. His cast of characters reflect a rather distant England, overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, suburban and circling constantly around the institution of marriage. Aside from *Drowning on Dry Land* (2004), which was the first of Ayckbourn's plays to feature a black actress in its opening cast, Ayckbourn did not specifically write for a black character until *My Wonderful Day* (2009), his seventy-third play.[2] The suburban town of Pendon, the fictional setting of many of Ayckbourn's plays, was unusually homogenous in the 1970s: in the second decade of the twenty-first century it seems preternaturally so.

But, if some of these theories really do represent reasons that scholars have neglected Ayckbourn's work, then it is possible that academics and critics have missed the point. For example, commentators and reviewers frequently refer to Ayckbourn as a non-political writer. Simon Trussler describes him as a 'non-political Priestley' (Page and Trussler 1989: 6), writing apparently conventional plays about apparently conventional people, while Guido Almansi cites an (unnamed) critic who describes Ayckbourn as having the sole aim of making audiences laugh: 'His plays contain no message, offer no profound vision of the universe, tell us nothing about how to live our lives' (Almansi 1984: 120).

Such attitudes seem, at best, superficial. It is possible, perhaps, to watch one Ayckbourn play and to miss the gnawing sense of wrongness that pervades the lives of most of his characters, distracted perhaps by the audience's laughter. But it is surely not possible to pay serious attention to the body of his work and miss that he has chronicled a distinctively British revolution. While playwrights like Pinter and Wesker were trying to change the world through radical theatre, Ayckbourn was recording the transformation that was actually taking place. Even as the working-class communities beloved of kitchen-sink dramatists were being obliterated by economic and political forces beyond their control, Ayckbourn was writing about the lives of those who looked like they were winning. He was tracking the rise of the ambitious middle classes, whose votes were assiduously pursued by both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, and whose appetites were endlessly studied by their spin doctors. They formed the vanguard for a decade or more of profound social change.

Ayckbourn records their aspirations and their deepening discontent. As one profile in *The Economist* put it, his work 'profitably holds a mirror up to his buyer's destructive weaknesses' (Anon 1998). If his early plays do seem to retain a lightness, a sense that things *might* turn out okay, the arc of his work through the second half of the 1980s and beyond is towards an ever darker

sense of disillusionment. Ayckbourn's middle class characters lose faiths: faith in God, yes, but also in society and community, in love and friendship, in each other and even in themselves. They try to compensate, stuffing the gaping hole in their lives with money, technology, power and sex. But none of it satisfies or sustains them.

Ayckbourn is in no sense a radical writer. Billington calls him a 'reflex libertarian' (Billington 1990: 10), but it is a particularly British libertarianism – of the Ealing comedy, such as *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whiskey Galore!* (both 1949) or, more pertinently, *The Man in the White Suit* (1951). His focus has remained unflinchingly on the sometimes uncomfortable but overwhelmingly familiar suburbs of Middle England, even as Britain has become ever more politically divided and culturally diverse. In 1987, at the height of Thatcherism, he reflected: 'I sit, I suspect, in the middle of most English opinion. The Tory party right wing fills me with total despair, as indeed does the Labour party left wing. I suppose the nearest I get to being political is that I'm rather attracted to things like the Social Democrats ... I really like things to be fair' (Watson 1988: 90). It is precisely this desire to be 'in the middle' that makes Ayckbourn's work essential as a record of a moment when his country changed. The political content of Ayckbourn's work is important precisely because, for so many of his critics and much of his audience, it is invisible, masked by the day-to-day background noise of their own preconceptions.

Ayckbourn's Science Fiction

Given Ayckbourn's reputation as an intimate chronicler of the British middle class, it is notable that, since writing *Henceforward...* in 1987, Ayckbourn has frequently included elements from the horror, fantasy and science fiction genres in his plays (see Appendix). Of the thirty-two adult plays Ayckbourn has written since *Henceforward...*, fifteen have contained some genre element – including time travel, body swapping and ghosts – making him possibly unique amongst major British playwrights in the depth and longevity of his interest in science fiction and fantasy. He has also written a further thirteen family plays in that time that contain elements of the fantastic.

The roots of Ayckbourn's interest in science fiction run deep. One of his earliest surviving works is *The Season,* a juvenile play written, at the latest, in 1958 when the author was eighteen, although it was never performed. It is a time-travel story which, seeming to anticipate a more famous British time traveller, follows The Girl and The Traveller as they move from medieval England to a post-apocalyptic future (Murgatroyd 2013: 91). Ayckbourn's fourth professional play, which came close to being his first to transfer to the West End, was *Standing Room Only* (1961) set in a distant future – 1997 – in which

overpopulation has run rife and a family dodge bureaucratic interference in their lives while living on a bus caught in a permanent gridlock on Shaftesbury Avenue.

Standing Room Only would, however, be the last science fiction play written by Ayckbourn for almost thirty years. In those three decades he established himself as an acute observer of middle-class domestic dramas and a chronicler of the tensions of a class in transformation. Although earlier plays, like *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) and *Way Upstream* (1981), had indicated Ayckbourn's concern with the damage wrought by growing materialism, by the second half of the 1980s his work was becoming darker and more violent. Disenchantment with the costs of the Thatcherite reshaping of British society had become a recurring theme in his plays. At this point Ayckbourn returned to science fiction with *Henceforward...*, a near-future dystopia. It marked the start of a new period in Ayckbourn's work, one in which he would increasingly intersperse his familiar domestic comedies with plays that made use of tropes from the horror, fantasy and science fiction genres.

However, while Ayckbourn's set dressing changed during this period, the essential concerns that motivate his writing have remained remarkably constant. At the heart of Ayckbourn's writing has always been the relationships 'between men and women and the particular strains which the process and state of marriage inflict' (Holt 1998: 12), and the abuse wrought by the strong upon the weak. As Paul Allen puts it, the stakes are 'not life or death, or even love [...] but mental health, sanity, hope or despair; the possibility of happiness and the probability of messing it up. In an age of relative material well-being our ability to make each other and ourselves wretched is a major issue facing advanced society' (Allen 2002: x). Far from offering escapism or watering down Ayckbourn's preoccupations with human relations, the fantastic elements in Ayckbourn's later works have served to allow him to repeat his primary messages with greater force in ways that are more challenging for his audience and more difficult to ignore.

Henceforward...

Henceforward... is set in a dystopian future London where the all-female gang, the Daughters of Darkness, battle the all-male Sons of Bitches for control of the streets. Jerome is a composer divorced from his wife, Corinna, whom he has driven away – ironically because of his obsessive quest to 'express the feeling of love in an abstract musical form' (Ayckbourn 1989: 30). He lives on his own behind heavy steel shutters, surrounded by technology with only a malfunctioning robot nanny, Nan 300F, for company. Jerome wants his daughter, Geain, back, largely because he believes she is the key to lifting the mental block that has

prevented him writing music since his divorce. He uses Nan to impersonate his notion of a perfect partner in the hope of tricking his wife into believing that he is responsible enough to care for Geain.

A number of Ayckbourn's works feature women who have been so damaged by their circumstances that they retreat into eccentricity or madness. *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) features Eva, who spends much of Act 2 failing to commit suicide while being ignored by her friends and her husband. *Woman in Mind* (1985) is told from the point of view of Susan, whose fantasy world bleeds into her banal everyday existence as she suffers a nervous breakdown. Ayckbourn's frequent use of mental breakdown is not just a simple portrayal of hysterical women incapable of coping with their world. Instead, his portrayal of women slipping into madness seems to echo the way in which some feminist authors have embraced insanity as a legitimate form of escape from the inequalities and iniquities of a patriarchal society. Carl Freedman, discussing the work of Joanna Russ, notes a 'kind of Foucauldian feminism [...] after a certain point there are few, if any, possibilities for feminine development that can wholly escape the taint of madness' (Freedman 2000: 143). Madness becomes, then, not just an issue of mental wellbeing but a political statement – a refusal to be bound by hegemonic limits on acceptable behaviour. If the world in which you have been forced to live is made unbearable by the relationships of power that bind you then any escape, even into madness, would seem to be preferable.

Nan may be a robot, but it is clear that she – like Eva and Susan – has been brutalized beyond her capacity to cope by the expectations and limitations placed upon her by the role she is forced to play. In an early stage direction, Ayckbourn describes her as a 'Jekyll and Hyde creature. Her sunny side is the result of her initial "nanny" factory programming, her darker side the result of subsequent modifications by Jerome himself' (Ayckbourn 1989: 5–6). But perhaps it is not just Jerome's tinkering that explains Nan's Jekyll and Hyde nature. Nan is 'unfulfilled' and Jerome wonders if 'the biggest mistake they made was to make a machine so sophisticated and then give it too small a function. I mean I think a machine that complex needed more than just a child to look after. Otherwise there's bound to be stress' (Ayckbourn 1989: 19–20). Ayckbourn's target here is not just Nan's programming but the restrictions placed on many women in a patriarchal society.

Jerome, meanwhile, is unable to 'distinguish between substance and shadow, between the things that affirm our common humanity, and those which isolate us' (Wu 1996: 126). When forced to choose between Nan and human company, he cannot come up with a good reason to opt for humanity. 'That woman,' he declaims when Nan's honour is impugned, 'has more dignity, more sense of loyalty and responsibility than any other fifty women you can name

put together' (Ayckbourn 1989: 66). It is an outburst that reveals more than just Jerome's inability to relate to other people, it reveals the limiting expectations that men like Jerome place on their partners.

Nan gets a brief moment to fulfil her basic programming through Geain, who has arrived dressed as a member of the Sons of Bitches and demanding to be called a boy. Nan takes the adolescent wild child in hand and, almost instantly, transforms her back into a 'normal' child. It is a moment of triumph in which she demonstrates that she is more capable than any of the humans around her. Her true potential is revealed and, for an instant, she is no longer a thing of comedy but something formidable and accomplished. However, outside the situation is worsening. The Daughters of Darkness are furious that Jerome is giving refuge to Geain, who they have seen entering dressed as one of their enemies. Corinna and Geain leave, offering Jerome the chance to come with them, to give domesticity another chance, but he abandons them to the gang. As the Daughters of Darkness storm Jerome's fortress he fiddles with music that will never be heard. Nan, meanwhile, sits ignored gradually counting down to her own oblivion. Her maintenance has been neglected by Jerome, she has been pushed beyond the bounds of her programming and, in a final indignity, just at the moment when she can finally fulfil the role for which she has been created, the opportunity is ripped away from her. Ignored by Jerome 'Nan's countdown reaches zero and she shuts down' (Ayckbourn 1989: 75).

Nan has been created to carry out a job that is far beneath her capabilities – a job which, even in its most challenging and seemingly intractable form, she completes in moments. But even this satisfaction is denied her. Instead she has been forced to attempt to adapt to the desires of a man who never takes seriously what she needs or the limits of her endurance. She is reshaped to serve Jerome's selfish goals, pushed beyond her ability to cope, neglected and, ultimately, destroyed by him. As Holt points out, many of the women in Ayckbourn's work are victims of self-obsessed men who do not notice the damage they are doing. Nan may not be an actual woman, she may even be a figure of fun, but like many of Ayckbourn's other women she seems 'doomed to disappointment and lack of fulfilment. Small wonder that they frequently reach breaking point' (Holt 1998: 27). Her quiet, ignored expiration is chilling.

Comic Potential

First performed in 1998, *Comic Potential* is in part a satire of television production, born of Ayckbourn's own frustrating experiences, and part a comedy about the importance of a sense of humour in relationships. In 'the foreseeable future where everything has changed except human nature' (Ayckbourn 2001: 5), Adam Trainsmith visits a television studio owned by his uncle's company. He has

come to see a once talented but now washed-up director, Chandler Tate, who is producing low-quality soap operas using defective 'actoids' (android actors), one of which, JC F31 333 (Jacie), keeps laughing at unexpected moments. Adam is hoping to make a comedy rather like those of Ayckbourn himself, but there is no room for that kind of material in an age where executives like the fearsome Carla Pepperbloom hold sway.

Adam is a familiar Ayckbourn character: the innocent young man who blunders into a situation and upsets the status quo simply through his naiveté, echoing characters like Greg in *Relatively Speaking* (1965) and Guy in *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984). Adam treats Jacie as a human, she having endeared herself to him by her laughter and her appreciation of humour – characteristics which others (including Jacie herself) regard as a fault. This sets in motion a chain of events that change Jacie's life forever. Towards the end of the play, Chandler tells Adam that 'She was only a poor machine. You screwed her up Adam. It was your fault entirely. Poor thing didn't know whether she was coming or going. Just another sad victim of cupid's custard pie' (Ayckbourn 2001: 110). Both men, however, have underestimated Jacie.

Jacie, like many Ayckbourn women, is superior to the men around her, even if she is not at first aware of her own capabilities. She learns quickly, however, and rapidly surpasses Adam in everything he attempts to teach her but, before she can reach her full potential, she has to overcome the limitations imposed on her by her status in society. She learns to read in moments, aided by Adam and a Bible in a seedy hotel room, but the first passage she reads on her own is Genesis 3:16, which tells her that 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee' (Ayckbourn 2001: 93). While Adam thinks he is offering her freedom, Jacie quickly realizes that what he is actually offering is just another role, one that she can't fulfil: 'I can't be what you want me to be. You're asking too much of me Adam. Yes, I can *play* your Jacie. I can play her just as you want her to be. I'm good at that. That's what I was built for. But I can't *be* your Jacie' (Ayckbourn 2001: 94).

Jacie is stronger than Adam physically (she saves him from a pimp who believes they are trying to muscle in on his operation) but also mentally and emotionally, better able to grasp the reality of her position. Adam is injured during the fight with the pimp and, while he is unconscious, Jacie decides that she cannot cope with the demands Adam has placed upon her and leaves to have herself melted down and her supposed faults rectified. She returns at the end of the play, but the separation has changed her. She has come to terms with her own strength and she is poised, self-possessed and entirely in control. When she is offered the role of executive she confidently displaces the

disgraced Pepperbloom. Adam naively thinks that this is *his* happy ending and that he is now going to get his own way – that Jacie will naturally allow him to make his comedies – but, as we might now expect from Ayckbourn, this is only an *almost* happy ending. Adam will get his show but only in the style that Jacie permits. She has again surpassed him.

While most reviews have assumed that the play ends in a straightforwardly romantic fashion, Allen is right when he insists that *Comic Potential* actually reflects 'our longing for paradise and our capacity for spoiling it' (Allen 2002: 301). This is not a straightforward retelling of the Pygmalion myth and Allen argues that its conclusion owes more to the expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden, and the ending leaves us 'with that sinking recognition that the innocent idyll of their love will not be allowed to last' (Allen 2002: 301). The ending of *Comic Potential* places Jacie in a position of pre-eminence, which the audience recognizes as a moment of victory, but it also contains both the promise of Adam's future disappointment and the seeds that will destroy any long-lasting relationship between the two would-be lovers. Jacie's ascent carries her beyond the romantic notions contained in Adam's hopes.

Surprises

Another of Ayckbourn's future stories, *Surprises,* was first performed in 2012. Lorraine Groomfeldt is a high-powered lawyer trying to avoid being reminded of her sixtieth birthday while dumping her unfaithful husband. Unlike the robots discussed so far, the play's android, Jan, is male: a janitor with a serious crush on Lorraine. Jan's modifications comprise a subroutine inserted into his programming which, unlike most androids, allows him to lie harmlessly on occasion. But the modification comes with a serious drawback, if it is used too frequently it will shut down the modified unit permanently. If Jan lies too much, he will drop dead. The situation is complicated by Jan's belief that the modification may also be responsible for his ability to feel love for Lorraine.

Franklin, an older man who has his own troubled relationships, tells Jan: 'If you happen to row – and believe me, if you spend any time in a woman's company, you're both of you bound to argue eventually – never ever try to win. On the rare occasion that you do win, you'll almost certainly live to regret it' (Ayckbourn 2012: 68). Jan takes him literally.

By the end of act two, Jan and Lorraine are dancing together and, by act three – set decades later – they are married, though it is a marriage of companionship since, like all Ayckbourn's artificial people, Jan is not equipped for physical intimacy. Still, Lorraine and he are 'still very much in love [...] Fifty years and never an argument' (Ayckbourn 2012: 91). But, the marriage has taken its toll on Jan. Lorraine had always been used to taking charge and being

right – and Jan has fed this need by always avoiding confrontation. But as Lorraine has got older (life extending technology means she is now 120), she has become forgetful and cantankerous. Jan, locked into a set of behaviours that has ensured fifty years of happy companionship, is forced to bend the truth more and more frequently to keep her happy. He is lying himself to death. Jan's inability to change his ways or renegotiate his relationship with Lorraine is an example of the way in which many of Ayckbourn's characters are 'quite incapable of traversing the boundaries of their circumscribed lives' (Page and Trussler 1989: 6). At the same time, Jan fears that tinkering with his modification will alter his feelings for Lorraine. So, trapped between his limitations and his love, he faces destruction. Lorraine, meanwhile, is blissfully unaware of the damage her behaviour is doing to her partner.

Surprises reverses the usual relationships in Ayckbourn's plays – for once the woman is in the position of power – but the mechanics are the same. The lower-status partner – this time the power differential is based on class relationships – is being ground down by the other person in the relationship. As is often the case in Ayckbourn's work, this is not through malice, or even deliberate action, but simply through the accommodations necessary to maintain a lengthy marriage and inattention to the needs of a partner. As Laura Thompson argues, Ayckbourn moves 'his usual cast of anxious suburbanites into a world of time travel and hyper-longevity' (Thompson 2012), but he does not see human nature significantly changing. We will continue to be obsessed with, and damaged by, love.

A Modest Catachresis

Ayckbourn's introduction of elements from sf and other genres does not represent a shift from his foundational concerns with 'the destructiveness, the incomprehension, the predatoriness of marriage; the failure of men to understand women' (Billington 1990: 51). But if Ayckbourn's concerns are unchanged then, what is the point of using science fictional imagery? Are Ayckbourn's artificial people merely window dressing?

Despite the continuities in theme, Nan, Jacie and Jan do bring something unique to Ayckbourn's work. These artificial humans allow him to push his core concerns further, to make literal the metaphors he has used in other works. Nan can actually die of Jerome's neglect, Jacie accelerates beyond Adam's grasp far faster than a natural woman could, and Jan can really destroy himself to preserve his love.

In this sense, Ayckbourn's artificial people allow him to perform an act of *catachresis*. In rhetoric 'catachresis' is the misuse of language – choosing the wrong word or mixing a metaphor – for rhetorical effect (King John's begging

for 'cold comfort' in Shakespeare's play, for example). The term was taken up by Michel Foucault to represent a fundamental property of language. He argued that as there is no inherent link between meanings and signs so words can 'change positions, turn back upon themselves, and slowly unfold a whole developing curve' (Foucault 2001: 126). Even allowing for language's unavoidable fluidity of sense, catachresis remains potentially subversive. The abuse of signs threatens our sense of an ordered universe. When the symbols that are supposed to apply to one thing (and that carry with them an array of expectations and understanding) shift to something quite different we are left momentarily adrift. This disturbance opens a space in which the subject is allowed to look again at those things that are taken for granted – questioning the labels and categories that are applied to physical and social hierarchies. It achieves, if only for a moment, 'the irruptive extension of a sign proper to an idea, a meaning, deprived of their signifier. A "secondary" original' (Derrida 1982: 255). This act of violence maps out the fault-lines in our understanding, creating a language of its own that 'emerges at a given moment as a monster, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent' (Derrida 1982: 123). The violence of catachresis threatens our ability to distinguish between *proper* meanings and the deviational and in this moment of disturbance we are able to see the world differently. It allows, as Foucault says of philosophy, the 'displacement and transformation of the limits of thought, the modification of the received values and all the work done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is' (Foucault 1988: 201).

In a modest way, this is what Ayckbourn does for his audience when he takes the themes of love and suffering, marriage and relationships, and substitutes his defective, obviously inhuman, androids and gynoids. They are a misused sign that subverts our sense of order. If these unreal, comic, mechanical things can suffer so much damage by being caught up in the relations that we take for granted, then a space opens in which his audience can consider their own behaviour, their treatment of others and how they, themselves, are treated. By tracing the faults of our familiar world onto these inappropriate new landscapes Ayckbourn seeks to lead his audience to read the maps by which they have understood the world in new ways, to see the world as other than they have taken it to be.

This is not to heap too heavy a weight of meaning on Ayckbourn's work which remains, after all, popular comedies of relationship and manners. But it is to recognize that, as a playwright, Ayckbourn has worked a consistent theme of estrangement and domestic desperation that cannot lightly be dismissed. Further, it is to argue that when a playwright like Ayckbourn – deeply versed in theatrical tradition and somewhat more than comfortably successful in a

particular genre – systematically deviates from his well-worn path, it is worth exploring what he might hope to achieve.

Conclusion

Ayckbourn is a writer who deserves to be taken seriously. He has established a unique niche for himself as an acute observer of an English class during a period in which they were afforded significant influence, transformed their nation and suffered significant trauma. But he has also assiduously mined themes that are fundamental and familiar even if the aggressively homogenous society in his imagined worlds has always been, and has become rapidly more, anachronistic. The significance of Ayckbourn's increasingly frequent use of the tropes of horror, fantasy and science fiction is not that it marks a break with his long-term and rigorous thematic focus, but that it marks a playwright who has been willing to pursue new methods of making his concerns strange and affective for his large audience even at the risk of alienating them by disrupting a successfully lucrative formula.

Ayckbourn's artificial people – Nan, Jacie and Jan – bring into sharpest focus the playwright's on-going preoccupation with our ability to damage those around us, even as we believe we are cherishing them. They demonstrate Ayckbourn's concern with the unequal distribution of power in relationships and the casual, often unwitting, cruelty of those who can exercise power over others. And they show Ayckbourn's belief that, too often, the limitations attached to the social roles imposed on women by the structures and expectations of our society are damaging, not just to women (though clearly it is most often the women who suffer) but to men as well.

Through his creation of these artificial people Ayckbourn offers a modest catachresis – a moment in which by breaking familiar metaphors his audiences, though already intimate with his cast of put upon women and hopeless, casually cruel men, see the world they know mapped onto the absurd. It is surely Ayckbourn's intention that, in this moment, his audience might become open to difference and that they might, however, briefly, break from their usual assumptions and think otherwise of the relationships of power in which their lives are enmeshed.

Appendix: Ayckbourn's Science Fiction and Fantasy

Android plays
Henceforward... (1987)
Comic Potential (1998)
Surprises (2012)

Family plays
Callisto #5 / Callisto #7 (1990)
The Champion of Paribanou (1996)
My Sister Sadie (2003)

Other plays with horror/fantastical or sfnal elements
Standing Room Only (1961)
Invisible Friends (1989)
Body Language (1990)
Wildest Dreams (1991)
Dreams from a Summer House (1992)
Haunting Julia (1994)
A Word from Our Sponsors (1995)
Communicating Doors (1995)
Virtual Reality (2000)
Snake in the Grass (2002)
If I Were You (2006)
Life and Beth (2008)
Awaking Beauty (2008)

Additional family plays
Christmas V Mastermind (1962)
This Is Where We Came In (1990)
My Very Own Story (1991)
The Boy Who Fell into a Book (1998)
Whenever (2000)
The Jollies (2002)
Champion of Champions (2003)
Miss Yesterday (2004)

Endnotes

[1]A 'definitive play list' of Ayckbourn's produced and unproduced work is available at: http://plays.alanayckbourn.net/page11/index.html (accessed 22/09/17).
[2]Simon Murgatroyd, '*Drowning on Dry Land*: In Brief', http://drowningondryland.alanayckbourn.net/styled-9/index.html (accessed 22/09/17).

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The Fourfold Library (6): Matthew De Abaitua on Alan Moore and Ian Gibson, *The Ballad of Halo Jones*

The Fourfold Library is, of course, always up-to-date with new media. In fact, it is *already* always up-to-date. Our latest visitor, Matthew De Abaitua, here selects from the comics and graphic novel section. Matthew's first novel, *The Red Men* (2007), was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2008. Its successors, *IF THEN* (2015) and *The Destructives* (2016), are also concerned with themes of consciousness and artificial intelligence. Matthew has also written a history and memoir entitled *The Art of Camping: The History and Practice of Sleeping Under the Stars* (2011).

The Ballad of Halo Jones originally ran in the British science fiction comic *2000 A.D.* between 1984 and 1986. It is the story of an ordinary woman, Halo Jones, who lives in a floating structure for the unemployed moored off the coast of Manhattan, called the Hoop. All she wants is to do is get out, and her break for freedom unfolds across three volumes, taking the reader to the edge of the collapsing Earth Empire.

In the Hoop, Halo lives in an all-female commune with her friend Rodice, a talented musician called Ludy, the elderly Brinna and her robot dog Toby, whose razor-sharp teeth offer them some protection from the roaming violence of Hoop life. The first volume turns upon a shopping trip. Artist Ian Gibson suggested using an action as mundane as shopping to reveal the depth of the world Alan Moore built for Halo. Its details still make me laugh: when facing muggers, Rodice pulls out a collection of non-lethal weapons that includes zenades, explosives which trigger a deep meditative state in the victim. They explode with a profound *Aummmmm*.

Life in the Hoop reflects life in the industrial cities of the North and the Midlands in the 1980s, and the mass unemployment that resulted from the policies of the Thatcher government. Growing up in a suburb of Liverpool at that time, with the city running around thirty per cent male unemployment, for me the future seemed jobless. Older siblings journeyed south in search of work. They got out. Moore, famously loyal to his home city of Northampton, did not: at least, not physically. No matter how far Halo travels in space, first leaving the Hoop as a waitress on the spaceship the *Clara Pandy*, then serving in a female platoon fighting in the Tarantula Nebula, she cannot elude the economic imperative.

The third and final book opens with Halo's nightmare of a web that is both the Tarantula War and her past, a trap of belonging shared with the friends she has lost on her journey. She has come so far but cannot escape her past or her low status: either she is in service as waitress or soldier or baby farmer, or she is face down in drunken oblivion. At the edge of the galaxy, she is proof of Fredric Jameson's famous citation that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than

it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

In my novel *The Destructives*, capitalism survives the end of the world. An event called the Seizure, triggered by the appearance of artificial intelligence, erases the digital infrastructure sustaining contemporary life. After the Seizure, the AIs or 'emergences' as they prefer to be called, put together a semblance of consumerism to repair the damage caused by their creation. Consumer capitalism is restored as a therapeutic environment to sustain the surviving population. The term 'retail therapy' is made literal in giant asylum malls erected out of the ruins of a redundant English landscape.

After the novel was published, I began to wonder about the creative debt I owed to Halo Jones specifically and Moore's early work in general. He was the first writer whose work I actively sought out. The Marvel UK monthly comic *Daredevils* was a motherlode of Moore. It featured his reality-warping domestic dystopia Captain Britain, his prose noir serial Night Raven, and reprints of his strips for *Doctor Who Weekly*. In addition to his fiction, *Daredevils* also published his essays on 'Sexism in Comics', his monthly fanzine reviews, even his responses to reader's letters. From the age of eleven to thirteen, this one-two punch of his fiction and journalism formed the blueprint of my literary imagination.

My asylum malls are clearly influenced by the Hoop. More than that, the loose trilogy of my novels (*The Red Men*, *IF THEN* and *The Destructives*) is concerned with the complicities of work and the prospect of widespread redundancy; they are informed by the onset of digital culture and consider how to survive a future in which the things we care for, the qualities synonymous with our humanity, our secret selves, our relationships and our very *qualia* are translated into data as a way of making them exploitable resources. The punk and counter-culture sf British writers and artists of the 1980s, working in the shadow of the dole queues of that time, prefigure such post-digital horror toward the present and near-future of work. In the Hoop, migrant aliens save up money to add further words to their names, just one of many minor prophecies of the deepening shadow cast by capitalism upon the self.

I am also influenced by the smart details of Moore's world-building. In the first book of *Halo Jones*, her dreams of escaping the Hoop concentrate upon her housemate Ludy, who plays in a band on the verge of making it big. But Ludy sells her musical instrument to pay for an implant, transforming herself into one of the Different Drummers. These are a cultish group in robes with identical tonsure haircuts, appearing somewhere between the Hare Krishna movement and junkies. The Different Drummers represent counter-culture as a dead end; under the influence of the implant, they slump, eyes closed, listening to the beat in their head. In the junkie parlance of the time, they are on the nod, conflating

Thoreau's famous quote with the nihilistic withdrawal of heroin addiction. Ludy joins the Drummers because 'she is sick of being scared all the time.' At the same time, the violent murder of the proxy-mother Brinna exposes the arguing quasi-siblings of Rodice and Halo to the hard choice of Hoop life: to live in familiar fear or to leap into the unknown.

Halo's journey takes her through rites of passage that culminate in hellish war experiences. The combat scenes in *Halo Jones* owe a considerable debt to Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1975). Haldeman uses the time dilation caused by travel at light speed to express the social dislocation his fellow soldiers experienced returning home from Vietnam. Similarly, Halo finds herself in the warzone of the planet Moab. The planet is a solid giant, larger than Jupiter, with a gravity that squeezes everything including time. The few minutes Halo spends in a combat zone known as 'the Crush' translate to weeks outside of it. As with *The Forever War*, the regiments consist of male and female soldiers – although the men who serve alongside Halo are Rambo-clones called Slabs, genetically engineered dumbos drawn by Gibson as caricatures of Sylvester Stallone. *The Forever War* also inspires the anti-gravity suits Halo and her fellow soldiers must wear when fighting on the planet surface, wandering through slow-time like heavily-armed Venuses of Willendorf.

The warzone of Moab is named after the descendants of Lot, and a statue of Lot's wife stands in their underground community. (Now I read that word as the acronym of MOAB or 'mother of all bombs'.) The image of Lot's wife is a strange one to encounter in the strip and it connects to various muted images of motherhood throughout the three books. In her first warzone, Halo and her fellow female soldiers fight child terrorists; after killing one, the soldiers persuade themselves that the dead child was really much older. After a second terrorist attack, Halo drags her injured friend on a stretcher around in circles on the battlefield, talking to her. Only when she is discovered by the rest of her platoon is it revealed that her friend has died and that their conversation was a post-trauma inner dialogue. Taking leave from active service, Halo hits rock bottom. She spends her days cleaning her gun and idly targeting passers-by, including a child. This turning away from the maternal role echoes her rejection of the welfare system in the Hoop, the MAM. Meanwhile, a veteran soldier called Life Sentence, dying from self-inflicted wounds after armistice is declared, mourns the war as her lost mother. It is a powerful moment, and a realisation that people will helplessly fashion intimacy with a destructive system if destruction is all they know.

The title of *The Destructives* is an inversion of the noun 'creative' used in media agencies. The early rhetoric of the digital monopolists advocated creative destruction, the ability to move fast and break things. Both *The Destructives* and

my debut *The Red Men* stare with glassy-eyed awe at this ethos and the culture it quickly created, a reality we now thoroughly inhabit. It is a similar trap to that which Halo encounters: the impossibility of creating anything under a zombie economic system, how every act is bent toward a destructive end because it takes place in a system in which the overriding imperative is toward destruction. Following Halo Jones, the protagonists of my fiction tend to fall into passive states, unable to see a way to act until it is (mostly) too late.

Behind Halo's world, we can discern the culture and politics of its time. As a soldier enmeshed in a jungle war, Halo's patrols combine the cultural memory of Vietnam – played out in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the *Rambo* films and *Platoon* (1986) – with the contemporary tensions of a divided Belfast. When Halo first hits rock bottom, she becomes a drunk on the planet of Pwuc, a once-prosperous port that begins to rot when new shipping lanes open up bypassing it completely. It is part-Liverpool, part-desolate seaside town, 'a ghostworld where men with boarded-up eyes loitered outside the boarded-up souvenir shops.'

I wonder how much of what in the Noughties was codified as 'dark' in science fiction and superhero cinema had its origins in the British political conditions of the 1980s. Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982–89) and *Watchmen* (1986–87) are key influences in this *dark* code. Watching a preview screening of the film adaptation of *V for Vendetta*, from which Moore pointedly distanced himself, it was clear that the film used a dystopia inspired by Britain in the early 1980s as a pair of protective gloves with which to handle the radioactive material that was Bush's America and the War on Terror. The science fiction comics of my childhood have been disinterred and rebooted as global product. I feel a slippage as works that were once a direct response to local conditions are cleaned up of historical specificity to fit the commodified codes of rebellion. Or to put it another way: in every contemporary dystopia, I see the shadow of my home city. Under Halo's influence, I got out, only to discover a greater prison beyond.

Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots*, **National Youth Theatre of Ireland, Peacock Theatre, Dublin, 21--26 August 2017**

Reviewed by Jim Clarke (Coventry University)

The Royal Society of the Arts has warned that four million jobs in the British private sector alone could be replaced by robots over the next decade, which seems positively optimistic when seen in comparison with the Bank of England's prediction of fifteen million jobs at risk. Some years back, academics at Oxford predicted that one in three of all jobs could be at risk of obsolescence. It seems that the day of the robot is finally imminent. Contemporary concerns relate to the fate of those human workers thrown on the unemployment pile. But what will the robots think of this? Will they welcome a future of doing our drudge work, or, as so many sf texts have warned us, will they rise up against humanity to claim a future for themselves?

The potential lack of a future employment market is likely to concern younger people increasingly, and it is therefore appropriate that this timely return of *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots* to the stage was performed entirely by a cast under twenty-years of age. The National Youth Theatre of Ireland is an ensemble troupe assembled from the brightest up-and-coming talents brought together annually from youth theatres across the country. In previous years they have performed a somewhat conservative repertoire, from Shakespeare to Arthur Miller, via the likes of Chekhov, Strindberg and Brecht, so the choice of *R.U.R.* as their chosen text could be seen as a somewhat radical departure from the norm.

Čapek's play, an instant hit when it first was performed in
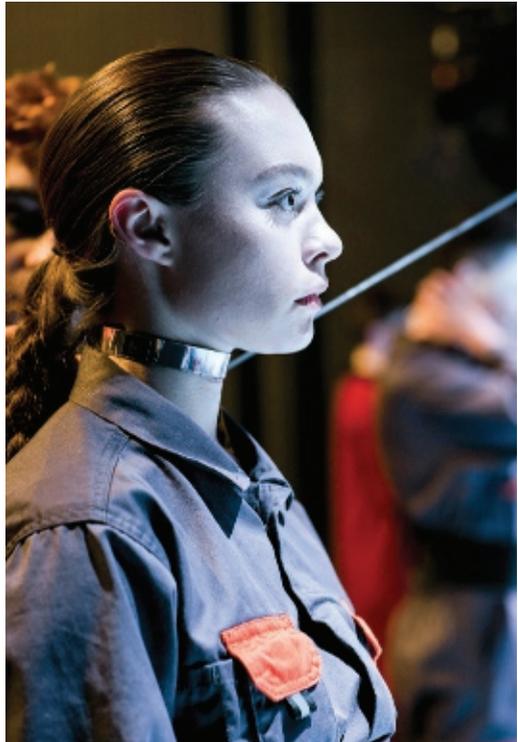
Sulla (Sarah Stafford)

1921, has not had the exposure in recent times one might have expected. The Edward Alderton Theatre in Kent hosted a short run in 2012, while in the U.S., Naked Theatre performed a production at the Washington DC fringe in 2013. Kansas University theatre held a run last December, and Hatbox Theatre in New Hampshire hosted the Late Bloomers production of the play in March of this year. It may be that the imminent arrival of robots as a workforce reality is disproportionately, but understandably, of interest to youth and amateur productions.

To have the play grace the stage at the Peacock in Dublin, the experimental stage of Ireland's national Abbey Theatre, provided a rare chance to see a well-funded and professionally developed production. The Abbey's own Catriona McLaughlin, also Co-Artistic Director of the Playground Studio in London, helmed this production with sensitivity to the relative inexperience of the cast. Ambitiously, McLaughlin abandoned the proscenium staging typically used for plays which, like *R.U.R.*, are set entirely in a single space (in this case the boardroom of the robot factory). Kate Moylan's minimal but evocative set design was corridored between the audience seating, creating additional positioning demands upon young actors already tasked with the challenge of conveying the otherworldliness, not to mention the lack of emotion, of Rossum's robots. A nightclub aesthetic with LED floor lighting occasionally morphed into sex club chic, as the robots were attached and detached via dog collars to chains hung from the ceiling, evoking their enslaved status.

The concept of the robot has evolved so much since Čapek first introduced the world to the term that it is easy to forget that Rossum's inventions are less metallic automata than they are coerced clones, part of the lengthy lineage of literary androids which goes back to Albertus Magnus's mythical invention. The robots in Rossum's factory are organic, but lack a human component, that which female lead Helen Glory (Maria Lee) calls a soul. But how can we meaningfully define the difference between an organic (or even inorganic) sentient intelligence and a human being? For Čapek, the answer lies in the capacity to love, which is why the play functions like Pandora's Box, unleashing the worst possible outcome upon humanity before ending with a sliver of hope, when the robots Helen and Primus fall in love and could, it is hinted, become a new Adam and Eve for a devastated world.

Their slow emergence into a fuller humanity, beautifully realized as a passionate adolescent first love by Aoife Connolly O'Sullivan and Josh Campbell, was merely the last of a series of gripping scenes which underlined the value of *R.U.R.* as a piece of theatre, and not simply a significant footnote in the history of sf, as it is so often treated. Though the language and interactions were occasionally clunky, as might be expected in a play now nearly a century

old, potent moments of raw drama continually shone through. James Quinn's despairing Engineer Alquist, the last man left alive after the robotic holocaust of humanity, managed to evoke the horror of such an isolation without lapsing into melodrama, while Lee's Helen Glory perfectly encapsulated the kind of well-meaning naivety and idealism which, for the best of reasons, lead to that very apocalypse. The smug corporate assurance of factory manager Harry Domin, which is eroded and ultimately destroyed by the robot rebellion, was perfectly captured by Elliot Nolan. But it is perhaps unfair to isolate individual performances in what was most of all a cleverly balanced ensemble piece. Suffice to say that, as the engaged reactions of the audience on the far side indicated, there were few if any lulls in the action.

So does *R.U.R.* still speak to us today, on the brink of the roboticization of the workplace? Or is it primarily a narrative of enslavement, a modernist period piece drawing on antecedents like *Frankenstein,* or a theatrical curiosity best preserved in the footnotes to sf histories? This production seemed to favour an interpretation based on the moral wrongness of corporate exploitation of labour to dehumanising ends, a reading clearly supported by the text. But Helen Glory's impossible naivety, insisting on the programming of 'souls' into the automata, is still the cause of humanity's downfall, no matter how presented. In some ways, Čapek's play has become outdated. The Skynet threat to humanity, the fear of playing God and being destroyed by our own creation, has been better narrated both before Čapek and after. Seen narrowly through that lens, Čapek's version of this timeless morality tale is simply a high modernist curiosity.

Yet this performance found many more nuances within it – the risk of corporate control of technological development as well as the potential of unforeseen consequences by utopian dreamers seeking universal equity at any cost. The irony of watching a nation's most talented young actors on stage, many of whom in the current environment may never get to live their dreams of a career in performance, enacting a narrative of corporate exploitation that ultimately dehumanizes, was not lost on this viewer. The RSA, Oxford University, the Bank of England and all the other doom-mongers may be correct about the forthcoming threat to employment posed by roboticization. But some things will always lie outside the capacity of robotic achievement, including the performance of engaging drama like this. Some things will always require a soul.

A Note on *Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry*

Henry Wessells

Back in London in 1967–68, Tom Disch was living at 221b Camden High Street with Pamela Zoline and John Sladek 'in a squalor', as he put it in his 2000 *Locus* obituary for Sladek, 'worthy of today's Mozambique but also in the glory of our own self-declared genius'. In the spring of 2006, Disch told me that, at that time, Sladek wanted to publish a poetry magazine with a title even more obscene than Ed Sanders' *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*.

Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry documents an unusual moment at the intersection of the literary avant-garde of the New York East Village scene and British New Wave science fiction. We do not know who 'invented' Ronald Reagan as a subject for satire: was it Sladek or J.G. Ballard? Disch or Zoline? Reagan had been elected governor of California in 1966 and was already seen as the face of the ultra-conservative wing of the Republican Party. Ballard was an acute observer of the present and the United States had long figured among his obsessions. David Pringle has written in a personal communication:

> I suspect, although I have no proof, that it was Sladek, who, at some point in 1967 requested contributions to the 'zine he proposed to call *Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry*. Ballard was no doubt among those he asked. All this would have been done on a personal basis, through conversations at parties and the like. Ballard must have written his piece in late 1967, modelling it on another short satire he had done earlier in the year, 'Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy' (published in *Ambit*), but focusing this time on Reagan rather than a Kennedy. I don't doubt that it was intended, in the first instance, for the Sladek 'zine.
>
> How Bill Butler came to publish it first (on 16th January 1968) I don't know. Perhaps he heard tell of it at one of those parties, and rushed to offer to publish a chapbook edition. Meanwhile, the Sladek/ Zoline poetry 'zine seems to have been delayed, and didn't appear until the summer of 1968.

Ballard's deadpan satire, 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan', was first published by Bill Butler's Unicorn Bookshop and seized by the Brighton police in January 1968. Butler was prosecuted for obscenity and the magistrates found all charges proven. (See also John Shires' *Bookends: A Partial History of the Brighton Book Trade* [2011] and Mike Holliday's history of the Unicorn Bookshop at http://www.holli.co.uk.) Ballard had not been called to testify for, as he recalled in the annotations to *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970/1990), he

had told the defence lawyers, 'of course it was obscene, and intended to be so.' The Ballard piece was reprinted in an issue of *International Times* (no. 26, February 1968), and later in the first issue of *Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry*, which also contained pieces by Disch and Zoline and others, including a contingent affiliated with the Poetry Project and Angel Hair Press in New York City: Ann Waldman, Ron Padgett, Lewis Warsh, Michael Brownstein and John Giorno.

A second issue was produced in 1970, with contributions by Disch, Larry Fagin, Trevor Winkfield and many others from the first issue. The second issue has survived only in very small numbers. The history of the last decades of the twentieth century has shown how accurate Sladek's grim joke was.

(BALLARD, J. G.) Sladek, John, Thomas M. DISCH, Pamela ZOLINE, eds. *Ronald Reagan. The Magazine of Poetry*. Nos.1-2 [All published]. Illustrated. 52; [40] pp. 2 vols. 4to, [London: 1968-1970]. Issue no. 1 in stapled pictorial wrappers by Sladek & Zoline (tiny split at top of spine, as most other copies seen). No. 2 in stapled wrappers with moulded plastic construct on front cover (soiled, slightly crumpled). Boxed. Provenance: the library of Tom Disch (his contributor's copies, issue no. 2 so noted in ink). Not in LC. Exhibited at LonCon3, World Science Fiction Convention, 2014.

Conference Reports

Apocalypse and Authenticity, University of Hull, 11–13 July 2017

Reviewed by Jennifer Woodward (Edge Hill University)

Notions of 'apocalypse' and 'authenticity' predominate in modern cultural experience. The Religious Studies, Theology and Popular Culture Network's conference was, accordingly, a multifaceted, interdisciplinary affair. The event united scholars of religious and secular eschatology in their explorations of apocalyptic ideas and authentic experience. Questions around whether our understanding of authenticity is ever authentic, and what constitutes an authentic apocalyptic experience, were the subject of much discussion.

The variety of papers attested to the conference's commendable scope. Some, like the opening presentation, pushed the limits of what many understand as 'apocalypse'. Karen Gardiner's detailed discussion of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) challenged conventional uses of the term by considering the nineteenth-century crisis of faith and the way children's fiction writers dealt with issues of hell and eternal punishment. This was followed by Jouni Teittinen's insightful paper on P.C. Jersild's *After the Flood* (1982) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), seen from the perspective of the child characters. Teittinen introduced the concept of the 'sur-apocalypse' to describe fictional characters who lack substantial experience of the pre-apocalyptic world. In such cases, Teittinen argued, the author is challenged with creating an authentic characterization so as to offer, through their estranged points of view, an anthropology of disaster.

The afternoon's parallel sessions were divided thematically between the authentic and apocalyptic. The former opened with Paul Moon's examination of 'Rua Kenana and the Founding of an Authentic Maori Religious Movement'. Moon's discussion revealed the complications of authenticity in the establishment of religion. Shifting to a considerably different experience, Chris Deacy followed with a consideration of nostalgia on radio. His paper explored the way in which radio may evoke a sense of authenticity through often ostensibly 'inauthentic' means. Emily Rowson concluded the session with her analysis of 'Postfeminism at the End of the World: Authenticity and Identity in *Doctor Who*'. In a well-argued and detailed piece, Rowson considered two apocalyptic scenarios in *Doctor Who* which construct a vision of authentic humanity through Rose's 'ordinary, working-class femininity' as well as offering an overt criticism of postfeminist conceptions of beauty.

Day one concluded with the first keynote. Part plenary, part interactive experience, Michael Takeo Magruder took attendees through his remixing of *The Book of Revelation* into various digital or digitally rendered forms, including 3D printing, Biblical passages as scannable QR codes, and an immersive VR rendering of the 'New Jerusalem'. Binding traditional and modern, Biblical and secular, art and technology, and theory and practice, Magruder's piece encapsulated the conference's open-mindedness to varied scholarly activity.

The second day opened with Natasha O'Hear's keynote on the role of the Apocalypse in popular culture. Beginning with a discussion of the way Christian imagery has influenced art and media before focusing on texts like the hugely successful *Left Behind* novels (1995–2007) by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, O'Hear grappled with the complex tensions existing between representing apocalypse and authentic experience. Paradoxically, she concluded, works like *Left Behind* strive towards authenticity by relying heavily on scripture, yet fail to be authentic by bypassing modern theological scholarship.

Parallel sessions followed, each with an apocalyptic focus. Both Anna Boswell's ecologically focussed 'Possums in Paradise' and Eleanor Course's 'Authentic Theology and Culture in Hull 2017', in the panel "Living in the End Times", dealt with human interaction with the apocalyptic and/or authenticity. The session concluded with Steve Knowles' fascinating paper 'Prophecy, Brexit and Babylon: Semiotic Promiscuity in Late Modernity'. Knowles outlined how uncertainties affecting the post-Brexit economy offer assurance and meaning for Christian fundamentalists who understand these as the signs of the end times.

Running alongside this session, "The (Post)Apocalypse in Comics and On Screen" opened with Fryderyk Kwiatkowski's 'A Road to Gnostic Salvation? The Ascension of the Soul in the Post-Apocalyptic World of *Snowpiercer*'. Here, Kwiatkowski moved away from conventional class-based readings of the film to explore it in the light of Gnostic myth as a narrative pattern for contemporary apocalyptic cinematic. In 'A Taxonomy and a Few Interpretations of Superhero Comic Book Apocalypses', Kevin Wanner offered the most detailed analysis of the conference. Utilizing detailed charts and overlays, Wanner provided a taxonomy of apocalypses in superhero comics to illustrate trends, plots and tonal and thematic shifts in relation to contemporary concerns over globalism, nativism/nationalism, and transcultural migration.

"Christian Music: Apocalypse, Eschatology, Authenticity" and the more broadly titled "Authenticity" comprised the next parallel sessions. In the former, Ibrahim Abraham's opening paper discussed philosophical perspectives in relation to Evangelical punk, hip hop and heavy metal. On a more traditional note, Daniel Thornton's paper examined the musical framing of apocalyptic

lyrics to communicate 'an authentic contemporary Christianity' in some of the most popular congregational songs used in worship today. Kathryn Kinney offered a more focused examination of a similar topic in her discussion of Barry McGuire's 1965 hit song, 'Eve of Destruction'. Kinney revealed how it encapsulates an interplay between a secular apocalyptic ethos and evangelical eschatology. As with many of the papers at the conference, Kinney's work drew attention to the intersections between religious and secular eschatology in contemporary cultural experience.

This was also found in the opening paper of the concurrent "Authenticity" panel, in which Bina Nir argued that modern westerners live according to a linear, historical, and cultural timeline directed towards the biblically influenced 'end of days' as well as a more personal timeline. Sheng-Yu Peng's 'Toward Aesthetics of Apocalypse: A Nostalgic Approach of Authenticity' focused on theological aesthetics to uncover how humans lost their ability to perceive the beauty of apocalypse. Given the conference's consistent focus on cultural obsessions with apocalypse, this was a particularly thought-provoking paper. The panel concluded with an entirely secular examination of myth creation. Vivian Asimos offered an engaging account of the creation of the Slender Man mythos and the way a sense of an 'authentic' yet constantly shifting digital supernatural presence was established. The conference's second day concluded with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati's keynote which discussed apocalyptic motifs and authentic cultural representation in science fiction films like *Avatar* (2009).

The final day's opening parallel sessions divided focus between "Popular Music" and "Apocalypse and Transformation". In 'South African #FeesMustFall Protest Songs as the Sound of Apocalypse' Marie Jorritsma explored the social context of music to reveal apocalyptic themes. With a more mainstream focus in 'Apocalypse as Critical Dystopia in Modern Popular Music', Javier Campos discussed apocalypse as a self-referential category in the collective imagination and its utilization in rock music. In the latter panel, both presenters discussed secular literary works that utilize cataclysm for change. Jennifer Woodward's paper on J.J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923) examined the way in which literature can utilize an apocalyptic event to critique contemporary culture and offer alternate socio-cultural systems. Stephanie Bender similarly argued that literature can reveal the utopian potential of apocalypse, in her insightful discussion of 'Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy'.

The afternoon was divided between panels focusing on art and religion. The former included Tom Bromwell's excellent paper on Stanley Spencer, which argued that Spencer's artistic conception of the Resurrection was the means by which he articulated his desire for renewal and reconciliation after the Great War. The latter featured Moojan Momen's paper which examined closely

how the founders of the Bahá'i faith used hermeneutic methods to claim their religious movement fulfilled the prophecies of the end times.

The conference closed with Robert Geraci's superb keynote on the Indian independence movement. Geraci offered an alternate perspective on end times by examining Indian notions of cyclical eschatology and cultural authenticity. This revealed how conceptions of 'endings', 'truth' and 'history' can be complicated by the idea of cyclical time. Here, endings signify change, what is new is conceived of as old, and myth becomes a means of recapturing previous cyclical cultural iterations. This alternate cultural and conceptual perspective meant that while the conference closed with Geraci's paper, the subjects of apocalypse and authenticity felt far from concluded.

100 Years of Estrangement, Worldcon 75, Helsinki, 9–13 August 2017

Reviewed by Beata Gubacsi (University of Liverpool)

The academic track of Worldcon 75 celebrated the centenary of Viktor Shklovsky's coinage of *ostranenie* (literally 'making strange'), an aesthetic concept which has been closely associated with the uncanny and the genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy. The track not only showcased the various applications of 'defamiliarization' from Bertolt Brecht to Darko Suvin but also analysed, revised and challenged our notion of it. Open potentially to some 7000 fans, Worldcon created a unique setting in which to discuss fantastic literatures. With four panels and twelve speakers each day, the track offered a bewildering spectrum of expertise and a vast array of papers.

The first session I attended began with Irma Hirsjärvi's introduction to the 'World Hobbit Project', a multi-national research project examining the reception of the book and its film adaptations. The panel, amusingly described in the programme as 'A Field Guide to the Academics', reminded us of our conflicted position as both critics and fans. Jyrki Korpua analysed the Finnish results of the global survey, reporting a general disapproval of Peter Jackson's Hobbit trilogy, and reassuring us that Tolkien's book will survive it. Despite the fans' criticism, the majority still considered the films part of Tolkien's legendary world. Tanja Välisalo discussed the audience's engagement with the characters, explaining the system of different trajectories of mapping the fans' relationship to their favourites. Minna Siikilä spoke of the phenomenon of fandom and anti-fandom, and how the audience has kept engaging with the films in an attempt to 'get it right' by, for instance, re-editing them.

The second session began with Merja Polvinen's welcome, in which she gave 'starting points' to the '100 Years of Estrangement', and produced a laser pistol with which to time the speakers. She introduced the organizing team of the academic track, the members of the Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research (twitter: @Finfar_Finland) and the editors of the accompanying academic journal, *Fafnir*. Tommi Huttunen's presentation took us back to the origins of *ostranenie* and its influence on Russian Futurism. Alexei Kruchenykh's 'trans-sensible', 'trans-rational' poem, 'Dyr bul shcyl' (1913) was collectively read out loud. Next, Andrew M. Butler spoke of the 'cognitive uncanny' in *Gattaca* (1997), explaining the effect of estrangement with the lines 'I was conceived in the Riviera', where the Riviera refers to a Buick and not the French resort. He suggested that Suvin's cognitive estrangement relies more on Brecht's political approach rather than Shklovsky's aesthetic method, emphasizing that neither of them is concerned with strangeness in itself but the depiction of reality in a strange way.

I spoke in the closing panel of the day, dedicated to posthumanism, focusing on the use of estrangement in building a posthumanist narrative, and pointing out the similarity with science fiction. To give an example, I analysed the Voigt-Kampff test in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). I proposed that 'the semantic fog' is the site of estrangement, resulting in the sense of arbitrariness of binary categories, which is instrumental in the construction of the posthuman. Claire Wall's paper elaborated on the deconstruction of the human-animal boundary in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), noting both the unfamiliarity of totalizing narratives and that empathy toward animals is key to a posthuman future. Jani Ylönen drew attention to a similar problem in Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's graphic novel, *We3* (2004), exploring our relationship to 'cute pets and killer cyborgs'. He walked us through the different, contrasting visual and linguistic representations of animal sentience.

I started the next day with the second session. Laura E. Goodin began by enumerating the various historic occurrences and variations of estrangement from classical to contemporary literature. She argued that the rigid classification of science fiction and fantasy is only economically explicable when the characteristics of science fiction and fantasy do not allow such a categorical exclusion. Mittu Ollikainen explored the transgressive experiments of the Finnish group of artists, Reaalifantasia, with different form and techniques. Lastly, Mongia Besbes appeared on screen to present her paper, 'Slipstream and the Politics of Estrangement in *Naked Lunch*', in which she defined slipstream as embodying characteristics of both science fiction and 'high' literature.

The next panel returned to the theme of posthumanism. Aino-Kaisa Koistinen

juxtaposed the figures of the monster and the posthuman as both political and cultural concepts. Next, Kaisa Kortekallio spoke of the bestiary of New Weird animals in Jeff VanderMeer and Johanna Sinisalo's fiction, explaining the use of cognitive estrangement in the depictions of the nonhuman as embodying ecological anxieties. Juha Raipola closed the panel entertaining us with the 'Totally Not Robots' Reddit thread, explaining the uncanny naiveté of robots in human disguise and the non-threatening familiarity of the posthuman.

On the third day, I attended the second half of the panel entitled 'Rationality, Society and Embodiment'. Matthew Mastucci proposed that Brian Evenson's *Last Days* (2003) is instrumental in de-marginalizing disability, as the character's disability is independent from the plot, and so defamilarizes the ableist gaze. Ryan Morrison compared the ranges of emotional capability of AIs in *Neuromancer* (1984), *Do Androids Dream…?* and *Ancillary Justice* (2013), concluding that these characters are cast as villains because they appear to lack emotion in spite of their superior intelligences. After that, I managed to catch Tiffani Angus' delightfully provocative presentation asking the burning question: 'Where Are the Tampons? The Estrangement of Women's Bodies in Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction'. She explored misrepresentations of female bodily functions from impossible sanitary expectations to problematic birth scenes, or, rather, the lack of them in an end-of-the-world context. On the penultimate day, I attended the 'Structures and Representations' session, in which Andy Hageman explored China Miéville's short fiction, examining the historical and ecological interpretations that the intricate imagery of infrastructure yields in the story 'Covehithe' (2011).

On the final day, all the attendees, academics and fans seemed to be somewhat estranged after the excitement of the previous days and the Hugo Awards ceremony. Yet the quality of the papers and the depth of discussion did not suffer at all. The 'Environmental Anxieties' panel started with Marian Via Rivera-Womack's analysis of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) and Brian Catling's *The Vorrh* (2015). She explained that the sublimity of Gothic transgressions such as real and fantastic, past and present, civilized and barbaric create fluid boundaries in which the relationship of society and nature are problematized, as suggested by the texts' obsession with the imagery of overgrown architecture. Next, Val Nolan spoke about uncanny threats of another kind in Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House* (1990). He suggested that the book, an amalgamation of Irish folklore and the post-apocalyptic genre, represents the anxiety in Ireland caused by the closeness and negative environmental effects of the Sellafield nuclear plant on the Cumbrian coastline. The way that anxiety was suppressed by British energy policies gives the novel further historical and political resonance. The last session was particularly interesting for me, as I

was sitting in the audience as a fan rather than a scholar. Essi Varis argued that the estranging arrangement of panels in *Sandman: Overture* (2015) permits a better understanding of the non-human experience. Katja Kontturi brought us back to childhood with the 'uncanny and fantastic' narrative frames of Disney Comics, problematizing concepts like dreaming and authorship.

Despite its size, the academic track ran smoothly thanks to the immense work of the organizers. The panels were well frequented by critics and were also a popular choice for fans. There was a welcoming, friendly and laid-back atmosphere throughout the span of the convention. The expertise and enthusiasm of the attendees sparked many inspiring conversations, and as far as I can tell, everyone left with new ideas, an extended reading list, and a bunch of notes. Due to the effort of the organizers and attendees who live tweeted the panels, #w75academic is a detailed and accurate catalogue of topics and discussions, and I can only recommend it to those who might have missed Worldcon 75.

Organic Systems: Environments, Bodies and Cultures in Science Fiction, Birkbeck College London, 16 September 2017

Reviewed by Paul March-Russell (University of Kent)

This was the first conference to be held by the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC), formed by graduate students at Birkbeck College and Royal Holloway College in 2014. It followed the theme of the LSFRC's monthly reading group for the academic year of 2016/17, broadly speaking, that of sf and ecology, although as co-organizer Aren Roukema made clear in his introduction, the conference sought to think through the systemic links between environments, the bodies that inhabit them and the cultures that form as a result of this interaction. As befits this aim, the conference proved to be a stimulating mesh of interdisciplinary interests from scholars working both from within and outside sf.

Chris Pak's opening address drew upon the LSFRC's past reading list – texts ranging from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) to Sherri Tepper's *Grass* (1988) – and supplemented them with several choices of his own. In revisiting some of the foundational texts of posthumanism – works by Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles – Pak sought to disentangle a posthuman ethos from the porous boundaries between human and machine, as explored in cyberpunk fictions from the 1980s and 1990s, with one that emphasizes

instead the fuzzy borders between human and animal. Taking Shelley's post-apocalyptic novel and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) as his starting-points, Pak outlined the influence of Darwinism upon the creation of characters, from J.D. Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911) to A.E. van Vogt's *Slan* (1940), who are more than human in contrast with the racialism of stories such as Julian Huxley's 'The Tissue Culture King' (1926), in which African natives are portrayed as less than human. Questions concerning what is or isn't human, often subsumed with the rhetoric of cyberpunk, not only predate the cybernetic revolution of the post-war years but are also rooted within the biological and racial preoccupations of early sf. As Pak went on to demonstrate, these concerns, although parsed very differently during the post-war period of the Atomic Age and the onset of the ecological movement, are nevertheless rooted within their origins. To illustrate this continuity, Pak concluded with the glut of terraforming narratives from the 1980s onwards, demonstrating how poems (Frederick Turner's *Genesis* (1988)) and novels, most notably those of Kim Stanley Robinson, rephrase these earlier ideas. Pak offered an excellent overview of both the critical and imaginative literature and so, to some extent, established initial parameters for the following panels.

The first panel focused on the role of nature in the Anthropocene. Andrew M. Butler, drawing upon recent work by Haraway on what she has variously termed the 'Capitalocene' or the 'Chthulucene', teased out the contradictions within James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). Butler argued that, whilst on the one hand the film opposes an unthinking militaristic and capitalist bureaucracy with the telepathic and harmonious culture of the Na'vi, on the other hand, through the redemptive role of the saviour-hero Sully, it also serves to domesticate the wildness of the planet Pandora. Amy Cutler looked back to an earlier film, Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972), to draw out similar contradictions surrounding the legal and botanical definitions of the forest. Whilst, on the one hand, another saviour-hero seeks to preserve the remaining forest in its pristine state, on the other hand, this act is to ring-fence what we mean by the 'forest', to deny its essential wildness and independence of human intervention.

Both papers, and especially Cutler's, also suggested an engagement with the fashionable work of philosophers such as Graham Harman. In the following panel, Gayathri Goel took issue with Speculative Realism whilst focusing on a short story, Gwyneth Jones' 'The Universe of Things' (2011) and a poetry collection, Rita Wong's *Forage* (2007). Speculative Realism, or 'object oriented ontology', focuses upon the object as a thing in itself devoid of the mediating subjective gaze. The return to a qualified Kantianism has resulted in some strange bedfellows between literature and philosophy – Harman's exemplum of a Speculative Realist in fiction is the misogynist, racist and misanthrope H.P.

Lovecraft. By contrast, Goel argued for things to be seen both in themselves and in relation to one another, the intersubjectivity of her critical position equating both with the feminist and ecological concerns of Jones and Wong.

Similarly, in a paper added to this session, Esther Andreu Martinez explored Unno Juza's little-known story outside of his native Japan, 'The Music Bath at 1800 Hours' (1937). This fascinating tale describes a devastated Earth in which the survivors live underground under the autocratic rule of Lord Miruki. Various means, familiar to readers of *We* and *Brave New World*, are used to control and contain the populace but the most original touch is that of the music bath itself. Here, the people are bathed in music which has mind-controlling properties. Martinez showed how this immersive environment acts as a critique of both the totalitarianism and technological fascination of Imperial Japan. But, following Goel, it was also possible to read both her paper and Juza's story as advocating for the kind of intersubjective relation that would break the spell of the music bath.

Lastly (although actually the first paper on the panel), Rhys Williams explored the merits and limitations of the emerging sub-genre of 'solarpunk'. This admittedly small body of work, active online, increasingly available in print and originating primarily from developing nations, argues for an economy based upon sustainable energy sources – wind, water and solar-driven. Williams was particularly interested in the use of what we in the West would term fantasy tropes, but which Williams saw not as a regressive move but as a device pointing forwards in terms of speculative thought. Whilst, on the one hand, this use of the fantastical seemed to compensate for a limitation within Western science fiction, on the other hand, Williams was sceptical of some of the utopian claims made for solarpunk and pointed to some of its dystopian elements (the persecution of individuals, for example, who do not abide by the need for socio-economic homeostasis).

Following lunch, the postcolonial theme was extended by Michelle Clarke in her paper on African speculative fiction. Taking Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, Dilman Dila's short story 'Leafy Man' (both 2014) and Jacqui L'Ange's *The Seed Thief* (2015) as her examples, Clarke explored how Okorafor opposes Western technology and African ecology, through the mutated sea-creatures that take revenge on oil drilling, whilst Dila – problematically – ties to accommodate Western science by displacing nativist beliefs. More successfully, according to Clarke, L'Ange's non-sf novel finds a balance between the use of Western biological science and a respect for local belief-systems. Kerry Dodd, meanwhile, picked-up on the theme of cores and peripheries by exploring the role of the Zone in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1972) in terms of object oriented ontology. Although a well-argued piece, following the papers of Cutler

and Goel, another potential route opened-up in terms of thinking about the Zone as a forest – which, as Cutler emphasized, did not necessarily mean a wooded space but a legally defined terrain, just as state authority attempts to prevent the Stalkers access to the Zone. Instead of the en-Weirding of ontology favoured by Speculative Realism, to think of the Zone in these more legalistic terms would potentially read the Strugatskys' novel back into the context of the Soviet Empire.

The politics of space underwrote what was probably the day's most interesting panel. Amy Butt, a practising architect, explored the role of the gated community, principally in Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty* (1981). Butt showed how the novel offered a caricature of Paolo Soleri's real-world designs for a utopian community in which to justify a right-wing libertarian vision of the bourgeoisie shielded from the precariat. Nic Clear presented a self-reflexive piece on one of his own speculative designs, the 'Chthonopolis', a subterranean city based in the Thames Estuary, in order to think through his claim that architecture is a form of science fiction. Lastly, David Ashford in a wide-ranging paper argued that the fear of the Daleks can be attributed to a post-war unease with modernism. Referring to David Whitaker's novelization of Terry Nation's *The Dead Planet* (1963-4), Ashford suggested that the Dalek city may have been inspired by one of Frank Lloyd Wright's designs, whilst the Dalek shell is perhaps emblematic of a modernist desire for speed and efficiency to be found in such documents as F.T. Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' (1909). This was a suggestive and invigorating analysis, perhaps over-freighted by too many allusions from Le Corbusier to Henri Lefebvre, J.M. Keynes to George Orwell. Instead, taking a cue from modernism that 'less is more', Ashford could have streamlined his account by pursuing the well-known claim that the movement of the Daleks was based upon Nation's attendance at a performance of the Georgian National Ballet. The extent to which the performers were influenced by modernist innovators of the early twentieth century could, almost by a process of osmosis, suggest ways in which the Daleks were influenced by modernist designs in space and performance. Nevertheless, what was apparent in all three papers was a desire to extricate the utopianism – in Clear's terms, the science-fictionality – of modernist architecture from its post-war repudiation.

The final session of the day was a roundtable discussion, chaired by Caroline Edwards, and featuring three science fiction writers, Gwyneth Jones, Paul McAuley and Adam Roberts. This was an interesting and amusing encounter although, much to Jones' frustration at one point, the conversation tended to focus around notions of utopia rather than ecology or the environment *per se*. Nonetheless, after so many theoretical discussions, it was invaluable to have the points of view from three leading practitioners in the field. It also emphasized

the communal aspect of the conference, a key part of the LSFRC, as Rhodri Davies noted in his introduction to the day. With an entrance fee of just £7, the conference organisers – Davies, Roukema and Francis Gene-Rowe – had sought to make the event as open as possible to all . After such an auspicious start, the conference should not only become an annual occasion but also a key instrument in the greater discussion and understanding of science fiction and its relation to real-world concerns.

# Call for Papers
Special Issue: In Frankenstein's Wake

To mark the 200th anniversary, in 2018, of Mary Shelley's novel, we invite articles for a special issue, examining the impact of Shelley's creation on the development of sf. Following Brian Aldiss' critical intervention in *Billion Year Spree* (1973), this is a relationship that has often been explored, so we would like to encourage contributions that investigate the afterlives of Shelley's novel within the sf genre in new and innovative ways. Topics may include (but are not confined to) the following areas:

- Critical and historiographical reassessments of the relationship between *Frankenstein* and sf
- Re-workings/rewritings of the Frankenstein myth within contemporary sf
- Performing *Frankenstein* on screen, stage and in music
- The Frankenstein legend and contemporary portrayals of scientists
- The Frankenstein myth and the popular communication of science
- Adapting the Frankenstein story to new media – graphic novels, videogames, etc.
- New and contemporary theoretical approaches to the Frankenstein myth
- Mary Shelley and her creation in contemporary women's sf

Articles should be approximately **6000 words** long and written in accordance with the style sheet available at the SF Foundation website. The deadline for entries is **Monday, 29th January 2018**. Entries should be submitted to journaleditor@sf-foundation.org

Book Reviews
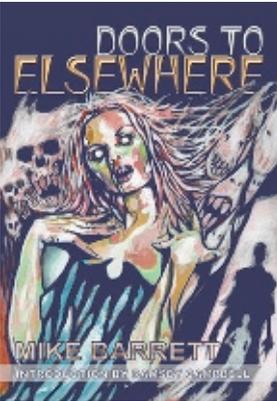
Mike Barrett, *Doors to Elsewhere* (Alchemy Press, 2013, 290pp, £10.99)

John Howard, *Touchstones: Essays on the Fantastic* (Alchemy Press, 2014, 294pp, £11.00)

Reviewed by Joseph Norman (Brunel University, London)
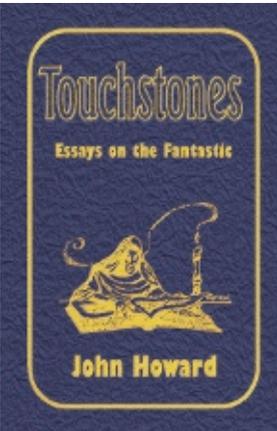
These two recent monographs from Alchemy Press, winner of The British Fantasy Society's Best Small Press Award in 2014, share a similar concern with the more obscure fringes of Weird, fantastic and/or Gothic fiction. *Doors to Elsewhere,* nominated for the non-fiction category of the British Fantasy Award in 2014, collects various pieces by fan contributor and critic Mike Barrett, which previously appeared in publications such as *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Fantasy Commentator*, *Wormwood* and *Dark Horizons* between 2004 and 2013. *Touchstones* is the second non-fiction title by John Howard, an author of widely anthologized Weird stories in his own right, and, as with *Doors to Elsewhere*, is a collection of revised essays, originally appearing in a very similar list of publications between 1991 and 2009.

Barrett's book is notable not only for the relatively obscure writers for whom it demands renewed attention, but for the fact that seven out of sixteen of these authors are women – Greye La Spina, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Marjorie Bowen, Mary Elizabeth Counselman, C.L. Moore, G.G. Pendarves – writing in a sub-genre in a time renowned for its androcentrism. Hardly a dramatic, progressive reimagining of the gender balance in the history of Weird fiction, but a strong start nonetheless. Howard's collection focuses on a more familiar range of predominantly male authors, including Arthur Machen, August Derleth, Robert Bloch and Fritz Lieber, although selected works by Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett are linked to M.R. James by the theme of 'Old England, New England'.

Barrett provides 'sundry observations' and a brief history of Arkham House

Publishers, without whom much of the classic Weird fiction we know today would no doubt have remained unread, and even a 'History of the History', providing commentary on the various books concerned with the House. This latter section is especially enlightening for Barrett's comments on *Sixty Years of Arkham House* (1999) by S.T. Joshi – a seemingly definitive publication, published by the foremost Weird scholar – for example, suggesting that 'Joshi may not have seen all of the titles commented on' and correcting a few details provided in that volume. Barrett's bullet-point lists of 'Rarities' and 'Miscellany' will be mostly of interest to collectors and die-hard fans, providing comment on the print runs and availability of rare Arkham titles as well as trivia on the variations in binding, cover art, titles and copyright information. More useful to the general reader is the bibliography of Arkham House titles, including lists from imprints such as Mycroft & Moran which published mostly detective and mystery stories, especially the Solar Pons series. The bibliography is also interesting for drawing attention to Arkham authors generally better known for their sf work, and not often associated with Weird fiction, such as Joanna Russ, J.G. Ballard, James Tiptree Jr. and Iain R MacLeod.

Largely published to keep Arkham House afloat, Derleth's own fiction is often criticized as mediocre, and his work set in Lovecraft's mythos has proven controversial. A reoccurring point in both Howard and Barrett's books is Derleth's reimagining of Lovecraft's bleak and idiosyncratic worldview. Derleth provided a 'reduction of the Lovecraft mythos to a standard conflict between good and evil', Barrett observes, whereas Lovecraft's key innovation was to set much of his work in a cold, absurd universe inhabited by extrasolar deities unconcerned with human achievement and therefore beyond such a simplistic binary understanding of morality. In his essay on Derleth's *The Dweller in Darkness* (1944), Howard examines Derleth's Lovecraftian novella as 'showing the ambiguities of both world-views coming together in a single story', suggesting that the tale is marred by the presence of Derleth's 'Roman Catholic Christian cultural background' as well as his 'seemingly genuine belief'. Howard concludes that Derleth's Lovecraftian tales should be regarded as 'a whole new game, not an updated version'.

Another writer who recurs in both collections is Freeman, a key influence upon Derleth. Barrett provides an overview of Freeman's professional and personal life, as well as an appraisal of her supernatural stories which – despite forming only a small part of the 250 short stories she wrote in her lifetime – are the works for which she is largely remembered. Howard explains that Freeman's stories, reflecting her experiences growing up in a strictly orthodox family of Congregationalists, 'show that life in small communities is often not at all idyllic', and are frequently concerned with 'victims of conformity, or the risks taken in

reacting against it'. While Freeman published prolifically throughout most of her life, winning the William Dean Howells Medal for Distinction in Fiction in 1926 and attracting the admiration of Machen, James and Lovecraft amongst others, she 'remains largely forgotten today', as Barrett explains, and 'a full edition of Wilkins Freeman's eerie tales has yet to appear'.

The fiction of Mary Elizabeth Counselman – once referred to as 'the Stephen King of Alabama' – is perhaps better known today. Counselman is notable for being possibly the longest-running contributor to *Weird Tales*; as Barrett states, a 'remarkable fifty-eight years from her debut, in 1932 to her final appearance in 1990'. Counselman's most anthologized tale 'The Three Marked Pennies' (1934) is, like Freeman's work, concerned with life in a small American town: in this case, three pennies mysteriously enter circulation, each promising a different reward which, upon receiving and spending the penny, are delivered with unexpected and unfortunate consequences. Barrett describes the tale, comparable to Shirley Jackson's more famous 'The Lottery' (1948), as 'an allegory accentuating that what you most want is not always what you get, and that what is extremely desirably to one person is quite the opposite to another'. 'The Three Marked Pennies', along with another similar tale 'The Devil's Lottery' (1948), would be interesting considered as a strand of the current interest in and revival of Folk Horror.

Alongside her stories and two non-fiction books, Counselman also wrote a significant amount of Weird poetry in verse, which – bar Ashton Smith and Lovecraft – is something of a rarity and surely an under-researched area. While some of Counselman's work was formally similar to her *Weird Tales* contemporaries in this manner, she used the introduction of her Arkham House story collection, *Half in Shadow* (1978), to distinguish her work ideologically from the 'gruesome, morbid fiction' and 'doom philosophies' of writers such as Lovecraft and Ashton Smith. According to Barrett, the moral and helpful attributes of her supernatural beings are 'helpful to the well-intentioned but are ruthless to the predatory', and we can perhaps align her work more closely with Derleth's moral reinvention of Lovecraft's mythos. Despite these comments, however, Counselman did contribute to the Cthulhu Mythos in 1988 with the poem 'The Summons', which impresses Barrett by 'the way it so capably evokes it subject matter despite its brevity'.

It is fascinating to read of other women contributors to *Weird Tales*, such as the first regular female author Greya Le Spina, and the prolific Marjorie Bowen, who is credited with some 170 books in total, thirty-six of which were published in just four years. Bowen particularly excites Barrett with her bleak and dark ability to 'produce a memorably chilling final paragraph', and he concludes that Bowen's tales will 'undoubtedly continue to occupy what is an eminently secure

place high in the field.'

Although Howard's book covers ground that is more familiar, he nevertheless offers an account of the Christian Scientist author Harry Otto Fischer who is 'known today solely for his friendship with Fritz Lieber', exploring the influential writing relationship between these writers, Fischer's rather unfortunate life, and the poignant notion that he 'could easily have made a name for himself as a writer of fantastic fiction, if circumstances had turned out otherwise'. Howard argues that the out-of-print story collection, *In a Lonely Place* (1983), by another largely forgotten author Karl Edward Wagner, should be considered alongside genre classics by Ray Bradbury, Campbell, Lieber and others, for the 'well-crafted and evocative southern United States regional setting' that became Wagner's trademark.

Unusually, Howard offers commentary on a 'fantastic and bizarre' radio play, *Traume* (1951) by Gunter Eich, 'touched with the fleeting and vivid realities and intensities of dream', which 'generated considerable controversy at the time'. Eich's play features five dreams 'by different characters in a wide variety of everyday settings and situations', each from a different continent, with 'no explicitly stated connections' between the content of the dream and the short summaries that precede them. First broadcast during the 'chaotic conditions of the immediate post-war period' where 'all political ideologies had been discredited', the play prompted hostile telephone calls from listeners and was later rejected by the War Blind Radio Play Prize jury for reflecting contemporary fears but without 'speaking a word of comfort or of a way out'. Howard's piece concludes that 'the overarching theme of *Traume*' is 'the necessity for removing illusions, that the consequences of rejecting a horrible reality are themselves more horrible', and invites further comment upon the unique potential of the Weird radio play.

Both *Doors to Elsewhere* and *Touchstones* are non-academic titles. Of the two, Howard's book tends towards critical argument, supported by analysis of longer quotations and more extensive footnotes. Barrett's essays often read like extended book reviews, considering the narrative quality, plot strengths, originality of generic tropes, and assiduously avoiding spoilers. To those used to reading scholarly titles, this could perhaps become a little frustrating at times: for example, when Bartlett makes an intriguing comment, such as the following about Greye La Spina, 'When vampires do appear, as in the serial *Unfettered*, the story progresses in a far from orthodox manner', but does not elaborate. But, at the heart of *Doors to Elsewhere*, is Barrett's laudably deep and wide reading of such fascinating and oft-neglected authors, awarding him the gravitas to offer continually insightful comment upon their often-prolific and varied careers. Howard's articles are accompanied by monochrome images,

frequently depicting pulp paperback editions, as lurid as they are beautiful, in their stark, lo-fi glory. Both collections would have benefitted from an index covering, amongst other taxonomies, the themes and settings of the material discussed, useful for teachers and researchers in the field, although both authors do provide a select bibliography of the main authors discussed, and offer advice throughout on tracking down more obscure volumes.

I hope that these texts play a part in the rediscovery of unfairly maligned writers and help encourage the reprinting of their works in high quality editions. Many of the authors with whom Barrett and Howard are concerned have limited works available through Amazon, for example, largely in small press editions, but surely deserve to be enshrined in the Penguin Classics series as bigger names such as Lord Dunsany, Ashton Smith and Lovecraft have been . Ultimately, Barrett and Howard's collections are key reading for those already initiated into the pleasures of exploring Weird fiction wishing to pursue this interest further and to expand their reading more widely. As Barrett says of the task of hunting down Greye La Spina's work, reading both *Doors to Elsewhere* and *Touchstones* 'is a pleasure that may be reserved for the few, but which nonetheless will bring much satisfaction to those who make the effort'.
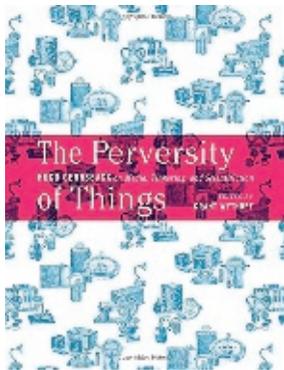
Grant Wythoff, ed. *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 444pp, £28.99)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer (University of Liverpool)

Part of a series called 'Electronic Mediations', *The Perversity of Things* offers a way into understanding Hugo Gernsback, variously the creator of the 'idea of science fiction' (Gary Westfahl) or a charlatan of 'stultifying vision and lack of literary taste' (Richard Bleiler). Here, we are less concerned with Gernsback and *Amazing Stories* as establishing the tone of US science fiction during the first part of the last century, and more with Hugo (occasionally 'Huck') Gernsbacher, the dapper German-Jewish émigré from Luxembourg who saw the future beginning to arrive in the USA. A poor student and something of a gambler, he landed in New York in 1904 at the age of nineteen with the design for a new dry cell battery and formed the Electro Importing Company to promote wireless and electrical equipment. The company's catalogue became *Modern Electrics*, which was already promoting

speculative and futuristic claims before Gernsback's launch in 1914 of *The Electrical Experimenter* (later *Science and Invention*) which began to illustrate the new future with the work of Frank R. Paul and Howard V. Brown. On the way, Gernsback saw science fiction forming and jumped in to claim it. Myths (many self-created) cluster around him. *The Perversity of Things* tries to untangle some of these myths, and to argue that Gernsback's own writing and publishing are part of the myth of progress he wanted to created.

While we are shown much about how Gernsback promoted 'scientifiction' in his magazines, we are also given examples of his own fiction, such as extracts from *Ralph 124C41+* (1911) and stories such as 'The Magnetic Storm' (1918). While *Ralph* (whatever judgement might be made of its literary qualities) is essential reading for anyone with the slightest interest in how the science fiction of today became what it is, the other fiction takes some time to get into. Even so, once the suspicious reader has taken the plunge and decided to brave the often wooden plotting and the way the story serves as engineering fantasy of the highest order (a footnote to 'The Magnetic Storm' proudly boasts that 'the cited experiments and effects of the Tesla currents are actual facts checked by Mr Tesla himself, who saw the proofs of this story'), these fictions show themselves up as fascinating documents. If the speculative essays such as '10,000 Years Hence' (1922), with impressive illustrations showing 'one of the future cities of about the size of New York floating high up in the air, several miles above the Earth', still live as remarkable fantasies about the future, the way stories such as 'The Magnetic Storm' serve as sugar-coated essays about technology are equally noteworthy. 'Why' Sparks, the young boy-genius of the latter story is a dime-novel echo of Ralph, but the interrogative which is his nickname is a classic reminder of the 'unending quest for knowledge', which is the tinkerer/inventor's burning passion.

The non-fiction selected for inclusion in *Perversity* ranges from the entertainingly speculative squib to the earnest textbook material for the hobbyist. For the former, we have 'Wireless on Mars' (1909), an amusing extrapolation of wireless transmission in which our Martian inventor has perfected a method of transporting matter through the ether, and (what I suspect many readers of *Foundation* would require) the 'Bookworm's Nurse' (1915), a simple device to enable avid readers to walk down the street in all weathers and traffic conditions and keep their attention focused upon their book. For the latter, we have 'Television and the Telephot' (1909), an early description of television (and forecast of the videophone), exhortations such as 'What to Invent' (1916) or detailed descriptions of Gernsback's own inventions, such as the 'Detectorum' and the 'Pianorad' (both 1926). Reading the book page by page can, for some, be a slog: the appearance of circuit diagrams explaining obsolete technology

and didactic pieces of fiction such as the extract from *Baron Münchhausen's New Scientific Adventures* (1915), in which Gernsback flags passages containing *actual scientific facts* by means of typographical symbols. Skipping through the book at random, however, or paying attention to the editor's suggestion that there is more than one way to access its contents pays dividends. A double set of contents pages offer a thematic approach as well as a chronological one, so that it is possible to access all Gernsback's writings on television, say, or all his fiction with ease; or it is possible simply to trace his remarkably fertile thought from Gernsback's first published piece, for *Scientific American* in 1905, through to 'Wonders of the Machine Age' (1931).

Either way, the reader stumbles upon material which ranges from the thought-provoking to the gloriously quirky. 'The Perversity of Things' (1916), possibly owing something to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse' (1845), shows how even the most meticulous plans fall apart because of that annoying habit of materials not to do what they are supposed to do. In 'Hearing Through Your Teeth' (1916), Gernsback begins: 'The following interesting experiment can be performed by anyone who has an ordinary disc phonograph'. For those who *have* such an item of ancient technology about their persons, it is apparently possible to hear the music of a disc being played on the turntable by means of a darning-needle held between the teeth and pressed onto the disc. Wythoff points out in a long footnote (one of the most valuable aspects of the book consists of the detailed contextual notes) that the same issue contains an episode of *Baron Münchhausen* in which the apparently telepathic communication among Martians works by means of something very similar. We are even urged again to try the same experiment.

The mixture of playfulness and sober – even obsessive – attention to detail is typical. To run through each issue of *The Electrical Experimenter* is, says Wythoff, 'to watch the activities of a quirky group of hobbyists grow into a mass cultural phenomenon'. The word 'geek' meant something very different in Gernsback's time, but one thinks of it here, and thinks of the thousands of his readers who were genuinely believing that these amazing new technologies would improve the world.

Does *The Perversity of Things* rehabilitate the man who was known to some of his contemporaries as 'Hugo the Rat'? Not quite, because in his determination not to let the obsession of literary critics get the better of Gernsback, Wythoff overlooks the fact that some of his early victims had every right to be aggrieved. 'Spectacularly racist' H.P. Lovecraft might have been, but it was Gernsback's famous unwillingness to pay on time that caused the epithet. 'One can be forgiven for wondering why such singular attention has gone toward bankruptcy proceedings, profits and wages in works of literary scholarship,' writes Wythoff.

A professional writer might have given an answer. But Wythoff is right to point out that Gernsback's championing of 'tinkering' was something important. Like science fiction itself, a literature that crystallized into a 'named' form pointed to by a man who was thinking on his feet in order to make a quick buck, the process of invention in the early twentieth century was hardly the most upmarket of activity. Gernsback, Wythoff argues, was not an Edison or a Steve Jobs. His relationship with his hobbyist readers was, however, that of a builder of a community. Just as his Science Fiction League was later to legitimize in the eyes of science fiction fans the *activity* of being a science fiction reader, so his hobbyist magazines gave people a sense of participating in the world that was being created by those *real* analogues of Ralph 124C41+. Gernsback's 'theory of amateur tinkering as an activity distinct from, and even superior to, "invention" by credentialed researchers and engineers' may have suffered from the same flaws as his theory of scientifiction as something that would inspire its readers to go out and *create* that future about which they were reading, but both those theories were about communities and change. *The Perversity of Things* argues that Gernsback and his self-created community is worth more than our patronizing half-attention. It is a fascinating, entertaining and valuable book.
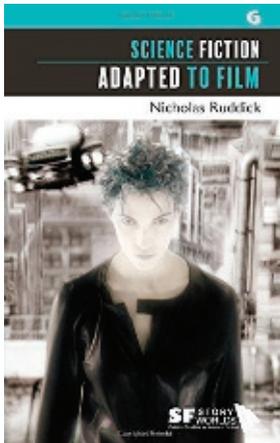
Nicholas Ruddick, *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* (Gylphi, 2016, 380pp, £18.99)

Reviewed by Sue Smith

In the foreword to his book, Nicholas Ruddick states that he is 'unapologetically subjective' when it comes to exploring 'how sf novels, novellas, and short stories worth reading' are adapted into 'films worth watching'. In particular, Ruddick's approach favours science fiction literature over what he calls the 'aesthetically inferior' world of film. As he confesses: 'For me, the literature will always come first'. Nonetheless, despite Ruddick's aesthetic bias, he also argues that for the purpose of his book he is more motivated by 'what makes for a successful adaptation than by 'the desire to assert one medium over another'. Ruddick's hierarchy of literature over film, therefore, is a rhetorical strategy with which to flesh out and explore the tensions inherent within adaptation studies, such as the professional and cultural differences and biases that continue to prevail between the fields of science fiction literature and film. Ruddick's aim is not merely to simplify but rather to create a specific critical

lens through which to explore the complexity of adaptation between two popular mediums that share the common concerns of science fiction.

According to Ruddick, these preoccupations relate to humanity's fascination with and fears about the evolutionary development and survival of the human species. In general, Ruddick's evolutionary theme is reflected in two kinds of adaptation. The first involves a broad-ranging analysis of high frequency adaptations of particular texts, which are, according to Ruddick, adaptations that are deemed failures due to their excessive deference to the original literary source; the second involves the close analysis of successful adaptations of literature to film, which Ruddick argues translate or 'remediate' a text in such a way that they develop, extend, complement, or even improve on the original. Ruddick's focus on humanity's evolutionary development and survival is a logical and worthwhile project mainly because of its long historical association with science fiction literature and its subsequent adaptation to film. Nonetheless, Ruddick's approach to adaptation studies along with his chosen theme of evolution also means that his book takes on a particular rhetorical form and argument that is at once problematic, but that also creates an incredibly readable and well-informed critical studies text.

Following Ruddick's introduction, *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* consists of a middle section that is divided into four parts, followed by an impressive 'Checklist of Significant SF Film Adaptations and their Sources'. In the mid-section, the four main parts are structured in the following way. In Part I, Ruddick develops his framework of literature versus film into a more complex relationship that demonstrates the messy entangled world in which two historically contemporaneous 'coevals' have 'influenced one another profoundly'. In Part II, Ruddick clarifies terminology he uses in the book, such as the word 'remediation' which he explains consists of three categories, primary, secondary and tertiary translation; tertiary translation being the optimum 'radical shift from one medium to a very different one, such as from a *single-track textual medium* (a novel) to a *multi-track audiovisual medium* (a film)'. In Part III, Ruddick moves through an impressive list of science fiction 'remediations', starting with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and ending with the popular and highly adaptable works of Philip K. Dick. In Part IV, Ruddick applies his theory of 'remediation' to ten science fiction texts, which, in his opinion, have been successfully adapted to film.

Ruddick's book is comprehensive, informative and well written, making for an excellent read. *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* is both educational and entertaining and is so engrossing that, at times, it is difficult to put down. What makes Ruddick's book so good is the way it recreates the atmosphere and tone of original science fiction texts by evoking their historical influences and

conveying accurately the stylistic presentation specific to their particular context and moment. Furthermore, *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* is accessible to both layperson and academic, reaching out to the reader on both a personal and professional level. For instance, Ruddick's historical survey of science fiction literature and its adaptation skilfully evokes shifting social and cultural contexts that inform the reader of original authorial influences and intentions as well as the rationale behind directors' interpretations of science fiction texts, helping to make sense of a text's susceptibility to adaptation and popular psychological appeal. To take one of many possible examples, but probably the most relevant, is Ruddick's discussion of H.G. Wells' classic novel, *The War of the Worlds* (1898). For Ruddick, Wells' original contains the all-important common thematic elements of science fiction's obsession with evolution as well as the Darwinian narrative thread that concerns a species' ability to adapt or die in a new or changing environment. At the same time, another and possibly more powerful concern that has made *War of the Worlds* such an adaptable novel and so meaningful in differing historical moments is a nation's fear of invasion. As Ruddick argues, 'Since Orson Welles's notorious radio dramatization of 30 October 1938, *The War of the Worlds*, has been associated with American fears of invasion. And since September 11, 2001, when the USA was struck by an alien force descending from a blue untroubled sky, Wells' novel has taken on a new topical relevance in both popular culture and academic discourse'. Therefore, as Ruddick makes clear, despite authorial intentions and original thematic concerns successful adaptations often follow 'new topical relevance' popular at the time of a text's 'remediation'.

However, despite Ruddick's incredibly persuasive and insightful close analyses of film adaptations of science fiction literature, his book is also problematic on a number of levels. To begin with, *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* favours certain theories of the literary origins of science fiction over others in order to support its chosen evolutionary thread. For instance, Ruddick states that 'Science fiction is an agnostic genre' for a new scientific era and 'came into existence, […], because no other kind of fiction had the means to engage with the issues raised by evolutionary theory'. As Ruddick goes on to explain: 'Foundational to sf are the scientific romances of T.H. Huxley's ex pupil H. G. Wells, beginning with *The Time Machine*'. Therefore, in Ruddick's view, it is 'the Wellsian tradition' and its response to Darwinian theory that is most significant for understanding the unfolding history and popular appeal of science fiction and its adaptation to film. While Ruddick is entitled to argue his opinion on the genre's foundational origins and its importance in explaining newly emerging scientific thought and its influence on science fiction and its adaptation, it is also somewhat selective, to fit his argument. Ruddick argues that 'Works such

as *Frankenstein* (1818) which, though they precede Darwinism, anticipate its implications – Mary Shelley imagined an "improved" variety of human being created by a scientist, not by God – deserve the "proto- sf" label'. In effect, Ruddick's nod to *Frankenstein* serves both to acknowledge the author's and the text's importance as well as to side-line them. Situated outside of 'the Wellsian tradition' because she precedes Darwin and Wells, Shelley is marginalised as a proto-sf figure. Ruddick's decision to marginalize a key female writer such as Shelley might betray this reviewer's feminist sensitivity to a female author being so easily brushed aside and displaced by an andocentric interpretation of sf but I also consider Ruddick's rationale questionable mainly because it appears to reflect a suspect gender bias and attitude that appears throughout his work.

Ruddick's choice of language and phrasing in his book at times borders on casual sexism. For instance, in one excerpt in which Ruddick explains the problem of adapting 'classic sf texts [which] frequently have no significant female roles', he silently assumes that his reader is male when he makes the following statement:

> Under pressure to produce profitable features, most filmmakers cannot afford to neglect the reasonable desire of the female half of the population to identify with major characters of their own sex. Moreover, film is a medium in which the pleasure of looking at people can be indulged without guilt of the fear of an aggressive reaction. Everyone likes to look at beautiful women: their physiology is the basis of human aesthetics. Adaptors of classic sf once had a choice: be 'faithful' by including only those minor female roles specified by the source text, or add major female roles and take the risk of distorting the source material. Today this is no longer really a choice: to be greenlighted, films must have women in important roles. Successful adaptations manage these inclusions while respecting the source material.

Here Ruddick wishes to make the point that adaptation is not merely about the faithful translation of a classic sf text into film but rather adaptation is about remediating a text respectfully, while also reflecting present concerns and addressing shifting attitudes in contemporary culture. Unfortunately, however, in his explanation, Ruddick also naturalizes film as a domain for the male gaze that facilitates the male pleasure of looking at women. Ruddick's sexist tone is presented without irony or critical comment. Instead, the resolution to this 'problem' of women is explained away as an economic necessity by a filmmaker's sole pursuit of profit, which dictates women must not be denied their 'reasonable desire' for a more equitable representation in science fiction. Ruddick's tone towards women authors and readers in science fiction is patronizing, jarring against what is otherwise a book that provides a

fantastic showcase of one expert's knowledge and interpretation of science fiction literature and its adaptation. Whether Ruddick's viewpoint is part of his 'unapologetically subjective' approach to science fiction remains unclear, but the fact that both editor and publisher failed to vet Ruddick's clumsy account of women more closely is somewhat worrying.

Nonetheless, despite this problem in Ruddick's book, his work on adaptation and his knowledge of science fiction is impressive, providing a welcome contribution to adaptation studies that grants *Science Fiction Adapted to Film* a necessary place in the toolbox of critical studies in science fiction.

Dan Hassler-Forest*, Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism* **(Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 246 pp., £91.60)**

Reviewed by Rhys Williams (University of Glasgow)

Dan Hassler-Forest's insightful new book positions the contemporary practice of transmedia world-building as a privileged site for reading the tensions of contemporary global capitalism. It's a persuasive choice. Contemporary story-telling in the fantastic mode is less a matter of contained narratives, and more an immersion in – and continual construction of – story*worlds*, in which any number of discrete stories can take place. Our focus has shifted, Hassler-Forest argues, 'from the linear and teleological structure of narrative to the environment that surrounds and sustains it'. Such work is 'transmedia' because it 'takes place not within but *across* media' – think films, books, games, webpages, toys, and more, all funneling in to (or more precisely, *filling out*) one big world.

It is a productive site for political analysis because these worlds are produced through the tension between the official, for-profit canonical output of commercial franchises, and 'fandom's radically heterogeneous creative work'. From fan fiction to conventions to online debates and remixes of canon, there are enormous possibilities for creative grass-roots engagement by fans. Hassler-Forest figures this tension by mapping it onto Hardt and Negri's influential theorizing of Empire and Multitude. As global capital spreads its tentacles ever further, it also opens up new networks of communication and collaboration with radical, anti-Empire potential – Multitude. Transmedia story-worlds are thus the site, and emergent signature of, the tension between capital's top-down

impulse to colonization, and the radical bottom-up potential for creativity, playful subjectivities and community-building that such worlds hold open to their fans.

The book takes a Jamesonian cue for interpreting these storyworlds, reading three levels on which they mobilize the anti-capitalist imagination, and on which the radical potential can be re-appropriated back into Capital's fold. First, the basic narratives of the stories; second, the way the storyworld itself is organized; and finally, the level of production, encompassing the creative and collaborative work of the fans, and its varying relationship with the profit-driven work of the media conglomerates.

The book's argument depends upon the assumption, argued from Ernst Bloch to Richard Dyer and beyond, that the fundamental attraction of these cultural products, whether fans know it or not, lies in the way they contain 'the common hope and desire for a different, better world'. But the book itself is also of the utopian party. Hassler-Forest wants to 'move beyond mere critique' and take a 'more utopian and celebratory approach' – 'to identify and acknowledge' the 'radical potential' of the various story-worlds but 'without underestimating the powerful forces that contain it'. In this spirit, the book moves along an increasingly positive trajectory.

After the introductory first chapter there are four main chapters that detail increasingly radical examples of contemporary transmedia world-building. The first acts as a kind of foundational section, looking at the paradigmatic worlds of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (the TV series) and *The Lord of the Rings* (with an emphasis on the Peter Jackson movies). These are read as straddling and articulating the wider shift from an older, imperial paradigm to Hardt and Negri's full-blown Empire. *LOTR* gives us a pre-capitalist fantasy while *TNG* provides a post-capitalist technocratic utopia, but both ultimately 'depend on a central tension between imperialism's tendency to establish clear boundaries, on the one hand, and capitalism's deterritorialising nature, on the other'. This chapter also traces the shifting status of fans over the latter half of the twentieth century, from a marginalized section of the audience to being seen as core influencers and collaborators. Along the way, 'fan culture is increasingly absorbed and reterritorialised as a valuable new form of immaterial labour', transforming it 'from a set of social relations that operates on the fringes of capitalist culture to an essential component of Empire's biopolitical power'. This has the effect of 'diminishing the storyworlds' political potential', and indeed this presents a problem that dogs the book's optimism throughout.

The second set of readings focus on *Game of Thrones* and the remake of *Battlestar Galactica*, situating these as Empire's transformations of *LOTR* and *Star Trek*, 'minimizing the residual elements of imperialism and industrial capitalism, and articulating in dramatic form the postideological spirit of global

capitalism.' Named as examples of 'fantastic capitalism' (riffing off Mark Fisher's capitalist realism), they are steeped in a cynical realism that ultimately reinforces capitalism's basic logic, despite their apparent otherworldliness. Flexibility is the key to survival, and relinquishing belief in traditional stable identities and values a must. A utopian thrust is nonetheless identified. *GoT* articulates a 'politically productive tension between the nonexistence of global capitalism's big Other and the emergence of a monstrous, unrepresentable Real' – which is to say it recognizes that when there is nothing stable to believe in, monsters crop up everywhere. *BSG* on the other hand contains a religious sincerity that is deeply utopian and thoroughly at odds with its overall cynical realism. Again, there is not much hope at the level of production – the capture of fans as Brand Ambassadors is well described, and for *BSG* the idea of interpassivity posits an approach to collaboration between fans and media companies that 'offers the illusion of participation while remaining firmly grounded in the processes of cognitive capitalism's immaterial labour and capital accumulation'. Over-production of authorized additional story elements dampens the need for fan production and turns producers into consumers.

The third section looks at a pairing of texts that directly foreground class conflict and revolutionary political action: the Starz TV series *Spartacus* and *The Hunger Games* franchise. There is more radical hope here, the idea being that the revolutionary energy tapped into by these texts cannot be fully contained by the capitalist machinery. This is the chapter where we turn decisively from negative to positive. Firstly, these two texts present critical breakthroughs in the radical imagination of the present. Both 'foreground the crucial role of spectacle and mass media as an instrument of global capitalism's biopolitical power, bringing into clearer focus the central problematic of imagining new collective forms that could mobilize anticapitalist action'. They outline the problem much more clearly than other texts. On this recommendation I watched the *Spartacus* TV series, and found myself completely and unexpectedly enamored by it. Hassler-Forest brilliantly pinpoints the value and appeal of this gorily orgiastic work, which 'acknowledges the seductive power of the spectacle while also critiquing its fundamentally political nature'. Both *Spartacus* and *The Hunger Games* provide us with an important narrative and conceptual antidote to the overwhelming individualism of Empire. Both 'project the organization of social, cultural, and political alternatives in ways that foreground systems, structures, and social relations rather than individual narratives'. This chapter highlights the necessity for radical action to be communal, and for it to be a process of *making* alternatives, not merely imagining them. It also, appropriately, gives us the best example of fan culture moving decisively in a political direction – the Harry Potter Alliance, and its use of *The Hunger Games* to leverage political

action in the real world.

The final chapter is the culmination of this growing radical potential, and locates that potential in the notion of the posthuman. The argument is that to move beyond capitalism we must reject its basic coordinates of liberal humanism and its subjectivities, utilizing zombies (*The Walking Dead* TV series) and cyborgs (the oeuvre of Janelle Monáe) to think it through. For Hassler-Forest 'the radical potential of posthumanism lies in its ability to disrupt and transform the hierarchies that underlie the entire history of capitalism', and 'it gives us deceptively simple concepts that can actually move *beyond* capitalism's focus on the individual subject as an entrepreneur of the self.' Zombies are the negative face of our utopian desire – to watch the collapse of the status quo, but also to identify ourselves directly with the zombies, either as capitalism's victims, or more thoroughly embracing the posthuman potential of the undead as revolutionary. A point that Hassler-Forest doesn't make is that the zombie hordes succeed in pulling down capitalism precisely because they are a horde – they are communal agency embodied, the individual suppressed utterly. But it is in the cyborg – and in Monáe's world-building in particular – that Hassler-Forest sees the positive, creative potential for building an alternative to capitalism.

Hassler-Forest gives us an explosive display of critical acumen in this section on Monáe – there is a reading of her video 'Cold War' in particular that deserves applause. Broadly, he interprets the looser, more ambiguous world-building of Monáe by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* to theorize its refusal of coherent unity or meaning. Such ambiguity is purported to 'reject post-Enlightenment foundations organized around a metaphysics of presence in favour of the posthuman realm of Hardt and Negri's Multitude'. Monáe's world-building is intelligent, layered, complexly articulated, and has much in common with (as the author notes) Philip K. Dick's ideal of worlds that fall apart. And yes, these do reject the coordinates of Enlightenment humanism in a number of ways. Further, Monáe's work is Afrofuturist, and like works in that genre it directly estranges and rewrites the truth of our primary world rather than creating a separate secondary world that might reinforce the coordinates of our own.

But here at the peak is where this excellent book seems to falter. After a cumulative argument that stresses the necessary communality of radical action, it feels wrong to give Monáe this pride of place. Behind all of the ambiguity and fluidity of her world-building, there is something absolutely concrete, which is her, Janelle Monáe; the individual, the entrepreneur, the brand. She is the flexible, fluid neoliberal subject par excellence. Her whole USP is her unique self, sharply defined amongst the playfulness, and holding it all together ('embrace everything that makes you unique', as her cover of *Diva Magazine* has it). To

lay radical utopian potential at her feet clashes with Hassler-Forest's claims that 'Global capitalism's biopolitical power depends in the first place on us thinking of ourselves not as members of a class or group but as distinct individuals who cherish their singularity above all else. The cultural logic of neoliberalism thus teaches us to be an entrepreneur of the self while systematically demonizing all forms of collective organization'. She has a collective, of course – Wondaland – but again, there is no real detail in the text of what this entails, or why it's particularly radical, and really Wondaland isn't radical. At best it's a privileged space for creativity of the kind that's existed for centuries, and at worst it's a start-up, a hothouse for entrepreneurs, churning out unique, recognizable artists.

The explanation lies in the fact that Hassler-Forest shows signs of Accelerationism. He references warmly a few texts from the canon – *Inventing the Future* (2015) by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams perhaps the most well-known. The idea roughly is that to get beyond Capitalism we have to embrace it, and exacerbate it – to push the logic of Empire until it collapses. As an argument it's an important corrective to radical politics that remain local in their thinking, or merely reactive in their utopianism. But it leads us, in this book, to this odd impasse, where we acknowledge the necessity of communal agency, and the damage of Empire in breaking down traditional categories of belonging, and yet our example of the most radical subjectivity is the most individual, the most entrepreneurial, the one that most embraces the same logic of deterritorialization. For this to be persuasive, the moment of involution, where such sheer individuality and mutability becomes community and belonging on a mass scale, needs to be articulated. As it stands, it feels like a mode of being available only to a privileged few, and far from scalable.

Hassler-Forest is right to stand on the side of the utopian. But much optimistic work has been done on fan cultures, and one of the main valuable contributions of this book is the negative, critical balance it brings to that conversation, detailing the appropriation and remaking of fan culture by the profit and production circuits of contemporary capitalism. Hassler-Forest ultimately makes this argument too well, and doesn't have anything like as much weight on the opposite, optimistic side. His readings of the radical potential at the level of narratives, and of the worlds themselves, are excellent and productive. But, as he acknowledges, real oppositional force comes not so much from imagining, but from doing, from organizing and building opposition in the real world – from his third layer of interpretation, that of production. And here the evidence is thin on the ground. We get a passing mention of the 'Frodo Lives!' tagline from the counterculture years, a gesture towards the Occupy movement's occasional donning of zombie make-up, and – by far the most significant example of

the imaginary turning into reality – the example of the Harry Potter Alliance, which has done some good work (but again, how *radical*, how *oppositional*, in Raymond Williams' terms, rather than *alternative*?). Mostly the fan culture work is either cheerleading for the new commoditized franchises, and, in the case of the *Spartacus* fans, a clear disinterest in the radical politics of the show itself. If we are genuinely talking about anti-capitalism, rather than the expansion of certain individual freedoms which capital doesn't have much of a problem with really, then there doesn't seem to be much cause for hope here. The hope – and much of the hope that we invest the fantastic genres with – hinges on 'the notion that transmedia world-building involves not only the audience's creative transformations of commercial entertainment properties but also the active development of alternative imaginary worlds'. Hassler-Forest sees this as a practice ground for people to not only consume narratives of possible alternatives to the status quo, but to be actively engaged in their construction – and so gaining some sense of agency over the construction of a new world in reality. And yet there is no real evidence of this tending in a radical direction, as opposed to just escapism, or play.

Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics is an excellent book. It draws our attention to a dominant contemporary mode of the imagination, and identifies it as a key battleground. The interpretation of the socio-economic tensions that give rise to the particular form, mode, and content of these story-worlds is thoroughly convincing. When it draws out the forces that shape these narratives, and how they negotiate them, it is always insightful, often sparkling. This intervention is extremely valuable, and should be a spur to scholars of narrative of all stripes to take account of this radical change in the way their subject matter is being produced, and perhaps we can cut the Gordian knot that this book brings to our attention. Like zombies in *World War Z*, utopianism is often just a matter of throwing bodies at the problem.
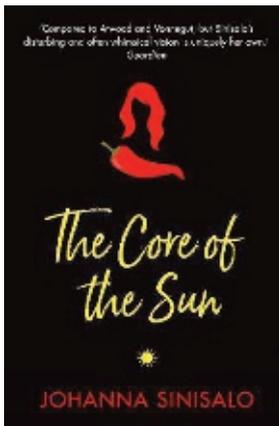
Johanna Sinisalo, *The Core of the Sun* (Grove, 2016, 302pp, £8.99)

Reviewed by Mylène Branco (University of Kent)

The Core of the Sun owes much to the classic dystopias of the twentieth century. Strongly reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Sinisalo's work pivots around the gender politics that are brought about by an extreme welfare state, a so-called 'eusistocracy', in which 'the government's

most important task is to promote the overall health and well-being of the citizens'. The novel's epistolary form, composed of fictional propaganda pieces and school reports, letters, and dictionary entries (mirroring George Orwell's Newspeak appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949]) does not so much break up the storyline as gradually establish the reader's understanding of the political structures of this alternative society.

Women, the reader learns, are divided into two distinct classes, 'elois' and 'morlocks' (a direct reference to H.G. Wells is made in the dictionary entry of these terms), and distinguish themselves by their appearance and reproductive abilities. Elois are, by definition, beautiful. Fair-haired, their doll-like appearance is emphasized by heavy make-up and specific eloi attire designed to attract healthy 'mascos', who, as opposed to the physically deficient 'minus men', are desirable candidates on the mating market. Elois officially enter the market after a decadent coming-out ball that resembles a carnivalesque meat market as female flesh is extravagantly exposed by low-cut dresses and revealing skirts.

Sinisalo, thus, skilfully depicts the sexualizing effects that women have to endure when faced with an abusive health system, one whose politics are based on eugenic ideologies, which endorse the sterilization of the socially weaker individuals. The non-fiction article Sinisalo includes to support her narrative dates back to 1935 and advocates human sterilization by arguing that 'society no longer rids itself of weak individuals by means of a natural instinct for self-preservation, demanding that the weak make way for the strong. The preservation of our species thus must be ensured by other means, the nearest at hand being the prevention of the birth of weak individuals'. It continues by suggesting that it is the responsibility of the 'genetically eligible' to ensure the preservation of the human species. In conjunction with the domestication experiments of Dimitri Belyayev, a Russian geneticist, who, through genetic selection, managed to produce a tame breed of foxes, the Republic of Finland succeeds in creating the domesticated eloi, or 'femiwoman'. Similar to their Wellsian predecessors, elois are intellectually limited. Their submissive behaviour is culturally conditioned; they are treated like dogs: rewards for good behaviour, punishment for bad one. In order to shed light on the abusive power structures emanating from this patriarchal regime, Sinisalo switches between narrators. As different voices blend, the reader is able to get a sense of the oppressive tendencies that are caused by the medical discourses that have inspired the Finnish government.

The Core of the Sun mainly focuses on the relationship between two sisters, Vera and Mira. After a series of tests designed to specify their final gender, Vera and Mira are renamed Vanna and Manna. This marks their eloi identity. However, and this is what distinguishes the sisters, Vanna/Vera was actually born a morlock. Having successfully copied and adopted her sister's natural

eloi demeanour, Vanna/Vera is able to pass. Her hybridity allows her to join the criminal activities of a masco, Jare, who deals with different forms of chilli flakes prohibited in Finland because of the capsaicin addiction it has caused among its population. Vanna/Vera, too, is an addict, a 'capso'.

The use of drugs is a recurring theme in dystopian fictions. While different forms of drugs have generally been utilized for mass manipulation and control, Sinisalo reverses their traditional power structures by imagining a religious sect who seek to harvest the ultimate chilli. The Gaians believe in a mystical connection between the chilli and a person. By breeding the strongest possible chilli, they aim to detach themselves from the rational, scientific society they are subjected to. The Gaians' clandestine cultivation of chillies characterizes a revolutionary act never before seen in the dystopian tradition. Indeed, the shamanic experience of spirit travelling that the Core of the Sun induces stands in sharp contrast with the lulling effects of Aldous Huxley's soma. To Finnish citizens this most powerful of all chillies would offer the opportunity to escape the shackles of their totalitarian regime. An out-of-body experience means that body and mind become two separate entities. Opening up a new dimension, this new chilli represents the key to a change of perspective. The Core of the Sun holds the power to connect individual minds and free-thinkers. It is empowering in that the body is not needed for a revolutionary act, and therefore constitutes a threat to the social order called for by a totalitarian system that intends to re-programme its citizens' minds and take control of their bodies.

Following in the footsteps of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies, Sinisalo chooses a strong female protagonist for her novel. Vanna/Vera is literally driven by the fire of the chilli. In her quest to find out what happened to her sister, Vanna/Vera defies easy categorization. She shows equal, if not superior, intelligence to the men she encounters, thereby challenging the normative gender roles at play. From the very first page, Sinisalo has her reader hooked. Describing how Vanna/Vera tests a sample of chilli flakes by inserting it into her vagina, Sinisalo sets the tone for the rest of her story. *The Core of the Sun* is a provocative satire interspersed with vibrant images summoned up by the protagonist's personal experiences. Past and present alternate in a rhythmical manner drawing the reader deeper and deeper into the mind of this complex woman, who, to add to the intricate layering of the dystopia, has synaesthesia, which allows her to assess people's reactions and intentions from a different point of view. In this respect, Sinisalo does not only open up an in-between space for her protagonist, but also for her reader. Because of Vanna/Vera's double identity, the reader is able to explore Sinisalo's novel from different angles, and to actively engage with the thriller that parallels her dystopia. *The Core of the Sun* is a reminder that dystopian literature, as a genre, is multifaceted and, in

the light of ever-changing political upheaval, inexhaustible.
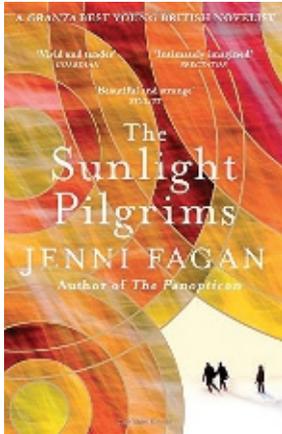
Jenni Fagan, *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (Windmill, 2016, 320pp, £8.99)

Rose Harris-Birtill (University of St Andrews)

If current events – Brexit, Trump, North Korea – haven't completely ruined your appetite for disaster narratives, Jenni Fagan's latest novel offers a more pocket-sized tale of a very different type of global problem: the planet, a few years from now, facing its most extreme winter for two hundred years.

From the author of *The Panopticon* (2012), a lion-hearted first novel about a girl struggling to grow up in the foster care system, comes a powerful speculative fiction of the nearly-now, a tale set in a remote corner of Scotland as a twenty-first century ice age creeps in. Set over four months, from November 2020 to March 2021, Fagan's novel takes us to the brink of human endurance as the temperature creeps down from a chilly -6 degrees Celsius to a deathly -56. What follows isn't a global epic on the fate of the human race, or a Hollywood-style mission to save the world. This is a novel that traces the everyday struggle to survive the big freeze through the eyes of three characters: a displaced Londoner, a seasoned survivalist and a twelve-year-old transgender girl.

The tale begins as Dylan MacRae leaves a note for the bailiffs, packs his family's ashes, and locks up his tiny Soho art-house cinema for the final time. He heads north, setting out for a remote Scottish caravan park to find the caravan that he recently inherited from his mother. Arriving in the beautiful, freezing surroundings of Clachan Fells and setting up his 'dilapidated' new home amidst 'shoulder-high thistles' as winter worsens, he meets Stella Fairbairn and her free-spirited mother Constance, who help their ill-prepared new neighbour adapt to the harsh conditions. Yet as the three pull together to create their own unconventional family-unit-of-sorts, the local community's struggles to deal with the cold pale in comparison to the wider global fallout taking place. Fagan's snapshots of the international reaction to the impending ice age feel disturbingly real. As Morocco is buried under twenty feet of snow, protests erupt against the local government for allowing families living on the streets to perish. Chicago declares a city-lockdown after being overwhelmed by riots and widespread looting. As global climate change causes Scotland's northernmost islands to freeze over, incredulous tourists and fisherman alike

hold up camera phones to an iceberg drifting down the Scottish coast, while IKEA is opened as a community centre for desperately-needed medical aid, shelter, food and warmth.

This is a tale with an acute social conscience, as well as an environmental one, and the novel's juxtapositons of domestic and global events are equally chilling. Stella's developing identity as a transgender pre-teen and her anxieties about boys, sex and her strained relationship with her father are countered by the very real possibility that none of the novel's characters may in fact survive the months ahead. The worsening winter is matched by the impending onset of puberty for Stella – which, without access to the right medical treatment, she must face in the wrong body, following a doctor's referral that leaves her facing a wait of over a year for the hormone replacement that she so desperately needs. As her mother struggles to prepare for the coming freeze, scavenging for old furniture to restore and sell for food and fuel, their domestic situations continue to unravel. Dylan will find out the dark family secret that led him to Clachan Fells. Stella's private delight in her secret first kiss with the most popular boy in school is offset by her harrowing experiences of bullying and discrimination from peers and community elders alike.

And yet, as their surroundings become colder, and colder, and colder still, there is a warmth in this novel that refuses to leave. Yes, we are made to witness the possible final weeks, days and hours of the human race – but we also see a small community pulling together to face the unknown together. The landscape almost seems invigorated by human demise, even more beautiful as it becomes more deadly: 'the landscape is brilliantly lit, flawless' in endless snow, while 'somewhere in the cherry blossoms away down the farm lane there are the tiny buds just waiting for a thaw that might never come round.' And yet Fagan's characters never entirely lose hope: 'They can't feel it, but perhaps the thaw is finally on the way somewhere in the world, a tiny shoot of green way down in the soil somewhere, ready to reach its way up toward the light.'

The novel's final section is equally ambiguous: is this the end for Dylan, Constance, Stella and *homo sapiens* itself, or does the possibility of their survival change the novel's focus to a fledgling love story between Dylan and Constance and a coming-of-age tale for Stella? Fagan rightly refuses us the readerly satisfaction of finding out. As with Brexit, Trump and North Korea, for the moment, we can only imagine how it will end.

With her second novel, Fagan has deftly navigated a difficult balance for any author – striking away from the already-trodden subject matter and preoccupations of *The Panopticon* whilst leaving enough thematic and stylistic continuity to create a distinct and powerful narrative voice across the two novels. While there are plenty of differences between *The Sunlight Pilgrims*'

more subtle engagement with the natural world and *The Panopticon*'s gritty realism and raw narrative style, manifested in the latter's unflinching portrayal of adolescent mental illness and Scottish subalternity, both novels venture into alternative communities, confronting shared issues of survival, exclusion, identity and grief with remarkable warmth and humanity. *The Sunlight Pilgrims* somehow manages to find humour amidst the possible end of the world, and there are many darkly funny moments here. Unable to fit his family's cremation urns in his suitcase before setting out for his journey to Scotland, Dylan's only suitable alternative containers are an ice-cream tub and a Tupperware container, leaving him scratching his head over who should go where: 'Vivienne would be mighty fucking pissed off about travelling anywhere in an ice-cream tub. His grandmother wouldn't give much of a shit.'

Set against the deep-time markers of mountains, glaciers and icebergs, Fagan's impressive novel reinforces that once such global disaster is already underway, human actions can be brave, humbling and even funny – but ultimately, they will be pitifully inadequate. Fagan's portrait of a near-future environmental dystopia joins a growing list of twenty-first century literary fictions that force us to confront just how frighteningly easy it currently is to imagine a global-scale ecological catastrophe within our lifetimes (for example, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy or David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*).

Read against the current political struggles between environmentalists and climate-change deniers, made all the more real by Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement in July 2017, Fagan's haunting tale offers a warning that we cannot afford to ignore: if we don't take global climate change seriously – and act accordingly – we may face catastrophically unstoppable consequences. In the midst of our real-world crises, then, make room on your bookshelf for this novel-sized intervention: a heartfelt tale of who we are, what we've done, and where we must not go.
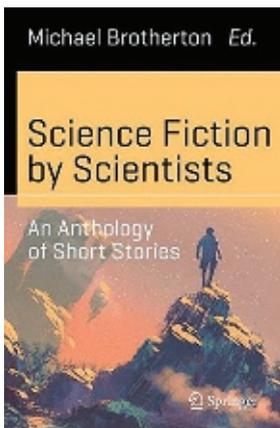
Michael Brotherton, ed. *Science Fiction by Scientists: An Anthology of Short Stories* (Springer, 2016, 228pp, £15.00)

Reviewed by Thomas Kewin (University of Liverpool)

In the preface to *Science Fiction by Scientists*, Michael Brotherton suggests that the distinguishing feature of sf 'has always been and always shall be the "science" part'. With this in mind, it is not altogether surprising

that the scientific interest present in this anthology of fourteen short stories is exceptional; nonetheless, it is a shame that what results is an uneven selection of hard sf storytelling, calling to mind another collection, Geoff Ryman's *When It Changed: Science into Fiction* (2009), which covered similar ground.

Given the central gambit of transforming thoughtful scientific premises into faithful narratives or captivating reads, there is an imbalance in the success rate. Those that do succeed in executing their ideas provoke fascinating discussions and, in turn, project spectacular beings and worlds for the imagination to inhabit, some returning to familiar tropes such as the colonizing of new worlds, bioengineering the human subject and the possibility of machine intelligence. Others falter in turning over tired sf tropes and producing sparse stories that fail to develop a sense of purpose beyond the initial kernel of an idea. Whilst firmly abreast of developments in the field of scientific research, more often than not, the stories stall before their wonderful ideas are realized on the page.

Having initially drawn a comparison between *Science Fiction by Scientists* and *When It Changed*, it is worth noting the distinction between the two anthologies is that the latter includes collaborations between scientists and literary authors, whereas the present anthology is celebrated as a testament to the scientific literacy of its authors. SF has always necessitated the blending of scientific speculation with literary style and narrative, and thus I am hesitant to make broad proclamations about what constitutes a successful union of the two. Although I would pause to make the observation that introducing an opposition between scientists and literary authors by further privileging the '"science" part' seems like a backwards step – especially when reflecting on the work of respected science fiction writers operating outside scientific industries, like Justina Robson, Adam Roberts, Simon Ings and Ken MacLeod, who appear in Ryman's collection.

The most egregious device is that of 'info-dumping'. Although I tend to forgive its usage, as even some of the superb inclusions within this collection are guilty at times, there are moments when it is intrusive and signals rather clearly that exposition is necessary, often at the expense of character development; in most cases, this is due to the sparsity of some of the narratives. In this vein, certain stories, particularly Marissa Lingen's 'Upside the Head' and Andrew Fraknoi's 'Supernova Rhythm', are fluent, sometimes gripping, additions to the anthology, yet they feel as if they serve more as introductions to more expansive novels and expanded worlds than as self-contained short stories. Particularly with regard to the latter short story, the narrative felt weighed down by intrusive, expository interludes to maintain the mechanism of the plot. Arguably, a similar criticism could be made of the entire premise for Les Johnson's 'Spreading the Seed', which is itself one of sf's most over-used clichés: Earth is threatened

by an asteroid, and a space mission must be mounted to save the planet. Nonetheless, Johnson's depiction of the ongoing search for an exoplanet, a reflection on the Fermi Paradox, as well as the depiction of interstellar travel with the 'de Broglie generators', did excite the sf reader in me and suggested an awe-inspiring galaxy populated by wonders and terrors in equal measure. However, these moments are fairly scattershot. Dialogue often acts as a substitute for a sense of personal interiority or even action – the brief length of some of the stories in the collection communicates a relative lack of character development or plot.

In spite of these criticisms, Ken Wharton's 'Down and Out' stands apart as one of the superlative stories by introducing an alien protagonist, Ogby, who lives within the ice-encrusted landscapes of Jupiter's moon, Europa. Wharton distances the reader from the central character by emphasizing the alien workings of her anatomy, and in the same gesture crafts a convincing nonhuman character to inhabit a world of precarious direction and multi-sensory communication – techniques that intuit a sense of otherworldly characterization.

Equally flawless in its execution and sheer creativity is Edward M. Lerner's 'Turing de Force'. Lerner offers a distinct sense of style and humour, particularly in his use of dialogue, framing the narrative around the central question, 'Can protoplasmic life *be* intelligent?', which is itself an inherent criticism of an already familiar sf trope, the Turing Test. Similarly, Tedd Robert's 'Neural Alchemist' provides a perverse zombie narrative that overturns horror clichés by communicating the tedium of the afterlife, as Professor Posthumous has to navigate the whiles of university administration and academic life.

Ultimately, though, *Science Fiction by Scientists* is an uneven collection of hard sf short stories that harnesses ground-breaking, scientific ideas but often frames them within tired, familiar narratives that communicate most of their action through dialogue and thematic recourse. The exceptions are successful because of their subversion of familiar scientific tropes, creative and often humorous characterization, as well as logical and enticing world-building. It is, however, the afterwords that are most illuminating by allowing the scientists-cum-authors to explore the plausibility and intent behind their work; these segments often provide greater depth than the stories themselves.
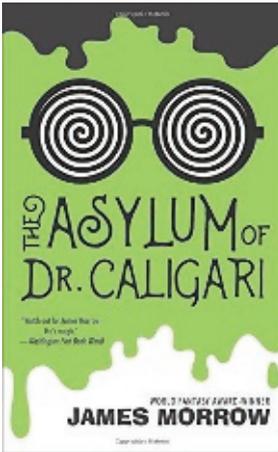
James Morrow, *The Asylum of Dr. Caligari* (Tachyon, 2017, 192pp, £10.99)

Reviewed by D. Harlan Wilson (Wright State University)

This short, multi-generic novel combines elements of surrealism, sf, fantasy, metafiction, existentialism, humour and satire while extrapolating the titular source material, Robert Wiene's silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), an appropriately multi-generic work in itself that has been widely regarded as an epitome of German Expressionism as well as a precursor to cult, horror, arthouse and noir cinema. In the film, Caligari is an ostensibly pathological hypnotist. He enchants and forces a somnambulist, Cesare, to commit a series of murders in the fictional German village of Holstenwall. In Morrow's book, the main character's first name is Francis; he witnesses the unfolding of Caligari's transgressions and his perspective informs our viewing of the film, which is framed by Francis's retelling of events. Ultimately we learn that Caligari is not a murderer but the director of an insane asylum where Francis has been committed, rendering the film a product of his paranoid delusion.

The Asylum of Dr. Caligari appropriates and riffs on some aspects of the film and can arguably operate as a kind of loose sequel, although a knowledge of the film is not contingent upon an appreciation of Morrow's flight of fancy. Caligari remains the director of an asylum, but of a different type, one specializing in 'art therapy', an experimental form of psychiatric treatment whereby patients come to terms with their various disorders by learning how to channel them onto the canvas. Caligari, rebuking Freud at every turn, believes that the 'future of psychiatry belongs to hypnotism, not to some byzantine theory or sublimated fucking', whilst his method of treatment in 'the brave new world of heteropathic medicine' involves usurping one delusion with another. Caligari adds: 'We charm the patient into embracing a self-image incompatible with the behavior that brought him here. Does he suffer from split personality? Then convince him, through drugs and hypnotism, that he is God of the Jews, that is, the most monolithic entity imaginable.' Over time, then, the two delusions will negate one another. It's funny – but at the same time not a far cry from the imaginative vagaries of some Freudian machinations.

The novel begins in 1913 on the eve of the Great War. Francis Wyndham, an American painter and recent graduate from the Pennsylvania Academy

of Fine Arts, travels to Europe 'aflame with the naïve notion that avant-garde images were destined to cure the complacency of the bourgeoisie'. Rejected by a string of prominent real-life artists, Wyndham finds favour in the eyes of André Derain, who ushers him into Caligari's employ as art therapist-in-residence at Träumenchen in Weizenstaat, a fictional principality situated on the border of Luxembourg and the German Empire.

Played by Werner Krauss, an actor known in his time as 'the man with a thousand faces', Wiene's Caligari is a focal character who appears in the better part of the film's scenes. Morrow's Caligari, in contrast, is not as visible; in fact, he is more palpable by way of his chronic absence and the havoc that he wreaks off the page, like a puppeteer manipulating the strings of existence from the rafters. When he does appear, his presence always takes precedence, and he rarely misses an opportunity to impart some kind of witticism, apothegm or philosophy of the human condition. Morrow's initial description of him recalls the features of Krauss' hypnotist while demonstrating the dynamism and acuity of his writing:

> He was a stout and blockish man, reminiscent of Andrew Dashburg's plaster Lucifer from the Armory Show, with redundant chins, tumescent cheeks, a beetle brow, and round-lensed, black-rimmed spectacles behind which tiny eyes lurked like skittish voles. His clothing was elegant, a black frock coat with a vest of green brocade. Despite his formidable features, he proceeded to install on his face a countenance so benevolent that a pastor would have gladly entrusted him with the role of Saint Nicholas in a church pageant.

Allusions to artists like Dashburg (among other figures of literature, science, philosophy and psychology) aren't limited to Caligari, who is more frequently associated with Nietzsche and his Dionysian style of artistry and post-morality. They abound in the novel, which isn't surprising insofar as Wyndham is the narrator, but the references serve to constellate a text that is also a work of art distinguished by rich, playful prose and a non-traditional storyline that many publishers wouldn't indulge and that most authors can't get away with, let alone get away with effectively. Some readers may feel that the prose is overbearing or affected, but that's the point, or at least the effect. Satirizing the various posturings and pretensions of the stereotypical artiste, Morrow paints an ironically alluring portrait of an alternate history in which the Great War is spurred by a supernatural will to power.

The film has been treated as an allegory for the brutality of war and the abuse of power and control, with (Kaiser) Caligari representing German tyranny and (Hermann) Cesare the symbolic, mechanized Everyman who is made into

a soldier and killer. To some degree, Morrow literalizes this allegory, depicting Caligari as an evil genius whose magnum opus, *Ecstatic Wisdom*, transforms 'tender young men into sleepwalking warriors'. The portrait is a 'war machine' (*Kriegsmaschine*) that hypnotizes the masses and incites bloodlust in viewers. Generals from all sides of the war pay the nonpartisan Caligari for their soldiers to gaze upon and receive his 'wisdom'. His *modus operandi* is simple: 'For Nietzsche this impending cataclysm, this transcendently meaningless war, would have been a gift from the gods. Nothing is true, everything is permitted, morals are nefarious, pity is for weaklings, so let us turn our lives – and our deaths – into works of art'. Hanging his beret on the rack of meaningless violence, something J.G. Ballard foretold would become the only real insignia of modern identity, Caligari emerges as both mad artist and scientist. Like Frankenstein, he creates a monster. The difference is that he does so intentionally.

Not only did the Great War redefine the nature of warfare, it redefined the social, cultural, economic, political, psychological and ontological register, showing us how capable (and artful?) human beings are at annihilating themselves, especially in the fold of modern weaponized technologies. This sort of truth is not interchangeable with beauty, let alone happiness, and Morrow's conclusion gestures towards the collective anxiety produced by the Great War and, ultimately, human pathology and violence. On the other hand, Morrow certainly has fun with that pathology and violence, telling a story that is largely playful and often humorous. The author metafictionally aligns himself with Caligari in this respect, conjuring beauty from the madness of history. Likewise, he conjures cinematic history by extrapolating and reimagining Wiene's film.

Retrospective and introspective, *The Asylum of Dr. Caligari* is essentially a work of soft science fantasy that may be too smart and niche for a wide readership. It will appeal to readers familiar with Morrow's writing as well as those with a taste for weird literary fiction.

A Conversation
larger than the Universe

Science Fiction & the Fantastic 1762-2017

The Grolier Club, 47 E. 60th St., New York City

Exhibition on view 25 January through 10 March 2018

A Conversation Larger than the Universe charts a history of Science Fiction in seventy literary artefacts from the bookshelves of Henry Wessells. Beginning with the origins of science fiction in the Gothic, this Conversation contemplates topics such as the End of the World (and After), Imaginary Voyages, Dystopia, Women Authors, Literary Innovation, Humor, the Sixties, Rock 'n' Roll, Cyberpunk, Steampunk, and what's happening in Science Fiction and the Fantastic right now. The exhibition adopts a broad description of Science Fiction encompassing Fantasy and Horror as well as bibliography and scholarship in the field.

A Conversation Larger than the Universe , an illustrated collection of essays to accompany the exhibition, including a descriptive checklist of materials on view, will be published by The Grolier Club in January 2018. The book includes 'A Hatful of Adjectives', an original Foreword by John Crowley.

Further details at : endlessbookshelf.net/Conversation2018.html or from Henry Wessells : wessells@panix.com

Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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In this issue:

Brian W. Aldiss is remembered by Colin Greenland, Michael Moorcock, Andy Sawyer and David Wingrove
Special section on sf theatre, edited by Susan Gray, featuring articles by Shelby Brewster, Geraint D'Arcy, Ian Farnell, Tajinder Singh Hayer and Martin McGrath
Jim Clarke reviews the National Youth Theatre of Ireland's production of *R.U.R.*
Matthew De Abaitua on the influence of Alan Moore and Ian Gibson's The *Ballad of Halo Jones*
Henry Wessells on the back-story to *Ronald Reagan: The Magazine of Poetry*
Conference reports by Beata Gubacsi, Paul March-Russell and Jennifer Woodward

In addition, there are reviews by:

Mylène Branco, Rose Harris-Birtill, Thomas Kewin, Joseph Norman, Andy Sawyer, Sue Smith, Rhys Williams and D. Harlan Wilson

Of books by:

Mike Barrett, Michael Brotherton, Jenni Fagan, Dan Hassler-Forest, John Howard, James Morrow, Nicholas Ruddick, Johanna Sinisalo and Grant Wythoff

Cover image/credit: The cast of the National Youth Theatre in *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots*, by Karel Čapek, directed by Caitríona McLaughlin. Photo by Fiona Morgan. Produced by Youth Theatre Ireland at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin.