



VECTOR

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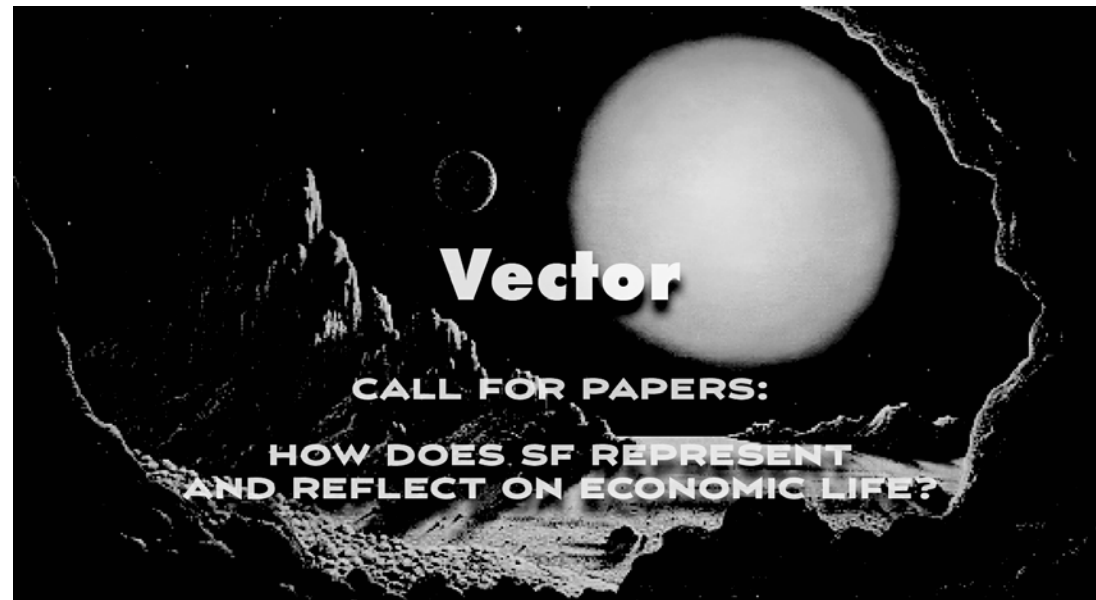
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Torque Control

Joseph Walton

'We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.'

— Ursula K. Le Guin, from a speech at the 2014 National Book Awards

THE YEAR THAT WAS

BEST OF YEAR is a venerable and a wonderful genre, but this time it makes me nervous. Something is different. The editors for example are different, but also I think it may be years that have changed. Years are springing to life. Everybody talks about these things as if they have agency, sentience, intentions. Mostly murderous ones:

'2016 is a bloodthirsty maniac who ate several of my favourite pop stars.'

2016 speaks softly at your shoulder. 'I may have had a hand in the affair, yes.'

'2016!' you gasp. 'Don't sneak up on me like that. And I mean what I said. You even killed a few celebrities I already assumed were dead, plus one or two who –'

'– whom you've always seriously suspected were immortal extraterrestrial seraphs? There, there. But really ... have you chatted with 1974 yet, Inspector? Or 1968? We're in more of a *Murder on the Orient Express* scenario here, trust me.'

'Well, you also made Trump an overlord, so.'

'Sounds like a sentient year is everyone's favourite scapegoat,' marvels 2016. 'Whereas complex historical forces in which you are partly influential, or at least complicit ... not so much. But don't take it from me.' Here comes 2017 ...'

That's why rounding up the year feels a bit like talking about somebody behind their back. Somebody who has the knack of hovering just behind yours. But our plucky contributors plunge ahead regardless, recounting their impressions of last year's science fiction across movies, TV, podcasts and audiobooks, games, art and fashion, plus a few other bits and bobs. We're also lucky enough to bring you a fantastic in-depth interview with artist Larissa Sansour, who furnishes us with the issue's cover, alongside a review by Molly Cobb of a recent Sansour exhibition.

Of course, it's futile to try to capture all that's going on: in video games, for instance, Jon Garrad spotlights *Life is Strange* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, but 2017 also saw the release of titles like *A Museum of Dubious Splendors*, *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Call of Duty: WWII*, *Cosmic Express*, *Cuphead*, *Doki Doki Literature Club*, *Dujanah*, *Earth Atlantis*, *Everything Is Going To Be OK*, *Faith*, *Future Unfolding*, *Getting Over It*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, *Little Nightmares*, *Nidhogg 2*, *Nier Automata*, *Night in the Woods*, *Old Man's Journey*, *Persona 5*, *Rain World*, *Rime*, *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*, *South Park: The Fractured But Whole*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, *Tacoma*, *Tooth, Tail, What Remains of Edith Finch*, and many more.

So what we have here is an eclectic mix: some unmissable behemoths get catalogued, plus some real hidden *Orthonama obstipata*.² The reception of *The Last Jedi* was very *Pew! Pew! Phew!* – when there’s a movie we all must see by law, it’s a massive relief that it’s big and shiny enough to let us witness ourselves and our world reflected in it.³ At the more obscure end of the spectrum, sadly no contributor has picked up on my personal cinematic highlight of 2017. ‘Spiderman GOT TEN HEADS Learn Colors Frozen Elsa Vs Pregnant Baby Hulk Vs Baby Elsa Superhero Minecraft Joker Five Fingers’ was just one of bazillions of peculiar YouTube videos aimed at very small kids that gained some grown-up attention in 2017 – mostly of a concerned kind – after exposés by Brian Koerber and James Bridle.⁴ Many of them have since disappeared.

Any glimpse of another world might also be a glimpse of our own, and these pages are woven with themes of climate change, capitalist exploitation of humans and ecology, racism, police brutality, colonialism, imperialism and occupation, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, and the strange dizzying imperilling of self and reality by new technologies. Toxic masculinity and sexual harassment appear frequently. A variety of tacit postures are taken too: gallows humour, punchy defiance, grim alertness, enthusiastic early adoption, eschatological abandon, effervescent escapism, guarded hopefulness. Surveying what Hollywood had to offer in 2017, Cheryl Morgan remarks, ‘for a genre that is traditionally supposed to be “boys only,” science fiction is doing remarkably well here. [...] I’m rather proud that my little corner of the world is taking a stand.’

Then at the back of the issue, in our recurrent columns, Stephen Baxter remembers Brian Aldiss, towering sf author, closely associated with the New Wave movement, and an influential figure in the history of the BSFA as well. Aldiss died in August. Paul Kincaid meditates on John Crowley’s ‘This Is Our Town’: could the forgiveness of sin be an inducement to sin? Could God reform the universe from scratch just to answer a prayer for snow tomorrow morning? What kind of a God would, or wouldn’t? And Andy Sawyer finds much to enjoy in James White’s *The White Papers*, admiring the humour and peaceful decency of work where ‘solving problems and helping people’ provides all the narrative drama necessary.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BSFA

2018 also marks the 60th year of the BSFA. It’s an anniversary we’ll be celebrating all year long, but especially at Eastercon, so book your tickets now! This year Eastercon is Follycon, taking place in Harrogate on 30 March, with Guests of Honour Kieron Gillen, Christina Lake, Nnedi Okorafor and Kim Stanley Robinson.

Meanwhile, the *Vector* website has already had a new lick of high-tech nanotubule-suspension smartpaint (vector-bsfa.com), and is featuring fresh content more regularly. The main BSFA website is also set for a big upgrade later in the year.

If you’re wondering where all the book reviews are, don’t forget the new digital *BSFA Review* – edited by Susan Oke, emailed to members, and downloadable from the website some time later. Keep an eye on the BSFA Facebook group, on Twitter (@BSFA), and listen out for the postie: as well as *Vector* and *Focus*, an extra-special publication assembled from the archives is headed your way later in 2018.

And tell all your friends: the time to join the BSFA is now!

This issue may be a roundup of 2017, but of course 2018 has not stood still. *Black Panther* is being hailed as the best of eighteen Marvel Cinematic Universe movies to date. Billionaire Elon Musk launched his sportscar into space without even asking. I wanted that sportscar :(. The newborn macaque clones Zhong Zhong and Hua Hua: welcome, you. We’ve been graced by a supermoon.

And Ursula K. Le Guin died.

THE FARTHEST SHORE

Ursula K. Le Guin reshaped genre fiction. Whenever we think of the possibilities of fantasy and science fiction, we’re partly thinking of the imagination, the reason, the vision and the voice of this specific person.

Her most celebrated works include the heart-lingering high fantasy sequence *Earthsea* (1968-2001), and the parable ‘The Ones that Walk Away from Omelas’ (1973), a bare-bones utopia, which is also a reflection on the utopian genre itself. Imagine the most perfect society you can: now imagine it depends on just one persistent, painful injustice. Will you live there? Will you walk away? Or...?

Le Guin became the first woman to win a Hugo Award, for *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), an impossible-to-nutshell book: boiling, icy, all about political power, myth, trust, intimacy, and the androgynous, ambisexual societies of an icelocked world, whose first visitors christened it Winter. In its introduction, Le Guin writes that sf ‘is not predictive; it is descriptive.’ Meaning: sf describes the real world, and it describes the *present*.

She is certainly not alone in cautioning her fans against treating sf as prophecies or as recipes for the future.⁵ If *The Dispossessed* (1974), a novel about an intellectually remarkable individual in a revolutionary anarchist communist society, actually *were* a recipe, it would be an odd recipe, something like:

... Step Three: Now into the middle of the flour, make a well, and into it break both eggs. Later on in the recipe, we may enter another kitchen, and see how differently they shatter the eggs in those parts. Their flour wells will be more deep and more steep, and we will be able to compare the holes in our flour with the holes in theirs, although not in any simple way. And after that, we may say a quick hello to a third kitchen, and their much shallower flour wells. But for now, this is your flour, and these your eggs, and this your well – and what good is he to you? Oh! You do not know? You drill your well, with the tips of your fingers, by rote. How did you learn? To that we will come. But for now, perhaps you’ll say, “Well, I may as well.” Perhaps you’ll say, “The wet all pools in here, so if shell falls in by mistake, I shall easily pick out the flakes.” But then is it really a *well* at all, if its real role is to fence in these rogueries of eggshells? Are you better off telling yourself you carve a *petri dish*, or sculpt a *corral* or a *peephole*, into your hill of flour in your bowl? But when all’s said and done, they do get scooped out, these bits of shell, so we must say is truly a well: only it’s not a well for water or a well for eggs, but a well for bits of shell. Could it ever have been a well, had you made it only to pour things *in*, and never to draw anything *up*? Although, after all, perhaps every well does run its traffic both ways, up and down at once. For a vessel of water may winch up, but it drops too, and so do autumn leaves and shifting shafts of light and wish-pennies and children. So do drops from the poisoner’s vial, for there are always those who peer down into the darkness and murmur, “If you wanna make an Omelas, you gotta break some eggs.” And so, to treat of the eggs themselves ...’

That’s not to say Le Guin’s prose is verbose or prone to drift – certainly not! But she thinks about what she writes. To put it bluntly, *The Dispossessed* is a novel that advocates anarchist communism by intricately inspecting the shortcomings and risks of anarchist communism.

Le Guin is an elegant stylist, whose lucid flatness over a short stretch tends to mask the restless searching of her intellect over a longer one, and the fierce roughness with which she layers her motifs, jabs her themes so they won’t sit neatly. Yes, of course *The Dispossessed* is mightily opposed to capitalism, opposed to the ownership of property, opposed to patriarchy ... but these are all only starting points.⁶

The restlessness is even there in that intro. ‘Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.’ Soon, following a few sly wry words about the profits of prophets, clairvoyants, and futurologists, Le Guin tells us something else. She tells us: ‘A novelist’s business is lying.’ And of course, whenever a liar *tells* us they are a liar, we enter the terrain of the Liar’s Paradox. Perhaps paradoxes are the novelist’s business too. Fruitful self-contradiction – that kind of tussling and quarrelling

and qualifying and hairpin-turning which never quite settles into stillness – this is certainly a very Le Guinnish quality. How? What then? What next? And after that? And after that? And what about?

As with any cherished writer, there comes the temptation to auto-tune or to cherry-pick the politics. To say, for instance, ‘Not only is Le Guin’s work feminist, it’s my particular *kind* of feminism, all the time.’ And like many very good writers, Le Guin was alive to the power of names, and chary of ideological labels. Her books, next to the social movements with which they have the greatest affinity – anti-capitalism, feminism, queer and trans politics, ecological activism – not only furnish many uncomfortable moments and qualities. These books also carry out a sustained struggle against *comfortable* discomfort, against any glib devil’s advocacy, any sense that artistic heterodoxy and orneriness is always and everywhere going to be intellectually justified, regardless of context.

Among the labels Le Guin did not use was ‘anarchist.’ In an interview in 2009, Margaret Killjoy asked her if she considered herself an anarchist. ‘I don’t,’ Le Guin replied, ‘because I entirely lack the activist element, and so it seems phony or too easy.’

Then again, not calling yourself an anarchist can be kind of an anarchist thing to do. Maybe paradoxes are an anarchist’s business too. Anthropologist David Graeber points out, ‘it’s possible to act like an anarchist – to behave in ways that would work without bureaucratic structures of coercion to enforce them – without calling yourself an anarchist, or anything else.’⁷

‘I hope you don’t mind that a lot of us claim you,’ Margaret Killjoy says, to which Ursula Le Guin soon responds: ‘Of course I don’t mind! I am touched and feel unworthy.’

Anyway. For me it was *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), probably when I was about twelve. Not a book that I enjoyed, exactly. But one that seeped into my dreams.

YOU’RE A FINE ONE TO TORQUE

Oh, and hello. *Vector* has two new editors. We say farewell to Anna McFarlane and Glyn Morgan, and congratulate them on their sundry scholarly achievements of late. Those are some big shoes to fill: since we arrived in them, Polina has successfully led an expedition to the Eastern Lace Aglet of Anna’s Left Converse, and is currently mining it for brass with a swarm of jury-rigged drill-nosed hover-drones. I set out for Glyn’s Toe in September, and I have not been heard from since.

It’s not really farewell, of course, since Anna and Glyn are both still very active in British science fiction circles. Both now hold PhDs in sf-related topics, and Anna currently is continuing to research medicine and science fiction in Dundee, while Glyn has turned Waterstones Gower Street into a kind of dazzling celebrity sci-fi chat show with his #SciFiSessions series. Why not follow their exploits on Twitter? @MariettaRosetta and @GR_Morgan.

But ... all that torque ain’t gonna control itself, so here we are, and we shall do our best. And as ever, we encourage your ideas, comments, thoughts, pitches, and letters of comment. Please send them to vector.editors@gmail.com. And now ...

ENDNOTES

1 Story prompt: chunks of time assume corporeal manifestation, in some sense. In what sense? How? What then? Peter Manson’s poem *Adjunct: An Undigest* makes suggestive reference to ‘A self-portrait of 1650.’ Warren Ellis’s Jenny Sparks is the spirit of the whole 20th Century. Hugo-nominated Chuck Tingle chronicles being *Pounded in the Butt by the Sentient Physical Manifestation of the Year 2016*. Other approaches are also possible.

2 [You mean “Gem moth,” in distinction from “behe-moth” and yet remniscent of the phrase “hidden gem”? Jo this is bad even by your standards. Make sure you cut it.]

3 My metaphors seem to have got mixed here. If it is the purpose of art to hold a mirror up to nature, that *doesn’t mean you should fire a laser at it*. Also, you don’t legally *have* to see *The Last Jedi* or to form an opinion of it. You are perfectly permitted to stroll blithely unharmed through the beam spam firefight, as glowing red pills and blue pills zap to and fro. *Pew!*

4 They’ve sometimes been described as ‘algorithmically generated,’ although we don’t think that’s *quite* right. Bridle is closer to the truth when he bemoans ‘the impossibility of determining the degree of automation which is at work here.’ He adds: ‘This is content production in the age of algorithmic discovery—even if you’re a human, you have to end up impersonating the machine.’ James Bridle, ‘Something is Wrong on the Internet’, medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2.

5 This is always more of a risk for science fiction than for fantasy, of course. Yet is it necessarily so? Could we think of Earthsea as a strange kind of recipe, or blueprint, or manifesto, just as we may be tempted to think of Anarres? (I require a *harekki* to roost on my shoulder).

6 Altruism, for instance, is every bit as dangerous as selfishness. Both of them are distortions of a kind of deeply non-propertarian, non-egotistical enlightened self-interest. I don’t think I can explain, but Le Guin can.

7 Graeber continues, ‘In fact most of us act like anarchists – even communists – a lot of the time. To be an anarchist, for me, is to do that self-consciously.’ Interview with Jo Lateau, *New Internationalist* 2014.

Review of Larissa Sansour 'In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain'

Molly Cobb

Centred on her film of the same name, Larissa Sansour's exhibition *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2017) aims to examine the links between history, self, and nation. The titular film explores the actions of a resistance group which deposits porcelain tableware underground, with the aim of influencing future archaeologists into positing the existence of a past civilisation which in fact never existed. By influencing history in such a way, the group hopes to support their future claims to the territory and resist losing their land to invading forces. By challenging claims of ownership and "historical entitlement," Sansour's film reflects on the nature of myth, history, and the self-creation of a national heritage. By de facto creating a nation, the resistance group has essentially participated in "historical intervention" and created a mythic nation which will eventually become historic fact.

By portraying the creation of an alternate history in the present to enact an alternate future, Sansour's film combines a technological future with a mythic past, most notably through the juxtaposition of high-tech spaceships and low-tech porcelain tableware. Throughout the film, Sansour excels at portraying this through the use of powerful, thought-provoking imagery. Depicting the porcelain as raining down upon the artist, Sansour couples this with the imagery of spaceships swarming overhead like a plague of locusts. Sansour's exhibition replicates the swarm of spaceships which feature in her film in the installation titled *And They Covered the Sky until it Was Black*. Referring to both porcelain and spaceships as similar to biblical plagues, Sansour explores connections between the overwhelming nature of connections to the past (that is, the porcelain) and the crushing force of an oncoming future (via the spaceships). The dropping of bombs from the spaceships reflects the destructive nature of the invading forces as

perceived by the resistance group. Interlacing these bombs with symbols of the past and future indicates how these two temporalities destroy one another, inform one another, and ultimately survive one another. The porcelain placed by the resistance group thus aims to reclaim what this invading future has destroyed.

Linking art and reality together, Sansour has also enacted burial performances of actual porcelain tableware in Israel and Palestine, with the coordinates of these burial sites recorded in a series of bronze sculptures styled like Soviet missiles and included in the exhibition. As the porcelain is buried rather than exhibited with the other artwork, they are essentially artefacts in absentia, with the bronze sculptures as their proxy. Indicating their presence despite their absence, Sansour examines notions of culture and nationality as concrete concepts which exist as a result of their effect or influence rather than through their actual presence. The use of bombs to indicate the burial sites reflects the destructive imagery in Sansour's film as these buried objects are designed to reflect a nation destroyed. In combining bomb imagery with the burial of these false artefacts, however, Sansour toys with the idea that these remnants are actually a destructive force due to their alteration of history.

Examining the connections between myth and history allows Sansour to explore ideas of fiction, narrative, and the ability of individuals to twist such things into fact despite their fictive nature. In fact, Sansour's film ends with the same dialogue with which it begins – "tell me about your dream" – which not only calls into question whether the events in the film have occurred as fiction or reality, but reflects the cyclical nature of history and myth. In creating this fictional history, however, Sansour implies that the resistance group is not altering anything which has not already been previously modified. Rather,

the resistance group accuses the ruling nation of 'unseeing' anything that does not fit, or is inconsistent with, their narrative fiction in which they alone are entitled to the land. Claiming that the burial of the porcelain is "depositing facts," the film's protagonist refers to herself as a "narrative terrorist." She goes on to comment that "fiction has a constitutive effect on history and political reality." As such, the nation which the resistance group hopes to create will exist as a polemic utopia, designed to alter political history in such a way as to grant them entitlement which does not exist. Discussing the creation of history as an act of storytelling which alters the political landscape, Sansour implies that myth not only creates fact, it indeed creates identification via heritage, culture, and nationality as well. Referring to the present reality in which the resistance group exists, Sansour calls it a "barely functioning dystopia" and overlays the film with apocalyptic imagery designed to reflect not only the destructive nature of the bombs but the idea of change. Indicating that apocalypse has a way of sneaking up on the individual, Sansour acknowledges that the historical change which the resistance group is hoping to enact will not come to pass until those enacting it are long gone.

By examining history and the future as a by-product of fiction, Sansour explores links between the creation and destruction of nations and people through story, rather than physical action alone. Sansour's burial performances emphasise this link between reality and fiction by acting out the fictive narrative of her film. Whether such actions would actually be able to de facto create a nation is uncertain, though Sansour acknowledges the challenges presented by carbon dating. This scientific advancement serves to once again demonstrate how technological progress has a way of affecting how a narrative is told. Sansour also acknowledges that porcelain tableware without the skeletons of those who would have used them betrays the fiction. However, the film indicates that members of the resistance group aim to be "buried as part of [their] own fiction," thereby inserting themselves into the fiction created by the porcelain.

Alongside the film, Sansour's exhibit also includes reproductions of the porcelain plates featured in the film. Titled *Revisionist Production Line*, the plates are laid out on a conveyor belt leading to a large stack onto which the plates continue to pile up. Reflecting the cyclical nature of history as indicated above, the conveyor belt also serves to reflect the mass-produced nature of the future. The plates created via this production line represent the resistance group's endeavour to create historical fact which will alter the narrative of the future and parallels the mass-produced spaceships utilised by the invading nation to alter the cultural narrative.

What Larissa Sansour achieves so well throughout her exhibition is the combination of past and future in such a way as to comment on the political nature of the present and its impact on individual self and identity. By coupling futuristic technology with handmade crockery, the ability of individual culture and heritage to survive future progress is called into question. Sansour's combination of various media in order to depict her version of an altered future through a transformed past allows audiences to examine the various ways in which narratives can be conveyed and the differing approaches to how myth can present fiction as fact. As Sansour herself is Palestinian, her choice of burial location for the artefacts in absentia reflects a personal attachment to ideas of historical entitlement, themes she illustrates so well as to give them global significance. The use of a near-future dystopia in order to achieve this indicates that Sansour's vision of a slow-building apocalypse which occurs when least expected and alters concepts of history, self, and nation may be closer to our present than our future.

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Interview with Larissa Sansour

The Editors

VECTOR: *In an interview for "Reorient", you talk about how your piece uses SF to address the ongoing trauma that is both national and personal. The film swerves away from a documentary approach, yet you leave room for it to be interpreted as a realistic narrative by using a framing device common to 19th and early 20th century SF. It is possible to imagine our world just off screen. On the soundtrack we hear a conversation between a woman and her therapist – they can be in the here-and-now; the visual narrative of the film can be interpreted to describe an imaginary world of the patient's mind, her dreams, her hopes, fears and fantasies. Was this ambiguity intentional? Was there a decision not to commit fully to science fiction?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: Working with science fiction offers a lot of malleability in how I choose to comment on present day issues. There is a

tendency when addressing heated or urgent political topics to fall into an already established and non-flexible discourse. One then generally has to accept the premise of the arguments that preceded your contribution. Science fiction helps me posit a new equation in which a new approach to can be formulated. So, the trauma, fear and fantasies are intended to occupy the blurry space between fantasy and reality and, like in most of my work, to question the basis of our understanding of what reality means. In *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, this focus is very much on historical narratives, and how much of that is really based on truth value.

The anachronism in the film is also very intentional. It is hard to talk about the Palestinian trauma without addressing several tenses. The Palestinian psyche seems to be planted in the catastrophic events of 1948 and is tied to a constant projection of the future, yet the present is in a constant limbo.

VECTOR: *One of the reasons I was drawn to your film is that it uses science fiction to comment on science, archaeology in particular. The majority of narratives in SF about archaeology are associated with 'limits to knowledge' concerns: don't go digging, you might find something dangerous! Your*

film interrogates archaeology as a discipline in an entirely new and more urgent way by considering the role of archaeology in the past and ongoing (neo)-colonialist projects around the world. The film problematises archaeology as a tool for 'projecting a state into the past,' 'galvanising public sentiment' and 'shaping national imagination' according to the dominant discourse. Why did you construct your critique of science around falsifying evidence, rather than other shortcomings such as power, sovereignty, and politicisation? For example, if marginalisation persists in your fictional universe there may be no possibility (or funding) for intended future archaeologists both to discover the planted evidence and to operationalise to support a territorial claim – power is a prerequisite for both.

LARISSA SANSOUR: Although the critique of scientific method is very present in the film, the instrumentalisation of archaeology in particular, the main focus is the political and social implications of narrative disadvantage. This results in the protagonist's radical attempt to flip the power balance by tampering with a discipline historically instrumental for nation-building in the region. Resorting to falsifying archaeological evidence, and projecting the potential impact of this act hundreds of years into the future, are quite radical measures to take and scopes to accept, and this is intended to expose the importance of controlling narrative. While the fictional protagonist's project may appear utopian and hopeful, albeit possibly delusional, with her hoping to cause a historical intervention and somehow even out the playing field for future political discourse, the film's underlying intention is possibly a bit more destructive: exposing and dismantling core mechanisms supporting a colonialist-nationalist project. By highlighting archaeology as instrumentalised, its findings pairing up with religion, folklore, myth and fiction to reinforce and strengthen a territorial claim, bypassing all legal standards for settling land disputes in the process, the critique of the scientific method does naturally touch upon its subjugation to politics and power. In the process, scientific method shows its vulnerability to politicised hijackings. Archaeology usually

digs first and concludes later, yet in the film, the scientific process is reversed, with the narrative to confirm established prior to the excavation of the artefacts to confirm it.

VECTOR: *You imply in the Reorient interview, and elsewhere, that SF as a genre is aspirational and universal, and that the more powerful states like the USA and the UK have used SF to dominate the public imaginary with their narratives, while marginalised groups are represented by documentaries, being seen through anthropological lenses. Could you extrapolate this beyond the example of Palestine?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: I think this is clear in a number of unbalanced power contingencies and of course can be applied to many colonial narratives and continues with a facelift in post-colonial times. This of course is also true when it comes to gender and the female representation in art and film throughout those practices. I think once you become the subject of a gaze, then your role as an active member in building or analysing those structures is immediately dismantled. It is a very disadvantaged position. I find that contextualising the Middle East in a sci-fi framework already subverts this hierarchy and allows for a more meaningful discussion to take place.

VECTOR: *In a lot of SF, especially during the Golden Age, the imagination is stilted when it comes to envisioning cultural and social changes. Imagining interplanetary travel seems far easier than a future without sexism or other forms of discrimination. In your film, the conflicts involving land and identity persevere. The parable of Palestinian-Israeli conflict is projected hundreds of years into the future, intractable as ever, with a few spiked bones and porcelain thrown into its unsolved equation. Is there a space or need for Israeli/Palestinian utopias?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: Historically, Israel/Palestine has been a natural breeding ground for utopias and dystopias in equal measures, ranging from





biblical doomsday tales to ideologically founded aspirations of statehood. As much as utopias are probably needed for nation building, my films rarely hold any utopian outlines or definitions, but tend to embrace a dystopian approach, suggesting that the apocalypse is the first stop on the road to an acceptable future. That's something which doesn't necessarily reflect my conviction, but does establish an at once ominous and polemical point.

VECTOR: *One pseudo-utopian solution you imagine is the vertical Palestine of Nation Estate, where the nation is accommodated in one giant but 'modern and comfortable' skyscraper overlooking Jerusalem. It is a great satire of a two-state solution, in which Israel gets all the land except for one building. It reminded me of Platonov's The Foundation Pit where the Communist state wants to house everyone together on one giant communal vertical paradise of a skyscraper. Were you aware of this reference or is it a coincidence? What other references from science fiction have influenced your artistic practice?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: That's very interesting. I am embarrassed to say I was not aware of Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*, but I see how it makes sense in relation to my own work. I was reading J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* when working on *Nation Estate*. A lot of Soviet writers, poets and artists

had to use satire to criticise their authoritarian regime. I am very fond of Russian film and literature, and that, I think, has influenced my work. A lot of it has to do with finding a different language to address collective traumas with a heavy use of absurdity.

In my latest film, I was looking a lot at *Stalker* by Tarkovsky and they use of the endless corridor as one big metaphor. *A Space Exodus* heavily references Stanley Kubrik's *A Space Odyssey* and the American lunar landing.

Central to the film are themes such as dealing with trauma and options for resistance. One interpretation is that the patient's worldbuilding in your film is a form of therapy, of processing. Do you see art as a way to help Palestinians as a nation to process trauma? To what extent can art serve the resistance?

Palestinian identity is multi-layered and hard to define, especially if one considers the diaspora not only outside, but also inside Palestine. Striving for a home or a belonging becomes a goal and eventually a form of resistance. In my latest film, the lead figure takes on an overwhelmingly convoluted surreal scheme just to achieve a definition or a closer understanding of what that means. It underlines the difficulty encountered by Palestinians for self-determination and the outlandish ways that have to be followed in order for this simple human right to be achieved.

VECTOR: *Your film is filled with women's voices, and the focus is on women and their relationship to each other. Men appear as soldiers and (seemingly) scholars or philosophers and colonial officials. Can you talk about gender in your film?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: It is very important for me to have female voices and figures be central in my work. The female perspective is important in dismantling the given accepted structures that humanity has long lived with and that are of course often built by centuries of patriarchal thought and governing systems. Just like many elements in my work, the female figure becomes another post-structuralist tool for dismantling narratives.

VECTOR: *Is the film also concerned with environment and climate change? There are no blue skies, no trees, no water – it rains porcelain. There is a deep well, but it is a well of grief. There are looming apocalyptic dust clouds. Is this a reference to climate change, and to drought and worsening water problems in the Middle East? Why is water absent from the film?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: Seeing as the film is about narrative and the impact of myth and fiction on anything from history to national identity, an early decision was to use a barren desert landscape as a recurring stage for the scenes and the arguments to unfold in. Using the desert with looming dark skies as a constant template, the aridness acts as a metaphor for a vacuum in which new narratives and histories can take shape. The film's deep dark well is a hole of memories; it's the reservoir of the protagonist's traumas, a metaphor for her subconscious, if you will. The film deals with the psychology of the bereaved, personal and collective loss, and certainly, the environmental decline counts among these losses, with water resources restricted, agriculture suffering due to various mechanisms of occupation.

That said, there was never a conscious decision to avoid water. An early draft of the script included water scenes. But eventually, the only rain falling is made of porcelain, referencing the biblical plagues, just as the spaceships on the

horizon do, looking like a futuristic locust swarm.

On a side note, this futuristic locust swarm was since turned into a suspended installation of 1,500 miniature spaceships and exhibited alongside the film and other related works.

VECTOR: *You use collage as a technique in a manner reminiscent of other SF artists, for example Seana Gavin. In your work, collage elements include both historical figures and CGI. What guided your choices of the elements to include? What specific contradictions were you using collage technique to highlight?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: One of the starting points was a comprehensive photo archive of Palestinian life throughout the past centuries. Before the idea for a script emerged, the intention was to make a grand tableau vivant of a cross-temporal Palestinian street scene, with inhabitants from different decades and centuries coming together in one discretely animated frame, breathing life into the past and bridging a temporal gap. This idea stayed with us and made it into the script. As the protagonist's actions are intended as a historical intervention, the future revisions she hopes to cause would effectively change the past. Using archive to illustrate the past undergoing revision not only seemed conceptually interesting, but also addresses the concept of archive per se. The film explores the impact of myth and fiction on fact and history, making archive and documentary malleable institutions, subjected to dominant narratives and political agendas.

Including archival imagery alongside futuristic CGI also highlights an important aspect of the Palestinian experience. Palestine is temporally suspended between past and future, between history and ambition, with the present reduced to a state of limbo, a transitional stage bridging the two others.

VECTOR: *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain concludes a trilogy. Are you working on something new at the moment?*

LARISSA SANSOUR: I am currently working on my first feature film, entitled *In Vitro*. It is a science fiction eco-disaster film set and partially

shot in Bethlehem. The film accelerates a climate doomsday scenario already unfolding in present day Palestine. In a converted nuclear reactor under the biblical city of Bethlehem in Palestine, Dunia, the dying founder of a hi-tech orchard designed to reverse the effects on an eco-apocalypse, passes on instructions to her younger successor Alia. The aim is to cultivate a replica ecosystem and replant the healing soil above. Exploring classic sci-fi tropes such as apocalypse, human cloning, political and environmental critique, the film is also a nostalgic and dystopian portrait of the town of Bethlehem throughout the past century. We are currently in early development, but if things go according to plan, *In Vitro* should be completed late 2019.

LARISSA SANSOUR IS AN ARTIST WORKING ACROSS VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATION, OFTEN TO CREATE POLITICAL ARTWORKS THAT EXPLORE LIFE IN PALESTINE. OUR COVER IMAGE THIS ISSUE IS TAKEN FROM HER RECENT FILM INSTALLATION, 'IN THE FUTURE THEY ATE FROM THE FINEST PORCELAIN', A COLLABORATION WITH THE ARTIST SØREN LIND.



Television Overview of 2017

Molly Cobb

Science fiction television of 2017 featured a large number of adaptations. While one may bemoan the decrease in 'original' science fiction programming, adaptations do allow narratives to be introduced to new audiences. Adaptations allow an opportunity for imagination and creativity as the more visual nature of television can transform and perhaps enhance the original work, give it a new contemporary resonance, or even more deeply explore themes and concepts that the narrative may not have been able to fully examine in its previous form.

Although SF television in 2017 explored a multitude of themes, one theme that stood out was fear of the other. The cultural and social implications of differences, and how these differences are tolerated or treated, served as a backdrop for a number of series this past year. The fact that so many of these were adaptations of previous works only serves to demonstrate how pervasive and consistent such fears are.

Anthology series like Philip K. Dick's *Electric Dreams* (2017 – present) or *Black Mirror* (2011 – present) are able to explore a number of different concepts across multiple episodes, but both series as a whole shared a unifying concept: that technological impact can best be understood by its effects on the individual. *Black Mirror* demonstrates this sharp focus on individuality perhaps best in the black and white episode 'Metalhead,' which utilises a simplified plot with minimal dialogue to portray one person's struggle to survive against oppressive and hostile technology. By focusing on a few human characters and how they coexist with technology, these series are able to extrapolate technology's impact on society as a whole. *Electric Dreams* is better at achieving a broader perspective, as *Black Mirror* often fails to convincingly infer a connection between the individual and wider society.

Based on a number of Philip K. Dick's short stories from the 1950s, *Electric Dreams* explores subjects such as telepathy, space tourism, artificial consciousness, alternate realities, and aliens. Throughout, these episodes remain true to one of Dick's core concerns in his original fiction – the ambiguous nature of reality. What *Electric Dreams* does well is to explore the power of memory and one's perception of reality, especially in 'Impossible Planet,' 'The Commuter,' and 'Real Life.' By focusing on something so private – one's own memories – these episodes demonstrate the power of the mind in shaping and constituting individualised realities and therefore establishing one's own sense of 'normal.' The episodes 'The Hood Maker' and 'Crazy Diamond' explore a similar theme in different way, examining how those who do not fit society's definition of 'normal' are treated, and how such treatment interacts with ideas of class distinctions, and with the ethics of human experimentation. Thus 'Human Is' is well placed as the last episode of 2017 as it links together ideas of memory, reality, and the human self in a way which ties together themes explored in previous episodes. The overall question of whether an alien could make a better human than an actual human member of our species brings to the forefront questions about what it is to be human – the physical human body or characteristics perceived as being human. The episode's conclusion invites the audience to re-examine concepts of 'us' and 'them' and judgments of the other based on fear.

Similarly, *Black Mirror* examines concepts of reality and memory, particularly in 'USS Callister' or 'Crocodile.' 'USS Callister' explores digitally recreated individuals, existing as sentient code, and how they would engage with their digital reality while still having the memories from their self in our reality. 'Crocodile'



Discovery (2017)

imagines being forced to share subjective or emotional recollections via a 'recaller' with another individual, and thereby explores themes of reality and memory in relation to consent. Though the 'recaller' used in the episode enables police to prevent or solve crimes without the suspect's explicit help, the inability to consent makes this technology dangerous. Though one may agree to being hooked up to the machine, which memories are then seen is hard to control. 'Arkangel' is also interested in consent, in particular as it relates to children, who are sometimes thought to be beyond the realm of consent. In 'Arkangel,' a child is shown to be increasingly intimately monitored and recorded, and their perceptions of reality manipulated in the name of 'safeguarding.' The episode questions whether the usefulness of such tech outweighs any ethical concerns. Similar to the benefit of solving a murder with the memory recaller, Arkangel has the benefit of allowing parents to protect and monitor their children. Both of these technologies are presented as beneficial while still allowing one to question concerns of privacy, the effects of unmitigated fear, and whether using technology to monitor another is an invasive method which subverts autonomy and ethical/moral standards.

'Black Museum,' like 'USS Callister,' explores consciousness transfer and what constitutes humane treatment of a consciousness no longer attached to a human body. What

is meant by 'human' is restructured around questions of whether consciousness alone, regardless of its physical vessel, possesses the same rights and considerations as the actual human body. This raises issues of the 'self,' 'other,' and the mind-body problem as we can no longer be sure who or what does or does not experience consciousness.

The question of equal rights often arises when there is a perceived division between 'us' and 'them.' Shows such as *Cleverman* (2016 – present) or *The Gifted* (2017 – present) do well to examine the fear attached to such divisions. Both series utilise this theme to provide social commentary on how individuals considered different are treated, engaging with issues of colonialism and racial oppression. *Cleverman* depicts the social and cultural separation of humans and hairypeople, with the hairypeople consistently referred to as 'subhuman.' Though they are a genetically distinct species, insofar as 'species' is a meaningful and useful concept, the insistence that they are 'lesser' than humans is a social construct arising from fear and defying logic (hairypeople are actually much stronger and faster than humans). As the show progresses, it suggests an inevitable link between oppression of the 'other' and eugenics.

Genetic manipulation of the hairypeople and the insistence on IDs based on one's genetic makeup echoes concerns examined in the *Electric Dreams* episode 'The Hood Maker.' More

broadly, *Cleverman's* depiction of social control through fear and technology echoes concerns in *Electric Dreams* and *Black Mirror*, and resonates with science fiction tropes of humans using technology to subjugate aliens or species they find threatening or inconvenient. These similarities, and their consistent use throughout these shows, indicates science fiction's ability to explore these concerns in a way not necessarily afforded other programming.

In the superhero genre, *The Defenders* united Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Iron Fist, and Luke Cage, allowing fans who have encountered them in their own series to see how these individuals interact. The role of superheroes in society is explored by examining the different ways in which each character conducts themselves and how society responds to them. For instance, Daredevil being the only one to wear a costume becomes far more obvious when placed next to the others, allowing for discussions about what it means to be a vigilante and about what each character is really risking. The wealth of Danny 'Iron Fist' Rand sets him apart from the others and he is confronted by Luke Cage over his privilege, and his lack of belonging to the social world where Danny chooses to act as a vigilante.

The serious nature of such superhero programmes makes *The Tick* (2016 – present) a comedic diversion for those looking for a more light-hearted approach. *The Orville* (2017 – present) or *Red Dwarf XII* (2017) serve a similar

purpose when it comes to shows like *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017 – present) or *The Expanse* (2015 – present).

Another comedic series is *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (2016 – present). Though the most recent season differs greatly from the previous one (each season revolves around a different case), it still offers up the same perfect combination of funny and serious. The move from time travelling to alternate realities as the main trope allows the show to explore fresh concepts while continuing to develop established characters and relationships. The new fantasy elements of the alternate reality blur genre lines and keep the show from retracing its own steps. The alternate reality lets the show to play with distinctions between fiction and reality, by literally making dreams come true. The exploration of the 'other,' and of where ideas of 'us' and 'them' are created and reinforced by society, here remains as strong as ever. The various races found in the alternate reality, Wendimoor, flags up differences both amongst themselves and those from our reality. This is most clearly seen in the treatment of individuals by 'Project Blackwing,' a government organisation essentially tasked with monitoring and collecting those with strange abilities. Alongside this, *Dirk Gently* scrutinises the concept of good and evil by proposing that the line between good and evil is more blurred than the audience may think. By having various characters question whether they themselves

Black Mirror (2017)



are 'the good guys' or 'the bad guys,' *Dirk Gently* opens questions of how ethical norms are formed and how perspectives or intentions can alter the moral significance of experience and action.

Though *Dirk Gently* has moved away from time travel, other science fiction programming of 2017 has continued to explore its implications. *Outlander* (2014 – present), for example, though perhaps more fantasy than science fiction, does an excellent job of portraying multiple time periods simultaneously. The exploration of parallel years between the 20th century and the 18th century is well executed and couples the real-life actions in the 18th century with the corresponding historical documents in the 20th century, thus reinforcing the impact actions have throughout time, and linking past and present in a tangible way. The show's portrayal of how time travel works through the standing stones may not always be consistent, but the show does use time travel in interesting and thoughtful ways to explore aging, family, and the nature of time itself, through its representation of how time both affects, and is affected by, the individual.

A show which appears to want to more specifically explore how the time-travelling individual might impact history is *Timeless* (2016 – present). Unfortunately, though the show is certainly fun, it fails to do anything particularly new within the genre and does not attempt to explain how time travel or changing history actually affects things. The show seems to simply rely on a fairly predictable premise: when you change something in the past, it creates a handy plot point in the future. This lack of consideration for the 'why' or 'how' means too much emphasis is put on the 'what' and many twists within the show hinge on how history has changed – while they do keep the plot moving forward, they don't often make much sense. The show is very similar in both concept and characterisation to *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015 – present), which only makes it seem more derivative. Hopefully, upcoming alternate history series such as *Confederate* (TBC) or *Black America* (TBC) will do more to explore the impact of altered timelines and how the world would change as a result.

Near future representations of society have also done well to examine where civilisation may end up if certain attitudes or actions are taken to

their extreme. *Into the Badlands* (2015 – present), for example, explores a post-apocalyptic world, destroyed by war, and the subsequent cultures and societies that spring up in the ruins. There is as well of course *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017 – present), which is a significant adaptation of an SF and feminist classic. Fortunately, the series uses Margaret Atwood's source material with sensitivity, insight and imagination.

The new nation created after a Second American Civil War, known as Gilead, insists on a return to the traditional values of family and religion. This includes the 'traditional values' of the subjugation of women. No longer allowed to read, handle money, own property, or work, women in this dystopian police state are categorised based on their 'usefulness' to society. 'Handmaids' are women able to have children and they are forced into ritualised rape with commanders in order to be surrogates for their 'barren' wives. Wives themselves, though they are afforded more bodily autonomy, remain subject to the idea of a woman's place being in the home. Along with 'Marthas' and 'Aunts,' these roles come with a prescribed uniform and associated colour, thus further delineating them. The impact of this separation is that women are unable or unlikely to unite or feel solidarity outside their own subsect. Though there is shown to be solidarity among those who suffer, the secret resistance network of women is put at a disadvantage by those who do not suffer, or do not feel that they suffer, even though others would lament their situation.

Gilead's oppressive regime emerges in the context of widespread infertility fears as birth rates sharply decline and children become a rarity. (The existential risk of global infertility surfaces also in *Zoo* (2015 – 2017), *Utopia* (2013-2014), and in a potentially upcoming TV adaptation of another Margaret Atwood novel – *MaddAddam*). Handmaids are considered privileged for their ability to bear children, but only insofar as they are supposed to feel thankful for their own oppression. Discussions between characters about children being a woman's biological destiny, or reproduction as a moral imperative, reflect contemporary issues concerning women's rights and bodily autonomy. The show implies that this lack of bodily autonomy extends to



Electric Dreams (2017)

males as it is indicated that vasectomies are now illegal, and even discussing the idea of a sterile man is banned. Many characters within the show acknowledge that the current situation is not necessarily the best method to solve the infertility issue – let alone right or fair – but little is done to better the lives of the handmaids or attempt to change the situation. Such hypocrisy is rife in *The Handmaid's Tale*, most notably through the fact that rape is actually illegal and that there is an unlawful subsect of women called Jezebels who perform sex not for reproduction, as ordained, but for men's pleasure. Those who break these rules are physically punished, for example by cutting off a hand, but those who pass these sentences break the same rules.

Its treatment of power and corruption, and its tremendously well-done representation of sexism, sexual assault, and the destruction of women's rights taken to the extreme, gives *The Handmaid's Tale* a particularly contemporary resonance, making it a highlight of 2017 science fiction programming. Considering Atwood's novel was originally published in 1985, it demonstrates the pervasive and ongoing need to ensure discussions of these topics, at a time when such discussions are seldom simple.

Conversely, 2017 also saw a number of shows championing diversity not by showing the dangers of subjugating it, but the benefits of encouraging it. *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017 –

present) features the first black female lead and the first East Asian captain in a Star Trek TV series, as well as an officer whose experiences and relationships as gay is openly offered to the audience. The diversity within *Discovery* can be seen through gender, race, sexual orientation, and species, and the lack of overt commentary within the show itself regarding this diversity only helps to strengthen the sense of inclusivity, as a result of the show not feeling it needs to explain or justify its characters. Early on in the series, there's a discussion of how fear leads to judgement and how fear prevents exploration. The diversity on the ship then reflects this desire to eschew fear by not erasing the 'other,' but rather by removing the lines between 'us' and 'them.'

Discovery is still careful not to erase difference, or the tensions and conflicts that can come with difference. Michael Burnham, the protagonist, has been raised under Vulcan traditions and culture; the struggle between emotion and logic in her character explores questions about whether culture can override genetics, and whether human emotion actually can or should be contained. The show portrays how individuals interact with and think about those who are different, including compassionate self-sacrifice for another species whom we can neither understand nor communicate with. It also examines how command and authority

impacts relationships and decision-making. The fact that Burnham is not a starship captain permits a different perspective on what it means to be a member of Starfleet.

Keeping in line with its focus on exploration, much of the show centres around the discovery of a new propulsion system and what impact this technology would have on exploration, war, and space travel in general. It asks whether research and exploration can be conducted for its own sake, or whether it is inevitably linked with both war and conquest.

The premise of *Sense8* (2015 – present) is that eight strangers, spread across the world, become psychically linked and capable of sharing each other's skills, knowledge, and perspectives. The show explores what makes a person who they are, and how we are connected – and separated – through culture and society. The sensate ability accentuates the connectedness and similarities humans already have, but may not be aware of, or choose to overlook. As with the other shows discussed here, *Sense8* also examines how the fear of differences leads to inequality, and an 'us' and 'them' mentality based on what is considered 'normal.' It comments that, 'Nothing good ever happens when people care more about our differences than the things we share in common.' The trope of genetic manipulation is also seen again, as antagonists attempt to harness the sensate ability for their own use. By examining personal identity through the lens of how it fits into society's preconceptions, *Sense8* scrutinises the cultural and social assumptions that lead to individuals needing to hide their true identity out of fear.

The show is both multicultural and international, with a racially diverse cast portraying a range of individuals, including gay and transgender characters. *Sense8* also pushes diversity beyond just the cast and includes its crew as well. Lana and Lilly Wachowski created, directed, and wrote the series, along with J. Michael Straczynski, and the inclusivity they bring behind the camera lends credence to the diversity portrayed in front of the camera. The narrative makes full use of the medium, with cinematography artfully employed to convey the sensate's interconnection through

the use of interwoven dialogue and visuals. Though the plot is slow, it is counterbalanced with characterisation and relationship building. Individual lives are thus given precedent over the plot, but as the lives and stories told are all connected by this central narrative, it works well together. The show becomes less about what actually happens and more about how individuals involved deal with situations and each other. Netflix announced the show's cancellation in March, but after an energetic fan campaign, it has been revived for at least a two-hour special in 2018.

Among the many shows that touch on genetic manipulation, *Orphan Black* (2013 – 2017) probably explores it most thoroughly. The most recent and final series focused heavily on the nature versus nurture debate and how much impact genetics have on an individual's identity. Though all the clones in the show do of course look exactly the same, their attitudes, interests, likes and dislikes are all widely varied. The show utilises the nature versus nurture debate to examine the impact of genetics versus environment but takes no strong stance either way. In particular, the show portrays the impact that family, friends, and other support systems can have on an individual. Discussions of elite medical care are also raised by examining who has access to the best medical care, why, and the ethical implications of reserving such care for the wealthy or upper classes. This discussion is compounded by the clones being 'owned' by their creators and the role they are intended to play in this elite medical care, while simultaneously being excluded from it.

The ethical implications of class and the politics of such a structure are perhaps best seen in *The Expanse* (2015 – present). *The Expanse* focuses heavily on grand topics such as planetary politics, war, and economy, while still portraying how the individual exists amongst these concerns. One of the show's motifs is how technology is constantly changing and affecting how war is waged, while war itself remains the same. *The Expanse* particularly explores the impact of politics and war on the poorer populations, including refugees. The discovery of an extra-terrestrial protomolecule leads to, as predicted by previous shows mentioned here,

human experiments to determine whether the lifeform could be used as a weapon. These experiments are 'for the good of humanity,' but the human sacrifice is deemed necessary by those performing it, rather than those it is performed upon. Considering the warring factions as well, it's clear that the good of 'humanity' often only means the humanity which comes from a certain location, or who hold certain roles in society. The alien protomolecule also has the ability to construct new lifeforms using human beings as a base, thus redesigning and recreating the human. These living weapons raise complex questions about war, technology, and weaponisation.

Finally, 2017 also gave audiences two pilot episodes for potential or upcoming shows. One, *Oasis* (2017), does not currently appear to have been picked up, though no formal announcement has been made as yet. The pilot itself is very atmospheric and visually pleasing, even if the plot is initially rushed too quickly. Everything before arrival at the exoplanet – the lack of food and supplies, the collapse of social order, and the mounting uninhabitability of Earth – occurs too quickly to be properly explained or explored. The creation of an off-world colony, presented as only accessible to the wealthy or elite, comes as a result of this economic disparity and resource scarcity. The availability of technology and lifesaving resources as, again, reserved for the wealthy, echoes the class disparity examined in *The Expanse*. What the show does question well is the place of God and faith in the future, alongside or replaced by technology and the disparity between believers and non-believers. If it is ever picked up for a full season, *Oasis* has the potential to explore very compelling issues.

Another pilot was *Counterpart* (2017 – present), which has been picked up for a full season. Utilising an alternate reality and the concept of branching realities, the show explores self, identity, and how small choices or incidents can affect an individual's life. Two Howard Silks, one from each reality, have different personalities, jobs, and attitudes towards life, despite sharing the exact same genetics, childhood, and experiences, up to the point of the realities diverging. Audiences learn that

the two realities did not start to diverge until a crossing was established. This raises questions of whether the crossing itself could have influenced the way causation and probability work in the alternate reality and how much merely observing something can change it. With the promise of exploring these metaphysical issues via an espionage thriller, *Counterpart* is primed to be both entertaining and intellectually stimulating.

2017 saw a range of shows concerned with the 'other' and the detrimental effects of delineating between 'us' and 'them,' and the forces and circumstances that encourage such a mentality. However, a number of shows also aimed to celebrate inclusivity, while still exploring the challenges and issues that may arise. With such a large number of these shows being adaptations, it underscores just how prevalent these concerns are, especially given the wide range of source materials they draw from. Underscoring science fiction's determination to address contemporary matters, it also reminds audiences how deeply-rooted these issues are in our social and cultural makeup. One can hope that SF television continues raising these questions as we move into 2018.

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Cleverman

So Mayer

So much for faint hints of feminism in *The Last Jedi* and whispered intimations of smash-the-state in *The Handmaid's Tale*: 2017 offered full-blast anti-colonial feminist science fiction resistance onscreen, in the shape of *Cleverman*. The second season of the Australian import, created by Aboriginal writer Ryan Griffen, screened on BBCThree this summer. So literally no-one saw it, missing six hours of heart-pounding take-downs of whitefella culture – including a chillingly on-point satire of Australian anti-immigrant detention policy and policing – and heart-lifting indigenous resurgence. Season 1, now on Netflix UK (read my review on the BFI website), introduced viewers to a future-present Sydney in which a newly-visible indigenous people, the Hairypeople, had been pushed out of the bush and into settled urban white Australia. They were violently policed and locked up in containment – except in the Zone, a precarious area of warehouses where Hairies, indigenous people and poor white people lived in fractious community, led by aspiring indigenous community leader Waruu West. But it was Waruu's half-brother Koen who received the leadership his older sibling expected, inheriting his uncle Jimmy's role – and responsibility – as Cleverman, wielder of the nulla nulla, a wooden club that channels vast powers. Koen, a barman and trafficker of Hairies, had some growing up to do, and reparations to make, even as the Zone came under siege.

Season 2 starts in the aftermath of the Zone's destruction, betrayed by Waruu in his craven association with the deeply and convincingly sinister Jarrod Slade. *Game of Thrones* fans will enjoy Iain Glen's slippery performance as the seemingly-liberal Slade, who is trying to appropriate the Hairies' speed,

strength and longevity to breed a (white settler) super-race. (If that seems an unlikely aim for a contemporary media mogul and political string-puller, I give you: Toby Young, eugenicist). Specifically, Slade is experimenting – without her consent – on his wife Charlotte, taking advantage of her longing to bear a child.

Charlotte's one of several returning female characters who kick up a gear this season: not only does she clue in to her husband's devious and abusive behaviour, but Frances O'Connor, who plays her, gets the unusual opportunity to show a pregnant action heroine, as Charlotte finds herself in the bush thanks to Jarli, a member of the Bindawu tribe of Hairies who have remained hidden and resistant. Jarli's arrival introduces a new community of Hairypeople, perhaps in response to criticisms of S1's Hairies as seeming passive and disorganised compared to the human Indigenous leaders such as Waruu. The rebellious Jarli, appropriating and repurposing human technology and reaching out to urban Hairies, represents a new generation of young anti-colonial activists. Latani, one of the Hairies whom Koen tried to traffic in Season One, also finds her way to Bindawu, continuing her journey in search of her family and herself, a kind of walkabout by a young warrior who will thrill Rey and Katniss fans. Her human friend Alinta and her mother Nerida, who have taken care of her since the raid on the Zone, confront both the racist police state (in the form of a policeman they hold hostage) and (finally) the problem in their own family: Waruu, Nerida's husband, who has become the face of Slade's deeply disturbing DNA-deprogramming initiative for the Hairies.

Cleverman is unflinching. Unlike the 'it couldn't happen here/butler wouldn't melt' wide-eyed dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale* – in



Cleverman (2017)

which, as Clarkisha Kent argues, the creators are able to pretend that sterilisation, female genital mutilation, the shackling of women giving birth, and imprisonment for gender variance are not already as American as apple pie, because they predominantly happen in the real world to poor women of colour – *Cleverman* has that perfect edge of future-present dystopia, in which the world is recognisably, shamefully ours. Slade and Waruu are both playing and being played by each other – and by media-friendly politician Marion Frith, whose assimilationist policies are presented under the familiar shiny-haired helmet of the ambitious conservative woman. Her scenes with her new underling Waruu are skin-crawling; literally, as Waruu is trying to keep a secret that is growing out of him.

Rob Collins keeps Waruu ambiguous, a brilliantly weighted portrayal of an activist corrupted by his desire for power and his resentment of his brother, the charismatic Koen whose Cleverman learning curve provides a satisfying and recognisable arc – with additional laughs, as the very modern Koen confronts traditional powers he barely believes in, and that knock him on his arse. His magic pixie whitegirl sidekick, one of the people living in a condemned building where Koen tries to rebuild the Zone, is the least convincing new character, but Koen's

developing relationship with his Auntie Linda is the heart of the show. Deborah Mailman, one of the most experienced indigenous actors – star of *The Sapphires* – is far from the usual sci-fi Wise Elder. She brings most of the show's humour as well as its sagacity and strangeness: she's its muya, as Koen discovers, its life spirit.

At the end of season 2, Koen has wrecked the deprogramming facility and Slade is out of the picture, but a shadow hangs over Bindawu – and (in the shape of Waruu) over Koen: can the solidarity of the unlikely collective Koen is forming win out over Waruu's lust for power? But, like that of the Bindawu, *Cleverman's* fate hangs in the balance. The Beeb's lack of trailering and marketing hasn't helped (the same for Sundance TV in the US), and creator Ryan Griffen rightly tweeted a gif of tumbleweed when the first season failed to pick up a single AACTA nomination despite starting a national conversation in Australia. Watch it before it's too late.

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Film 2017 roundup

Nick Lowe



Plates were shifting under a surprised Hollywood this year, uplifting two massive new landmarks in *Wonder Woman* and *Get Out* while burying careers and franchises and destabilising entire studios in the cultural and commercial upheavals that unfolded after them. Ambitious films took huge writedowns (*Valerian*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Assassin's Creed*, *The Great Wall*, *Monster Trucks*, *A Cure for Wellness*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *The Dark Tower*, *The Mummy*, *King Arthur*, *Justice League*, *mother!*, *Downsizing*), while on the other side cheeky Blumhouse auteur hits *Get Out* and *Split* smuggled themselves into cinemas by passing their audacities off merely as high-concept horror, in a year when Stephen King was inescapable on screens of any size. Trilogies within larger franchises wrapped up strongly in post-apocalyptic western mode in *Logan*, *War for the Planet of the Apes*, and the underappreciated *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*, but the year has already largely forgotten it also saw *Alien*, *Transformers*, *Underworld*, *Despicable Me*, *Pirates*, and (two) Lego films, as well as insipid reboots of *Power Rangers* and *Flatliners*. Only Disney's blockbuster farms made it through the year with their stock largely intact: Marvel expanded their cautiously-announced "cosmic universe" brand with two enthusiastic and crowdpleasing space operas, and in a presentiment of year-end studio intermarriage delivered a *Spider-Man* with Sony

that wound cross-studio IP tightly together, while the *Star Wars* franchise continued to produce spectacle and startlement at the cost of chewing through directors and perplexing fandom with its abusive relationship with canon and narrative coherence. The reputational collapses and tectonic realignments of industry power after Hollywood predators suddenly became invisible from September bypassed most of the sf slate, but in the year of Joss Whedon's fall from grace his unsilenced ex Kai Cole produced a clever marital biopic of *Wonder Woman's* creator that was very obviously not just about Bill Marston. In the wider indiescape, insistently ironic kaiju cinema bridged east and west in *Shin Gojira*, *Colossal*, and *Kong: Skull Island*, while barmy rest-of-world imports in other subgenres included Mexican hentai (*The Untamed*), Russian body tragicom (*Zoology*), and anime inceptioneering (*Napping Princess*); and arthouse ghost stories *Personal Shopper* and *A Ghost Story* intersected with *Blade Runner 2049's* affecting VR companionship in the multiply haunting *Marjorie Prime*, a runaway year's-best in its marriage of right-here-now sf ideas with bravura slow cinema and heartrending emotional futurology.

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Wonder Woman

Andrew Wallace

Fans like me had wanted a *Wonder Woman* movie for years, but despite the character's popularity the false narrative that a female-led superhero movie would fail to attract moviegoers kept her off the big screen. Fortunately, the success of *The Hunger Games* led DC/Warner to shoehorn *Wonder Woman* into *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, where she pretty much stole the show.

Then there was the appointment as director of Patty Jenkins, whose remarkable 2003 film *Monster* featured an Oscar-winning performance by Charlize Theron. *Wonder Woman* was released just before the breaking of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, and the resulting odious revelations of harassment and systemic sexism in Hollywood. The ability of both director and character to overcome these obstacles are as much an incredible achievement as *Wonder Woman's* success as one of the top grossing North American films of 2017.

Appropriately, the setup of *Wonder Woman* on the tropical island of Themyscira hints at an epic destiny underscored by dark secrets. The film takes its time establishing the civilisation's backstory: the Amazons are an ancient female race created to protect the world, with young Princess Diana, daughter of Queen Hippolyta, the first child to be born there. The fall of the old Gods at the hands of Ares, God of War, means the Amazons now live behind a kind of cloaking device as they prepare for the next onslaught. Sure enough, the First World War crashes into their lives in the person of American spy Steve Trevor (played by Chris Pine), pursued by what looks like most of the German navy circa 1918. Convinced that Ares is behind this intrusion, Diana – who for some reason is not referred to in the film as *Wonder Woman* – sets off to find the God of War, vanquish him for good and restore world peace.

Diana accompanies Trevor to London: 'It's hideous,' she deadpans. The humour, of which there is much, is not cruel and never at

Diana's expense. Instead, the witty, light tone is maintained by three elements: the performance of the extraordinary Gal Gadot as Diana, who combines bemusement, understanding and determination in a single look while barely changing her expression; a great supporting cast, particularly Lucy Davis who brilliantly mocks the 'glasses as disguise' trope; and the subversive nature of the story.

Take the scene where Diana crashes a British War Cabinet meeting, full of the kind of whiskery old duffer who started the whole conflict in the first place. There is much gammon-faced blustering about there being 'a woman in here,' which does not deter Diana at all: paternalistic outrage bounces off her as harmlessly as bullets from her bracelets.

Dynamics like these show Diana's fresh mode as a superhero. Unlike Marvel's god-prince Thor, who in his 2011 movie gets chucked out of Asgard for hubristic aggression, Diana seeks to end a war rather than start one, because she instinctively understands that her superhero status is based on responsibility rather than entitlement. Yet she underestimates the complexity and the nature of the conflict. 'Where is the Front?' she demands, wanting to get stuck into a fight she doesn't even know the location of, as eager in her own way as the innocents who thought they were off on a grand adventure and would be home in time for Christmas.

In the film's most powerful scene, Diana leads the Tommies across No Man's Land, whose dread name takes on new significance as the Amazon uses her shield to block streaks of blazing machine gun fire as she advances slowly and inexorably across the churned brown earth. It is an astonishingly emotional sequence, because it works on so many levels.

Partly, it is the wish fulfilment that properly-written fantasy can achieve; we are over-familiar with the drab horror of the trenches, which were the inevitable result of an absurd national and international class hierarchy. In *Wonder Woman*,



Wonder Woman (2017)

we are reminded that this bright-armoured female character was created not long after that world conflict and just before the next one. Diana is exceptionally strong but not indestructible; by this point in the story, she knows what she is up against and leads the campaign anyway, clear-eyed in her determination and bravery.

Unlike other superheroine movies, like *Catwoman* and *Electra*, *Wonder Woman* was made by people who love the genre and the character. There is the sense behind the film of a genuinely inspired creative team, willing to layer in poignant detail like the Sikh soldiers at the railways station as they head off to the front.

Then there's Diana's costume. While less flimsy than Linda Carter's in the 1970s *Wonder Woman* TV show, it's still more revealing than, say, Batman's body armour. Again, Gadot manages to transcend these obstacles to portraying a superhero. Gadot's performance suggests a deep trust between performer and director; a generosity that informs the feel of the entire film.

While no single movie would be able to overturn or even address every intersectional nexus, the allegorical nature of this one allows the film makers to present relationships like that between Diana and Trevor in a subtle new light. Trevor knows he is not Diana's equal and never could be, understanding instead that his role, although significant and heroic, is not the main one. As with that amazing scene in *No Man's Land*, Diana gets to where she wants and, significantly, brings the male characters she has inspired with her.

ANDREW'S SCIENCE FICTION THRILLERS SONS OF THE CRYSTAL MIND AND THE OUTER SPHERES ARE AVAILABLE NOW, WHILE HIS NEW NOVELLA CELEBRITY WEREWOLF IS BEING PUBLISHED BY NEWCON PRESS LATER THIS YEAR. HE BLOGS ABOUT SFF AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS AT WWW.ANDREWWALLACE.ME

Some films from Cameroon and SA/Canada

Dilman Dila

Last year, after a long wait, I got a chance to see Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Naked Reality*, which he describes as an afrofuturistic/scifi. Shot in black and white, it is a time-travel tale in which the protagonist searches for her identity, this being allegorical for a continent's search for its identity. Like his earlier films, including *Les Saignantes* (2005), it does not use visual effects or mise-en-scène to portray the future. But while strong storytelling with an offbeat style carried his previous works, *Naked Reality* turned out to be difficult to watch. Its website suggests it "is a new science-fiction interactive and collaborative cinema concept where we make feature films with a story as usual but take out certain aspects like sets, music, dialogues, costumes..." While there is a call for collaboration, it is not clear if it would mean re-editing this film. What made it drag was the miming, the near complete lack of sets, and the attempt to compensate using overlays, where two video clips are blended together – kind of the cinematographic equivalent of Instagram filters – creating a style more suitable to music

Zygote (2017)



videos. If ten years ago a lack of props or effects could be a consequence of low budget, today, more resources are available to a filmmaker, especially in a collaborative venture, and there is free software to achieve photorealistic visual effects.

One such software is Unity. In 2016, the company behind it made a short film, *Adam* (available on YouTube), to showcase its cinematic creation tools and to test out the graphical quality achievable. *Adam* is short and sweet to look at, though does not have much of a story. The main protagonist, a prisoner, wakes up in a robot's body along with scores of others. They meet a mystical figure, who leads them away into a bleak horizon. In 2017, Unity partnered with Neill Blomkamp – the South African director well-known for *District 9* – to make two sequels to *Adam*, where we learn of a government called *The Consortium*, which harvests the body parts of prisoners but, rather than kill them, puts their brains in robots, for unknown but possibly legal or even mercantile reasons. I like the series so far, and although both plot and character development are still thin, it is a visual joy.

Neill will be making more episodes of *Adam* alongside other short films in his own Oats Studios, which he set up to develop ideas without years of waiting for Hollywood. The first film he made was *Rakka*, set in a dystopian, post alien-invasion world. The obsession of seeing aliens as the evil other echoes colonialist era



Her broken shadow (2017) by Dilman Dila

fears (e.g. H.G Well's *War of the Worlds*) but also resonates with anti-immigration sentiments of today. *Rakka* features Sigourney Weaver, whose great performance failed to save the film from a clichéd plot that does not add anything new to an alien invasion narrative.

I thought other Oats Studios films would be similar, but was pleasantly surprised. *Firebase* starts off like an alien-contact film, and ends up something like a revenge-ghost story, with US soldiers in Vietnam encountering something called the River God. Like the other shorts from Oats Studios, *Firebase* could develop into a feature film, and a recent tweet from Neill suggests he is planning to crowdfund its production – this might explain its abrupt and unresolved ending.

Zygote is the film I liked the most. Though it also seems to be the first twenty minutes of a feature, it works beautifully as a stand-alone short. It's a sick horror, a good old-fashioned monster tale redolent of *Frankenstein*, and it may be difficult for some people to watch. I liked the monster very much because it reminded me of Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and the awesome "flash-eyed mother," which is a ghost made up of "millions of heads which were just like a baby's head," each with two

hands and two eyes that shone day and night. *Zygote* gripped me right from the start, and the suspense did not relent. It is set in an asteroid mining operation, and the story opens with two survivors from a catastrophe that is never fully explained, though we deduce it coincided with the creation of the monster. One survivor is a slave, an orphan bought in her infancy, and the other a synthetic human, who sacrifices himself to help the orphan escape. Like most of Neil's films, this one is very entertaining, and yet still packs in social issues, in this case genetic engineering and a critique of corporate capitalism.

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Hollywood versus the Patriarchy

Cheryl Morgan

The past year has been one in which extreme-right political views have been resurgent. Much to the surprise of many people, it has been necessary to remind the world just how awful the Nazis were. It was therefore reassuring to find that Nazi-punching was still fashionable in, of all places, the *Supergirl* TV show.

Well, to be fair, it wasn't just *Supergirl*. The *Crisis on Earth X* series was a crossover covering four DC titles: *Supergirl*, *Arrow*, *The Flash* and *Legends of Tomorrow*. The story involved an attack from an alternate Earth in which the Nazis ruled, Arrow was the Führer, and Supergirl – complete with SS symbol on her chest – was his main enforcer and love interest. Much Nazi-punching ensued. There was also some hot lesbian sex and a gay kiss. Although President Petulant allegedly watches over eight hours of TV a day, I am pretty sure that this wasn't on his list.

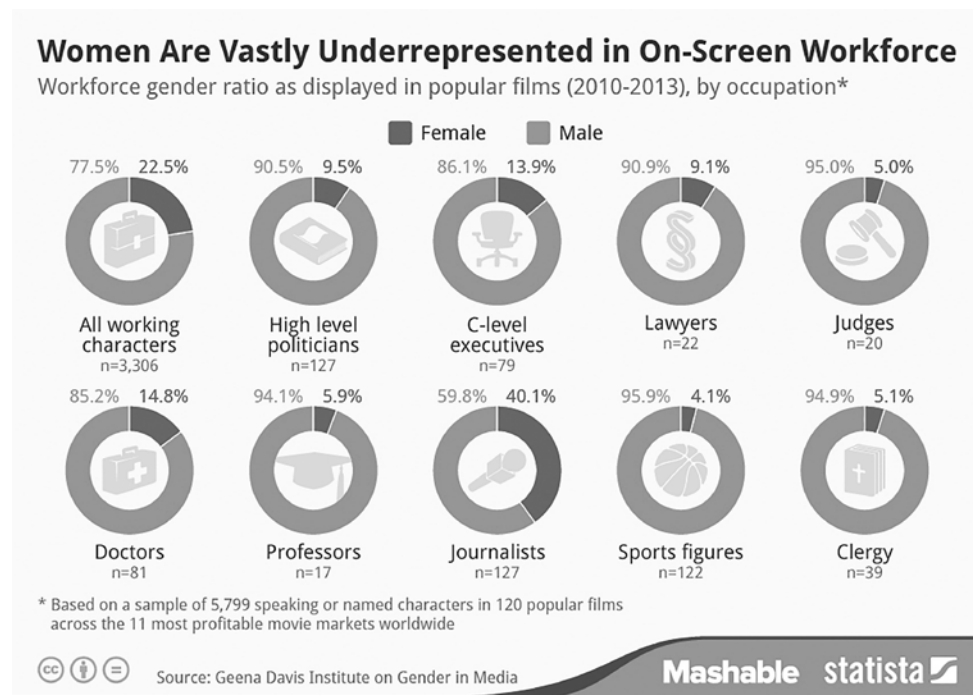
Unlikely as it may seem, some superhero movies also made major political points in 2017. Obviously there was *Wonder Woman*, which won just by existing. If you felt that the film itself got a bit meh after the action left Paradise Island, check out the extras on the disc release. There's a lot of great feminist material and subtle criticism of the occupant of the White House. The extras for a big budget superhero movie is the very last place I would have expected to find people using terms like "gender identity" and "non-binary", and yet there it is. It isn't much, but the contrast to the raging transphobia in the British press, mostly from self-identified feminists, is stark.

Over at Marvel, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* took careful aim at patriarchal ideas of fatherhood. The first movie set up the mystery of Peter Quill's father. Which character from the Marvel Universe would he turn out to be? Not many people guessed the answer would be Ego, the Living Planet. Nor, I suspect, did many people

expect that he'd turn out to be a manipulative jerk obsessed with impregnating women all over the galaxy in a desperate quest to make a perfect (and perfectly obedient) copy of himself. The film ended by explaining that true fatherhood is all about raising your kids with love, not planting your seed and then rushing off to find the next poor girl to seduce.

This was followed swiftly by *Thor: Ragnarok*, which lived up to its name by providing the literal end of Asgard. Most of the Asgardian gods die – killed by the invading death goddess, Hela – and the small remnant of survivors follows Thor, Heimdall and Loki into exile. Director Taika Waititi, who is of Maori descent, filled the movie with references to the imperial ambitions of Odin and how Asgard's vicious conquering past had been papered over by a sugary myth of benevolent colonisation. You would have to be a pretty dim British person not to get the message. Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie was particularly impressive.

Finally we need to leave the realm of superheroes and travel instead to a galaxy far, far away in which *The Last Jedi* systematically attacked the myth of the boy hero on which the original *Star Wars* movies had been based. George Lucas, of course, had always seen The Empire as a metaphor for Nixon's America, but he based his Rebellion on myths of genetic exceptionalism. *The Last Jedi* does away with all of that. Luke Skywalker has become a bitter old man filled with self-doubt. Despite Leia's best efforts, the Resistance has dwindled, in no small part thanks to the recklessness of its fighters. Rey has no Jedi ancestry. And the whole conflict between the Resistance and the First Order is seen to have been cynically fomented and manipulated by a cartel of rich galactic arms dealers. Although our heroes must triumph in the end, we are told that the final solution can only



be found through love, not continual warfare.

What's more, while the original Empire was clearly modelled on actual Nazis, complete with Stormtroopers, the First Order supporters are much more like Neo-Nazis. They have seen what the Empire was like, and they idolise it. Hux is the epitome of white male entitlement, throwing a strop whenever things don't go his way, while Kylo Ren broods over his relic of Vader and fails miserably to be anywhere near as competent or vicious as his hero.

It would be a mistake to see all this as some sort of protest by Hollywood against the US government. Studio owners are interested in profits, not politics. Directors and actors may well have a political agenda – and that can be seen most obviously on the Wonder Woman extras – but they will only be allowed to do so if their product delivers the expected profits. That these films have been successful, despite the constant whining from white men that quality has cratered thanks to pressure from SJWs, tells us a lot about how audience appetites are changing.

I'm sure we will see the toy division at Disney continue to pretend that Darth Vader and Kylo Ren are the true heroes of Star Wars, and claim that no one wants toys of female heroes. The people in charge there are clearly a different breed from those making the films.

Hollywood itself also has a long way to go. Recent research has shown that what few gains

there have been in diversity in the business have been in television rather than movies. Natalie Portman was spot on at the Golden Globes when she highlighted the all-male makeup of the Best Director short list. It is no surprise that last year Hollywood was found guilty of discrimination against female directors. The settlement of that case is still being negotiated, and the Harvey Weinstein scandal and subsequent #MeToo movement have strengthened the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's hand.

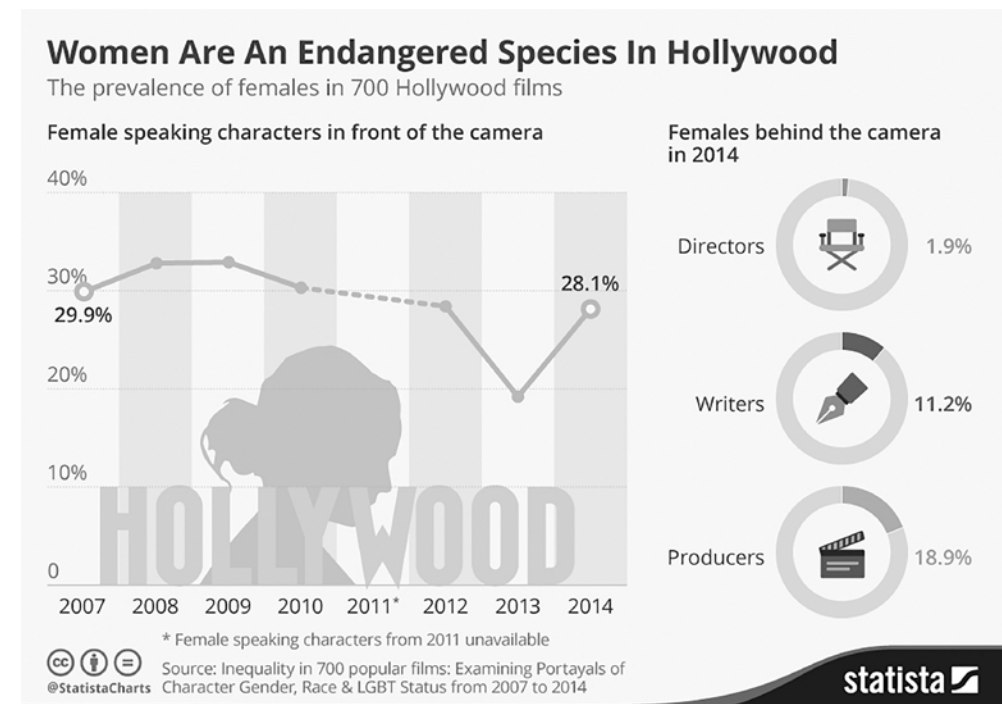
Casting directors and script-writers too are under fire. While the ridiculously low bar of the Bechdel Test is still being failed by many movies, more stringent analysis is throwing up interesting data. Researchers at the University of Southern California (USC) developed a software tool to check movie scripts for female roles and the agency of those characters. In the nearly 1,000 films studied women had only 29% of the number of roles and a similarly low share of the dialog. More worryingly the analysis showed that in most cases the female characters were not central to the plot and could be removed without affecting the story unduly. The only exception to this is in horror films where women traditionally play the essential role of murder victims.

There will, of course, be a backlash. Research by the Geena Davis institute has shown that we are so conditioned to male dominance that if a crowd scene contains more than 17%

women it starts to be seen as female dominated. Since that report was published similar ceilings for female representation have been noticed in a wide range of other settings. Getting female representation above this level will likely be accompanied by much wailing from men that they are being discriminated against because they perceive fairness (50%) as dominance. I mean, look at the panic that has been caused by having one in fourteen of the incarnations of a gender-fluid Time Lord be female.

In the long term, equality is better for everyone, including the movie business. The top three grossing films of 2017 were *The Last Jedi*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Wonder Woman*, all of which were female-led. In fourth place was *Guardians of Galaxy Vol. 2* which also takes aim at the Patriarchy. That 50% of the human race that Hollywood was poorly catering to actually enjoys going to the movies when they are of interest to them. Who knew?

While we've seen women pick up more leading roles in 2017, they were white women. Young white women. Another statistic worth noting from the USC research is that on average female characters in films tended to be about five years younger than their male counterparts. While there are attempts to bring in people of colour in supporting roles, lead roles have generally gone to whites. The closest we have come to breaking that in the films discussed



here is in *Wonder Woman* where Gal Gadot's accent clearly betrays her Israeli origins, but her character is almost certainly read as white. I am waiting eagerly for *Black Panther* which will finally give us a major black-led superhero film from Hollywood.

The situation for disabled people, LGBT+ people and so on is doubtless much worse. Not only are they under-represented, but their portrayal is often handled in a way designed to cater to the prejudices of the majority audience. There will be tragedy; they will die at the end.

All this said, for a genre that is traditionally supposed to be "boys only", science fiction is doing remarkably well here. What I have seen from superhero film and Star Wars, has been some of the brightest spots of an otherwise deeply depressing year. I didn't see *Beauty and the Beast*, but of course it is a fairy tale so we can claim that one too. I'm rather proud that my little corner of the world is taking a stand.

Save what you love. Join the Resistance.

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Okja

Ali Baker



2007, New York. Lucy Mirandos (Tilda Swinton), recently taking over the Mirandos Corporation from her evil twin sister, stands in front of a whizzing Prezi presentation to introduce the first Super-Piglets. As the buzzwords “eco-friendly, natural, GMO-free” spin behind her, she explains that these animals not only consume and excrete less, but taste “fucking delicious.” Twenty-six of the super-piglets have been sent across the world to be raised using traditional techniques, honouring farmers’ culture.

2017, South Korea. Okja the super-pig (looking something like a cross between a hippo and a tapir, with feet like an elephant) has been cared for by farmer Heebong (Byun Hee-Bong) and his granddaughter Mija (Ahn Seo-Hyun), foraging around their mountain farm, swimming in pools and having an idyllic porcine life. However, time is up for the super-pig project, and TV zoologist Dr Johnny Wilcox (a scenery-gobbling Jake Gyllenhal) comes to award Okja the best super-pig prize and to take her back to New York. Mija is distressed to discover that Okja is not theirs, and runs away to Seoul to bring her home. From here on the race is on to rescue Okja, with the help of the Animal Liberation Front, from the opposing forces of the

Mirandos Corporation, including Lucy’s evil twin Nancy (also Tilda Swinton).

Okja is directed by Bong Joon-ho and co-written by Bong and Jon Ronson. In Lucy Mirandos, Swinton, Bong and Ronson might seem to have created a comical narcissist archetype. Certainly, the scene where Lucy semi-reclines on a huge, soft-grey chaise longue while the others meeting with her are crushed together on the other piece of furniture in the meeting area – a sofa – made me laugh aloud; it reads as a powerplay from a dominant business person manual. But, as Swinton states in an interview with *Dazed* (27/6/17), the blonde, media-friendly women using wellbeing, corporate feminism/femininity, and eco-friendly branding to equate capitalism with altruism have become a feature of our political landscapes this year.

This film is a fun mix of speculative fiction, satire on Western hipster wishes for feel-good attitudes to food, and a heist movie. At two hours, it is around 25-30 minutes too long; I did find myself losing concentration at parts. However, it is a mix of great entertainment and thought-provoking commentary on the need for an attitude-change to food production in the face of climate change. Recommended.

My Little Pony

Ali Baker

‘So take the Storm King’s orders and toss ‘em’

– ‘It’s Time to be Awesome’

All is well in the female-centric ponytopia of Equestria. Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity and Rainbow Dash are helping their friend, Princess Twilight Sparkle, prepare for the Friendship Festival, featuring pop star pegasus Songbird Serenade (played by Sia). But the festival is interrupted by the arrival of ferocious minions of the Storm King, led by Tempest, a unicorn with a broken horn (Emily Blunt). Tempest captures Twilight Sparkle’s sisters, Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, inside obsidian spheres. Just before she is petrified, Celestia yells to her sisters to seek help from the “Queen of the Hippo.” So Twilight Sparkle, along with her friends and her assistant dragon Spike, head off on a quest, unaware that the Storm King has also charged Tempest with the capture of Twilight Sparkle to complete the spell to activate his staff; in return he will mend her broken horn. On their travels, the Mane Six encounter a con artist called Capper, who intends to sell them to pay off a debt until their friendship convinces him to help; some bird-like former pirates turned delivery airship crew; and they discover that Celestia hadn’t quite finished yelling when she was frozen in that sphere: the ‘hippos’ are in fact hippogriffs, Queen Novo and Princess Skystar.

My Little Pony: The Movie (directed by Jayson Thiesson) is no *Moana* or *Despicable Me*. It is squarely aimed at little girls, and while some of the songs are catchy – Rainbow Dash’s ‘It’s Time To Be Awesome’ is particularly tenacious as an ear-worm – Sia’s ‘Rainbow’ is rather lacklustre as a finale to such an epic quest, where honesty and friendship have been so sorely tested, and peril so resolutely faced.

So why include it in a round-up of SFF films of 2017? Well, when women’s roles in genre films are still too often either Smurfette (*Wonder Woman*), or Princess Peach – a reward for the hero’s successful quest and persistence (*Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*) – it is tremendously positive to see a fantasy film where friendships between female characters are prioritised, where they rescue themselves, and are resourceful and independent, solving their own problems. Crucially, female characters in *My Little Pony: The Movie* can relate to each other in many different ways. I haven’t yet seen *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* but I have read that while there are strong female relationships that are core to the plot (notably Leia and Holdo, and Rose and her sister Paige), the actual screentime given to women tends to situate them in relation to men (Finn and Rose’s quest, Rey caught between Luke and Kylo Ren).

Katha Pollit first used the term “The Smurfette Principle” in a 1991 essay for *The New York Times Magazine*, in which she cited April O’Neill from the *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* cartoon as well as Miss Piggy from *The Muppets*; and indeed, we could include *Paw Patrol* with its one female puppy – the pink one, of course – as a contemporary Smurfette. By having a mainly female cast of protagonists – and a female antagonist – *My Little Pony: The Movie* centres female friendships in a SFF film in a way that I have not seen since *Ghostbusters* (2016).

I told my resident eight-year-old Brony that I was writing about *My Little Pony: The Movie*. He said “it’s great!” And yes, it is.

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Star Wars: The Last Jedi

Paul March-Russell

Poor Luke Skywalker. He was the hero in *A New Hope*, the peasant boy who defeated the planet-eating dragon. But then, in successive films, he had to jostle for attention – his friend and rival for Leia's affections had all the charm, Leia herself got to throttle Jabba the Hutt and reveal hidden powers, and even Luke's dad not only sliced off his hand but, in doing so, delivered that film's most memorable line. Upstaged throughout the rest of the original trilogy, by the time the Force reawakened in 2015, Luke was no more than a folk memory at least until the closing moments.

You have to feel for the actor Mark Hamill. There could have been no bigger break than *Star Wars*, but in the intervening years – apart from a memorable animated turn as the Joker – his career has trodden water. Yet, even though it is impossible to watch *The Last Jedi* without reflecting upon Carrie Fisher's premature death, it is the grizzled, disillusioned, self-pitying but ultimately self-sacrificing Hamill who really owns this film.

The younger heroes, by contrast, play supporting roles. When she is not cajoling Luke, Rey is preoccupied with the mystery of her parentage and her 'place in all this.' Rey's problems are entwined with those of Kylo Ren, who gains much-needed backstory; Adam Driver's performance is all the more confident, and even sympathetic, as a result. The headstrong Poe, meanwhile, not only gets stung by Leia but also slapped down by her second-in-command Holdo (a dignified, albeit brief, turn by Laura Dern). Finn is somewhat side-lined in a narrative arc that puts human relationships ahead of plot, yet fails to fully capitalize in terms of character development. Just like Poe, Finn not only fails to achieve his

goals but is made to question whether they were even right. But whereas Poe gets to show off his newly-acquired thoughtfulness, Finn's frustrations seem to exist more to reinforce the film's broader themes. He does however finally get his stand-off with the underused Captain Phasma, and finishes up entangled in another series love triangle, this time with Rey and new character Rose. The overall message seems to be that these youngsters will have to learn their place in the overarching destiny – that, and never trust a codebreaker who stammers.

Which brings us back to Luke. Whereas J.J. Abrams played up to fan expectations, Rian Johnson has had the nerve to challenge them – signalled by Luke's dismissive response to his light-sabre. The coincidence of the film's premiere in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal has, for some of its reviewers, given its negotiation of masculine roles added focus, even though the overall narrative trajectory moves from male hero worship to sisterly comradeship. Despite finally dominating the screen for the first time in forty years, Luke now stands accused of being the embodiment of toxic masculinity. At the film's centre is the realisation that Luke is prepared to kill not only an adolescent but also his nephew and student. (Teachers may think about killing their students – they don't usually attempt to.) He claims to act on 'instinct' but holds back, or is held back – too late though – by the sight of 'a terrified boy.'

What is this 'instinct' though, so powerful that it not only temporarily clouds Luke's judgement but also his entanglement in the Force? It is more than toxic masculinity. Rather, it is the trauma of a man born in pain (the death of his mother), kept from his true self by his well-meaning but ultimately doomed step-parents,



Luke, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)

and matured in the cauldron of war. More than once the camera lingers upon Luke's prosthetic hand. Having been built-up throughout the series as the saviour-hero, Luke is now suffused with a sense of belatedness, a sense that hope will always arrive too late, and that evil will always triumph. All that Luke has achieved is to delay that process and then, ironically, through his blind rage, to accelerate it.

And yet, at the moment of crisis, Luke did hold back. Holding back, hanging on, staving off what may be inevitable, acquires a special significance in *The Last Jedi*. The film's strangely looping structure, in which narrative arc after narrative arc is repeatedly frustrated, constitutes one gigantic holding pattern. In that deferral, however, in that impediment to forward movement – just as the Resistance ships are themselves tracked and targeted by their enemies so that there appears to be no escape – there remains resistance, an invisible tension between things which, as Luke explains to Rey, is what constitutes the Force.

The second part of any trilogy is often the weakest part (think of Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Two Towers*) since it arrives in media res. Yet *Star Wars* as a whole begins in media res (with each new film we chant 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'); the series is, if nothing else, always belated. What Johnson has done is to take that anachronism and make it into the stuff of his film. *The Last Jedi* (and, as we

discover, it is never 'last') embodies the tension of always coming after, of always being defined in relation to something else. And, by embodying this tension, the film opens-up a suspension not of but in belief – of self-criticism and, potentially, of new hope.



Rose, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017)

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Blade Runner Black Out 2022

Amy C. Chambers



Blade Runner Black Out 2022 (2017)

Three short films were commissioned and released in the run-up to the opening of *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017). *Blade Runner Black Out 2022* (Shinichirō Watanabe, 2017), along with the Luke Scott (son of Ridley Scott) directed shorts *2036: Nexus Dawn* and *2048: Nowhere to Run*, intends to fill in the 30-year gap in the timeline since 2019 and enrich the audience's experience of the reintroduction of the *Blade Runner* storyworld. On Mamoru Oshii's recommendation, Villeneuve approached the creator of the cult anime *Cowboy Bebop*, Shinichirō Watanabe, to create a *Blade Runner* anime. *Cowboy Bebop* was indebted to the style of tech/neo-noir subgenre that Ridley Scott's 1982 masterpiece established; both imagine (multi)culturally palimpsestuous dystopian futures. Watanabe is a master of experimenting with and mixing animation styles. Even within its brief runtime *Blade Runner Black Out 2022* shifts between lush animation, sketched black and white memories, and colour-drained imagery that adeptly visualises humanity's paranoia and

succinctly communicates the chaotic postmodern panculturalism of the *Blade Runner* world. Accompanying the film is a gorgeous soundtrack produced by Flying Lotus that draws upon the seemingly spontaneous soundscapes of both *Blade Runner* and *Cowboy Bebop*.

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Blade Runner 2049

Amy C. Chambers and Lyle Skains



Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

Blade Runner is a formative SF film for many fans and scholars, inviting endless revisitation to its multi-layered, visually excessive storyworld that prioritises aesthetics over narrative. Its long-awaited sequel, *2049*, is equally beautiful and complex, but more narratively accessible than its predecessor. Similarly, *2049* also asks questions about the essence of humanity while lacking depth in its cultural representation. *Blade Runner 2049* imagines a mesmerising future America via its intricate production design and cinematography – an undeniably bleak, largely white, cis-gendered, dystopian world, where the utopian promises of the Off-World feel as impossible in *2049* as they did in *Blade Runner*'s vision of 2019. *Blade Runner 2049* is interwoven with intertextual references to many other SF films (e.g. *Her* [2013]) that themselves are indebted to the visual and philosophical audacity of the original.

Frustratingly for many, *2049* fails to address the original's issues with the racial/queer/gendered perspective. In a film about systematic

de-humanisation and programmed inequality, the lack of diversity could be seen as intentional, equating monoculturalism with dystopia. If so, its failure lies not in the message, but in the ambiguity of visual storytelling. Leaving issues of cultural representation so ambivalently open to interpretation undermines any

statement the filmmakers might have made in an otherwise extremely self-aware film.

If the existential questions posed by the film feel a little tired, and the cultural discourse somewhat shallow, the visual splendour distracts us from them. Viewers barely have a chance to consider the intricacy of human nature or cruelty whilst they are batted between soaring techno-vistas and claustrophobic personal spaces. Ultimately, *2049* does offer its viewers replayability, both in its philosophical questions and – especially – in its breathtaking frame-to-frame artistry.

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War of the Planet of the Apes

Amy C. Chambers

War of the Planet of the Apes is the final instalment of the reboot of 50-year-old *Planet of the Apes* franchise, empathetically imagining the fall of humanity from the apes' perspective. It concludes the three-film journey of Caesar (in a mesmerising performance from Andy Serkis) who moves from science experiment to resistance leader to sacrificial saviour. *War* delves into the past of the *Apes* franchise with some delightfully subtle rhetorical, visual, and aural references to the original series. Vietnam-era war films are also clearly touchstones for the filmmakers, as the opening sequence is a homage to *Apocalypse Now* (as is Woody Harrelson's laboured Brando/Kurtz inspired rogue colonel), with the literal fog of war obscuring our view of the action as the forest's foliage protects and cloaks the apes. In *War*, the apes are framed as an indigenous tribe under siege from the technologically advanced but tactically inferior US military. The spear-wielding apes on horseback who first fought back in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) continue to defy the arrogant humans who consistently underestimate them.

The film critiques the 'madness' of war and colonial attitudes to the other, but also acts as ecocolonial critique as it engages with discussions and striking images of the irrepressible power of nature that humans attempt to tame and exploit. Nature fights back: the post-apocalyptic world presented in *War* and *Dawn* is not a wasteland but rather a green near-future (utopia?) where

remnants of the human world (e.g. abandoned Coca-Cola trucks) are mossy monuments to humanity's failures. *War* closes a cycle of films that are worthy successors to the original and show that in this era of Hollywood reboots and reimaginings it is possible to make a creative, thoughtful, and entertaining blockbuster.



Film Reviews 2017

Gary Couzens



Imitation Girl (2017)

There once was a time when I couldn't have named any Iranian-American women film directors, and now not only can I name three, I've seen a film by all of them. Ana Lily Amirpour followed up her impressive debut *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* with the messy, heavily flawed but visually striking *The Bad Batch*, which bypassed British cinemas and appearing on Netflix a year after its Venice Festival premiere. There is also Desiree Akhavan, director of *Appropriate Behavior* and the forthcoming *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, which has just won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.

And now there is Natasha Kermani, whose *Imitation Girl* had its European premiere at Frightfest in London in August, with further distribution to be advised.

Despite the Frightfest billing, *Imitation Girl* isn't really horror, but is certainly science fiction. An alien creature lands in the southwestern desert and takes on the form of the first human

it sees: the woman on the cover of a discarded magazine. While the alien comes to learn the ways of human beings and to learn how to be human, the cover model, Juliana, is trying to make ends meet in New York City, going from low-paid gig to audition to low-paid gig. Lauren Ashley Carter – definitely a name to watch – plays both roles, ably distinguishing between the two. As the first people the disguised alien stays with are Iranian immigrants, much of her dialogue to begin with is in Farsi, which Carter learned to speak phonetically. The film intercuts between the storylines of the human and the alien. It's no surprise that the two eventually meet, but what happens then I'll leave you to discover for yourself.

Shown at Frightfest the previous year, US director Anna Biller's second feature *The Love Witch* had a limited cinema release in 2017 before going to DVD and Blu-ray. Attributing a film to its director is useful shorthand, as most films are team efforts. However, Biller not only

wrote, produced and directed the film, she also edited it, wrote the music score and did the production and costume design. Her films draw on older cinematic forms and traditions, shooting in 35mm with a lush use of colour. Her first feature, *Viva* from 2007, in which Biller also played a leading role, riffed on the sexploitation films of the 1970s, while *The Love Witch* works within the fantasy/horror genre, in which the title character (played by Samantha Robinson) uses witchcraft in her search for love. Biller's aim is to reclaim the figure of the witch or the femme fatale from the realms of male fantasy and turn her into a female fantasy figure instead. While a little overlong at two hours, *The Love Witch* is enrapturing, not least in its visual aesthetic. I definitely look forward to what Biller does next, said to be her take on the Bluebeard myth, though given her working methods it may be some time away.

From Hungary, Ildikó Enyedi's first feature film in eighteen years, *On Body and Soul* (*Testről és Lélekről*), won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and, has been nominated for the Best Foreign-Language Film Oscar. Two lonely workers in an abattoir, Endre (Géza Morcsányi) and Mária (Alexandra Borbély) come to realise that they are sharing their dreams. A hesitant and poetic love story, the film's mood, with its fine use of music, including two Laura Marling songs, will stay with me for quite a time.

The Australian film *Girl Asleep* bypassed British cinemas and came to DVD in 2017. Written by Matthew Whittet from his own stage play and directed by Rosemary Myers, *Girl Asleep* is a film of two halves. Set in the late 1970s, it begins as an acutely well-observed coming-of-age comedy, in which fourteen-year-old Greta (Bethany Whitmore) is at odds with her parents and the ruling school clique with her only friend the geeky Elliott (Harrison Feldman). In an attempt to get Greta out of her shell, her parents throw a party for her fifteenth and invite everyone without telling her. So far, not hugely original, but at times excruciatingly funny. Then the film takes a sharp left turn and we're in *Company of Wolves* dream territory. The film does set this up, but the join does show, and I preferred the first half to the second. However, there's plenty in this not-especially-long (77 minutes) film to make it worth seeking out.

Also from Down Under, and premiering in the UK at the London Oz Film Festival, is *The Death and Life of Otto Bloom*, written and directed by Cris Jones, who died suddenly in September aged just thirty-seven. Otto (Xavier Samuel) suffers from retrochronology, meaning that he is living his life in reverse. Our future is his past, and were you to meet him he'd remember what was yet to happen to you were you to meet him. Dr Ada Fitzgerald (played by Rachel Ward and, as a younger woman, by Ward's real-life daughter Matilda Brown) is the researcher who discovers Otto's condition. Jones tells the story in fake-documentary style, with characters interviewed to camera, dramatic reconstructions, still photographs, animations, and archive footage, including extracts from home movies genuinely shot on VHS tape and Super 8mm film by cinematographer László Baranyai. The film becomes a bittersweet love story.

The reissue of the year came just before Christmas, with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* having received a 4K digital restoration and in British cinemas, seventy-one years after its first release. In the last days of World War II, bomber pilot Peter Carter's (David Niven) plane is about to crash and he'd rather bail out without a parachute than burn to death. His last words are to American radio operator June (Kim Hunter), and a connection is made, knowing that it will only be for a few minutes. But somehow Peter survives. It turns out that the messenger (Marius Goring) meant to take him up to Heaven got lost in the fog. And, Peter, now in love with June, refuses to go with him, so he has to stand trial for the right to remain on Earth. Intended to promote American/British cooperation after the War, *A Matter of Life and Death* is one of Powell and Pressburger's richest films – moving from romance and comedy to flights of fancy, with Earth in Technicolor and Heaven in a pearly monochrome – and simply one of the greatest films ever made in this country.

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Get Out

Dev Agarwal

Get Out premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2017, and was theatrically released in the United States a month later. The film was well-received by critics and audiences, with particular praise for Jordan Peele's writing and directing and for Daniel Kaluuya's performance. *Get Out* was chosen by the National Board of Review, the American Film Institute, and Time magazine as one of the top 10 films of the year, and received four Oscar nominations.

The film is both its own unique story and part of a canon of socially relevant horror films. It blends social commentary, comedic elements, drama and genuine scares to bring together a coherent narrative about exploitation and the black experience in America today.

In genre circles, *Get Out* arrives at a time when some loud voices are decrying diversity as "virtue signalling" and "message fiction." Message fiction, they claim, puts politics ahead of all other considerations, especially storytelling and entertainment. As science fiction writer Larry Correia put it: "Let's shove more message fiction down their throats! My cause comes before their enjoyment!" Our schism in science fiction reflects a greater schism in western society itself. For the first time in decades, the neoliberal consensus is under serious pressure, both from the left and from the alt right. Long held certainties are in question. Brexit has wobbled the postwar European project. Nuclear Armageddon is being credibly imagined once more. There are actual Nazis everywhere; Marine Le Pen of the Front National brushes against the French presidency while White Nationalists run down protesters in Charlottesville. And, of course, looming over everything is the still

remarkable phrase: President Donald Trump.

And none of this is fiction. Not even the most outlandish science fiction. Into this volatile, surreal world comes the movie *Get Out*.

Get Out posits the story of a black man, Chris, driving from his comfortable middle-class home in Brooklyn to upstate New York. But just before we get to Chris and his weekend away, there is a pre-credit prologue. A black man is lost in a prosperous white suburb ... a 'nice' part of town. We have, for many years and, regardless of our own identity, been invited to follow the story from the default setting of white



protagonists navigating white society. *Get Out* invites us to instead follow black protagonists navigating white society, and horror proves to be the relevant genre for that journey. As this prologue unfolds, the terror mounts, and racial identity become an increasingly urgent matter.

Tanarive Due draws a comparison with 'The Comet' (1920) by W.E.B. DuBois, observing that DuBois "was writing horror from the heart. And, of course, what he's trying to counteract with that story is a different horror [...] There were moments in the DuBois story where he's nervous about where he goes and how he's seen from the outside. It's similar to the opening of *Get Out*, being lost in a strange, white neighbourhood. That's so real." Manohla Dargis, reviewing in *The New York Times* observes that "Peele briskly sets the tone and unsettles the mood. He's working within a recognizable horror-film framework here (the darkness, the stillness), so it's not surprising when a car abruptly pulls up and begins tailing the man [...] when this man anxiously looks for a way out, the scene grows discordantly disturbing because you may, as I did, flash on Trayvon Martin."

The film soon introduces our main character, Chris, played by Daniel Kaluuya. A staple of horror is that things begin very "normally." Chris is a black man in Brooklyn, living a comfortable middle-class life with his white girlfriend, Rose (played by Allison Williams). So things may seem normal, even humdrum. Chris has been invited to meet Rose's family, who live upstate on a huge estate. At the outset, the implication is that Rose's family are part of the wealthy white middle classes, post-racial, egalitarian, liberal, and welcoming. Chris's attempts to anticipate any racial awkwardness are met with disarming humour by Rose. This premise could be lifted from Poirier's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* from 1967, but then projected through the amplifying lenses of both horror and science fiction.

As we journey closer to Rose's family, things begin to steadily deviate from anywhere near "normal." On the drive upstate, Rose and Chris hit a deer – a jump scare and also a distressing and bloody encounter. A white policeman arrives on the scene and his reaction

to the traffic accident is to demand Chris's ID. It's a moment designed to outrage a liberal audience. But it also reveals how both characters react. Chris is pragmatically compliant, whereas Rose, the one who was actually driving the car, confronts the officer. Following this tense, ambiguous encounter, Chris affirms Rose's act – "that was some ride or die shit, baby; I like that" – yet it's a remark with many layers, and even below those layers, we sense that there is a lot Chris isn't saying. This film doesn't just talk about race, but also about silence: about all the ways race isn't talked about. Rose may be established as a 'white ally,' but the incident is tellingly linked with injury and violence. It may return to haunt the viewer too: car crashes bracket the film.

By the time he arrives on the estate, Chris has been through two unnerving events, the death of an animal and the threat of a police officer. Neither incident is fantastical, and yet they add to the accumulation of tension and discomfort. Now, the family who awaits him ranges from the patronisingly liberal to the loutish and offensive. It's just the welcome Chris appeared to fear at the outset. In this sense, the film is experimenting with the use of 'normality' in the standard horror arc. The possibility of being arrested or murdered whenever he meets the police is part of Chris's reality that Rose is shielded from. Likewise, the awkwardness of managing the family's creepy behaviour is 'normal' for Chris. As Tananarive Due points out, in an interview with Evan Narcisse for io9, horror can be "a great way to address this awful, festering wound in the American psyche, the slavery and genocide that was present during our nation's birth."

At this stage, the story may still seem more social drama than horror. However, Peele has already skilfully slipped in cues which will resonate later in the film. The narrative's details continue to accrete like coral. The black characters on the estate are mostly servants, and they remain distinctly uncommunicative with Chris, or weirdly out of sync in their behaviour. Indeed, it is these few black characters who create the gateway into the horror genre proper. Their uncanny presence, and the reactions of the white characters to their disturbed behaviour, is the chief source of tension in this part of the film. The smallest details imply

warnings of the looming terror, as the 'minor' characters start to leak their secrets, and bit by bit the skin of the genteel peels back to expose a brutal, fantastically horrific foundation.

I'll avoid any big spoilers, but this is a film you can run your mind over afterwards, admiring the many small, clever details that reveal its careful construction. Many audiences may be satisfied with the jump scares and plot surprises, while more schooled genre viewers will take the extra pleasure in their anticipation of horror and SF tropes. Peele engages established genre elements – hypnotic suggestion, out-of-body experiences, experiments on human subjects that would fit within David Cronenberg's body horror films. We even get grainy video footage of the 1980s that looks like the DHARMA Project from *Lost*, or recalls that moment in *Quatermass* where a major plot development is explained by silent film footage.

At the same time, Peele never resorts to pandering allusions or to cheap tricks. He asks us to emotionally invest in the characters' lives, and that means understanding how they feel in specific situations. The film draws on the history of slavery and exploitation, as well as the racist stereotypes about the 'physical vitality' of black bodies. The allegory has resonated so widely that a UCLA course in African-American Studies has now been named after a key conceit of the film: 'Sunken Place: Racism, Survival, and Black Horror Aesthetic.' (The course is now made available to anyone online). The trick that Peele pulls off is to make the message mesh with his story in such a way that they become synergistic and ultimately indivisible.

Get Out cost \$4.5 million dollars to make and took \$33.3 million on its opening weekend. It's now surpassed the \$175 million mark in the US alone, putting it behind *The Exorcist* and *It* for R-rated horror. In financial terms, *Get Out* is a success.

And, in cultural terms, the film is already earning the sobriquet "revolutionary." Tananarive Due describes how, "just recently, we were talking to some network execs about a pilot we were developing [...] and they were like, "Oh, like in *Get Out*." And it's not that it's anything similar to *Get Out*, it's just that was now the new

framework. That's what black horror looks like: *Get Out*. They can now have a reference point and you can continue with the conversation. Because before, you could barely even get that conversation started."

Revolutionary work resists pigeonholing, especially if categorisation itself is symptomatic, as in the case of *Get Out* being nominated in the "comedy" category at the Golden Globes. Peele himself has said that "[t]he reason for the visceral response to this movie being called a comedy is that we are still living in a time in which African-American cries for justice aren't being taken seriously. It's important to acknowledge that though there are funny moments, the systemic racism that the movie is about is very real. More than anything, it shows me that film can be a force for change. At the end of the day, call *Get Out* horror, comedy, drama, action or documentary, I don't care. Whatever you call it, just know it's our truth."

Quotations taken from "How *Get Out* Inspired a New College Course on Racism and Horror" by Evan Narcisse in io9, and the NYT articles: 'Get Out A Review' by Manohla Dargis (Feb. 23, 2017) and 'Jordan Peele's X-Ray Vision' by Wesley Morris (Dec. 20, 2017).

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Best of Fashion

Ricardo Suazo



Nadi-X vibrating yoga pants

Given that 2017 saw the launch of various SF blockbusters, when looking for the best of fashion one would be forgiven for turning to these highly visual, big budget productions. *Wonder Woman*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* all made a return to our screens. However, the year's most significant SF-related fashion events are to be found elsewhere. This is because in most cases the fashion references from these productions rely on a retro-futuristic vision, one which emphasises a post-apocalyptic, hyper-sexualised, Amazonian aesthetic.

An alternative would be to look to the catwalk, to the work of designers like Iris Van Herpen, Rick Owens or Comme des Garçons, all of whom share a reputation for futuristic, SF-inspired fashion. Whilst interesting, these proposals are not new, and certainly not representative of the mood in the industry. If anything, the fashion industry seems to be falling out of love with digital technologies. For example Hussein Chalayan's Spring-Summer 2018 collection (shown in September 2017) was a commentary on how digital technologies can veil individual identity. This was only a

year after the London-based designer showed a collection – in collaboration with Intel – which included accessories that could 'read' the wearer's emotions and transform them into visuals displayed on a large screen.

The truth is, the best of fashion in SF in 2017 came neither from films nor from the catwalks of Paris, London, New York or Milan. Instead, it came from startups and technology giants in the Wearable Technology field, who are forcing us to re-think how we conceive the human body. In this space, fashion is less suggestive of cyberpunk or *Matrix*-inspired SF, and more reminiscent of near-future dystopias such as *Black Mirror* or Channel 4's *Humans* – an aesthetic which insists on the innocuousness of the cyborg, often with an aura of artful temperance that is more normcore and humblebrag than it is minimalism.

The term 'Wearable Technology' is often used broadly to refer to smartwatches, fitness trackers and VR gadgets. Whilst those have become mainstream in 2017, it is really connected garments that provide a reason for excitement. 2017 will go down as the year in which wearable technology finally moved away from health

monitoring bracelets and chunky VR glasses, and gave new meaning to the phrase, 'Make sure you wear something smart.' It was also a year in which the influence of SF in scientific and technological research was undoubtedly demonstrated: once more, we see science fiction turn into science reality.

Perhaps the most popular application of connected garments is in sportswear which measures the wearer's biometrics to provide feedback that can help improve athletic performance. Notable examples include Lumo's smart running shorts, which provide real-time running coaching and feedback, Hexoskin's smart training tops, which monitor the wearer's heart, breathing, movement, and wakefulness, and Nadi-X's vibrating yoga pants, which provide real time haptic feedback intended to help the wearer improve their yoga practice.

Getting even more up-close and personal, SKIIN promises to improve the wearer's life through connected underwear. Their washable smart clothing can monitor body signals around the clock and suggest changes that may reduce stress levels and improve sleep quality. Measuring heart rate, posture, hydration, breathing and body temperature, SKIIN garments can connect with smart appliances in the home to control light and temperature or play music. In this specific case, machines get closer to the most intimate parts of our bodies. Their power stems from combining ubiquity with invisibility and from becoming one with the wearer by further blurring the distinction between man and machine. This corresponds to two of the boundary breakdowns which Donna Haraway cites in her 'Cyborg Manifesto': animal/machine and physical/non-physical. The machines she refers to 'are quintessentially microelectronic devices, everywhere and invisible'. There couldn't be a better definition of ubiquity than machines in our underwear.

What is fascinating is how these uses of biometric data suggest the very opposite of the bodiless exultation seen in Gibson's cyberspace in *Neuromancer*. Instead of a fleshless virtual reality, where the body is displaced by its data double, we may be heading towards a future where flesh itself is instrumentalised as a computational medium, a future where the body

becomes commodified, not for its physical power – as suggested in *Black Mirror*'s early 'Fifteen Million Merits' episode – but for the data with which it is merged.

It is therefore not hard to imagine a future in which human beings will be classed according to their ability to extend their bodies and enhance their physical and digital self through the clothes they wear. This would create a world of haves and have-nots, perhaps not dissimilar to that described by Huxley in his *Brave New World*, in which Alphas, Betas and Gammas are immediately identifiable by the garments they wear. Instead of a hierarchy programmed from birth, the class system would be determined by ability to afford connected garments, or to produce 'quality' data about their environment, themselves or those around them. Fashion has historically been about emulation of the upper classes, but perhaps we are at the dawn of a new type of hierarchy shaped by fashion as an evolutionary force.

Whilst all these changes are significant, the most exciting development in fashion for SF is the commercial launch of the Google x Levi's Trucker Jacket. The outcome of a collaboration between two giants, the technology uses conductive thread to turn an unassuming heavy denim jacket into an extended interface of your mobile phone, targeted mainly at bikers and cyclists. With the exception of Samsung's short-lived NFC-enabled suit, the Trucker Jacket is the first mainstream connected garment, not aimed for sportswear.

The Trucker Jacket shows how interconnectivity can be woven into a garment without radically altering its appearance. Through the use of touch sensitive fabric, Google and Levi's have transformed the garment into a peripheral device and enabled a new form of gesture-control (another nod to 'Fifteen Million Merits'). Whilst not explicitly mentioned in the launch, it is not hard to imagine that in the future, the jacket will track and measure the wearer's body in a way similar to those described above.

From a SF perspective, perhaps the most interesting thing about this jacket is its uncanny resemblance to the elusive Gabriel Hounds garment described by Gibson in his 2010, fashion-centred book *Zero History*. This



Google x Levi's Trucker Jacket

description could almost word for word be applied to the Google x Levi's Trucker Jacket:

'A very heavy denim shirt. She took it out and spread it across her lap. No, a jacket. The denim darker than the thighs of her Japanese jeans, bordering on black. And it smelled of that indigo, strongly, an earthy jungle scent familiar from the shop where she'd found her jeans. The metal buttons, the rivet kind, were dead black, non-reflective, oddly powdery-looking.'

In *Zero History*, Hubertus Bigend is obsessed with an elusive, mysterious American denim brand, which sounds very much like Levi's in this case. In the book, Gibson demonstrates a deliberate knowledge of fashion and garment construction when referring to a 'gusset' (a pattern cutting term used to refer to triangular piece added to a garment to improve fit and movement). It is probably not a coincidence that the book revolves around function-oriented garments like streetwear, workwear and military clothing. This may be a hint as to where fashion is heading both in SF and in reality: towards

a radical re-negotiation of the relationship between form and function. This could mean a far greater emphasis on how your clothes extend your body and your body's capacities, and on what your clothes enable you to do.

This new reality raises multiple questions which SF may answer in the near future:

- Is the capturing and processing of bodily data the next step in the journey to the achievement of the 'perfect simulacrum'?
- Who owns an individual's bodily data once it's generated and processed?
- What does this mean for the human condition? Where does the body start and end?
- Are we enabling a new form of exclusion through people's ability to afford garments which enhance and / or expand their human abilities?

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Avengers #8

Martin McGrath

My genre highlight of 2017 is really just three panels from a comic book. It's from *Occupy Avengers #8* (June 2017), written by David F. Walker and drawn by Martin Morazzo and Jorge Coelho. The story is a tie-in to the Secret Empire crossover that dominated Marvel's line of books in the middle of 2017 and, at a casual reading, the panels are easy to overlook.

The story features those resisting the authoritarian rule of Hydra, led by the briefly evil Captain America, which has taken control of the American government. In one panel a black man is being shot. He seems to be standing in front of a group of black men, trying to protect them. In the second panel the unnamed man is lying dead on the floor and the people he was trying to protect are being gunned down by white men in Hydra uniforms. Seven pages later, briefly and a bit obliquely, we learn that the man we saw being shot was an out-of-costume superhero, Nighthawk.

There have been about half-a-dozen different "Nighthawks" – a C-list character with a mixed-up history. He is usually the alter-ego of white millionaire Kyle Richmond created by Roy Thomas and Sal Buscema as part of the Squadron Sinister so that Marvel's *Avengers* could face-off against an ersatz version of DC's *Justice League*. That Nighthawk, a Batman surrogate, has generally been a bit of an arse – one version of his origin has him getting powers after killing his girlfriend while drunk driving, another early appearance has him pretending to be a hero fighting Daredevil just so he could be famous, and a later take, in *The Defenders*, sees Richmond narrowly avoid jail for tax avoidance and corporate fraud (a story that surely deserves revisiting in this new gilded age).



Although this Nighthawk must hunt a brutal psychopath in Chicago, the story's real villains are corrupt police, gentrifying property developers, racism, inequality and America's gun culture. That Nighthawk, however, is not this Nighthawk

This Nighthawk is an African-American – also from another reality – who emerged from Marvel's 2015 Secret Wars crossover to take the white Kyle Richmond's place (accidentally killing him in a fight) and then adopted the name Raymond Kane. In 2016 David F. Walker wrote a series chronicling this Nighthawk's brutal inversion of the Batman mythos. Although this Nighthawk must hunt a brutal psychopath in Chicago, the story's real villains are corrupt police, gentrifying property developers, racism, inequality and America's gun culture. Walker's books have been interesting and intelligent but not commercially successful and Nighthawk only lasted six issues, but it was one of my favourites of 2016. Unlike all previous incarnations it seemed possible that this Nighthawk could have developed into something genuinely interesting.

Then Kane is killed. Worse, he is thrown away in a barely noticeable flashback in someone else's comic. It seemed pointless, infuriating, stupid ... and yet, as time has passed, I have thought more about these three panels than anything else I've read this year.

Walker knows, of course, that in America today the gunning down of a black man – whether it's by the police or by someone else – is an event that is all too frequently passed over. It is something often witnessed but regularly ignored by the media and swept, with practiced swiftness, out of sight by police and courts. It is 62 years since the murder of Emmett Till energised what would become America's Civil Rights Movement and four years since the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, but the outrage and attention won by these high-profile cases remain exceptions, despite the best efforts of generations of protestors. Injustice and tragedy remain everyday realities and, in most cases, the profound silence persists.

Young black men are five times more likely to be killed by a gun in America than white men and while white gun deaths are overwhelmingly suicides (77%), black deaths are overwhelmingly homicide (82%), according to America's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. As I write this (almost at the end of December) The Washington Post has recorded 971 police killings in America

in 2017 – over 40% of these incidents have seen black or Hispanic men killed, despite this group making up only around one in ten of the American population

The casual disposal of Raymond Kane is art reflecting reality in an era when a statement like "black lives matter" can somehow become controversial and divisive. Given the themes Walker has explored with this Nighthawk there could, in retrospect, hardly have been a more truthful or more timely statement for an African-American comic book writer to make than to kill off a contemporary black superhero without fuss or hype. There is no magical resurrection, no investigation, no consequences and no sombre funeral oration from Captain America or Tony Stark. Raymond Kane's murder goes almost unnoticed, unmentioned by all but his closest ally. It hardly mattered to Raymond Kane that the fascist Hydra happened to control America's government, as Tilda points out: "simply being a black man" was enough to seal his fate. The more I think about it the braver and more essential a piece of writing these three brief panels seem to become.

So, farewell Raymond Kane. In dying, almost unnoticed, you became something no one else in a Nighthawk costume has ever been: you were important.

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Board Games Pick of 2017

Erin Horáková

The past year (broadly considered – I'm lumping 2016 in here, too) saw the continuing expansion of boardgaming / eurogaming in the Anglosphere and, connectedly, some impressive and winning SFF-themed titles. If you're unfamiliar with this style of game, which often involves greater thematic and mechanical complexity than 'trad' board games of the Monopoly and Life ilk, you may well wish to explore either genre classics or popular new titles. Contemporary in-roads might be especially appealing for newcomers because eurogames, like anything, are a product of the circumstances they're made in and show their age. A 90s game will look and feel 'dated'. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, so much as an indicator that games are a dynamic cultural product, responsive to trends and the times.

To start with lighter fare as a first course, in *Kodama: The Tree Spirits* (2016) players serve as caretakers trying to create a pleasing home for the folkloric beings. If 'kodama' doesn't ring a bell, think the small, head-spinning white creatures in *Princess Mononoke*. These kodama want you to lay out cards in order to accumulate sets of elements they fancy, such as flowers or fireflies. There are also temporary goals to meet, which change with the round, or 'season,' and with the play session. The art is quite sweet, and the game's nurturing and balance-seeking prerogatives make playing it particularly soothing. My one real beef is that the overlapping tableaux of cards leads to loose, easy-going play, which is all well and good, but it can be unclear what card placements are within the bounds of the rules. I don't like feeling I could accidentally cheat by understanding what's permissible differently than my opponent. Try *Kodama* with friends who aren't especially competitive, or as a low-key intro to more modern gaming.

Game of Blame (2016) is a fun and social fantasy court politics card game with a high-spirited 'screw your neighbour' mechanic and flavour text that's way more amusing than is strictly necessary. These snippets aren't integral to your gaming experience, and indeed the pace of the game prohibits you from engaging with them as deeply as I might like (you aren't creating an over-arching 'plot' with your play, either). But I really appreciate the effort that's gone into producing a solid game in which even the elements you don't get to pay much attention to are well-executed. *Blame* is a relatively inexpensive (not always true of eurogames!) and quick-playing title that'd be good to try with a small, energetic group.

Two crunchy, technical SF games, better suited to people who've done some eurogaming before, received a good deal of deserved attention this year. *Mechs vs. Minions* (2016), a fusion of eurogaming and trad figurine-based wargaming with a surprisingly whimsical *Codename: Kids Next Door* aesthetic, guides players through a booklet of scenarios during successive play sessions. This teaches people how to use an increasingly complex system, provides a variety of challenges and offers a sense of narrative without seriously diminishing the game's replayability (unlike, say, the central mechanic of the always promising and always





disappointing T.I.M.E. Stories franchise). This collection of scenarios, like a novel of short stories, is an intriguing system I'm looking forward to seeing more development of in future titles (though I've also seen this structure deployed woodenly—hello, Harry Potter: Hogwarts Battle, why are you so popular when you have done so little to deserve it?).

Mechs is also a collaborative programming game, where you choose abilities and assign them to your robot. You then execute your chosen move sequence, manipulate the robot on the board and achieve goals in the face of resistance from the game system. In a way this takes the algorithmic elements of strategy many video games would invisibly execute for you, the command functions, and locates the play in these decisions, opening them up to discussion. There's something meta about Mechs' literally playful answer to the perennial 'why would you play a board game when you could play a computer game?' question. The other day in our local boardgame café, I saw someone with one of the Pokemon Go watches that automatically catches Pokemon for you, optimising your exploitation of the augmented environment while eliminating the need for any actual interaction with it. I wondered where the game lay for this player? Where the point and the pleasure sat for her? Mechs makes me ask similar questions of myself, as well as nodding at eurogames' war-gaming kin, which can be infamous for their pen-and-paper, rulers-out calculation demands.

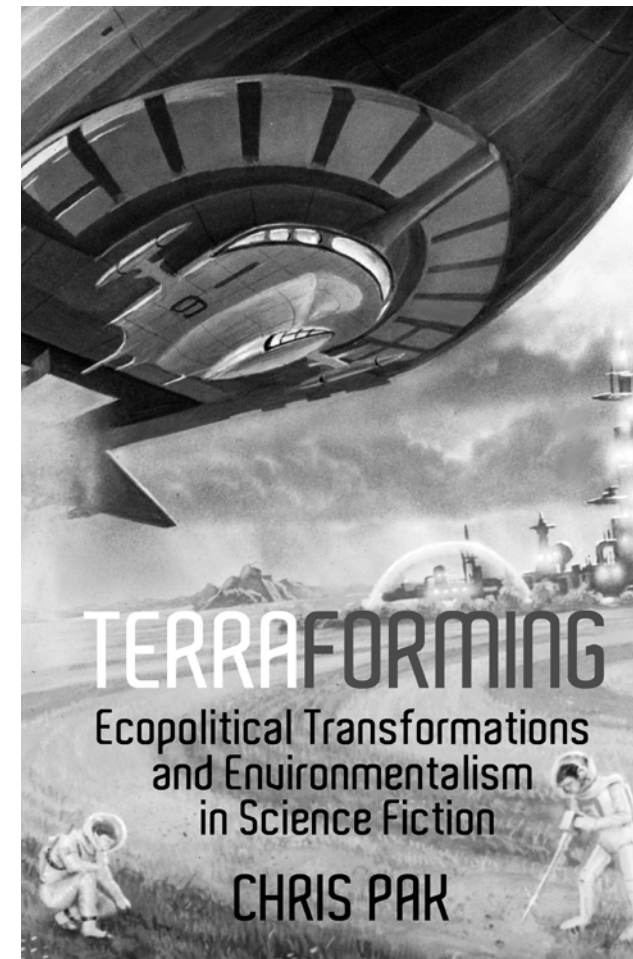
Then there's Terraforming Mars (2016). This sees so much play in our house I have trouble believing it's such a new game! Of course that may in part be due to its sad 90s aesthetic and

kind of shoddy components (not you, lovely cubes, I'm looking at the thin, infinitely jostleable boards). But I don't want to undersell this multi-layered game, which nicely pairs its hard SF theme with a complementary mechanical richness. You're trying to do what it says on the tin, either as a standard corporation with a government grant or, in the more complex mode, as a

highly competitive mega-corporation using your own cash for your own ends. Either way, the game evokes a bleakly endless and static capitalism controlling major political developments even many generations into the settlement of Mars. Per Žižek, it is easier to imagine the end of life on Earth than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

Successfully terraforming Mars across several defined performance vectors (specific climate changes, settlement levels) will involve spending your resources cannily, as well as the constructing various engines, i.e. card combinations that become systems with knock-on effects. Where Terraforming Mars lets me down as sci-fi is in the relative paucity of knock-on effects for the various changes you're enacting, and in the relative stability of the players' situation over 'generations' of play. What you do may set your opponents plans back, but you'll never trip over yourself and undo your own work, or set back the shared process. Everyone really is working towards the same end. Imagine this being true of any comparable collection of corporate agents.

Such simplifications do make Terraforming Mars a smoother game. Endless calculations of balance might be tedious, undercutting player agency and slowing down the game. But streamlining does make the game a less valuable evocation of the environmental and social impacts of its theme in miniature. There's a real argument to be made that massively overhauling a planet, in a way that uses tons of resources and affects tons of people, should be a tedious, cautious affair, and that to gamify it in a way that doesn't centre this feeds hubristic



naivety about complex ecological systems, plus an irresponsible Elon Musk-esque fantasy of what development is. Chris Pak's book *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* stresses that the way we think about nature on other planets is connected with the way we think about nature and the Other in the real present. "The ability to alter the landscape and the ethical dilemmas this poses direct attention towards the future. The fundamental question asked is how we want to live, and it emerges from the concern over whether we can continue living in ways that threaten the integrity of our environments." Pak points out that many terraforming narratives show humans changing their bodies to suit the new environment in some way—but as Terraforming Mars advances, it becomes clear that the goal is a creation not of a liveable Mars per se, but a perfect Earth II, with recognisable plants, livestock and pets. The Martian and Terran exchanges are one-way, and further the presumed colonist and presumed player are probably Western, judging by most of the names and images.

And, as Pak points out, more than gameplay is at stake. This month the *National Review*, an American Republican-aligned publication, tried to stir up fervour among its readers over 'boardgamer gate,' in part because I'd made fairly mild objections to Puerto Rico, a perennially popular gamification of the slave trade which employs brown 'worker' tokens in its sugar plantations and refineries in a review on the popular community site BoardGameGeek. Essentially my point there was that however abstracted or lightly obscured the mechanic (the rules never mention 'slaves'), I'm uncomfortable 'playing' something so thematically rooted in slavery, and that as a classic game, Puerto Rico is both particularly likely to be introduced to new or potential hobbyists and particularly likely to alienate POC from what's already a white male dominated fandom. The *National Review* columnist went on to criticise a crowd-sourced, tongue-in-cheek list of games with problematic content:

As of this writing, BGG's social-justice sleuths have catalogued the "strong classist undertones" of Lords of Waterdeep ("you play a 'lord' in a classist society/city"); the "potentially stereotypical depiction of Indians/Asians" in Jaipur; the fact that Castles of Mad King Ludwig "mocks mental health issues"; [...] the portrayal of a "pale/white race as superior and 'good'" in War of the Ring; Terra Mystica's "stereotypical depiction of desert-based groups"; and the fact that The Resistance's "dystopian future is entirely populated by white people."

I wasn't involved with this one, but I rather wish I had been, because it's hard to tell what he's peeved about when almost all of these observations are simply obviously correct. They're not stated as elegantly as they could be, under the columnist's untender hand. Neither are they necessarily damning indictments of the media in question. What they are is quite basic literary analysis, amounting to a declaration that games are media, which function like media



does, and are objects available to analysis, like anything. War of the Ring, a Tolkien-based game, might-just-might partake of the source text's well-documented racial overtones? DnD (of which Lords of Waterdeep is a board game spinoff) and fantasy in general have some class hang-ups? Surely not!

It is indeed satisfying to be subtweeted by the *National Review* in a way that so thoroughly proves my point that gaming could stand to be more conscientious about its influences and more thoughtful as a community of developers and players because dubious things are afoot, like, I don't know, a guy whining about a game review he disliked to his national publication in a slenderly-disguised effort to generate a contretemps for the 'protection' of his hobby and sake of his Personal Brand. Because he was just that mad Slave-owner Monopoly made someone else uncomfortable. Though really,

one writer to another,
I speak the ancient rhyme:
turn on locations, coward,
and @ me next time.

What I will say ideologically for Terraforming Mars is that you're not supposed to view this eternal capitalist wrangling as positive, and indeed the game can be amusingly scathing about its own

framework. Though what does that caution mean when to win, you enact 'beneficial' corporate dominance? Terraforming is also, to its credit, relentlessly interested in projects and teams rather than over-valorised Super Geniuses—a welcome difference between it and a lot of recent SFnal mass media. It's a good game, and one I won't stop playing, but isn't it worth thinking about what Terraforming could have done to push boundaries and become an astounding title that offered something as SF. I'll grant that the ludic experience isn't entirely reducible to literary analogues and that 'asking the game to be good SF' has to happen on gaming's own terms, rather than demanding a game give me what the best SF does, how it does. Yet I still feel Mars might have worked harder, conceptually, without 'risking' its gameplay.

Finishing with two titles that smoothly combine stronger narrative elements with mechanical game play—games that are also perhaps better suited to new players than the previous two—it's hard not to be intrigued by Stonemaier Games' dreamy Scythe (2016), which departs from thoroughly-explored steampunk aesthetics to give us an alternative early C20th East Europe with mechs. The 'not as you know them' nations and corresponding characters have a suggestion of development to them, and you execute light decision-based quests, but Scythe's focus is ultimately more on engine-building, and on making the most prosperous,



rounded and popular country. I was slightly disappointed by the Scythe artbook, which contained beautiful images alongside woollier world-building. Perhaps stick with the evocative game, designed based on the artist's pre-existing portfolio, which does more compelling SFnal work than the book's explanations thereof. For all BoardGameGeek raves about the design of any title with decent production values, Sythe is one of the comparatively few very attractive games out there.

Red Raven's Near and Far (2017), the sequel to 2015's Above and Below, is more story-driven than either its predecessor or Scythe. It combines a strong 'multiple ways to win' engine with a variety of maps. You can engage with these via free play, character quest and campaign modes. You can also access printable instructions for a fairly solid collaborative mode online. Near and Far is well-made, with the charm of a pick-up D&D game with minimal front-end effort. Sometimes I feel that who wins and who loses is a bit random, and that Near and Far does a worse job than many Euros of keeping the player score spread tight and setting up a situation wherein player agency validly results in someone winning or losing as a result of their strategic decisions rather than luck. But these complaints are less important if you're playing to share a game experience rather than to engage in an optimised competitive strategy session. I don't like Near and Far as much as some other

games, and yet I think it is, in many ways, a better game than most titles I prefer to it? If you want a pleasant story and play-session in a well-themed world, Near and Far is a great choice. It's also a promising step for the development of Euros that want to do even more with narrative.

Among these I'd count Charterstone (2017), just released and already destined to be one of the year's runaway hits. This 'legacy' fantasy game is decidedly not beginner-friendly. I have complex

feelings about legacy gaming, which is at once a fun narrative development that alters the physical game system as you play it and a capitalist ploy to tamp down on the thriving game-resale market. I have mixed feelings about Charterstone itself, which is gimmicky and boldly formally experimental, often in the same moment. But if you're willing to drop money you'll never see again and to read the rules as you go along with religious care (seriously, do this, we screwed ourselves over three times by treating Charterstone's rules as casually as we would those of another new eurogame), do try it. The way Charterstone unfolds is so novel I almost forgive the steep learning curve, the way that from round two you see the whole of the plot spread before you, the way the game asks you to constantly apply stickers—inevitably slightly wonkily, so they torment you forever—and how I'm not very good at it.

I've yet to play the year's other major legacy fantasy game, Gloomhaven (2015-2017), but I hope to later this month, to ring in the new year.

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AR movements in 2017

Susan Gray



Magic Leap AR

In 2017, it was all about the Rs – (Virtual) Reality, (Augmented) Reality, and (Mixed) Reality. The news was getting increasingly harder to grasp, and the SF predictions of ubiquitous virtual worlds were beginning to feel like an imminent change.

We probably all know what VR is, but what's the distinction between AR and MR? Both terms can be experienced immersively through smartglasses, or glimpsed through a tablet or phone. According to some definitions, AR weaves a layer of digital information into your visual field – think Head Up Display – whereas MR is a bit more comprehensive, surrounding users with digital objects that can respond to and sometimes even interact with the physical world. But the difference isn't that big or clear, so I'll just use the term 'AR' here.

Whilst AR hasn't kicked off in quite the same way as VR just yet, the resources dedicated to it have been highly visible in 2017, as enthusiasts and professional developers alike have received AR tools to disrupt reality in a multitude of ways.

Here are some of the tools that made great headway for AR in 2017:

ARKit/ARcore

With AR SDKs (software development kits), creating immersive environments is becoming more accessible than ever before. People worldwide are creating overlays from their laptops – models that could one day appear on the global stage of the mobile phone screen. The number of AR SDKs reflect this: with Vuforia, ARToolkit, Kudan, EasyAR and Wikitude only being a handful of examples. However, ARKit, announced in the Apple Keynote in 2017 along with iOS11, made the medium even more mainstream.

ARKit allows developers and enthusiasts alike to capitalise on their phone's camera and sensors to create enhanced AR experiences. For example, with SLAM technology (Simultaneous Location Tracking and Mapping), floors and surfaces can be scanned so that virtual objects can be placed in real locations accurately, rather

than solely relying on an image target. Features also included Face Mapping (the technology behind Snapchat filters) and Positional Audio, providing many creative solutions for AR builders. Even in iOS's beta version, people managed to construct such experiences as the AR portal.

Measurement Cloud, built by Smart Picture 3D, is another example of the ARKit's tool box: it enables the virtual objects to fit in proportionally into the real world tailored by AR via a virtual measuring tape. It may be the most fitting way of evoking how the virtual and physical worlds are starting to blur.

ARCore, the Android compatible AR SDK, came out soon afterwards, offering features such as motion/ground plane tracking and light estimation. What will undoubtedly become apparent in 2018 is many businesses adopting AR into their marketing and relying on this new way of storytelling.

Lens Studio

Snapchat made us sprout animal ears, modify our voice and even swap faces to display in our social media gallery. However, what made this app increasingly relevant after fierce competition with Instagram was the introduction of Lens Studio – a way for developers and AR enthusiasts to create their own Lens snaps.

Magic Leap

After a 1.9 billion dollar investment and a much hyped years-long waiting period, Magic Leap finally announced its headset in December 2017. The Magic Leap One is an AR headset which attaches to a small computer (the Lightpack) that can be clipped onto your clothing – allowing you to blend your "online" life with your "real" one. A controller is also included to enhance interactivity with augmented objects and experiences. The headset won't be released to 2018, but it looks like Microsoft's HoloLens (released in 2016) may be facing some fierce competition soon.



AR portal

Aryzon

Google Cardboard in 2014 allowed people to explore VR with a mobile phone and self-assembled cardboard headset, creating a highly accessible experience. Google also released a Cardboard SDK with Unity, allowing developers to whip up VR applications with the preset VR camera. This was inaccessible for AR, however, as there was no space for the camera.

Aryzon had a solution: to make a headset that works with a mirror, combining glass and stereoscopic lenses – projecting the image in front of the user. In this way, a camera can still be used in a headset that's relatively affordable! The Kickstarter raised €109,995 and was released in September, 2017.

With all of this in mind, it seems that 2018 will be an exciting year to see these AR projects blossom and expand, not only in the world of technology, but in the minds of the public as well.

How far it will go is anyone's guess.

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Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Jon Garrad

When Senua is struck in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, there's no floating health bar that neatly depletes. Her damaged body reacts in pain, her vision may blur, and the voices in her head grow more panicked.

Abandoning the Head-Up Display isn't exactly new, but it's generally done to achieve a sense of horror. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* grabs this trend by the throat and rams it into a visceral medieval aesthetic that takes on our sense of what's real. Here's the basic logic. HUDs draw the eye and the attention. They remind us we're playing a game. They fundamentally alter the aesthetic experience of play. Lack of a HUD creates a more immersive experience.

The result is a game that's genuinely fantastic, as friendly neighbourhood structuralist Tzvetan Todorov would say. For Todorov, a sense of the fantastic emerges from not being able to decide whether something is 'real' or 'supernatural'. Firstly, the reader – or in our case the player – has to consider the unfolding text as a world of living persons. That sense of worldliness is compromised by HUDs of health metres or minimaps, or button prompts that remind us we're in a simulation.

Secondly, said living persons have to experience (and transmit to the player) uncertainty about what's happening – is it natural or is it supernatural, from their point of view? The game revels in ambiguity here. Senua's belief that she's in Helheim co-exists with the player's beliefs about her mental health and auditory hallucinations, locating the player as a force in Senua's story that isn't quite fully identified with her. We've been told this is a game about psychosis, but that's not how Senua frames and understands her world – so what are we to her, to this character who perceives that there are immanent, impersonal forces determining her

actions? The uncertainty isn't located in Senua's reality, but in its relationship to ours.

Finally, in order to experience the fantastic, the player has to reject the idea that this is some sort of allegory or that things are being done purely for effect; there needs to be an element of naivety and belief in the game's world. Senua's own naive faith in her circumstances and direct confrontation of her 'voices' ticks that box on our behalf, forcing us into a relationship with her perceptions, providing a gateway which allows uncertainty to radiate out through the entire rest of the game.

The complicity which a video game encourages between the self that plays and the self that is played, and the uneasy liminal distance between them, can make a genuinely powerful fantasy possible – provided the player's attention is encouraged inwards at every opportunity.

Without the kind of aggressive user interface that drags you from pillar to post and story to sandbox in, say, *Middle Earth: Shadow of War*, your pace of play changes – it becomes more cautious and exploratory and uncertain. You don't know how many yards you are from your objective or how well concealed you are or what else is nearby for you to interact with or even, at first, exactly how to interact.

Instead, you're forced into paying attention to things which you perceive from Senua's point of view. You believe and interpret the world as she does. There's no distance, no safety available. From the moment that she first pushes that boat behind her, scowling into your face, Senua confidently asserts her own reality and challenges you to accept it – or not.

Now *that's* fantasy.

Life is Strange

Jon Garrad

Life is strange, and so's the franchise. In 2017, the time-travelling timeline-crossing Twin-Peaks-esque high school heartbreaker was graced with its first prequel – Deck Nine Games' *Before The Storm*.

At first, Deck Nine's choice to remove the original game's 'Rewind' mechanic (which allowed player and then-protagonist Max to reverse time and repeat encounters and conversations with more information, items and options in their pocket) seemed like a betrayal of the original game's SFF potential.

In retrospect, this take couldn't have been more wrong. BTS doesn't so much abandon the supernatural as displace and externalise it. New protagonist Chloe (promoted from her role as sidekick, catalyst and sacrificial lamb in LIS) is shadowed, guided and overseen by a raven, whose diet of carrion and mythic role as 'bird of ill omen' take on grim new meanings when she's placed and costumed in the role herself, at first on stage and later in her own dreams.

Every time Chloe dozes off, she encounters her dead father William, in a series of tender, harrowing reiterations of his death by car crash. Appearing as loving parent, Two-Face-ish spectre, improv theatre partner and finally full-blown daylight hallucination, William assigns a human face to the force of destiny and predestination that's defined the franchise since the beginning, allowing Chloe to confront, challenge and take a perverse comfort in her relationship with destiny.

It's fitting, for a prequel which celebrates and explores a relationship that has to end badly: for LIS to play out, Rachel has to die, and Chloe has to be left broken-hearted. It's fertile, extending the supernatural credibility and potential of the franchise beyond a single, arbitrary event. It's also frustrating, in that BTS

doubles down on the original's refusal to dot its i's, cross its t's, and explain what's going on in the terms of clear cause and effect that a particular kind of SFF readership demands.

What exactly happened at the end of Episode 1, when Rachel's scream set half the state on fire? Nobody knows – but the fire rages until Rachel passes out. The equivalence is obvious – the game compares Rachel to a wildfire, beautiful but out of control, again and again – but the question of how she did that is never even allowed to come up.

In its deployment of a stubbornly unexplained supernatural, though, *Before The Storm* makes its objectives clear. This isn't mythopoeic world-building for the D&D crowd. M. John Harrison's 'great clomping foot of nerdism' is invited to stamp elsewhere. Like David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me*, from which *Before The Storm* unabashedly cribs, what matters here is the affective sense of things. It feels right. Rachel's like wildfire, so she burns the world around her. Chloe argues with fate through dead dad dreams. Things make emotive sense for these characters, at this point in time. Deal with it.

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Podcasting

Peter Morrison, Erin Roberts, Laura Pearlman, Victoria Hooper

Podcasting 2017, An Overview

Peter Morrison

Podcasts are big business right now and there's a wealth of genre podcasting out there for listeners to explore. There are podcasts discussing the SF canon and the history of the genre, reviewing the latest releases, interviewing authors, and talking about the craft behind creation. Productions range from the amateur to the professional, so there's something for everyone. Here I'll focus on fiction and drama, based on my own listening experience.

Short fiction has always been a love of mine. It is a gateway for writers and readers, a literary form that leans toward connection and discovery. So it's unsurprising that short story markets have taken so enthusiastically to the online medium, or that they are now becoming so invested in podcasts. The Escape Artists group are among the longest running – beginning with readings of SF reprints in Escape Pod, branching out into fantasy at Podcastle, and horror with Pseudopod. Having established themselves at the heart of the scene, over the last few years they have expanded from reprints to new fiction, and added a YA branch, Cast of Wonders. The only thing that is stopping them from world domination is the presumably finite number of clever puns on the words 'pod' and 'cast.'

While old school paper magazines continue to rely on old school models, their digitally-native counterparts are treating podcasts as a serious part of what they do. This means that every month you can listen to the latest science fiction at *Clarkesworld*, science fiction fantasy at *Lightspeed*, or literary fantasy at *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (don't let the charging horses and clashing metal on the intro music put you off). The rich field of genre is filled out by

the likes of *Strange Horizons*, *Apex* and *Uncanny*. Others, such as *Nightmare* and *The Dark*, have us somewhere between dark fantasy and horror. Edinburgh's *Shoreline of Infinity* magazine is in the process of launching itself into the world of podcasting as it releases its tenth print issue. With so much new fiction to pick from, it can become difficult to keep up.

But perhaps it's the field of audio drama where we really start to encounter the medium's rock stars. I would imagine most folk reading this will have heard of *Welcome to Night Vale*. If you haven't, this podcast comes in the form of a community radio show for an imaginary – probably, who knows anymore? – weird little desert town, which experiences time travel, space wars, encounters with alien gods, angelic beings, and near-weekly brushes with destruction. Going from rough-and-ready beginnings, perhaps with a suggestion of "we're making this up as we go," to touring the world putting on live performances, the podcast has now earned the kind of reputation where you can put on a *WTNV* T-shirt and be likely to spark a conversation anywhere you go. The parent company, Night Vale Presents, has also gone on to put together another half dozen podcast series. *Alice Isn't Dead*, for instance, follows the adventures of a woman who becomes a truck driver to travel round America in search of her missing girlfriend Alice, discovering along the way the strange undercurrents of the nation and weird inhuman people responsible for numerous murders. *Within the Wires* subverts the idea of self-help tapes in its first series and museum guide tapes in its second, giving an uneasy experience that shifts the listener's expected reality.

Also coming from a theatre background and the tradition of pulp radio drama are Night Vale collaborators and peers *The Thrilling Adventure Hour*. These are performative, radio

play style stories, with a strong focus on humour, pastiche, and tributes to genre roots, featuring everything from *Sparks Nevada*, *Marshal on Mars* to my personal favourite: the high society, hard drinking, supernatural investigator couple of Frank and Sadie Doyle in *Beyond Belief*.

Another significant contributor to the field of dramatic podcasts is Pacific North West and Minnow Beats Whale and their collaborators, responsible for *The Black Tapes* podcast, which evolve from an investigation into debunking the paranormal to conspiracies to destroy the world. Full of demons and sacred geometry, corporate espionage and cover-ups, it's all very post-*X-Files*. From there they expanded into a second series, *Tanis* – the search for a mythical place referred to in legend and obscure science fiction stories. It pieces together urban myths, corporate investigation and conspiracy: part *House of Leaves*, part *Annihilation*. The most recent addition to the family of podcasts is *Rabbits*: a woman trying to find her missing friend, a friend who had become obsessed with a live action game with a mysterious and sinister history. All of these shows pitch as docudramas, exploring "real" events, heavy on conspiracy and tension.

Tor Books have gotten in on the game. Their new division Tor Labs had an impressive launch with the *Steal The Stars* series, pitching their story of a shady corporation with military ties, who find themselves in possession of an alien and a crashed UFO, as *Ocean's 11* meets *Arrival*. *Steal The Stars* comes from the legacy of writer Mac Rodgers, also responsible for previous cult dramas *The Message* and *Life After*. Both are similarly short run, single series stories. *The Message* follows a team of specialist cryptologists as they try to decode what could be a "cursed" message from space, while *Life After* explores grief and social media and the question of There Being An App For That.

As with the fiction podcasts, there are so many options to pick from that it can be difficult to keep up. But I certainly have my favourites: *Ars Paradoxa*, for instance, follows Sally Grisham, a scientist thrown back to the 1940s thanks to the unexpected side-effects of an experiment gone wrong. Each new exploration into time travel pushes us further into the realms of paradox. *The Bright Sessions* starts as the recordings of

Dr. Bright, a specialist psychiatrist who deals with those who have atypical abilities. This is definitely one for the post-*X-Men* crowd, expanding into inter-patient relationships and a consciousness of the government agency that wants to know more about all that is uncanny. Strange things happen on an isolated station on a fog-bound, possibly post-apocalyptic outpost of *The Bridge*, while *Small Town Horror* gets bonus points for ways to make podcasts meta-narratives, walking that line between fiction and the suggestion that these are real, true events, honest.

Just as it's interesting as to how something like *Small Town Horror* plays with the genre in response to bad things happening to the narrator, one of the podcasts with a special place in my affections is *A Scottish Podcast*. It's a *Trainspotting* meets *X-Files*, post-*Black Tapes* kind of show. The premise is that a drop-out radio host decides there is money to be made from podcasts, particularly those paranormal investigation type shows. And if he can't find something spooky to cash in on in Edinburgh, then he isn't trying hard enough. Full of swearing, drinking, football jokes and swearing, *A Scottish Podcast* is a podcast about chancers making podcasts.

One of the particular joys of drama podcasts is finding a new one and binge listening. Given this affinity for binge consumption, plus the current flourishing of the podcast industry, plus the intrinsically mercurial, hybrid nature of podcasts themselves – part radio show, part audiobook, part website, part something else entirely – perhaps it's no wonder that podcasts are slowly spreading into television (not to mention comics and novels). Successful documentaries *Lore* and *Serial* have already made the leap to TV, but the future is going to see *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Alice Isn't Dead*, *Tanis* and *The Bright Sessions* all become TV series as well. For this next step it is early days, with fans anxiously waiting to see how the characters they've come to love survive the translation from one medium to another.

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A Story, A Story Erin Roberts

I'm primarily a short story writer, which may be why I also prefer my audio adventures in bite-size form – I love the many podcasts that bring short fiction to life. As with audio books, these podcasts usually feature one narrator per story, and listening to them often feels like I'm hearing an old friend tell a campfire tale or transport me to a new and intriguing world. Luckily, there's a wealth of quality short fiction in audio form – some of it directly from the magazines like *Apex*, *Uncanny*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *Tor.com*, whose podcasts feature the stories they publish. In 2017, these SFF giants have brought me stories like 'Them Boys,' written by Nora Anthony and read with sensuous warmth by Anaea Lay; 'Every Black Tree,' a Natalia Theodoridou story made all the more compelling by M.K. Hobson's passionately languid reading; and S.B. Divya's 'An Unexpected Boon,' which showcased Veronica Giguere's ability as a narrator to get to the heart of the characters.

Short story markets aren't the only producers of quality audio short fiction – I am a huge fan of the *Escape Artists* and *District of Wonders* podcast networks, which feature original and reprint fiction in podcasts segmented by genre. *Escape Artists* has produced nearly 2000 episodes of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and young adult fiction on its *Escape Pod*, *PodCastle*, *PseudoPod*, and *Cast of Wonders* podcasts respectively, and *District of Wonders* produces the acclaimed *StarShipSofa* for science fiction, *Tales to Terrify* for horror, and *Far Fetched Fables* for fantasy. (Full disclosure: I am an Associate Editor with *Escape Pod*, where I read submissions and send them up to the editors.)

Both networks provide a smorgasbord of stories that are always sure to satisfy whatever flavor of genre I am currently in the mood for.

No matter where I get my audio short fiction, it's always an experience that I savor. Story podcasts are short enough to fit into a daily commute, workout session, or contemplative walk, and they elevate the mundane by giving us a peek into worlds not like our own. They help showcase stories that might not otherwise get a chance to be read and authors we might not otherwise get a chance to know. And most importantly, they are the answer to those six words that I, at least, loved most from my childhood: let me tell you a story.

ERIN ROBERTS' FICTION IS PUBLISHED OR FORTHCOMING IN CLARKESWORLD, PODCASTLE, ASIMOV'S, AND THE DARK. HER NON-FICTION CAN BE READ AT PEOPLE OF COLOUR DESTROY FANTASY AND TOR.COM, AMONG OTHERS. SHE IS A GRADUATE OF ODYSSEY AND THE STONECOAST MFA PROGRAM. FIND HER ONLINE ATWRITINGWONDER.COM AND ON TWITTER AT @NIRELE.

Podcast Pick 2017 Laura Pearlman

2017 brought us some great serialized audio dramas and nonfiction podcasts (*Steal the Stars*, the second season of *Homecoming*, and *Uncivil*, to name a few), but I'm going to focus on short fiction.

'The Sound Of,' written by Charles Payseur and narrated by Stefan Rudnicki (*Nightmare Magazine*, May 2017) is a chilling and all-too-believable tale of a person struggling to remain true to himself in an oppressive society. The titular sound is a perfect metaphor for the steady onslaught of regressive legislation, microaggressions, and propaganda faced by the main character; it eats at him constantly, but those who aren't affected by the laws, aren't targeted by the microaggressions, and believe the propaganda don't notice it at all. 'Clay and Smokeless Fire,' written by Saladin Ahmed and read by Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali (*PodCastle*, June 2017) is a story of neighbors banding together to face off a heavily-armed deportation

force. The stories are, in a sense, opposites: one is science fiction, the other fantasy. In one the speculative element is a tool of the oppressors; in the other, it powers a small, peaceful rebellion. One ends in hope, the other, despair. But both are timely, and both are excellent.

The best short fiction performance I heard last year was 'Trash Talk,' written by Holly Schofield and read by Robert Gonyo (*Escape Pod*, November 2017), a story about a father facing an impossible situation. Class issues are a major theme here, and Robert Gonyo's portrayal of the trash-collector father is spot-on.

For me, 2017's most fun podcast episode was 'How the Maine Coon Cat Learned to Love the Sea,' written by Seanan McGuire and read by Amal El-Mohtar (*Uncanny*, July 2017; the story intro starts at about the twelve-minute mark). It's lyrical and lovely, and the depictions of seagulls and of fluffy pampered cats – who were, underneath it all, still cats – made me smile. It's worth sticking around for the interview with the author at the end.

Finally, my favorite new short fiction podcast is *LeVar Burton Reads*, which debuted in June 2017. The performances and production values have been excellent, and the stories are hand-picked by LeVar Burton, who talks a little about why he loves each one.

Full disclosure: I read slush for *Escape Pod*, which is owned by the same company as *PodCastle*; Charles Payseur has reviewed a few short stories I've written; Seanan McGuire once said my cats were pretty on Twitter.

LAURA PEARLMAN SPENDS AT LEAST TEN HOURS A WEEK LISTENING TO PODCASTS WHILE DRIVING TO AND FROM WORK AND READS SLUSH FOR ESCAPE POD WHEN SHE GETS HOME. HER SHORT STORIES HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN A HANDFUL OF VENUES AND HAVE BEEN PODCAST ON CAST OF WONDERS, THE DRABBLECAST, STARSHIPSOFA, AUDIBLE CHANNELS, AND TOASTED CAKE. YOU CAN FIND HER ON TWITTER AT @LAURASBADIDEAS.

A Podcast Session in Four Courses Victoria Hooper

Setting: It's that time: the dishes are piled next to the sink and they aren't going anywhere, the cat is giving me his significant stare – the one that says it's exactly 32 minutes until his dinner time and he will be registering his dissatisfaction if food is not presented to him in exactly 32 minutes – and someone should probably think about getting the humans' dinner on too. Every good Disney character knows this is when you crack out your choice of motivational accompaniment – a spoonful of sugar (in a nice cup of tea please), a merry song, a podcast or two.

So what am I listening to?

First Course (and drinks): Grab your drink of choice and begin with *Sword and Laser*, hosted by Veronica Belmont and Tom Merritt. This is a fantastic podcast that's already a full meal in itself – the hosts are enthusiastic genre fans who present the podcast with a lively and light-hearted manner. *Sword and Laser* is predominantly a book club, with monthly book picks alternating between sword (fantasy) and laser (science fiction) picks. In addition, the hosts interview authors and discuss SFF- and author-related news, as well as interesting things happening in the book community. They also weigh in on discussions happening in the Goodreads forum, both about the month's book and other topics. It's a wonderful way to catch up on book news, hear about the latest awards or adaptations, find out about new books and authors, and whet your appetite for more geeky banter to come. If you take one podcast from this list, this is the one I would recommend the most!

Second Course: Time to switch it up a bit and pop on something completely different. This is my 'discovery time,' where I like to learn something new in a handy bite-sized chunk. If I'm in the mood for mythology, I'll stick on *Myths and Legends*, hosted by Jason Weiser. This is a fun podcast that presents stories from myth and legend in a light-hearted but always informative style. The host does a great job of exploring the often bizarre details of lesser-known myths and

fairytale, or popular stories that you thought you knew, while at the same time telling a good story with a sense of fun and humour. Stories from different cultures all over the world are covered and you are sure to learn something new, even if you're already very familiar with the subject.

If I'm in the mood to dive into a random topic in fascinating detail, I'll choose the BBC podcast *In Our Time*, hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Every episode covers a completely different topic, including history, art, literature, science and philosophy, in interview style with a panel of experts. Want to know more about the history of the gin trade, or explore Hokusai's *Great Wave* in detail, or discuss the Picts, or learn about the goddess Lakshmi? Okay, so this isn't strictly an SFF podcast, but if you love fantasy and science fiction then I'll bet, like me, you love to constantly discover new things. A fascination with the world, with its people and its cultures and its history lies at the heart of all good SFF. Plus, if you're a writer, podcasts like these are brilliant for inspiration and ideas.

Third Course: So, I've caught up on the SFF news and I've listened to interesting book discussions and/or an author interview, and I've fired up my curiosity and learned something new. Now I turn to a podcast that engages my writerly skills, and looks at the books I love from a slightly different angle. This is *Writing Excuses*, hosted by Brandon Sanderson, Mary Robinette Kowal, Dan Wells and Howard Tayler. While this is a more practical podcast and is primarily for writers, I do think it can be enjoyed by anyone who loves books, as it shows a different perspective for thinking about and analysing the writing we love. This podcast has been going for some time now, but is still always coming up with new things or new ways of looking at old topics. Two new returning co-hosts have been introduced, Wesley Chu and Piper J Drake, who helps to keep ideas fresh. There is also at least one book recommendation every episode (usually more than one is mentioned) and so it's another good way to discover new books!

Last Course: Feeling full yet? Time to round things off with more recommendations and ideas for new reads than your shelf (virtual or otherwise) can probably cope with. There are so many great

podcasts out there highlighting new books and authors that it's hard to choose just one. Recently, I've been listening to *SFF Yeah!* hosted by S. Zainab Williams and Jenn Northington, the SFF branch of the Book Riot podcast, a friendly and enthusiastic chunk of geekiness that feels like someone has sent a book blog straight to your player. It always leaves me with something new for the To Read shelf.

Wait, you're still hungry? Then go out and discover your own new favourite podcast goodies. Here are some great places to start: *The Skiffy and Fanty Show* (general SFF discussion and recommendations), *Tea and Jeopardy* (author interviews and mild peril), *The Infinite Monkey Cage* (science, humorous), *Book Riot* (book recommendations), *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* (general SFF discussion), *Lightspeed Magazine* (SFF short stories), *Clarksworld Magazine* (SFF short stories), and the various *Escape Artists* podcasts (SF, F, horror and YA short stories).



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2017 in Audio

Tony Jones

Audio is a great way to enjoy science fiction, and there's a huge range of titles available and multiple ways to access them. These cover everything from podcast dramas to audiobook readings via full-cast dramas. There are numerous on-line offerings and commercial publishers, and let's not forget the BBC.

Standards keep rising, and it's a matter of focussing on your own personal preferences, rather than struggling to find relevant content. This review aims to explore the very best of the titles aired or released in 2017, but will of course reflect my own tastes. There is plenty more out there to suit everybody.

HG Wells: 1866-1946

One of the major themes for 2017, at least back in January, was HG Wells. With the anniversary of his death, his works all fell out of copyright in the UK (see the USA HG Wells society for a more detailed explanation). A quick look at the Audible catalogue for HG Wells reveals three pages of titles released in 2017, comprising some 55 releases containing either at least one short story or being a complete work, in various languages. These cover everything you might think of, and much else besides.

Not to be left out, the BBC gave us a wonderful two-part adaption of *The War of the Worlds* back in March, along with a short season of six ghost stories in July.

Big Finish Productions first mentioned the idea of producing HG Wells stories back in January 2016 at their one-day event *Big Finish Day 8* and planned a sequence of releases starting with *The Invisible Man* starring Sir John Hurt. This was delayed by the sad death of Sir

John until February 2017, when it was met with strong reviews, including this one from *SFX Magazine*:

"It's a bravura performance, and a fitting final bow for one of our most cherished thespians"

Fittingly Sir John has been nominated for a posthumous award for Best Actor in the BBC Audio Drama Award 2018.

The rest of the series continued with a strong set of stories, including Nigel Planer in *First Men in the Moon*, Nicola Walker and Sam Troughton in Guy Adams's fantastic adaptation of *The Shape of Things to Come* and *The Time Machine*. A release of *The War of the Worlds* has been delayed until later this year (2018).

Nottingham based Sherwood Sound Studios have also had their own problems producing their version of *The War of the Worlds* starring Colin Morgan, Dan Starkey, Ronald Pickup and others. Titled *The Coming of the Martians*, it has been delayed since autumn 2017, but this just means we have something to look forward to this year.

The Regeneration Game

It won't have escaped anyone's attention that a certain character in a certain TV show regenerated in 2017. Bafflegab Productions also had a regeneration of their own, announced at around the same time as Jodie Whittaker's arrival in the TARDIS. Their range of Paul Magrs stories, *Baker's End*, starring Katy Manning and Tom Baker (as himself), had its own lead character change; none other than Colin Baker replaces



H.G. Wells (BBC Radio 4 'Great Lives' program image)

Tom Baker as the new King of Cats, appearing first in 'The Happenstance Pox', a tale as daft and entertaining as all the others so far released.

We also had another in *The Scarifyers* series with David Warner and Terry Molloy back as Harry Crow and Professor Dunning, MI13's finest in 'The Gnomes of Death', a tale of cultists, real ale and Morris dancing. Oh, and garden ornaments. It was the usual fine fare and there are hopes further episodes might be produced this year.

Bafflegab also announced a Mark Gatiss project to adapt the original screenplay of the 1971 horror film *Blood on Satan's Claw*, set in seventeenth century England. A full cast drama is set to appear on Audible in early 2018.

Elsewhere on Audible

It would be easy to fill several column inches with the various science fiction releases on Audible (31,087 at the time of writing) covering everything from Space Opera to Steampunk. Tucked away in the May 2017 releases was an original drama version of Jodi Taylor's *One Damned Thing After Another*, not to be confused with the many book readings from her *Chronicles of St Marys* series. As I wrote in my review for *Starburst Magazine*, "If you're already a fan of the series, this is a no-brainer." Over the space of seven hours, this full-cast dramatization gives a sharpened version

of the original story, with plenty of humour, romance, and some very dark moments. The tale romps along with Gemma Whelan, Ben Miles and others all convincing in this time travel epic. The story was produced by The Wireless Theatre Company, who this year also announced a series (yet to be released) entitled *Red Moon*, based on the Russian Moon landing of December 1968.

Record Store Day

For the second year in a row, Record Store Day (22 April) had something of interest to fans of science fiction. There was more *Doctor Who* (the previous year gave us *Genesis of the Daleks*) and a double vinyl release for *Dr Who* and the Pescatons / Sound Effects. This offering came in an interesting mix of colours: green for Pescatons and orange for the Sound Effects record.

There were other choices as well, with the *Bladerunner* Vangelis soundtrack released on picture-disc, as well as a 10" vinyl of John Williams's *Star Wars: A New Hope*. As someone who bought the original *Star Wars* soundtrack many decades ago, there was more than a twinge of nostalgia when I saw this was available!

Not to be left out, Big Finish also released another vinyl, this time their highly prized Fifth Doctor story *Spare Parts*, a Cybermen origin story.

BBC Radio

One of the great advantages of being a UK audio science fiction fan is BBC Radio. The year started with Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, presented in fifteen-minute slices on Radio 4, and told through the eyes of lawyer Stevie Brierly (Hermione Norris).

Later in the year we had several Mars themed programmes, alongside *War of the Worlds* mentioned above. There was also a return for the Dangerous Visions season, with Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as a ten-part Book at Bedtime, and a dystopian comedy, *Perimeter*, telling a story of haves and have-nots in a divided city, written by and starring comedians Josie Long and Liam Williams. The year also gave us a comedy version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and as part of its Contains Strong Language season (a celebration of Hull being the City of Culture), Radio 3 treated listeners to a new two-hour adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

We even had a two-part abridgement of the latest Philip Pullman novel, *The Book of Dust*, over two 75-minute episodes.

The year ended with a new adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* with Lenny Henry, Adjoa Andoh, Julian Rhind-Tutt and Jacob Anderson. The BBC website for the series also has several interviews and other items of interest.

Fighting Fantasy

Back in the early 1980s, Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone released the first in their *Fighting Fantasy* range, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*. A mere 35 years later, this genre shaping classic has been brought to audio as full-cast adventure with Toby Longworth as the Warlock, Rachel Atkins as Vale Moonwing and Tim Treloar as the hero, Cassius Stormblade. Nostalgia it may be, but it's also an advert for the power of audio drama.

Vworp, Vworp!

Audio drama can be found in the most obscure places, and from any number of sources. *Doctor Who* fan title *Vworp, Vworp!* released their third edition in 2017, and it included a short audio drama adapted from the comic strip *The Mechanical Planet*, taken from the 1960s annual *Dalek World*. It may have been short but for a fan of the show worth a listen.

Big Finish

It's not possible to talk UK audio science fiction and not mention Big Finish. Approaching their twentieth year, they have long been known for their continuing original Doctor Who stories featuring classic Doctors, and even now several from this century. They cover a vast range of titles including *Torchwood*, *Blake's 7*, *The Avengers*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *The Prisoner*.

In 2017 they joined forces with Jamie Anderson to help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Captain Scarlet* with a seven-disc boxset of original stories. They also released three audiobooks of *Captain Scarlet* novels giving us another twelve discs worth of *Mysterion* rich adventure for our indestructible hero.

In other celebration, it has been forty years since Trevor Baxter and Christopher Benjamin first appeared as Jago & Litefoot in *Doctor Who: The Talons of Weng-Chiang*. Big Finish has produced more than a dozen boxsets of *Jago & Litefoot* stories, and to mark the anniversary, they appeared in a brace of stories with not one but two of the modern incarnations of the Doctor.

Sadly Trevor Baxter passed away in 2017, and will be remembered in one final release due later this year.

Elsewhere, Big Finish added to their portfolio of returning *Torchwood* actors with Burn Gorman returning to the role of Owen Harper in the story *Corpse Day*, alongside Tom Price as Sgt Andy Donaldson. This story was widely reviewed and admired, including this from *Mass Movement*:

"...brutal, haunting, horrific and shot through with pitch-black humour and throughout its duration the 'terrible' twosome are confronted by the kind of insanity that never takes no for an answer. Burn Gorman and Tom Price are fantastic as the odd couple who take centre stage"

In other Torchwood news, Big Finish also made a full-cast series with Russell T Davies helping specify the setting for the upcoming TV series of the show. Called *Aliens Among Us*, it centres on a very different Cardiff from the one seen when the show was last on our screens.

The year also saw Billie Piper make her hopefully first of many appearances as Rose Tyler in a boxset with David Tennant, and the *Blake's 7* range returned after a hiatus. The end of the year also saw a boxset for Derek Jacobi's *War Master*, fleshing out some of what the Master did during the Time War, and before hiding out in the far future in the TV story *Utopia*. There were appearances for River Song (played by Alex Kingston) and in a curious coincidence, David Bradley appeared as the first Doctor in a new boxset, alongside some of the cast of the Mark Gatiss documentary *An Adventure in Space and Time*. This boxset was in production as David was announced for the Christmas special *Twice Upon a Time*, so the boxset was released just after Christmas Day.

Podcasts

Audio drama isn't just about the radio and commercial releases: there are also numerous podcasts available, and I'll just mention a couple that came to my attention this year (see elsewhere in this issue of *Vector* for more podcast picks).

After a Kickstarter campaign, *The Future Boys* has come to audio, and is a science fiction / comedy written by producer / director Steve Jordan. The concepts originally appeared in a trilogy of stage plays (*Dead Static* (2012), *Pilgrim Shadow* (2014) and *King Chaos* (2015)) and centre on a range of daring crimes the heroes must

commit to protect their freedom. The website has links to SoundCloud where the stories can be heard.

Both SoundCloud and iTunes host *Victorcity*, a neo-Victorian detective comedy, set in Even Greater London in 1887. It's free, it's funny and it's worth a listen. It comes in six parts, all of which are online now.

The Shape of Things to Come in 2018

2018 is shaping up to be as interesting as previous years. No doubt the BBC will have several projects lined up for later this year, but Big Finish has already announced new licences for both *Star Cops* and *Callan*. If that wasn't all, they are marking twenty years in business with a range of home-grown titles, including a set of *Cicero* stories starring Samuel Barnett (*Dirk Gently* on Netflix), and a time travel series written by Nigel Planer (*Young Ones*, *I Am Actor*). Called *Jeremiah Bourne in Time*, it stars Sebastian Armesto (*Broadchurch 3*, *Star Wars – The Force Awakens*, *Poldark*) as Jeremiah, alongside Tim McInnerny, Celia Imrie and Christopher Ryan (who also starred in *The Young Ones*).

Hopefully the two delayed versions of *War of the Worlds* will arrive sooner than later, and it will be intriguing to compare the two adaptations. Whatever else happens, 2018 is sure to produce plenty to delight the ears of any fan of audio science fiction.

TONY JONES HAS DINED WITH ROYALTY, SUPPED SLINGS IN SINGAPORE AND BEEN TAUGHT BY SEVERAL NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS (THOUGH HE COULD HAVE PAID MORE ATTENTION). HE IS A WRITER AND BLOGGER BASED IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY.

KINCAID IN SHORT

PAUL KINCAID



THIS IS OUR TOWN

Since this issue of *Vector* is devoted to the best of 2017, it seems appropriate to turn in this column to the best story I read in 2017: "This Is Our Town" by John Crowley. What I really want to do is look at what this story is doing, how and why it works, and then consider whether it is actually a work of the fantastic or not. These should be easy questions to answer, but this is Crowley we are talking about. Nothing is unambiguous about this story.

To begin with the first paragraph, which reads, in full:

When I was young I lived in a place called Timber Town. It can be found in a book called *This Is Our Town*, which is part of the "Faith and Freedom" series of readers, and was written by Sister Mary Marguerite, SND (which stands for Soeurs de Notre-Dame) and published by Ginn and Company, copyright 1953. Catholic children read it in the fourth and fifth grades. (7)

What do we learn from this? It is a story that at least touches upon the subject of being raised a Catholic in 1950s America, a theme that that Crowley has dwelt upon in the past, most

notably in *Love and Sleep*, the second volume in his *Aegypt* quartet, and in one of his very best novellas, "The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines", another story of a rural American 1950s Catholic upbringing to which this story feels like a companion piece.

It is a story that at least flirts with reality. Ginn and Co is a publishing company that apparently still exists (though I haven't found any book more recent than 2007) and that does indeed specialize in teaching aids and readers for young children. Though I have found no hint of a Faith and Freedom series, it does indeed sound like the sort of thing that would be produced at that time and in that place for that particular readership, and such books are so transitory that all trace might well disappear in the intervening half-century and more.

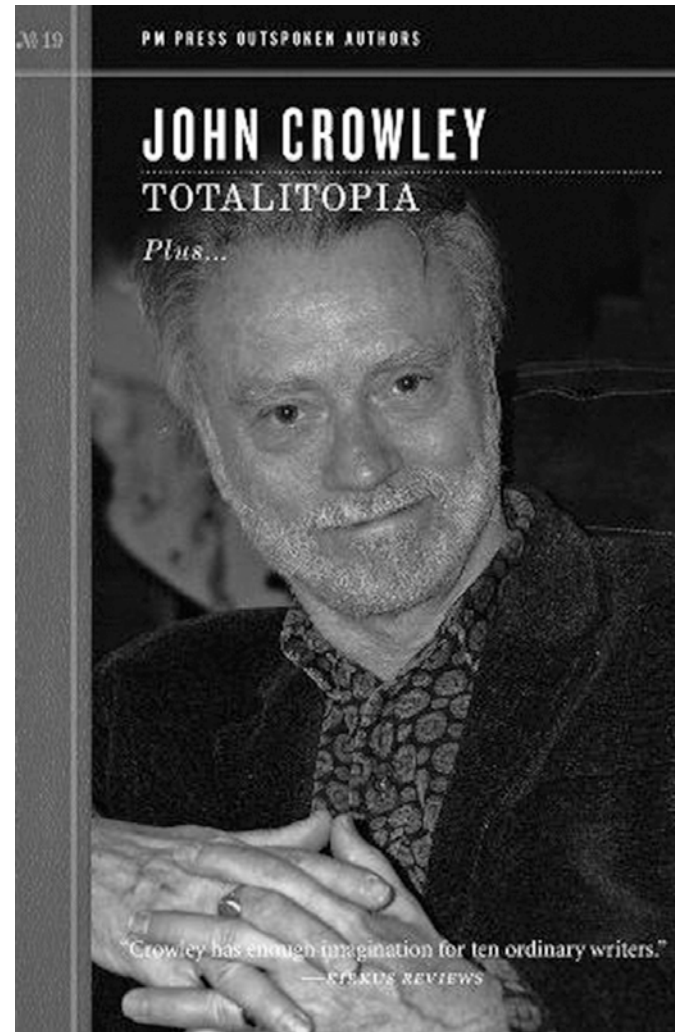
Yet it is a story that deliberately displaces us from reality. The first sentence locates us in Timber Town, an unlikely name for an actual place; and by the second sentence we are further displaced from a fictional reality into a fiction-within-the-fiction. Are we meant to assume that what follows takes place anywhere but in the simple sentences and highly coloured illustrations of a book for young children? Nothing in that first paragraph could give us that assurance.

And that displacement further into the book within the story is only made the more emphatic in the succeeding paragraphs. This Timber Town is nowhere: "Timber Town was a small river town, where exactly the book never

said, but it would have to be somewhere in the Northeast, maybe in Pennsylvania.” (7) Here is the narrator of the story, a resident of Timber Town, who doesn’t know where it is, who is reliant on the book for some vague sense of place. The neighbouring communities have similarly emblematic names: Coalsburg, Twin City. And the narrator points to herself in the book’s illustrations: “We wear the saddle shoes and the striped shirts and flaring flowered skirts we did wear then.” (7) But the book is not the story: “The stories are all true and of course they happened to us or we caused them to happen, or they wouldn’t be in the book; but the book never told everything about us, nor all that we could do and did.” (8)

We are, in other words, in a book within a story, but we are looking at that book from outside, looking at what was not actually recounted in the book. This is an extraordinarily complex existential situation: any sense of reality has been efficiently undermined within just a few paragraphs, yet they are paragraphs whose tone and manner is perfectly judged to emphasise their very ordinariness. Empirically, are we considering truth within fiction, or fiction within truth? One of the reasons I rate this story so highly is the deft way that Crowley presents what is, on the surface, a very straightforward story, and at the same time undoes any reliability.

The bulk of the story that follows is a series of dated incidents, ranging from May 1953 to December of the same year, although the May section mostly refers to events from an earlier unspecified time. The narrator recalls her First Communion, or more specifically recalls a conversation with her guardian angel in which the angel tells her that grownups can’t see or hear their guardian angel, which she considers “the saddest thing I had ever learned.” (9) Looking back on that moment, she realises that “It has been a long time now since I last saw my guardian angel” (8), so we realise that she is on the point of growing up, on the point of leaving the world of the book. She is old enough to feel sad at what she is leaving behind, young enough to still buy in to the beliefs that shape the world. In a story that can often feel like a congeries of familiar themes and images from



Crowley’s earlier work, the interaction of human and guardian angel, recalling his novel *The Translator*, seems to set the tone for everything else that follows.

This balance, or perhaps it would be better to say imbalance, between what she is growing out of and what she is holding on to is what informs the whole of the story. For instance, in June our narrator confronts unbelief, that disturbance in the Catholic universe that often seems a more shattering and dangerous threat to the Catholic worldview than the devil himself. In this instance unbelief is a family thing, for her mother comes from outside the community, and though she converted when she married, she “had a way of talking about things like saints and hymns and Bible quotes that made it seem she thought they were not serious or important to her.” (10) (I wonder, parenthetically, whether the fact that she talks of Maundy Thursday, sings about “rain-wet English land” (10), and has a cousin Winnie, Winston, should be read

as suggestions that she is from not just outside the Catholic, Timber Town community but outside the American community, an English woman?) When, on Winnie’s last visit, the narrator and her guardian angel detect that he is dying and insist that a priest be called, her concern is that he should make a good act of contrition. Though Winnie is not Catholic, this final breath that determines the eternal progress of the soul is the fulcrum about which the entire realisation of the narrator’s Catholic worldview turns. Her mother replies: “He had a lot of sins to recount, and I doubt he got to all of them ...” and “even though she was crying she was laughing too.” (11)

In contrast, July shows the power of prayer. But though we are told that “Prayer isn’t for things ... Prayer is attention: to God, to the soul, to the Virgin, to our hearts” (13), what we actually see is prayer as a materialistic rather than a spiritual endeavour. Throughout the story, belief and the various rituals of a Catholic upbringing that shape so much of the narrator’s daily life are presented in straightforwardly practical terms. Later, for instance, she describes prayer as “getting a hearing”, which was “what Dad would say when he went to talk to the union shop steward.” (19) There is a sense that however much the narrator might structure her life according to the beliefs and attitudes of the Church, she doesn’t really know how to do it. Our narrator prays that her father won’t lose his job, and he doesn’t; she prays that her mother will stop smoking, and she does. But then, when flooding damages the structure of their church, the priest instructs his congregation to “pray that the Capital Campaign would succeed” (13), which it does, money is raised and the church is quickly restored, so maybe belief really is no less a practical everyday thing than talking to a shop steward.

The contrast between spiritual intent and practical effect is highlighted again in August when the spotlight of Catholic practice falls upon confession. The narrator conjures some minor infringement from her past and is given a decade of the Rosary as penance. As she kneels at the altar and murmurs her prayers, “my sin went away from me and my heart was cleansed. That’s a nice feeling, your sin going away like dirty water down

the drain. It would probably be a sin in itself to go out and sin just to feel that feeling.” (14) Thus the forgiveness of sin becomes an inducement to sin; as a character in a book meant to inculcate the basics of Catholic faith, our narrator is innocent and unquestioning in her faith, but it is her very innocence that illuminates the contradictions and impossibility of such simple faith.

That there is a more nuanced and more complex world going on around the simple poster colours of the book is demonstrated in September. What happens here is that the local church school acquires a run-down, second-hand school bus. At first, the bus won’t start, but when the priest gets the children to pray, “The bus seemed to be happier, not so tense... It purred.” (16) But underneath this repetition of the material power of prayer, there’s a joke that the narrator’s father tells, a joke that she, with her narrowly restricted world view, does not understand. A school acquires a new bus and it is to be blessed by the different clergy of the town. The Protestant minister reads Bible verses, the Catholic priest anoints it with holy water, “then the rabbi came up and ... cut two inches off the tailpipe.” (14)

October is Hallowe’en, which grants us yet another perspective on the spiritual world of the book. The children are warned that “to dress up in costumes as ghosts or demons or figures of Death like skeletons or corpses might draw those very figures to walk with us.” (16) When the narrator sets out trick or treating, wearing a Snow White costume with a Brown Scapular and Miraculous Medal to protect her from the demons and corpses, she sees “a kid ahead of me on the bridge, in a white sheet like a ghost. When I looked again he wasn’t there ... then again he was there, but only sort of.” (17) Was he a ghost, or another kid in costume? Really, we never know; the narrator doesn’t feel threatened because she is protected by the Church, and having crossed the bridge she can no longer see “the little ghost child” (18), but it is clear that what is seen, or at least how what is seen is interpreted, is shaped by one’s belief system. Come November, and the service for the Feast of All Souls when the right prayer uttered with a righteous heart might release a thousand souls from Purgatory, she

prays for Cousin Winnie and for the ghost child, and “felt the rush of the thousands of escaping souls winging upwards into perpetual light. I was happy and sad as well.” (18)

Finally, come December and the approach of Christmas, the question inevitably comes around to the nature of God. “If God knows all that has befallen the world, and has known since before the beginning all that would befall the world, why should we pray that things will come out well for us and for everyone? Hasn’t it all been decided already?” To which the convenient answer is that “At each moment He can reform the whole history of the world again from its beginning so that it will come to be.” (20) A formulation that would seem to secure the authority and majesty of God only by denying the security and continuity of everything that we consider reality. The narrator has prayed for a white Christmas, despite the fact that as her Dad tells her: “If God wanted to bring snow on a certain day – even His own Birthday – He’d have to start up the right weather patterns a long way back, long before you asked Him for snow.” (19) Yet, as they leave the church “on that Third Sunday in Advent so long ago we found that it had begun softly to snow” (21), and so the foundations of the world have become unstable, a state that is suggested but not overtly stated, much as it was in *The Translator*.

And yet none of this ever happened, it was just part of a book written long ago. Looking back on this a lifetime later, the narrator says that all the characters in her story “still live in Timber Town, and so do I.” (21) Even though, at the same time, she went out into the world, discovered more than could be encompassed within that storybook, experienced the usual ups and downs, goods and bads of existence. There is something unfailingly attractive in a worldview where “God and His angels could always change the beginning of the world so that in some unexpected way it would come out right ... Because nothing is over in a book that’s being written or in God’s world being made.” (21) From outside, looking in to the book rather than out from it, that is not how we see things. Innocence cannot be sustained, the world becomes more complex, more variable, more solid. Yet still,

having escaped the book into the real world there is the wish to return to the comforting simplicity of the story where “I could reach my hands into the world, into the story of our town and all our towns, and change things so that the good guys would not be defeated forever.” (22)

Let us return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this column: what is this story doing, how does it work, and is it actually a work of the fantastic?

What I hope I have shown is that the story is describing how belief systems – Catholicism here though any belief system, religious or secular, could substitute for it – simplify the world. They provide something to trust in, something external to yourself to make it all turn out right. They are not the world, but a story within the world. And it works with great subtlety; Crowley has always been a very subtle writer, but this may count as one of the most delicately indirect things he has ever produced. The world within the book is all innocence, and though we never directly confront loss of innocence, there is always a subtle underlying suggestion that innocence can never consistently sustain, describe or account for the real world.

But is it fantastic? Honestly, I don’t know. It is not set within the world but within a book; it involves guardian angels and ghost children and answered prayers; but these are metaphorical ways of approaching reality. It is not realist, except in so far as these are real patterns of belief, real issues of growing up, real confrontations of the ideal and the real. Part of the genuine power of the story is that it eschews such distinctions, it is both realist and non-realist, fantastic and non-fantastic. That is how it works, that is why it works so well.

Quotations taken from “This Is Our Town” by John Crowley in *Totaltopia*, Oakland, PM Press, 2017.

PAUL KINCAID IS A WIDELY PUBLISHED CRITIC, AUTHOR, AND EDITOR. HIS LATEST BOOKS ARE IAIN M. BANKS (UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS, 2017), AND A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS AND REVIEWS, ‘CALL AND RESPONSE’ (BEACON, 2014).

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

ANDY SAWYER



THE WHITE PAPERS

BY JAMES WHITE

One of the issues with receiving large donations for the Science Fiction Foundation Collection is that they often come after the phone-call that goes “My dad/partner/friend has just died and I wonder if you might be interested in their sf collection.” On at least two occasions those people have been friends of mine, but apart from that, these things are never easy to deal with.

A secondary issue is that you spend much time sorting through masses of fairly standard paperbacks to sift out material we need—books not held, first editions that can replace later reprints, material in better condition than that which is on the shelves—and sort out what can be sold off or traded in order to support the work of the Foundation. Just occasionally, a book catches my eye. Sorting through a collection which was given to us towards the end of 2017, I found a book by Northern Irish writer James White that, inexplicably, I had never read.

James White, who died in 1999, was part of the small but highly-influential “Irish fandom” group centred around Walt and Madeline Willis in the 1950s (another member was the equally fascinating writer Bob Shaw). White began publishing sf stories in *New Worlds* from 1953, and later sold to *Astounding*, but is best known for the series of short stories and novels that became the “Sector General” series, centred

around a vast multi-species hospital and its harassed (and occasionally cynical) staff who have to deal not only with each other and each other’s environments but an increasingly complicated series of ailments and emergencies.

White was never strong on characters, although the novel I picked up, *Mind Changer*, shed interesting and poignant light upon the personality and motives of one of the series’ most interesting protagonists, the Chief Psychologist O’Mara, whose most effective motivational tool is sarcasm. There is, though, what I can only call an essential *decency* about his work. While much science fiction is about war and competition, and it has not escaped my notice that several novels on recent award-lists, while admirable for the progressive politics which animate them, still adhere to an essentially pessimistic vision of the grim necessity of endless war. White set out a scenario in which conflict had to be solved by understanding and co-operation and which attacked militarism and xenophobia. The vast “Sector General” hospital brings together species and environments that seem at odds, and forces them to find solutions—sometimes ingeniously ramshackle “Heath Robinson” solutions—to matters that are literally life-and-death.

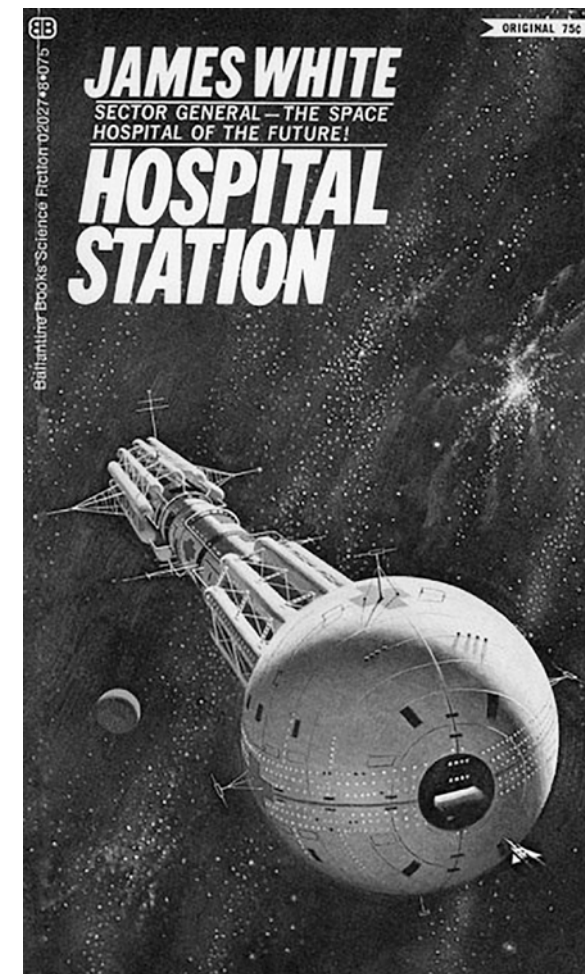
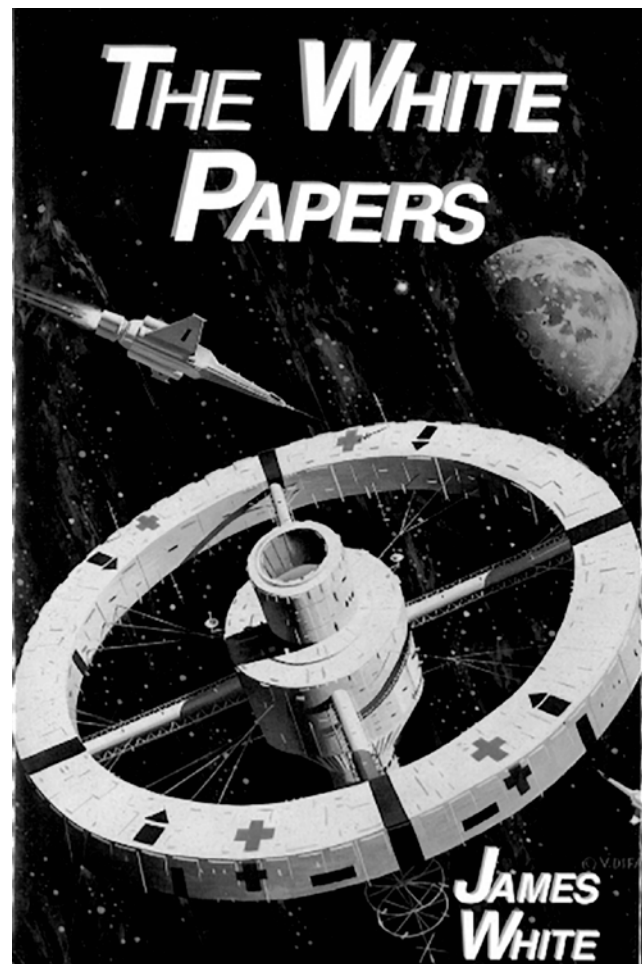
So it was with great joy that I also found, and added to the Collection, a copy of *The White Papers*, published in 1996 by the NESFA Press on the occasion of James White’s appearance at the Los Angeles World SF Convention as Guest of Honour. As with all NESFA Press books, it’s a beautifully-produced volume, and reading it

helped me articulate why I like White so much. It's a collection of fiction—nine stories and an essay, "The Secret History of Sector General," in which White revises an earlier introduction to the series—and some background pieces offering a timeline of the series and an explanation of the system with which White classifies his alien species (which ranges from the AACP mobile plants to the VUXG telepathic "withered prunes floating in a gob of syrup": we humans are among the DBDG classification, noted mainly for our unusual nudity taboo). One of the joys of the volume, however, is a section of White's fan-writing: ten essays which show his mastery of humour and which are object-lessons in how to present this strange sense in science fiction that we are *enjoying ourselves*. It's true that some of these essays will confuse some modern readers, who need to know who some of these characters are. In "The Last Time I Saw Harris," (which refers to fellow fan Chuck Harris) we may wonder why, exactly, grown men (White was born in 1928: this is the 1950s) are duelling with water-pistols. But this is fannishness and fan-writing as performance and play. "The Beacon" is a more complicated kind of performance piece. At its centre is the American Bea Mahaffey, remarkable editor for magazines such as *Other Worlds*, *Universe* and *Science Stories* as well as an influential fan, visiting Ireland before the 1953 London Coroncon. The "Torch" White carries for her as they he and the Willisises guide her around is as much a proclamation of her growing acclaim as editor as his own role as hapless and unrequited admirer. After all, Walt Willis tells White, who is selling his first professional fiction, *Other Worlds* is "now paying 3¢ a word". (Mahaffey herself takes on her role as Muse with aplomb. On hearing the "tragic news" that White has left his photographs of her on a mountain-top, "She even forced herself to laugh at it for about ten minutes.") "The Long Afternoon of Harrogate," though, is a self-explanatory account of the 1962 Harrogate Eastercon (the title echoes the variant title of Brian Aldiss's *Hothouse*, and Aldiss has a cameo appearance which is so . . . Brian).

The fiction is a good selection, including not only Sector General stories but other aspects of White's work that showcase his humour. Few

science fiction writers would ever focus upon underwear in their fiction (let us move swiftly over Piers Anthony!), but White proves the worth of the adage "write what you know" in the Hugo-nominated "Custom Fitting." It is almost certain that in his day-job experience of working for various men's outfitters White himself was not called upon to design suitable garments for the presentation of a centauroid alien ambassador at Court, but the old-fashioned tailor in the story is clearly drawn from life. The Sector General story "Countercharm," as White describes in "Secret History," shows him, desperate for a story for the 100th issue of *New Worlds*, draw a blank on exotic alien ailments and turn to his own medical condition (diabetes) for a neatly-extrapolated tale.

Struggling to sum up White's work, the quality I came up with earlier was "decency." White's sf is of that rather old-fashioned kind in which problems can be solved in as entertaining (for the reader) a way as possible. The early Sector General stories, written as short stories or novellas, can suffer from repetition as the



descriptive scene is set in more or less the same words, and the human relationships (especially those between two of our other main protagonists Conway and Murchison) are certainly straight out of Doctor/Nurse romance. But as the series progresses, we see (for example) Murchison progressing from "Nurse" to senior status as a pathologist. And even in the early stories such as "Countercharm," White adds sly undercurrents of his own (Conway's problem with his budding attraction to Murchison is that as a Senior Physician he holds in his mind an Educator Tape – the experiences of an alien medical specialist. And Conway's particular specialist is a six-legged crab-like creature who has even for his own hot-blooded species an exaggerated passionate attraction to other six-legged crabs).

Above all is White's dedication to the idea of medicine as a symbol of solving problems and helping people. Although White had no professional medical background, he apparently wanted to study medicine, and certainly drew upon his own experiences as a "patient". While

many sf writers have armies waging war, the nearest thing to an army in White's universe is the Monitor Corps, dedicated to maintaining peace. His multi-species environment may have tensions, but they are tensions that can be resolved. It is tempting to point to aspects of White's universe, such as the way beings as variant as six-legged elephantine Tralthans, spiny chlorine-breathing Illensans, fragile Cinrusskins, and beetle-like gestalt Telfi can even communicate, let alone take pleasure in the same gossip, and write them off as simplistic. But if believing that there are other solutions to human conflict than warfare and xenophobia is simplistic, then let's hear it for the simpletons!

ANDY SAWYER IS A SF CRITIC, SCHOLAR, EDITOR, AND LIBRARIAN OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FOUNDATION COLLECTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

RESONANCES

STEPHEN BAXTER



Brian W. Aldiss died on 19 August 2017, aged ninety-two. Such was his longevity as a writer – *The Finches of Mars*, which he called his last SF novel, was published in 2012 – and such was the diversity of his work – covering SF, mainstream novels, poetry, drama, autobiography and literary criticism – that I suspect it may take many years to appreciate fully his contribution to our culture. (In fact I would welcome a seminar on his life and work.)

But perhaps Aldiss's specific contribution to the world of British SF is easier to recognise. Aldiss was the first President of the BSFA, serving from 1960 to 1964. This must have given our fledgling organisation a great deal of cachet, energy and enthusiasm. By the time of his appointment in 1960, Aldiss, aged thirty-five, was already a significant figure, having published the classic *Non-Stop* (1958), and having already won a Hugo. In a few years he would be central to the acquisition of an Arts Council grant for *New Worlds*, that essential seedbed of the new wave of British SF.

And back then, indeed throughout his life, he gave a great deal of mostly behind-the-scenes help and encouragement to new writers. His generosity seemed endless. One recipient of that encouragement was Christopher Priest, who wrote a fine obituary of Aldiss for the Guardian (22 August 2017), and also posted a tribute online (christopher-priest.co.uk/2017/08) in which Priest recounted an anecdote of how he, aged eighteen, had read an elegant response by Aldiss as BSFA President to a dismissive review of John Christopher's *The World in Winter*. Priest

says he wrote to Aldiss to compliment him on his letter and 'timidly asked if it was possible for nonentities like me to join the BSFA, or was it only for writers?' Aldiss responded by complimenting Priest's attitude, and encouraging him to join the BSFA and attend the next SF convention. Priest writes, 'It was a marvellous letter for an insecure and bookish teenager to receive. I treasured it and kept it, and to this day it remains the first item in my huge archive of correspondence.'

It is something of a paradox that Aldiss's magisterial survey of SF, *Trillion Year Spree* (1973, 1986), necessarily ignores Aldiss's own essential contribution. But it seems quite possible to me that if in fact Brian Aldiss had not existed, British SF from about 1960 onwards would have been significantly weakened, by the loss of his influence and encouragement across generations – and of course by the loss of Aldiss's own work.

As for me, as far as I remember I first 'met' Aldiss in the pages of *Hothouse* (1962). Billions of years hence the sun hangs swollen and unmoving in the sky. Across Earth's sunward face a riotous jungle is dominated by a single continent-spanning banyan tree. And in the canopy, Gren, an adult at nine years old, the size of a small monkey, is one of the last humans: '[Earth] was no longer a place for mind. It was a place for growth, for vegetables. It was a hothouse' (Book 1 Chapter 1). When I first read *Hothouse* as a teenager I was thrilled by the vivid detail of Aldiss's fecund jungle, set within a grander Stapledonian vision of Earth's long evolutionary afternoon. Earth and Moon, tangled up in spider-webs . . . Later I would recognise that the book's



depiction of a devolved mankind in a wistful far-futurity recalls scenes of Eloi and Morlock from Wells's *The Time Machine* – Aldiss was always a great Wellsian. But the vision of the primal, lurid life force of the globe-spanning jungle surely derives from Aldiss's own experiences as a younger man; he had served in the chaotic Second World War theatres of Borneo and Sumatra as one of the 'Forgotten Army'. All that analysis was for the future, though; for a wide-eyed fourteen-year-old *Hothouse* was simply a thrilling, mind-expanding read.

I met Aldiss in person in 1987, when he was a guest at the British worldcon. I'd had just a couple of stories published by then, and was getting married the following week! – so I only had one day at the con. But I listened to a talk and sought out Aldiss. It was all very fannish, and it was just a brief moment, but he did say he recognised my name from Interzone appearances, and I'm sure he did.

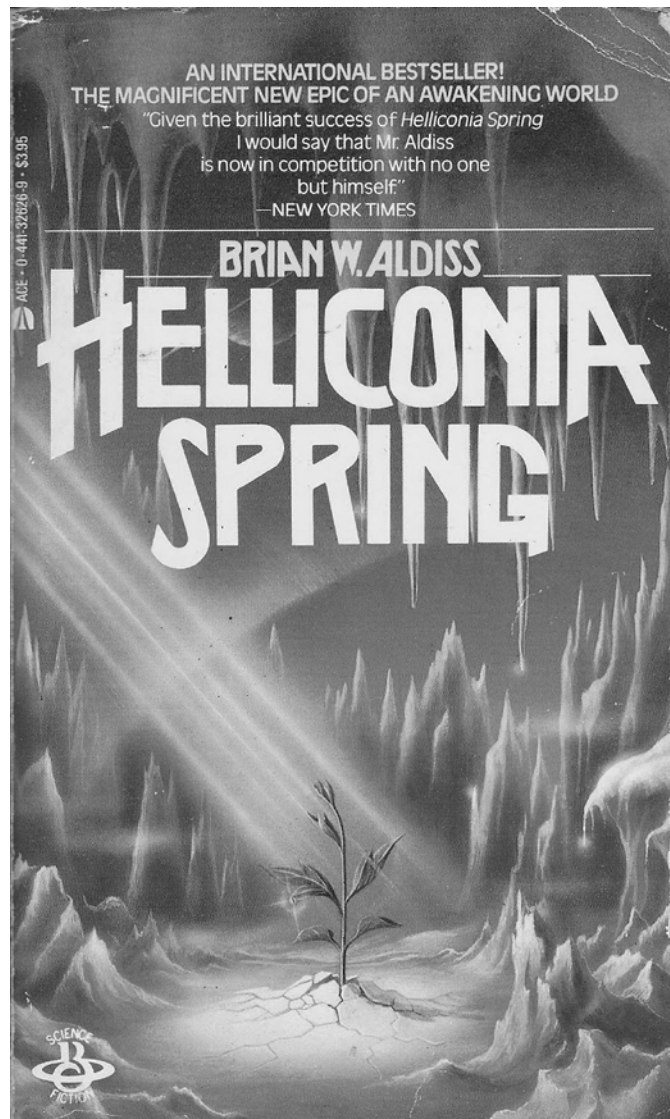
Later I got to know him better. In person, Aldiss's intelligence and wisdom were always apparent. But at the same time he was also hugely sociable, generous and funny – not so much a father figure as a rakish older brother, perhaps. At one con in the mid-nineties, Aldiss was there with Harry Harrison, his partner in crime, a regular apparition at the time. One

night they were holding court in the bar as usual, surrounded by fellow revellers, and I joined the group for a bit. But it was a bit raucous for me, and I started to withdraw. So Aldiss came away with me, and we found a quiet corner, to get away from the 'Harry and Brian Show', as he put it, and we talked about the work – he was interested in *The Time Ships* at the time. He was genuinely interested in people, and in the work of other writers, as opposed to being the kind of ego that likes to be the centre of attention.

But – while he was never cruel – he wasn't shy about expressing an opinion. At another con I gave a hard-SF type talk on mankind's expansive future in space, and there was Aldiss in the early morning audience. And his comment was: 'Oh, but we've heard all this before. You know, if only we could get along, we wouldn't have to go to the trouble of conquering the Galaxy!' That remark was funny, friendly, and perceptive – and it was a comment that summed up his own personal credo about humanity's future, I think, as well as bringing the house down.

I enjoyed and admired Aldiss's wider work, the mainstream fiction, the autobiographies, especially *The Twinkling of an Eye* (1998). But my personal preferences were for the core SF projects, including *Hothouse*, the *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-5). My personal favourite is probably *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand* (1960), a quasi-Stapledonian vista of an unfolding future with very human humans struggling to find meaning. His was fine writing in every sense, whatever genre he wrote for – but in SF he approached Wells I think in his mixture of humanity and grand Darwinian vistas.

But Aldiss himself, however, probably wouldn't thank me for that bit of praise, for he was always interested in the new. I did a



couple of signings with him, and fans would, understandably, bring bags of the old stuff for him to scribble on. But if anyone came along with the newest title he would stand, shake their hand, and loudly cry 'Bless you!'

Over the years I very much enjoyed the chances Aldiss and I had for drinks or dinner, when attending some event together – such as the SFX Weekender event in Prestatyn a few years back, when we had dinner as a precursor to my introducing his receipt of a lifetime achievement award. And when I dedicated my *Helliconia*-influenced novel *Bronze Summer* to him, he wrote, 'I don't think I have ever had a book dedicated to me previously (and you might think that a bit late in the day!)

I thought of Brian Aldiss as a good friend – but I have a feeling an awful lot of people feel the same.

STEPHEN BAXTER IS THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS SF NOVELS, INCLUDING RECENTLY AN OFFICIAL SEQUEL TO H.G. WELLS'S THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, THE MASSACRE OF MANKIND (GOLLANCZ, 2017). HE IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE BSFA.

VECTOR

BEST OF 2017

ILLUSTRATIONS AND DESIGN

PORTRAITS BY ANDREA MORREAU

ANDREA MORREAU IS A LONDON BASED ARTIST, ILLUSTRATOR, AND DRAWING TUTOR, WORKING ACROSS A RANGE OF MEDIA INCLUDING SCULPTURE TEXTILES AND PAINTING. FOLLOW HER ON INSTAGRAM

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OKJA BY IAN LONG

IAN IS A GRAPHIC ARTIST, WRITER AND SCRIPT EDITOR WHO ALSO TEACHES WORKSHOPS IN SCREENWRITING, SPECIALISING IN SCIENCE FICTION, HORROR AND NEO NOIR. HE'S CURRENTLY WORKING ON A CONTEMPORARY THRILLER WHICH REVEALS THE WEB OF COMPLICITY INVOLVED IN WHITEWASHING WEALTHY PARIAS REGIMES.

[WWW.IANLONG.ORG](http://www.ianlong.org)

COVER BY LARISSA SANSOUR

LARISSA SANSOUR IS AN ARTIST WORKING ACROSS VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY, SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATION, OFTEN TO CREATE POLITICAL ARTWORKS THAT EXPLORE LIFE IN PALESTINE. OUR COVER IMAGE THIS ISSUE IS TAKEN FROM HER RECENT FILM INSTALLATION, 'IN THE FUTURE, THEY ATE FROM THE FINEST PORCELAIN', A COLLABORATION WITH THE ARTIST SØREN LIND.

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COMPILED WITH THANKS TO DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE

PRODUCED BY VECTOR EDITORS

POLINA LEVONTIN AND JOSEPH WALTON,
WITH ASSISTANCE FROM SEONAI MACKAY.

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Ford*, fan. *Scott Fredericks* (b. 1943), actor. *Carolyn Kelly*, cartoonist. *Charles H. King* (b. 1934), author. *Charles Osborne* (b. 1927), author and critic. *Charlie Murphy* (b. 1959), actor, comedian, author. *Chelsea Brown* (b. 1947), actor. *Clifton James* (b. 1920), actor. *Clytie Jessop* (b. 1929), actor and director. *Cris Jones* (b. 1980), author and director. *D. Potter*, fan. *Dablov Ipcar* (b. 1917), illustrator and author. *Daliah Lavi* (b. 1940), actor. *Dan Spiegel* (b. 1920), comics artist. *Dave E. 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Hargreaves* (b. 1928), author. *Haiyan Xu*, academic and translator. *Harold Billings* (b. 1931), author and librarian. *Harry Dean Stanton* (b. 1926), actor. *Harry Mathews* (b. 1930), author. *Haru Nakajima* (b. 1929), actor. *Harvey Jacobs* (b. 1930), author. *Hasse (Hans) Alfredson* (b. 1931), actor, director and author. *Heathcote Williams* (b. 1941), author and actor. *Heather Menzies-Urich* (b. 1949), actor. *Heather North* (b. 1945), actor. *Helen Dunmore* (b. 1952), author. *Hilary Bailey* (b. 1936), author. *Howard Frank* (b. 1941), collector. *Howard Gottfried* (b. 1923), producer. *Hugh Hefner* (b. 1926), publisher. *Hywel Bennett* (b. 1944), actor. *Igor Volk* (b. 1937), cosmonaut and author. *Iona Opie* (b. 1923), folklorist. *Ivo Brešan* (b. 1936), author and playwright. *Jack Bannon* (b. 1940), actor. *Jack H. Harris* (b. 1918), producer. *Jack Mendelsohn* (b. 1926), comics writer and artist. *Jack Wodhams* (b. 1931) author. *Jaques Fresco* (b. 1916), author, engineer, futurist. *James Burnett* (b. 1968), actor. *James C. Christensen* (b. 1942), artist. *James Galton*, business executive. *Geoffrey Hayes* (b. 1947), cartoonist and author. *James Vance* (b. 1953), author and playwright. *Jared Martin* (b. 1941), actor. *Jay Lynch* (b. 1945), comics artist and writer. *Jay Thomas* (b. 1948), actor. *Jeff Carlson* (b. 1969), author. *Jennifer Daniel* (b. 1936), actor. *Jerry Lewis* (b. 1926), actor and comedian. *Jerry Pournelle* (b. 1933), author. *Kit Reed* (b. 1932), author. *Jill Barklem* (b. 1951), author and illustrator. *Jim Baikie* (b. 1940), comics artist. *Jim Nabors* (b. 1930), actor. *Jiro Taniguchi* (b. 1947), manga writer and artist. *Joan Lee*, voice actor. *Joe*

Bologna (b. 1934), actor. *Joe Wehrle, Jr.*, author, illustrator and fan. *John Dalmás* (John Robert Jones, b. 1926), author. *John Forgeham* (b. 1941), actor. *John Gordon* (b. 1925), author. *John Heard* (b. 1945), actor. *John Hurt* (b. 1940), actor. *John Mollo* (b. 1931), costume designer. *John Richard Newell Jr* (b. 1935), fan and bookseller. *John Watkiss* (b. 1961), artist. *Jonathan Demme* (b. 1944), filmmaker. *Jordin Kare* (b. 1956), fan and filker. *Julian May* (b. 1931), author. *Julio Oscar Mechoso* (b. 1955), actor. *June Foray* (b. 1917), voice actor. *Karen Lynn Davidson* (b. 1958), editor. *Karin Dor* (b. 1938), actor. *Kathleen Crowley* (b. 1929), actor. *Keith Chegwin* (b. 1957), actor. *Kim Poor* (b. 1952), artist. *Larry Smith* (b. 1946), fan and bookseller. *Lars Erik Helin* (b. 1937), fan. *Lars Helander* (b. 1939), fan. *Lawrence Montaigne* (b. 1931), actor. *Len Wein* (b. 1948), comics writer and editor. *Leo Baxendale* (b. 1930), comics creator. *Leslie H. Whitten* (b. 1928), author. *Lona Rietschel* (b. 1933), comics artist. *Lord Thomas of Swynnerton* (b. 1931), historian and novelist. *Loren Janes* (b. 1931), stuntman. *Loren Wiseman* (b. 1951), game designer. *Louis Charbonneau* (b. 1924), author. *M.M. (Meg) Justus* (b. 1959), author. *Marie Jakober* (b. 1941), author. *Mark Fisher* (b. 1968), author. *Mark Merlis* (b. 1950), author. *Martin Greim*, fan. *Peter Hansen* (b. 1921), actor. *Martin Landau* (b. 1928), actor. *Martin Ransohoff* (b. 1927), producer. *Masaya Nakamura* (b. 1925), "the father of Pac-Man." *Mervyn 'Skip' Williamson* (b. 1944), cartoonist. *Michael (Mike) Levy* (b. 1950), academic. *Michael Ballhaus* (b. 1935), cinematographer. *Michael Bond* (b. 1926), author. *Michael 'DikMike' Davies* (b. 1944), musician. *Lou Donato* (b. 1940), bookseller. *Michael Parks* (b. 1940), actor. *Michael Satran*, game designer. *Michiru Shimada* (b. 1959), screenwriter. *Mike Connors* (b. 1925), actor. *Mike Dickinson* (b. 1947), fan. *Milt Stevens* (b. 1942), fan. *Molly Peters* (b. 1942), actor. *Moray Watson* (b. 1928), actor. *Morton N. Cohen* (b. 1921), critic and biographer. *Naiyer Masud* (b. 1936), academic, novelist, translator. *Nancy Willard* (b. 1936), author. *Neil Fingleton* (b. 1981), actor. *Nelsan Ellis* (b. 1977), actor. *Norio Shioyama* (b. 1940), illustrator. *Om Puri* (b. 1950), actor. *Paddy (Patricia) Russell* (b. 1928), director. *Pascal Garray* (b. 1965), illustrator. *Patricia C. 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Schlobin* (b. 1944), academic. *Roger Garland* (b. 1950), illustrator. *Roger Moore* (b. 1927), actor. *Rose Marie* (b. 1923), actor. *Rosemary Leach* (b. 1935), actor. *Roy Dotrice* (b. 1923), actor. *Sam Glanzman* (b. 1924), comics artist. *Sarah Prince* (b. 1954), fan. *Sergio Altieri* (b. 1952), author. *Shelley Berman* (b. 1925), actor and comedian. *Sonny Landham* (b. 1941), actor. *Stanley Weston* (b. 1933), toymaker. *Stephen Furst* (b. 1955), actor. *Stewart Wieck* (b. 1968), game designer. *Susan Casper* (b. 1947), author. *Suzanna Leigh* (b. 1945), actor. *Thomas Endrey* (b. 1940), fan and editor. *Thomas Meehan* (b. 1929), writer and producer. *Tim Pigott-Smith* (b. 1946), actor. *Tim Poston* (b. 1945), author and mathematician. *Tobe Hooper* (b. 1943), director. *Tommy Castillo*, comics artist. *Tommy Silverros* (b. 1961), fan. *Tony Haygarth* (b. 1945), actor. *Trevor Baxter* (b. 1932), actor. *Trevor Martin* (b. 1929), actor. *Trish Vrandenburg* (b. 1946), author. *Ty Hardin* (b. 1930), actor. *Tzvetan Todorov* (b. 1939), literary critic. *Ulf Stark* (b. 1944), author. *Umberto Lenzi* (b. 1931), director. *V.E. Mitchell* (Victoria Estelle Mitchell Gustafson, b. 1954), author. *Vicky Stock* (b. 1979), fan. *Victor Pemberton* 1931-2017, actor, writer and script editor. *Waldemar Kummig* (b. 1924), fan. *Wally Burr* (b. 1924), voice director. *Walter Becker* (b. 1950), musician. *William F. Touponce* (b. 1948), academic. *William Hjortsberg* (b. 1941) screenwriter and author. *William Melvin Kelley* (b. 1937), author. *William Sanders* (b. 1942), author. *Yoji Kondo* (b. 1933), author. *Yoshimitsu Banno* (b. 1931), filmmaker. *Yoshio Tsuchiya* (b. 1927), actor. *Yves Velan* (b. 1925), author.